ARTWORK OR ARTIFACT: REFRAMING OBJECTS WITHIN ETHNOGRAPHIC MUSEUMS

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Abstract

In this article, I reflect on the reframing of objects in museums. In a Western context, objects of African provenance seem to oscillate between being categorized as artworks and as artifacts. My main objective is to delineate how these categories were historically distinguished, and what contributed to that process. By examining current exhibitions, I demonstrate that this legacy adds a problematic dimension to contemporary museum displays. The problem is, firstly, that only these two categories exist; and secondly, that the distinction between these categories is still linked to distinct display practices that carry on a colonial legacy. This article thus contributes to the discussion of the current transformation of ethnographic museums into postcolonial museums of global art history.

Keywords: Museum, Artifact, Artwork, Exhibition Display, White Gaze, White Supremacy

Unbelievable Treasures: On Decolonizing Museums

In the Western hemisphere, museums are privileged spaces for producing, canonizing, and performing cultural memory. Most of these museums were established in the late nineteenth century—the peak of European nationalism, imperialism, and colonialism—when loads of cultural objects were brought to Europe from the colonies. There are about fifty ethnographic and archaeological museums in Germany; the museums of Berlin alone have approximately 500,000 non-European objects in storage. Many other European countries as well as the US also host such museums, which face similar challenges to decolonizing: i.e., clearly stating how they were and still are entangled in colonialism, stepping away from their epistemic authority, involving the source communities of objects, and returning seized objects to museums in African countries.[1] Some activists, like the Berlin-based groups NoHumboldt21 and Berlin Postkolonial, have placed research into the migration and provenance of these

[1] Some of the objects kept in Berlin are accessible online via the Staatliche Museen Berlin, http://www.smb-digital.de/eMuseumPlus. Museum MARKK in Hamburg, Germany has published its inventory at this URL: https://markk-hamburg.de/files/media/2020/07/MARKK-AF-bis-1920-Neu.pdf. However, some objects are missing from these digital archives. Those in storage are often not properly inventoried, mostly due to the fact that they have been heavily contaminated with biocide preservatives like arsenic trioxide. It is neither known precisely what is stored there—and to find out about or digitize objects in such a way that people around the globe can get an idea of the archives, one has to take extensive safety precautions—nor do museum experts know exactly how their collections were brought together.

objects on the agenda, and continue to shape the discussion in Germany, which now centers on restitution. This debate took a turn for the better with Felwine Sarr and Bénédicte Savoy's report *The Restitution of African Cultural Heritage—Toward a New Relational Ethics* (2018), which explores "the chronological, juridical, methodological and financial framework in which the return of African cultural heritage items can be effectuated back to Africa" (Sarr & Savoy, 2018, p. 5). As a first step, they propose to publish inventories, as being unable to consult inventories greatly hinders pleas for restitution. Assuming that late capitalism values the singular and peculiar object as especially valuable, it is of no surprise that ethnographic museums "discover" artworks within their collections and are reluctant to restitute them. But how do they distinguish a masterpiece from a "banal" artifact of material culture? To contribute to the debate on the transformation of museums, I would like to point out how objects of non-Western provenance oscillate between the two fields of art and ethnography. These are categorized by different institutions and other gatekeepers who claim the power to interpret these objects and convey their significance by employing certain display techniques.

My interest in this area developed while I was working in the art field, where modern and contemporary art are especially concerned with the many possibilities of criticizing institutions and finding new answers to the much larger question of what art is or could be. I am especially interested in curatorial or artistic research practices that deal with epistemological violence and space-making. It is hoped that once again connecting the art field with the ethnographic sphere could provoke discussions on display methods and the handling of objects in former ethnographic museums. There is a consensus among social scientists that the separation and differentiation of the art field and the ethnographic field is crucial when it comes to placing objects within a system of value and meaning (e.g. Clifford, 1988; Bourdieu 1992; Reckwitz, 2017).

The discussion of how a non-Western object is to be displayed—whether as a representative artifact, or as an artwork presented without any sociohistorical context—is ongoing, but the very act of displaying such objects in museums should also be questioned. As an example, I take three recent exhibitions—in New York, Venice, and Berlin—that juxtaposed objects of African and European provenance. By studying the link between the displays and epistemological power, this paper thus considers the sociopolitical outcomes of the distinction between "art" and "artifact," especially in directing the *White gaze*[2] and sustaining White supremacy.

My starting point is the artwork *Golden Head (Female)*, part of Damien Hirst's fictional museum showcasing a collection of "ancient" objects, named Treasures of the Wreck of the *Unbelievable*, displayed at Palazzo Grassi and Punta della Dogana, the two private museums of collector François Pinault, in Venice in 2017. This particular sculpture is an appropriation of a famous Yoruba copper alloy casting from the centuries-old African city of Ife (Yoruba:

[2] The term *White gaze* encompasses a Eurocentric normative perspective that produces value and meaning from a White position of power, whereas non-White people are placed in a position of the "other," and their voices are excluded from discourse.

Ilé-Ifẹ̀) in modern-day Nigeria. My personal experience of Damian Hirst's reproduction of a museum of so-called "world cultures"—a model influential in the debate on transforming colonial museums into postcolonial museums—is what prompted this research. As the exhibition catalogue elaborates:

> Stylistically similar to the celebrated works from the Kingdom of Ife (which prospered c.1100–1400 CE in modern Nigeria), this head may be a copy of a terracotta or brass original. Extraordinarily, it is only a little over a century since the German anthropologist Leo Frobenius (1873-1938) was so surprised by the discovery of the Ife heads that he deduced that the lost island of Atlantis had sunk off the Nigerian coast, enabling descendants of the Greek survivors to make the skillfully executed works. (Corry, 2017, p. 23)

German anthropologist Leo Frobenius (1873–1938) took pictures of the Olokun Head, one of the sculptures shown to him by a "guardian priest" at Ife in 1910, and published them in his book *Und Afrika sprach* (1912, p. 301; an English translation, *The Voice of Africa*, appeared in 1913). Hirst's exhibition catalogue itself essentially perpetuates an element of White gaze found in Frobenius's "deductions" about the "sunken culture" of Atlantis and the "descendants of the Greek survivors": the Ife heads' naturalistic carving contradicted twentieth-century European assumptions of how African art should look. It demonstrates casting on a very high level, bearing witness to a unique artistic sensibility and technological knowledge of processing materials. Until their encounter with the Olokun Head, Europeans thought of African art as abstract art made mostly from wood and clay. This subordination of African material culture and artistry within the colonial worldview had been so definitive that Frobenius could not imagine that this artwork of "marvelous beauty" had been produced by African artists.

Consequently, he thought that one of the heads must represent Poseidon, the ancient Greek deity of the ocean, produced by descendants of a "sunken" culture from the Mediterranean: "wonderfully cast in antique bronze, true to the life, incrusted with a patina of glorious dark green. This was, in very deed, the Olokun, Atlantic Africa's Poseidon! Profoundly stirred, I stood for many minutes before this remnant of the erstwhile Lord and Ruler of the Empire of Atlantis" (Frobenius, 1913, p. 98). In a racist manner, he went on to deny African producers' ownership of their complex artistry: "I was moved to silent melancholy at the thought that this assembly of degenerate and feeble-minded posterity should be the legitimate guardians of so much classic loveliness" (ibid.). In spite of Frobenius's misconception, the Ife sculptures were the first objects from Africa that he did not regard as objects of material culture but appreciated as extraordinary artworks, and, through his writings, they became visible to a broader audience (Platte, 2010).

Golden Head (Female) was part of Hirst's 2017 exhibition *Treasures from the Wreck of the Unbelievable*, which was based on a fiction: two thousand years ago, the ship Apistos (Greek for "Unbelievable"), laden with objects, had sunk in the Indian Ocean on its way to the private

museum of collector Cif Amotan II (an anagram for "I am fiction"). Amotan himself had purportedly collected these objects for a temple in honor of a sun god named Aton. Damien Hirst was asked to bankroll the salvaging of the treasure and assemble the objects in an exhibition. According to the story, on the seafloor and amid the coral reefs, Hirst's crew had found ancient statues long overgrown with marine fauna. To make the story more plausible, spectacular underwater videos of the salvaging operation were recorded and made available on streaming services. For the exhibition, Hirst employed very advanced sculpting techniques, especially with regard to 3D rendering, printing, and serial production on various scales and with different materials.

Alongside the Ife Head, Hirst appropriated and remixed artworks from diverse sources, creating an intertextual puzzle of visual references to various times, places, and cultures in almost all of the "treasures." William Blake's miniature picture *The Ghost of a Flea* welcomed the audience to the atrium in form of an eighteen-meter-high statue named *Demon with Bowl.* A diorama shows Andromeda—the daughter of the Ethiopian king Cepheus in Greek mythology—chained to a rock, being attacked by Steven Spielberg's *Jaws* jumping out of Hokusai's *Great Wave*. Cultural icons like Mickey Mouse, a sphinx, and Transformers toys are found alongside the now-infamous *Golden Head (Female)*, the "salvaged" marble head of musician Pharrell Williams based on the golden mask of pharaoh Tutankhamun; a bust titled *the collector*, resembling Hirst himself; and the sculpture *Severed Head of Medusa,* which is a 3D version of Medusa's head as painted by Caravaggio. Hirst's "treasures" raise the question of where the boundary between "art" and "artifact" is drawn today, and how this is linked to Western display practices and the White gaze.

To elaborate on the persistence of colonial structures within his appropriations and cultural remixes, this paper delineates three contributing factors in the signification and valorization of non-Western objects within a Western framework: displays, gatekeepers, and their juxtaposition with other objects. In the 1980s, curator Susan Vogel stressed that display practices play an important role in the reading of objects; in 2012, curator Yaëlle Biro, former researcher at the Musée du Quai Branly (Paris) and now curator of the Metropolitan Museum of Modern Art in New York, proposed that ethnographic museums and galleries of modern art play a crucial role in distinguishing objects of African provenance as "art" or "artifact." Vogel and Biro have explained that these categories were instrumental in representing the "other" of Western modernity. I conclude the article by looking at a juxtaposition of an Italian putto and a sculpture of a Beninese royal at the Bode-Museum, Berlin, in 2017.

Art or Artifact?

In her widely discussed exhibition ART/artifact (New York, 1988), Vogel delineated the historical development of display practices: from displaying objects as souvenirs in *curiosity rooms* (German: *Wunderkammer*)[3] and as educational props in natural history museums,

[3] In general, such curiosity rooms had most often been located in Europe, at the homes of wealthy elites and royalty, since the sixteenth century, and are nowadays considered forerunners to natural-history, art-history, and ethnographic museums (Pomian, 1998; Bredekamp, 2000; Dolezel, 2019). Their encyclopedic inventory represented the knowledge of those days. Vogel explains: "Such 'curiosity' collections rarely

juxtaposed with zoological specimens, to singling out and displaying the objects for aesthetic contemplation in art museums (cf. Jones, 1993). Against this historical backdrop, Vogel presented three rooms, in each of which she had installed selected objects in a different manner, with the aim of confusing and interrupting the biased perspectives and thus interpretations of the objects by the visitors. To make her case, she purposely "misplaced" an ordinary hunting net from the Zande People (Congo) and a needle case from the Lozi People (Zambia) as if they were modern artworks. In contrast to this, Vogel hid out-of-the-ordinary *vigango* (singular *kigango*: memorial effigies, Mijikenda, southeastern Kenya; pictures in Vogel, 1988, pp. 146–152)[4] from Hampton University's African art collection in each of the different styles of room, i.e. both in the *Wunderkammer*-style room and as a specimen in a natural history diorama, but also in the "art gallery display" and on pedestals in the "art museum display" (pictures ibid., p. 197 and 205). In this way, Vogel confronted the visitors' assumptions of both African material culture and modern art, and highlighted the signifying function of displays—especially to visitors who did not have any background knowledge about the objects in the exhibition. Vogel's curatorial research on the different displays raised intriguing questions regarding the nature and extent of the origin and construction of the White gaze; for example, to what extent do displays support, reconfigure, or undermine biased perspectives on these objects?

Despite the contemporary pompous format and the undoubted artistry, Hirst's exhibition worked like a Trojan horse, smuggling colonial ideas into the contemporary art field. The objects Hirst and his team created were on display at the Venetian palaces in the same style that a contemporary Western museum of so-called "world cultures" might have presented their collection of a *shared heritage*, mixing display practices as Vogel describes in the "art museum display." Hirst also (1) refers to the vitrines of ethnographic museums and (2) employs dioramas depicting certain mythological scenes.

(1) The main purpose of ethnographic museums around the time of their broader establishment in Europe, around 1900, was to support so-called *Sammlungsexpeditionen* ("collecting expeditions"). On such expeditions, "explorers" like Leo Frobenius traveled the colonies and took whatever cultural heritage or contemporary material culture they got their hands on. The collections were not meant to attract the public; instead, researchers used them to make sense of the colonial world, thus museums tried to collect the totality of material culture worldwide.

separated botanical, zoological, and geological specimens from cultural artifacts, and often mixed together objects from different places" (1988, p. 12). The collected peculiar objects were embedded in a complex system of references, and constantly changed their places within the display following either the mythopoetic or scientific views of their collector.

[4] See also Udvardy, Giles, & Mitsanze, 2003 and Nevadomsky, 2018 for basic information on their trade to the US and the still ongoing restitution debate.

Such ethnographic museums have traditionally been a space dedicated solely to White peoples' worldviews. All objects by non-White producers occupying this space are perceived as foreign and different, and—because they are disconnected from the original societal function and signifying chains they were rooted in—must have their functions explained for them, thus being fully subject to the exhibitions' narration and the visitors' biased assumptions. Here, history is told by juxtaposing artifacts, preferably in vitrines, in a regional, thematic, or chronological order. Serving as evidences for the stories told, displayed objects became representations of a specific order of things. A popular ideology during the rise of the European ethnographic museum was Social Darwinism, which constructed a unilinear order of progress by hierarchizing cultures based on their stage of "development," from "primitive," "wild," and "traditional" to "civilized" (cf. Foucault, 1966; Fabian, 1983; Bennett, 1988, p. 92). African material culture was "othered" and subjugated under a Western rhetoric of progress, and thus displayed as representative of people viewed as less modern than White Europeans. Subsequently, these museums opened their doors and conveyed their notions of humankind to the general public. They quickly adopted some of the display methods of art collections as well, such as displaying singular objects on a pedestal, affording them extra space and dramatic lighting.

(2) The development of ideologically charged display practices culminated in the theatrical "diorama," which especially in Germany was promoted as the display practice best suited to conveying (colonial) knowledge of other cultures (cf. Vogel, 1988; Biro, 2018). During the peak of industrialization in Europe, a diorama presented mostly rural scenes in which display dummies, clothed in traditional garments, produced goods that represented "primitive" modes of production—in stark contrast to the factory workplaces of most of the recently urbanized visitors.

To add to the question raised by Vogel—namely, how a diorama reframes an object—I would like to briefly introduce the trajectory of Tony Bennett's seminal works *The Exhibitionary Complex* (1988) and *The Birth of the Museum* (1995). Firstly, in analyzing mostly British museums around 1900, Bennett found that by displaying objects as representative of such "primitive" modes of production, as well as by superimposing this "underdevelopment" on their producers, their audience was enabled to regard capitalist and industrialized modes of production as progressive and superior to others. Colonial rule was signified as a "civilizing mission" and thus legitimized within a Western logic of progress (cf. Bennett, 1988, p. 92). Secondly, he stresses that such institutions shared display practices with department stores, which were established in that same era, and thus constructed a strict regime of consumerist "technologies of vision." He argues that the gaze of the European public was primed by looking at so-called *Völkerschauen* (roughly, "human zoos"),[5] World Fairs, art galleries, and

[5] So far, however, there has been little discussion of "human zoos" in the colonial period, although non-White people had been exhibited in almost every European city as well as in the US. These "human zoos" were first established by animal zoo director Carl Hagenbeck in Hamburg, Germany in 1874. People from all over the world were kidnapped or lured by false promises to Europe. They were exhibited in fake villages, where they had to perform "rural" "daily life" in a theatre-like setting—and thousands of White people came to look at these caged, "primitive," "uncivilized" "Others." This practice ended in the 1930s,

eventually museums as well. The common architecture of these places, with their mazelike rows of vitrines and elevated galleries, allowed guests an overview and orientation, as well as the opportunity to observe fellow visitors. Museums thus promoted a gaze that "othered" people and things and presented them like goods in a store.

According to Bennett, these places educated the visitors on how to behave in an orderly manner—not touching the items in the vitrines, not fraternizing with people in the zoos' "primitive" villages; habitually, the people became a White (petite) bourgeoisie gazing at its displayed "other," and by framing them as "primitive" and "underdeveloped," they regarded themselves as White and superior. As history is written by the victors, it is important to stress that this economic and political order sparked protests in Europe, especially by socialist parties around 1900: e.g., the German Social Democratic Party (August Bebel, Rosa Luxemburg); at the First Pan-African Conference in London 1900, under the aegis of Henry Sylvester-Williams and attended by W. E. B. DuBois; and left-wing artists, like the surrealists who issued a clear condemnation of colonialism in their letter against the Exposition Coloniale Internationale fair held in Paris in 1931.[6]

Vogel's curatorial research supports Bennett's finding that museum displays contributed to an overall colonial culture of *othering*. In effect, the White gaze projects on objects of non-Western provenance an exoticized lack of civilization, and does not see what is actually present. The museums, established all over Europe in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, envisaged this kind of order for their collections. It could be argued that their display practices are rooted in the colonial project, and furthered approval for the enslavement of Black people, the exploitation of their workforce in the colonies, and the imperial domination of the African continent.

Visiting Vogel's exhibition, one might recognize that a perception of coevalness, chronology, and progress underlines the decisions for certain displays. Clearly, Treasures from the Wreck of the *Unbelievable* smuggles the colonial techniques of silencing and domination into a contemporary exhibition, and thus into art discourse. The vitrines contain coins, cups, and corroded bowls, as well as jewelry belonging to the sailors, arranged typologically like ethnographic specimens. Within the framework of an ethnographic museum, this arrangement allows for comparisons of similarities and differences. Within the field of contemporary art, arranging these objects based solely on aesthetic principles like similarity and repetition, the assemblages refuse any logical rationale or discursive meaning, but convey a notion of

but even today, some incidents recalling these "human zoos" are acknowledged. To date, these violent atrocities has received scant attention in the research literature, but see Dreesbach, 2005; Schwarz, 2001; Lutz, 2007; Lewerenz, 2007; Armbruster, 2011; and the documentary *Die "Wilden" in den Menschenzoos* (ARTE, 2017; directors: Bruno Victor-Pujebet and Pascal Blanchard).

[6] On a website dedicated to André Breton, a copy of the letter is available: "Ne visitez pas l'Exposition Coloniale" https://www.andrebreton.fr/work/56600100711050.

availability to both the gaze of visitors as well as their wallets. The ensemble resembles those vitrines filled with pills, medical demonstration models, seashells, sharks, and skeletons with which Hirst first started his career, already reflecting on the salability of art. Hirst exhibited the "treasures" in a private museum and gallery space, thus as part of the art market: *Golden Head (Female)* has an (invisible) price tag, and is available to buyers, like all the other objects of remixed cultural heritage. Therefore, Hirst adds to the notion that cultural heritage is up for sale—if you have that kind of money.

African Art and the European Avant-garde

Reflecting on the fact that Hirst's exhibition coincided with one of the largest art biennials—though it was not directly part of it—I would like to explore the transfer of museum exhibition practices to the sphere of contemporary art, which is related to the production of contemporary discourse on art. Hirst's reframing of the *Olokun Head* lacks critical distance from the fact that this *shared history*, as exemplified by his "treasures," is constructed from a Eurocentric and White position of power—a power embedded in museum displays, as Vogel argues. While Vogel's exposure of the visitors' assumptions may have been linked to the fact that the White gaze was and still is used to an understanding of human development as a unilinear progress, it has been argued that not only do displays reconfigure African objects like the *vigango*, but institutions like galleries and museums, as well as key figures like artists and art dealers, also play a role in categorizing them: "While by no means in consensus, it is the dynamic interplay between three categories of interested parties in the West—artists; collectors, dealers, and philanthropists; and museum personnel and related academics—who define which cultural media may hold the privileged status" (Udvarden, Giles, & Mitsanze, 2003, p. 567). To further elaborate on the role of such gatekeepers in objects oscillating between the categories of "art" and "artifact," I revisit Biro's 2012 curatorial research project African Art—New York and the Avant Garde,[7] which mapped the art trade and collecting scene of 1910s and '20s New York. This exhibition explored what Biro would later explicate in an article on a Parisian art dealer: "During the first decades of the twentieth century, the appreciation of African artifacts in the West shifted dramatically: from colonial trophies and ethnographic specimens, they became modernist icons worthy of aesthetic contemplation" (Biro, 2012a, p. 10).

Biro divided the exhibition African Art—New York and the Avant Garde (2012) into four sections. These sections were organized chronologically, starting with the aftermath of the famous 1913 Armory Show, where European avant-garde art was introduced to the New York public, and ends with the reception of African objects by the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s.[8] In Europe, Parisian avant-garde artists were the first artists to show interest in

[7] The Metropolitan Museum of Art website provides further information on the exhibit: https://www.metmuseum.org/press/exhibitions/2012/african-art-new-york-and-the-avant-garde. Biro also published the findings of her curatorial research in a special edition of *Tribal Art* magazine in 2012.

[8] The four sections were: "1914: America Discovers African Art"; "1915–19: Acquiring a Taste for African Art"; "1919–23: A Move Toward Institutions"; and "The Blondiau-Theatre Arts Collection and the Harlem Renaissance."

reinterpreting and remixing objects of African provenance (collected by the Musée d'Ethnographie du Trocadéro, established in 1882; today its collection is hosted at the Quai Branly). In the US, the 1913 Armory Show played a similarly important role in art history. As the artworks were displayed *salon style*,[9] the Armory Show echoed the historical displays of the late seventeenth century, which had also profoundly impacted the reception and understanding of art. At this early-twentieth-century art fair, Pablo Picasso's painting *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* (1907) was first presented to the American public; this painting, in adopting styles from abstract African carving, was widely considered a turning point in the perception of African objects as art, first in Europe and then in the US.

Shortly after the 1913 Armory Show, with the outbreak of World War I, the epicenter of the Western art trade shifted from Paris to New York. In effect, both African and European modern art was exhibited, sold, and collected in New York. Whereas Vogel emphasizes how objects oscillated between the categories of "art" and "artifact" and the different readings of objects in the 1980s in terms of their exhibition display, Biro found that in the US around 1920, European modern art and African objects were regarded equally as art, because they arrived at the same time and by the same art trading routes. Although objects of African provenance were collected and displayed in natural and ethnographic museums in Europe, both were recognized in the US for their "foreign" visual languages. Juxtaposing African and European objects "was a relatively common practice among the avant-gardes in the early twentieth century" (Staniszewski, 1998, p. 113). In the catalogue of Biro's exhibition, Alisa LaGamma notes considerable differences between the reception of African objects in Europe and in the US, arguing:

> Whereas in Europe, members of the artistic avant-garde were first exposed to such artifacts in ethnographic displays tied to colonialism, their counterparts in New York City were introduced to them several decades later in contexts that underscored their association with abstract art. Distanced from accounts of their contexts in Africa in favor of those in the ateliers and salons of progressive European artists and connoisseurs, Americans viewed these traditions as ciphers for the conceptual shift that their own art world was undergoing. (2012, p. 26)

[9] The *salon style* dates back to the display practices of European art academies in the late seventeenth century, most notably the Parisian Académie Royale de Peinture et de Sculpture, which promoted an *ars liberalis* highlighting the role of the *idea* in art production and seeking independence from the prevailing guilds. At the annual exhibition of graduates, chiefly paintings were mounted in *art wall* groupings, stacked vertically higher and lower than the visitors' eye level, thus allowing the public to compare and discuss the works of art.

Based on her reading of letters and essays by some of the most prominent art dealers and collectors of early twentieth-century New York,[10] Biro highlights how "African and modern art often appear to be thought of as one" (2012b, p. 66).

In the following pages, I will present some of Biro's examples from the first section of the exhibition, titled "1914: America Discovers African Art." In this section, Biro displayed thirty-six wood sculptures of African provenance and about twenty objects representing the Western avant-garde to support her claim. Biro took the well-known 291 art gallery of collector, art dealer, and photographer Alfred Stieglitz as her model, displaying pictures of both exhibitions as well as many of the objects shown at the gallery. Stieglitz, who was married to famous modernist painter Georgia O'Keeffe, began collecting and exhibiting European modern art in 1908 in an attempt to find a modernist visual language as a trajectory for his own agenda, later called "American Modernism." Biro points out that important distinguishing factors for American art collectors had been "the central role of European connections; the aura of mystery that surrounded the African sources of the European vendors; a constant concern about the quality of the works triggered by a lack of knowledge and comparative corpus; [and] the symbiotic relationship between modern and African art" (2012b, p. 66).

In 1914, Stieglitz opened the doors of 291 for an exhibition subtitled The Root of Modern Art.[11] This is considered one of the first exhibitions in the US dedicated exclusively to African objects within the framework of fine art. In the same year, Stieglitz staged an exhibition in which he juxtaposed works of Picasso (*Bottle and Glass on a Table*, 1912) and Georges Braque (*Sleeping Muse*, 1910) with a mask from the Kota people of Gabon, a reliquary guardian figure from the Fang people, and an ordinary wasp nest. In a picture of the exhibition[12] taken by Stieglitz, we can see that the African objects were stripped of their visible cultural context and function. Vogel also refers to the "Fang sculpture seen standing on a pedestal […] originally attached to a box of ancestral bones" as artwork, and notes, "Here it appears cleansed of bark and bones, and the dowdy aura of the ethnographic specimen. The impulse to strip African art of its visible cultural context has roots in the desire to make it resemble art of the West and conform to our definition of what art is" (Vogel 1988, p. 13f.). Even acknowledging their spiritual function seemed to compromise the objects' newly won status for sparking modern art (LaGamma, 2012, p. 33). It seems that reframing them as

[10] Biro focuses on Marius de Zayas, who wrote the chronicle *How, When, and Why Modern Art Came to New York* in the 1940s, published posthumously in 1996. Zayas had also been in close contact with the Parisians Paul Guillaume and Guillaume Apollinaire.

[11] The most prominent art dealers of the time collaborated on this exhibition: Marius de Zayas, who worked for Stieglitz at that time, contacted Parisian art trader Paul Guillaume, who then contributed many works. Later on, Guillaume became the source of most of the African works exhibited and sold in New York until the 1920s. The Ross Archive of African Images (RAAI) provides an annotated picture of the exhibition: http://raai.library.yale.edu/site/index.php?globalnav=image_detail&image_id=1770 .

[12] The National Gallery of Art (NGA) provides an annotated picture: https://www.nga.gov/collection/art-object-page.35525.html.

artworks in a Western context came at the price of silencing their production, provenance, and migration, and thus disconnecting them from their inherited signifying chain.

In Hirst's case, he appropriated what he deemed fit. The larger statues of the Treasures exhibition were positioned at a distance from the viewer and had their own bases. The smaller ones were either mounted on the wall below eye level, or placed on a socle or pedestal, and were thus perceived as artworks disconnected from their cultural origins. Although museums tend to paint their walls in more atmospheric, darker colors, the structural effect of the "white cube" might apply here as well. Established by Alfred H. Barr at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), New York in 1929, it became a popular art space principle after World War II (Staniszewski, 1998, p. 96): white walls are intended to separate artworks from the architecture of the exhibition space and avoid distracting the visitors' gaze as they contemplate the artwork in a spacious surrounding. A white cube draws focus to the aesthetic experience and the autonomy of art from societal influences, thus defining a modern "artwork," the unique achievement of an individual artist, as autonomous and possessing a certain agency: it has its own terms and rules by which it must be viewed. The main potential of the white cube lies in its function of reframing things as artworks—musealization—and therefore valorizes and aestheticizes objects by severing their inherited chains of signifiers; in effect, it resignifies objects and thus shifts their meaning.

The white cube model was heavily and widely criticized in the 1970s, after Brian O'Doherty (1976) elaborated the problematic aspects of its neutralizing effect, achieved by suppressing sociopolitical context. Barbara Steiner's thesis (2002) focuses on artists' critiques, like Andy Warhol's shelves full of Campbell's soup cans, which affirmed the white cube, but also hinted at the economic circulation of goods from galleries. In line with such critics, Hirst's museum profited from charging the objects auratically through the space's architecture, but also, again, making the salability of art and cultural heritage his topic.

Vogel has underlined that in contrast to their presentation in white cubes, non-Western objects, like *vigango*, were not perceived as contemporary to European art nor regarded as the achievement of a single "genius," an autonomous author-artist, but as "collectively produced" and "traditional" forerunners that were "inspirational" to Western modernism. This became evident in the heated debate over a 1984 exhibition curated by William Rubin for New York's MoMA: "Primitivism" in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern[13] (cf. Jones, 1993). Despite using the same display for objects of African and European provenance, it became apparent that African objects were chosen to shed light on European modern art or for their "appeal to modern taste" (MoMA, 1984). Such universalistic approaches add a problematic dimension to the term "Weltkunst" (*World Art*) employed in such exhibitions,

[13] The MoMA website features accompanying material, like press releases and pictures from the exhibition: https://www.moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/1907.

which implicitly denies non-Western cultures coevalness[14] with Western concepts of art (cf. Leeb, 2015). This points to a discussion that has been ongoing since the broader establishment of museums in Europe around 1900: should a museum that shows objects unfamiliar to most of its visitors provide basic background information? Or are ethnographic museums to be transformed into museums of global art history and thus connected with the globalized art field?

The question is not so much whether, but *how* to integrate such information into displays without recharging colonial legacies, as I elaborate here. Hirst's "treasures" reflected such contemporary discussions of global cultural heritage, but also conveyed the idea of a shared history marked by cultural "origins" that could be "read" by looking at remixed artworks, like the *Golden Head (Female)*, in their double bind: as a relatively faithful recreation of an Ife head, the artwork clearly echoes the original's status as a valued and iconic artwork, and Hirst's juxtaposition reframes the copy of the head as part of a canon of global art history, but the exhibition silences the original's complex provenance by only vaguely referencing Ife culture to people who do not recognize its visuality. Only scant visual traces, in need of deciphering, give hints to the object's provenance beyond its remix and reinterpretation by a Western artist, who thus became the author of a (fictional) cultural heritage already situated amid translation and reframing practices—indeed, a very *hypercultural* (Han, 2005) way of looking at entangled histories. Prolific critics like Okwui Enwezor (2008) and Chika Okeke-Agulu (2009) have elaborated on how a globalized art field (cf. Weibel, Buddensieg, & Araeen 2006) should both respect differentiated cultural heritage, and also delineate trajectories like "oceanic lines" (Enwezor 2016, p. 17) and "wake work" (Sharpe 2016) for the entangled global art worlds that are encompassed by the concept of an *art history of contact*, a term coined by Christian Kravagna (2017).

Hirst's wreck of the *Unbelievable* plays with such notions, but does not really contribute to their political agenda. Overall, Hirst neither sided with such contemporary critics nor with historical reappropriations of non-Western objects, e.g. those of the Harlem Renaissance and the Blondiau-Theatre Arts Collection of Primitive African Art exhibition (New York, 1927). In an essay, Kravagna points out that

> the sheer fact that European anthropological museums were founded in a spirit of colonialism at the same time that African collections were established as an instrument of liberation from colonial social systems and racist cultural concepts represents a remarkable counterpoint. Frequently, the same kinds of objects that were in the African collections also entered into "Western" collections at the height of the colonial era, where, however, opposing political meanings were ascribed to them. (2018)

[14] For an in-depth discussion of the *denial of coevalness*, see Fabian's *Time and the Other* (1983). This concept describes the epistemological violence embedded in ethnographic depictions of "othered" cultures, which have been interpreted as literally living in another time frame than "developed" Western societies.

In contrast to this, Hirst's exhibition concept points in the direction of the hegemonic and universal formats prevalent in European museums: according to his curator, Elena Geuna, Hirst was inspired by the book project *A History of the World in 100 Objects*,[15] published in 2010 by the British Museum and its former director Neil MacGregor—who had been part of the founding direction of Berlin's newly opened flagship museum, the Humboldt Forum.[16]

The last decade has also seen many artists becoming curators, a role that Hirst has also played with. One implication of this is the possibility that contemporary artists who remediate ancient objects are also intervening in the distinction between art and artifact. As Hirst's "treasures" were fabricated by highly specialized craftspeople, Hirst fashioned himself as the "explorer" and financier of the salvaging operation, and figures as the "collector" (as implied by his self-portrait, *Bust of the Collector*). Hirst, as producer and curator of the fictional museum, is responsible for both the remix and the juxtaposition of objects.

Beyond Compare

The three curatorial and artistic research exhibitions examined so far have provided us with insights into the legacy of displays of non-Western objects in Europe and the US. We have found that the differentiation of objects of African provenance as "artwork" or "artifact" and the subordination of African art under Western concepts of temporality are manifested in such displays. The current paper thus provides a deeper insight into the entanglement of museum displays and the White gaze. In Hirst's exhibition, the sculpture *Golden Head (Female)* was stripped of any cultural context beyond the shipwreck, despite obviously being a copy of an Ife sculpture; thus, its hypercultural juxtaposition with other objects seems significant. In effect, however, these objects serve as exoticized and mysterious representations of otherness, and are subject to the White gaze. Having elaborated on the observation that African objects oscillate between the categories of "art" and "artifact," I will now proceed to discuss a more current exhibition, Beyond Compare: Art from Africa (Bode-Museum, Berlin, 2017), which provided an in-depth analysis of African objects juxtaposed with objects of European

[15] This catalogue is a compilation of objects from various regions, ordered chronologically, and also features an Ife sculpture. This particular sculpture was excavated from the Wunmonije compound of Ife in the late 1930s. This Ife head shows clear stylistic resemblances to the *Olokun Head*. The radio station BBC4 collaborated with the British Museum on this book project, and presented each object in a fifteen-minute feature. The feature in which this sculpture is treated is called "Status Symbols (1200–1400 AD)," and it highlights the sculpture's aesthetic qualities, speculates on its representative function for Ife royalty, and recounts Frobenius's perspective on Yoruba culture.

[16] The Humboldt Forum was conceived after both the Senate of Berlin and the German government decided in favor of the controversial rebuilding of a Prussian palace—a symbol of the heyday of German colonialism—in the middle of Berlin. They did not have a clear vision for either the palace nor the Humboldt Forum, but the discussion about the museum effectively silenced the discussion of the building's problematic history itself. MacGregor became part of the founding direction and developed a concept for the museum that has been widely criticized.

provenance and was meant as an experimental forerunner to the Ethnological Museum of Berlin's new exhibition space in the Humboldt Forum, which opened in 2020.

When I visited Beyond Compare, I was confronted with the prevalence of classical display practices. The exhibition was dedicated entirely to objects categorized as artworks by curators Julien Chapuis, Jonathan Fine, and Paola Ivanov. The Bode-Museum hosts a collection of sculptures from European art history and the Byzantine Empire;[17] in this temporary exhibition, the curators juxtaposed these with objects of African provenance usually kept at the Ethnological Museum of Berlin. The exhibition centered on the act of comparing: the curators stated that this act is never an innocuous means of gaining knowledge, but is by nature already tendentious, biased, and leading to valorization. They addressed the colonial power imbalances configuring the gaze of visitors and asked: "What motivates comparisons and reveals underlying presuppositions?" (Chapuis, Fine, & Ivanov, 2017, p. 12; translation mine).

Moving on to a closer look at some of the objects exhibited, we find that the exhibition consisted of two main parts: the first part is divided into six groupings, e.g. "the Other," gender, and performance. Each grouping consisted of 15 to 20 objects in a vitrine. The second part directly compared 22 sculptures of African and European provenance, affording more space and a socle or pedestal to each. One prominent example of this approach, as shown in figures 1 and 2 below, is the pair that greeted visitors in the entrance hall, foregrounding the overall theme of the exhibition: "beyond compare."

[17] Google Arts & Culture features the temporary exhibition online at https://artsandculture.google.com/exhibit/unvergleichlich/pgKS3o1oSaFuLg?hl=de, and the permanent exhibition at https://artsandculture.google.com/partner/bode-museum-staatliche-museen-zu-berlin?hl=de.

Fig. 1: *Gottheit Goddess Irhevbu or princess Edeleyo, 46,5 x 22,6 x 18,7cm, 10 kg, © Ethnologisches Museum der Staatlichen Museen zu Berlin – Preußischer Kulturbesitz / Martin Franken (CC BY–NC–SA) http://www.smb-digital.de/eMuseumPlus?service=ExternalInterface&module=collection&objectId=210445&viewType=detailView*

Fig. 2: *Dancing putto with a Tambourine, 36,2 x 14,7 x 16,2 cm, 8 kg, © Skulpturensammlung und Museum für Byzantinische Kunst der Staatlichen Museen zu Berlin – Preußischer Kulturbesitz / Antje Voigt (CC BY–NC–SA) https://smb.museum-digital.de/index.php?t=objekt&oges=140462*

In these two pictures, we see one statue representing European cultural tradition, and another representing African tradition: a brass *Putto with Tamburin* by Donatello, from the font of the baptistery of an Italian cathedral from around 1429, and a copper alloy statue by an unknown sculptor from the Kingdom of Benin in the sixteenth or seventeenth century. One figure is meant to be viewed from every angle, the other one only frontally. One has its inventory number (III C 10864) written directly on its back; the other has it hidden discreetly on its socle. Both were bought on the British art market in the twentieth century, and later entered museums in Berlin. The putto was sold by the renowned art dealers Marks & Durlacher, based in London. It was gifted by Wilhelm Bode in 1902, and went into the sculpture collection of the Neues Museum and, later, into the Kaiser-Friedrich-Museum, dedicated to European antiquities.

The Benin sculpture was acquired by the Kunstkammer von Brandenburg-Preussen (which roughly translates to the "Curiosity Room of Brandenburg-Prussia"),[18] and was later added to the Africa-Department of the Museum für Völkerkunde. This particular sculpture of goddess Irhevbu or princess Edeleyo was brought to Berlin by collector William Downing Webster, together with approximately 170 other objects. To collect these objects, Webster traveled around Britain, gathering them from soldiers who took part in the infamous Benin Expedition of 1897.[19] In this incident, the centuries-old Kingdom of Benin was annexed by the British colonial army and its royal palace was looted. Most of the looted objects were auctioned off and are now scattered worldwide.

Biro has highlighted how being acquired by an art museum or an ethnographic museum has a great impact on an object's value and interpretation. In the exhibition catalogue, Chapuis, Fine, and Ivanov feature such differentiations, as they are realized by institutions, as their central topic. They provide us with some background knowledge: "usually, ethnographers are occupied with the cultural context and human interactions manifested in such objects. This way, the objects often represent something much bigger than they would by themselves. Traditionally, an art museum tries to display the development of a visual artform, like sculpting, by collecting a representative selection on this development" (Chapuis, Fine, & Ivanov, 2017, p. 9; translation mine). Their juxtaposition of objects illustrated this and explored notions of a shared global art history. However, the exhibition might have been far more original if the curators had considered that the display itself had been developed for objects of European art. Until modernism, European art showed strong historical links with

[18] For the history of Kunstkammer, see Dolezel, 2019.

[19] The British Museum owns about nine hundred objects from the Kingdom of Benin. The Benin Dialogue Group, which includes the Royal Court of Benin and the Edo State Government, was founded to deal with the presence of all these objects in museums worldwide. In a 2019 press release, they proposed to build a museum in Benin City (for which star architect David Adjaye has been retained): https://grassi-voelkerkunde.skd.museum/fileadmin/userfiles/GRASSI_Museum_fuer_Voelkerkunde_zu_Leipzig/Bilder/Allgemein/Veranstaltungen/Benin_Dialogue_Group/Pressemitteilung_des_Treffens_der_Benin_Dialogue_Group.pdf. The government of Nigeria filed two claims for restitution in Germany in 2019. Until the museum opens, a working group, including Jonathan Fine, will be working on the online platform *Digital Benin*, a digital archive that will bring together object data from all over the world. The website's launch is scheduled for 2022: http://www.digitalbenin.org.

Christianity and aristocratic representations of political power. This religious context is essential to traditional, premodern European art, similarly to African art: a spiritual function compromises their potential status as artworks (LaGamma, 2012, p. 33)—and a display needs to secure their autonomy. This is evident in the case of the putto, which had been taken out of its religious ensemble, similar to the Kota reliquary mentioned before.

Unfortunately, this exhibition neither included voices from the source communities, nor cooperated with curators connected with them. In the same vein, Chika Okeke-Agulu, in his comment on Western art history and globalization, envisions the rise of a global art history:

> The second alternative, the more optimistic one, will be the rise of a global art history constituted not so much through a diffusion of Western art history as through the formation of several, parallel or contradictory, art historical models and methodologies, each a product of specific cultural and political histories and ideologies. Much less certain than the first, but clearly more accommodating of difference, this future art history will mean a true dialogue across intellectual cultures rather than the expectation that only the ones originating from the West could define the parameters and scope of art history across the globe. (2009, p. 207)

Notwithstanding these limitations, one interesting approach of the exhibition is that of exploring new temporalities, historicizing African art, and making space for African objects. Until the 1920s, the exhibition's Benin Bronze had not been displayed on a socle as a unique artwork, but in a vitrine crammed with other objects, as in fig. 3. In comparison to this display, figs. 4 to 6 illustrate the development of display practices over the decades, with a visible change in the 1920s, when museums opened to the general public. Commenting on such changes, Clifford concludes, "Museums routinely adapt to the tastes of an assumed audience—in major metropolitan institutions, largely an educated, bourgeois, *White* audience. National sensibilities are respected, the exploits and connoisseurship of dominant groups celebrated" (1997, p. 209).

Fig. 3: *Museum für Völkerkunde, Berlin. Exhibition Afrika department; Benin. before 1914. © Ethnologisches Museum der Staatlichen Museen zu Berlin – Preußischer Kulturbesitz (CC BY–NC–SA) http://www.smb-digital.de/eMuseumPlus?service=ExternalInterface&module=collection&objectId=800622&viewType=detailView*

Fig. 4: *Museum für Völkerkunde, Berlin, Afrika exhibition. ca. 1926. © Ethnologisches Museum der Staatlichen Museen zu Berlin – Preußischer Kulturbesitz (CC BY–NC–SA) http://www.smb-digital.de/eMuseumPlus?service=ExternalInterface&module=collection&objectId=754909&viewType=detailView*

Fig. 5; *Exhibition Afrika department; Benin. after 1926. © Ethnologisches Museum der Staatlichen Museen zu Berlin – Preußischer Kulturbesitz (CC BY–NC–SA) http://www.smb-digital.de/eMuseumPlus?service=ExternalInterface&module=collection&objectId=754920&viewType=detailView*

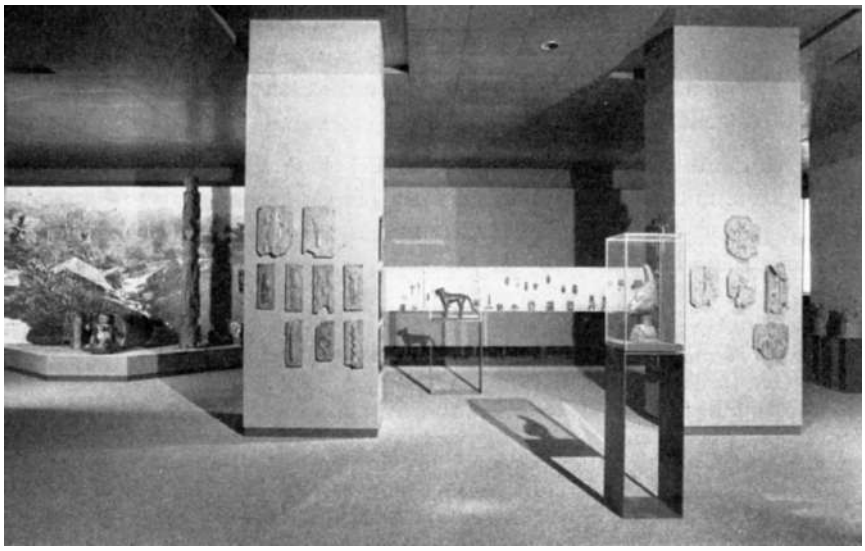

Fig. 6: *Exhibition Afrika department; Benin. 1973. © Ethnologisches Museum der Staatlichen Museen zu Berlin – Preußischer Kulturbesitz (CC BY–NC–SA) http://www.smb-digital.de/eMuseumPlus?service=ExternalInterface&module=collection&objectId=808009&viewType=detailView*

Bringing these two sculptures together at the Bode-Museum's entrance concealed the decision that objects of European provenance would not find their way into the ethnographic section of the Humboldt Forum. This is the only moment the putto and the princess/goddess shared a space, although it was not the first time Donatello's craft was used to reflect on the aesthetic qualities of a sculpture of African provenance. The first time Donatello's craftmanship became a benchmark for African art was in the 1930s, when construction workers accidentally dug up more Ife heads at the Wunmonije compound; as a result, Western art historians learned that the sculptors of the Kingdom of Benin had adopted the lost-wax technique from the Yoruba sculptors of Ife. American anthropologist William Bascom, who acquired two heads for himself—one of which greatly resembles Hirst's *Golden Head (Female)* (cf. the image in *Nigeria Magazine* issue 37, 1951, p. 22)—wrote about their sophisticated artistry, like Donatello's, in the *Illustrated London News* in 1939. The exhibition at the Bode-Museum failed to address this colonial tradition of comparing objects of African and European provenance. In contrast to this, in these examples we can observe the objects' own agency in disrupting Western perceptions and categories, bearing their own terms and rules for being looked at; people just need to listen.

Nonetheless, this combination of findings supports the conceptual premise that this approach privileges the judgments of the Berlin public—a public presumably primed by visiting ethnographic museums and looking at African objects as inspirations for modern art. In the catalogue, the curators underline how African art should not be regarded within a framework developed with and for European art history. The curators propose to look more closely at characteristics like the object's materiality and the assemblage of materials, participative and immersive forms of performing the objects, the amalgamation of signified and signifier, and concepts of authenticity and artistry that are not based on single objects but repetitions (cf. Chapuis, Fine, & Ivanov, 2017, p. 16). These theoretical reflections suggest several courses of action for the reconfiguration of display practices in postcolonial and future museums. The search for non-representational practices for objects is addressed in the heated debate over a new definition of what a museum is or could be. The display employed at Bode-Museum did not interrupt or redirect the White gaze, but facilitated colonial readings anew. That might not have been the curatorial team's intention; their approaches, however, overlooked how the legacy of Western display practices contribute to this as well.

Conclusion

This article has examined how different exhibition displays and museums frame objects as art or artifact. The popular and currently ongoing transformation of colonial ethnographic museums into places of non-European and global art history is mirrored in Hirst's mocking of a museum of so-called "world cultures." These transformations into postcolonial museums provoke criticism for the persistence of epistemological violence and, of course, in light of pleas for the repatriation of all looted objects remaining in the possession of European museums. Further artistic and curatorial research on museum display practices must be undertaken to broaden our understanding of the reframing and remediation of objects. In regard to Hirst's appropriation, I looked into the broader context of exhibitions dealing with colonial display practices. Historically, objects of African provenance have oscillated between

being categorized as either "art" or "artifact." Artifacts are displayed in dioramas, *Wunderkammern*, or vitrines, and were thus representations of otherness; in contrast, artworks are displayed in white cubes that strip objects of their inherited meaning, context, and function, reframing them for aesthetic contemplation and pleasure. The Bode-Museum's exhibition framed all the objects as artworks, grouping them to shed light on what the curators consider "universal" human themes, but ultimately gave insufficient background information on the objects subject to this narration. As Vogel and Biro have shown, both forms of display practice come with a legacy of colonial epistemological violence. They have explored how colonial institutions play a part in the art/artifact distinction, and how the idea of the autonomy of artworks consequently ignores the historical and social situatedness of objects. This challenges the development of a non-Eurocentric framework for African art and art histories. They have tried to resolve the traditional distinction between display practices for artworks and those for artifacts, to denaturalize these categories, and to deconstruct the White gaze.

This paper set out to explore how a colonial legacy is manifested in Western display practices, and how curatorial and artistic research projects deal with this legacy. The relevance of displays for the dichotomous categorization of objects as either artworks or artifacts is clearly supported by the findings of Hirst, Vogel, Biro and Chapuis, Fine & Ivanov. Taken together, the observations and analyses of this study suggest that the transformation of museums is linked to the reframing and remediation of objects by artists and curators, leading to the question of what art is or could be in a globalized art field. There is, therefore, a definitive need for future artistic and curatorial research to further deconstruct and disrupt these Eurocentric categories, and to find new categories that can do justice to the many African cultural heritages. Unfortunately, being limited to large-scale exhibitions in Western contexts, this study lacks African and Afro-diasporic perspectives that address practices for displaying objects of African provenance and provide more nuanced art histories. After visiting Black museums in the US (2019, with Cornelia Kogoj), Kravagna points out how Hampton University's museum has always been a place for reframing objects of African provenance:

> As a crossroads of minority histories and as a space of intelligent linkage of their politics of liberation, the museum produces a wealth of aesthetic experiences, which, in contrast to the promotion of exoticizing gaping at many anthropological museums, actually produces knowledge. Along with a clear political framing of relations between the parts of the collection, the reconnection of all narratives to the place of their narration and its history forms the second foundation of a museum experience in which enthusiasm for great artworks is not always immediately thwarted by the unease that the inequity of ethnographic collections usually triggers. (Kravagna, 2018)

Hence, it follows that a stronger focus on the display practices of museums on the African continent and Black museums in the diaspora promises to produce interesting findings about possible responses to how displays have been entrenched in coloniality, and thus to work with that legacy and account for a critical reconfiguration of such dichotomous categorizations as "artwork" or "artifact." I had planned a research trip to Dakar, Senegal for May 2020, to visit

the Musée des Civilisations Noires, which sadly had to be canceled due to the current global pandemic. Hopefully, I will be able to revisit these research questions on another occasion, when visiting the numerous museums of the African continent, e.g the planned Edo Museum of West African Art in Benin City, Nigeria, and the Zeitz Museum of Contemporary Art Africa in Cape Town, South Africa. These new museums amplify the need for the restitution of African objects so that they can draw from vast collections of art and material culture on the continent—and translate pasts into futures.

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