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“What if we could trust the ground under our feet?” Museums as spaces of rootedness and response-ability

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Museological Review, Issue 27

What if we could trust the ground under our feet? Museums as spaces of rootedness and response-ability

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Foreword

Welcome to issue 27 of Museological Review. 'What if we could trust the ground under our feet? Museums as places of rootedness and response-ability'1.

When we chose to consider the question for which this edition is titled, we had no idea just how much more urgent it would become in the intervening months. The continued rise in far-right ideology and nationalisms; the repeal of rights once thought to have been decisively realised; the growing wealth disparity and instability of economic circumstances; the continued spectre of health crises like COVID-19: all of this, and so much more, has led us back to the question of care time and time again.

What if we could trust the ground under our feet? We find ourselves asking this in the face of political unrest. **What if,** we ask in the shadow of war and genocide. **What if**, as we are confronted daily with the effects of a changing climate that has left many of us mourning the environment and life rhythms we once knew.

In the face of such change and loss it might feel impossible to foreground connectedness, care, sustenance, concern, responsibility and response-ability. It does not feel out of place to point out that we, the editors of this issue are two women and a non-binary person talking about care and community in a time of deep uncertainty, a time in which it is harder and harder to envisage— or even understand— what it means to be rooted in something.

Or does it? There are as many ways to be rooted as there are functions of roots in the natural world from which we draw imagery, vocabulary, metaphor, and meaning. Roots dig deep—to anchor a plant against harsh conditions, to seek out nutrients, to grab the substrate of dirt and rock and strengthen it against erosion. Roots spread wide—to connect plants to one another, to build an environment for others, to carry messages and resources far beyond what an individual plant could achieve on its own. When we think about roots, we think about the first ones— the plants whose fungal partners, the mycorrhizal organisms with whom they live and grow to this day, allowed them to live on land. Roots bear evidence to the truth that no one has ever survived alone. Rootedness is to be in community.

[1] The inspiration for this provocation came from the book "What if the ground under your feet cannot be trusted" published by the Chilean artistic collective Border Agency. It is both a meditation on the recklessness of modernity and capitalism, and an urgent call to focus on the need to rehabilitate and rediscover those places and temporalities hijacked by the rhythms and mechanisms of modern science.

It makes sense, then, that the words 'root' and 'radical' both stem from the latin 'radix', their shared etymology a testament to their shared qualities. Rooted, as in far-reaching. Radical, as in deep and fundamental. We set out to find museological practices that are both rooted and radical— practices that nourish and sustain, that take but also give, that happen in alliances for modest recuperations for living in the ruins of capitalism while doing the situated work of composing and sustaining new futures. We began searching for responses and response-ability, reaching out as if with roots of our own.

What if. This issue contains examples not only of how the wounds of the past live on, but how they can be repaired. How we can remain response-able to each other in the present. And how we can continue to secure the ground future generations will live on. The variety and diversity of contributors exemplify that the call for care, the call for hope, is also a call to action. As Rebeca Solnit so eloquently put it "Hope is not a lottery ticket you can sit on the sofa and clutch, feeling lucky. It is an axe you break down doors with in an emergency. Hope should shove you out the door, because it will take everything you have to steer the future away from endless war, from the annihilation of the earth's treasures and the grinding down of the poor and marginal" (Hope in the dark, the untold history of people power).

What if we could trust the ground under our feet?

Each entry within this journal asks this question in some way or another. How are museums recomposing the commons, engaging in the kind of place-making that can make it possible to trust the ground under our feet?

As we considered ways to categorise and organise the submissions for this issue, we noticed how each piece communicated a feeling or a sense of "past", "present" and "future". We approach these temporal conditions fluidly, detached from a conventional, linear understanding of time and space. While some papers reference specific chronologies or periods in the past, their concerns remain as pressing and urgent as ever. Other contributions reflect on our present moment and imagine possible futures, all while honouring and acknowledging diverse histories, cultures, and legacies. All of these articles speak to our "past", "present", and "future". Rootedness, then, becomes transtemporal. Here, it encompasses everything at once: archive, memory, experience, caring, learning, and hope.

Starting the section dedicated to the **PAST**, **Magali Wagner** presents an interview with Margaux Schwab, creator of 'foodculture', a platform founded in 2017, in Vevey,

Switzerland, aiming to share and build knowledge around food as a medium for convivial practices of nourishment for all species. **Poornima Sardana's** paper reflects on the role of community-based museums as spaces of resilience and reciprocity in India. She considers these museums both as responses to institutional challenges and as catalysts of further change.

While **Angelo Rafael da Luz** explores the expansion of Centre Pompidou to Brazil alongside the wider contexts of art in South America and the exoticising or othering of South American art in a global context. The author places these alongside an institutional history of Centre Pompidou to ask questions about value and agency in the contemporary art world, **María Eugenia López-Garcia** writes about the value of community-led organisations in preserving memory and creating new ways of interacting with contested heritage, as seen with regards to Museo Mayachen on the border of Mexico and the United States.

Towards the end of the section, **Dr Sampurna Chakraborty** examines how Rabindranath Tagore's vision for Kala Bhavana, the fine arts institute of Visva Bharati University in Santiniketan, created a unique educational space that functioned as both a living campus and an organic museum. Through its innovative architecture, outdoor sculptures, murals, and integration with nature, the campus challenged colonial models of art education and museum display, creating an environment where art was experienced as part of daily life rather than through formal exhibition spaces. This approach is now being negotiated as the site gains UNESCO World Heritage status and increasing tourist attention.

Finally, **Arya Adityan** presents research on how ritual objects from Bhūta Kola, an annual festival in India's Tulu region, are transformed when displayed in Western museums. Through analysis of collections at major US and European museums, the author explores how these sacred objects—masks, breastplates, and anklets used in spirit possession rituals—lose their original religious and cultural context when exhibited primarily for their aesthetic value, raising important questions about how indigenous religious artifacts should be curated and interpreted in Western museum spaces.

As part of the **PRESENT**, **Anna Helfer** reflects on the history of Senegalese paintings through an interview with Ken Aicha Sy, a Senegalese-French curator based in Dakar. Ken Aicha Sy's curatorial research project, SurvivalKit, aims to create a special tool for approaching the history of contemporary Senegalese art from the 1960s to the 1990s, **Muriel Damien** considers museums as therapeutic spaces in a world where crises of time and attention are increasingly prevalent. The author interrogates museums'

therapeutic potential through a pilot project conducted with Musée L in Louvain-la-Neuve, Belgium, and **Isabel Collazos Gottret** shares her review of the community museum of Traditional Medicine of Huancollo, Bolivia, by approaching rootedness through three different approaches. In her account, this community museum weaves together Indigenous knowledge with contemporary heritage-making strategies.

Marie Dewey critically examines the physicality and architecture of museums. The author asks if ICOM's recent definition of museums is realistic or aspirational— and considers how museums can grow into the definition while inhabiting their current architecture. **Weiling Deng, Sara Velas, Ruby Carlson,** and **Jonathan Banfill** examine how the garden behind LA's Velaslavasay Panorama museum represents a "feral" approach to museum-making that challenges traditional institutional models. Through its organic development, repurposed materials, and collaborative community engagement, the garden functions as both a living archive of local history and an experimental space that blends art, nature, and neighborhood life. The authors argue that this "more-than-panorama museum" offers an alternative to Hollywood's corporate spectacle by fostering grassroots connections and embracing the messy, collaborative process of creation.

Dr Laia Anguix-Vilches's article examines the evolving relationship between museums and fossil-fuel industry sponsorship, highlighting how climate activism and public pressure have led many institutions to end long-standing partnerships with oil companies. While some major museums still maintain these controversial relationships, there is growing recognition that fossil-fuel sponsorship may damage institutional credibility and conflict with museums' increasing focus on environmental responsibility and sustainability. Concluding the **PRESENT** section, **Dr Luise Reitstätter** and **Karolin Galter's** paper examines how a citizen board initiative with five Viennese museums revealed the gap between museums' aspiratory mission statements of dialogue and inclusion, and visitors' actual experiences, highlighting the importance of developing institutional listening skills to better serve diverse public needs through a series of accompanied museum visits and post-visit surveys.

Arantxa Ciafrino and **Pedro Gonçalves'** article examines the complexities of decolonial initiatives in Brazilian museums, focusing on the exhibition "Decolonial Brazil: Other Stories" at the Museu Histórico Nacional. While the museum attempts to address its colonial history through textual interventions and reinterpretations of objects, the author argues that true decolonization requires more than narrative revision. Drawing on Nêgo Bispo's concept of "counter-colonization" and experimental museology, the

article suggests that meaningful change requires active community participation and alternative forms of knowledge-making, rather than top-down institutional reforms funded by European organizations. In the **FUTURE**, **Chiara Cecalupo's** reflective paper explores the Bora Museum in Trieste, discussing collaborative projects developed in partnership with local communities in Trieste and recent interactive experiences happening at the museum, and **Erika Grasso** and **Stefano Porretti's** article considers two community-based projects and workshops recently developed by the MAET - Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography of the University of Turin, delving into participatory museology and practices. **Anne Bessette** and **Anaïs Roesch** examine how museums address the climate crisis with regards to their own institutional responses to eco-activism and civil resistance.

Julia Wintner's article reflects on instances of collaboration and community during her time teaching at the Srishti Manipal Institute of Art, Design and Technology. **Dr.-Ing. Radoslava Guirguinova's** paper examines museums as a source of civic literacy in the face of multifaceted crises. She uses two case studies, Futurium in Berlin and Theodor-Heuss-House in Stuttgart, to highlight the unique potential of museums to inform and facilitate discourse on democracy and its future. **Anna Calise's** investigation showcases how digital technologies, particularly NFTs and augmented reality, can help communities reclaim looted cultural heritage and build new connections to their past. Using the case study of the CATPC White Cube museum in Congo and their creation of NFTs based on the Balot statue (held by a Virginia museum), the article demonstrates how digital tools can empower marginalised communities to challenge traditional museum authority, create new artworks that address colonial heritage loss, and engage local people in cultural preservation and meaning-making.

What if?

We are scared, we are in mourning, we are uncertain about so many things. We are determined, we are in community, we are certain about so much more.

Victoria Guzman Monge

C. M. Wilson

Caroline Fucci

"DEVOURING THE SOIL'S WORDS" – MARGAUX SCHWAB FROM 'foodculture days' IN VEVEY ON MULTISPECIES CURATING AS GROUNDED PRACTICE AND ENTANGLED METABOLISMS

Magali Wagner

Art historian, curator, and cultural practitioner with a background in museology, comparative cultural studies, and exhibition analysis. PhD-candidate in the SNSF research project "Mediating the Ecological Imperative: Modes and Formats of Engagement" at the University of Bern (2021-24).

Abstract Founded in 2017 in Vevey, Switzerland, by Margaux Schwab, 'foodculture days' is a publicly funded cultural format that provides a platform –understood in the broadest sense of institutional framing– to share and build knowledge around food as a medium for convivial practices of nourishment for all species. By fostering longstanding relations and collaborations between local practitioners, such as farmers, cooks, gastronomes, winemakers, activists, and gardeners, with a globally interconnected network of artists, scientists, philosophers and researchers, the complexities of environmental and social justice in the realm of food are addressed in different strands and activities of the initiative. Its main project, a ten-day long festival that emerges every two years in the town of Vevey, is a moment of reflection, gathering and dialogue that allows the public and practitioners involved to rediscover the urban space and everyday locations, such as markets, streets, cafes, shops, agricultural initiatives, museums, and galleries, from a perspective where food, art and ecology intersect. Our conversation about the emergence, the different strands of 'foodculture days' and their vision for the future is based on a shared conviction that cultural programming attempting to address global topics rooted in a local context and focussing on more-than-human timescales and process-oriented art practices needs formats within different spacial and temporal regimes. **Keywords: multispecies curating, radical hospitality, conviviality, grounded practice**

Interview

MW: How did it start? What led you to create 'foodculture days' and which different strands does the initiative encompass?

MS: Honestly, it started out of frustration and the need to create a space for experimentation. First, I have always been passionate about hospitality. That's why I decided to study at École Hôtelière in Lausanne. But I was disappointed by the business approach of the curriculum that didn't allow to address hospitality in a broader sense: as collaborative practice or addressing environmental issues. Secondly, I always have been interested in going to museums, galleries and exhibitions, but it often felt like entering spaces that belong to a closed circle. When I moved to Berlin, I discovered a multicultural,

experimental environment with a lot of different art communities and practices around food. Through food as a medium, but also as a subject of research, many conversations were initiated and the spaces felt a lot more convivial, open, and horizontal. The subject of food speaks to almost everyone even if we all have very different relations and access to it. This was an important insight, especially being Swiss-Mexican. In Switzerland one usually respects the status quo easily as we are all aware that we are rather privileged in this country. Why would we complain? I found that food was an amazing way to talk about concerns that I had for some time without necessarily using the language of a political discourse at first. In 2017, one and a half years after I arrived in Berlin, I started with 'foodculture days'. The initial idea was to broadcast the multiplicity of artistic research-based practices around food and nourishment in a yearly recurring festival which was a first in Switzerland. But realising a festival and being attentive towards ecological questions was complex in terms of production, curation and relationship building. This is why the two-year rhythm established rather quickly. For the time in between we started to concentrate on research- based grants. With Covid, through a "transformation in culture" grant, we got the opportunity to start our digital editorial format Boca A Boca ("word of mouth"), where we invite a guest editor, someone from our network who's perspective sparked some interesting conversations or insight, to assemble articles and multimedia content in a cycle dedicated to one specific question or perspective that might be complementary to ours. The format allows for a certain depth and to share our thinking processes with our international audience, in contrast to the event character of the local festival.We also started some perennial projects on the territory, i.e. the urban orchard and a project called "The Planetary Wheat Field" with the artist Alexandra Baumgartner in cooperation with the city of La Tour-de-Peilz and a school.

MW: Could you explain this project in more depth? It is an interesting example of what multispecies curating, as a practice that is not only centred around human perception and timelines but incorporates or is attentive to other species, means concretely.

MS: It was a project following the whole cycle of wheat – the most widely consumed grain – in an urban context. We set up a field in a public park and invited inhabitants, gardeners, school children, wheat experts and artists to partake in the manual labour of growing wheat over the course of nine months. An educational programme was built around that, bringing together knowledges about the grain from different strands, such as social science, farming, and baking, as well as fostering artistic approaches. It was a big project that required a lot of (personal) investment, and constant care. Not only does tending to the field require regularity and presence, but so does involving all partners, explaining the project to people passing by and to funding bodies. We learned a lot about the aliveness of the matter, the wheat plants, – bringing up questions as who is working

for whom? But also, about the aliveness of a project that involves a lot of different people and exceeds the timeframe of a common cultural event as it is built around the timeline of a different species. You need to have the right infrastructures, more resources and time. The cultural committee of the city did not really understand what was different here and the transformative potential it contained. They had trouble understanding how food can be the subject of a cultural event and how agriculture could be artistic. The project is on pause now, but it was a good trial, and we want to continue in this direction of long-term research-based projects that relate to neighbourhoods or communities in a specific territory.

MW: You mentioned the aliveness of the matter. With conversations around the institution of the museum and its definition and handling of objects as passive and stable, the practice of preservation is starkly contrasted if you bring food into this context. Food is not stable at all, it is all about transformation of matter; you cannot own and exhibit it. It is meant to be shared and depends on multispecies contacts and collaboration, in the broadest sense – from soil microbes to microorganisms to gut bacteria.i What are your thoughts and experiences with that?

MS: The notion of the museum as something that is freezing things in time and is trying to preserve often by using practices and chemicals that attempt to keep species away that feed on them is very interesting. If you think about traditional practices of preserving food, there is so much aliveness, i.e. in a fermentation process. It is more a working-with than a working-against. In general, if you think about food in that sense, it evades all demarcations.ii The act of ingestion is something very intimate. The outside becomes part of your inside daily and is shaping your inner landscape. It is also shaping the outer landscape in a very tangible way, because our decisions in terms of what we consume is shaping what and how we are planting and producing which is sculpting the territory. In an ecological vocabulary one could say: how we tend to our world or to our environments is how we tend to ourselves. It is the same. The relationship to material becomes different. Some of the artists we work with tell us "My project is a success when there is nothing left." I think it is powerful to think about the impact of the ephemeral and its potential. Most of the artists working with food are very conscious about these things. You must consider the cycle of waste, storage, hygiene, the hunger and moods of people, taste and spiciness, timing of preparation and serving, language that tells stories or highlights certain dimensions of the dish. But what's also important to emphasise here: I don't want to romanticise food as this universal force that connects everyone and everything. We experience it very differently due to global systemic reasons and power dynamics. A dish can be nevertheless an entry point to understand these global dynamics, especially when it is rooted in a local context.

The tension between the local and the global is oftentimes a challenge when you try to change something but in bringing different people, practices, and regions together I see also a lot of potential and possibilities, also get into conversation with marginalised communities.

MW: Can you speak a bit more about this potential? What kind of exchanges or interactions induced your initiative so far?

MS: I think there are two layers. First, the encounters that are possible in the condensed moment of the festival. You can come and have access to many types of knowledges, people from different fields and with a certain expertise. There is no agenda. You can just come for a day and taste, see, listen to, and exchange with who or whatever sparks your attention. The relaxed atmosphere is very fruitful and vital. We have people who met at 'foodculture days' and opened a restaurant together. Others started to meet having a meal once per month and might come up with ideas there. This is already an amazing outcome for a cultural event. Second, the collaborative aspect with projects that intentionally bring people from different backgrounds together, i.e. a sound artist and a farmer. Both sides have a certain knowledge, perspective and interest and it can be very powerful for both parties to discover new aspects through an exchange. I think it is very potent to say everyone is an expert in something and to observe what types of knowledge have been made invisible through history, also from a feminist perspective if you think about the domestic realm. If you take the knowledge of a recipe book, knowledge that you can find in songs or dances, there is a lot of potency in valorising those types of knowledge and combine them with scientific insights, artistic or artisanal practices.

MW: 'foodculture days' is a platform, a container that allows these exchanges to happen. I would like to know more about your vision for the future, but also about the realities of fundings. You already mentioned that some funding bodies didn't understand the connection between agriculture and art, and even less what this means in terms of timescales and resources.MS: Our role shifted through the years, and this is where our vision and the realities of funding come together. It is not so much about showing the multitude of artistic practices around food anymore, as it is about questions of how we can provide an infrastructure that can host artists and interdisciplinary, process-based projects with decent resources and good working conditions. After focusing seven years mainly on the public's needs, which will always remain a priority for me, we would like to focus now more on the artists' needs in terms of creative sustenance as the art world is very precarious. The good thing is that we can apply to different types of funding with our approach. What is lacking nevertheless are funding structures that are decidedly interested in these different modes of working. So far, we are balancing a lot of short- term funds and are trying to anticipate the dynamics of irregular rhythms, also in terms of

uniting the various strands of the initiative. We could see how this creates precariousness in many ways. Right now, we are in a moment of consolidation where we reflect on our practice, the sustainability of it and the monetary realities. We realised it is about scaling down and question the notion of growth and progress. The goal would be to have fewer small and short-term funds in exchange for two or three bigger partners that can support our vision of long-term and process-based projects in different territories. Everywhere people are starting to realise that there is too much, too quick, too superficial. This holds also true for the cultural field. We don't want to be another space that runs on exhaustion. So, how can we be this container where we can address some urgent topics but, in a scale and a rhythm that is accessible and energising for everyone involved? Last year's festival under the topic of "Devouring the Soil's Words" was a good reality check. It was the biggest edition we ever had with a central pavilion at the lakeside, beautiful partners and artists. Somehow it was the edition I had always dreamed of, but we could also see that we're not there yet in terms of resources and being able to sustain that dream. We relied on a lot of voluntary help, which was amazing to receive but should not be the goal. In 2025 it is going to be a much smaller and more concentrated version that hopefully will allow us to live up to our vision. But this is what is great about 'foodculture days', we are small enough to be experimental, agile and flexible. We are like a para-institution that is not very bureaucratic and allows a certain freedom in these kinds of decisions.

MW: In this sense one could say you are trying to translate insights from content to form. I'm thinking here of a text from scholar Maria Puig de la Bellacasa on human-soil relationships and practices of care that are closely linked to a discussion about temporal regimes.iii Ecological soil care approaches exhausted soils as endangered living worlds and is attentive towards the different temporal rhythms of multispecies ecosystems. Taking your last year's curatorial concept of "Devouring the Soil's Words" seriously is then exactly picking up on questioning the anthropocentric fast-paced rhythm our world is currently caught up in and advocating for the integration of alternative modes of being and operating. Which brings me to another very interesting aspect of the situatedness of your initiative: Vevey is also the location of Nestlé's world headquarter. As one of the global players in the realm of food it epitomises the extractivistic, progressive, productionist and restless mode of technoscientific futurism Bellacasa describes. It literally stuck a fork into the Lake in Vevey and opened the Alimentarium in 1985, coined to be the first food museum, in a historical building at the lakeside. They are a very important and prominent player in the region. You don't position yourself against Nestlé, but you're offering an alternative. 'foodculture days' is a network that is growing around it. A lot of people from the region or the city that have a different vision how to interact with the world engage in your initiative. How would you describe the relationship or tension with this global player in town?

MS: We need to differentiate between Nestlé and the Alimentarium. People have a much more personal relationship to the Alimentarium than they have to Nestlé. Everyone knows someone working for Nestlé, it's a source of income and taxes for the city. One is aware of that. The Alimentarium is something else. Of course it is a branding strategy. But it also has the most beautiful (food) garden in the region, the best location at the lake, they offer cooking classes, school programs and it's a popular spot to celebrate a child's birthday and bake a cake. In terms of reconnecting with the land, with kitchens and food production they are doing a job that our schools are not doing. One must acknowledge that. But there is a big mismatch between the beauty they are presenting and what agenda the company is pursuing – operating within the logics of mass production, taking advantage of the power imbalances of free trade without any concern for human and nature, producing a lot of packaging and waste, and profiting of the invisibility of the ugliness in the agrobusiness' value chain.

MW: Beyond the building's and the garden's beauty, Alimentarium's scenography projects a very cold, deliberately scientific engineering approach towards food with a lot of lab spaces and on the other hand makes use of exhibition displays one knows from anthropological museums to evoke a more personal approach.

MS: The scenography feels very dehumanised and depersonalised to me if you consider how rich and diverse our food landscapes are and how personal food is. Nestlé's logo with the little bird in its nest and the motto "Good food, good life" is no better. One must ask: a good life for whom? What we are trying to live and broadcast with 'foodculture days' is a web of relationships, pluralism and diversity of tastes, species and knowledges, small scale actions within a network of trust, support and solidarity and agro-ecological practices. One way to regain power from the industrial food complex is through our taste, and I'm not speaking about something gentrified, inaccessible, or elitist. Taste is a body intelligence that everyone has but that needs to be cultivated. This is why our approach is to build a community around our initiative that shares values and sensibilities, to trigger encounters that don't necessarily need the initiative as a centre, but can continue on their own. One part is rooted here in the town of Vevey, but the network is international. It's important as a cultural initiative to be rooted in a landscape with partners, with people knowing the project, but at the same time to initiate new conversations by connecting to people, projects and practices from different backgrounds. Connecting to other projects and geographies in this context one learns quickly that it is an exchange and not a translation of the exact same thing or format. It's an important departure from the universalist mindset of taking one formula, one solution and applying it everywhere. It is about sharing experiences and being attentive to the site-specific conditions and realities.

MW: The strength and beauty of a cultural initiative around these topics is that it does not come with a fixed agenda. Addressing food politics can become easily very activistic, which is important. But speaking about the universalist mindset and the rush to find solutions, spaces that open conversations, that allow heightened sensitivities and that build consciousness around certain topics without having a clearly defined goal, might be equally important.

MS: With 'foodculture days' we are not inventing anything new, but we are shifting the focus, asking different questions, and trying new approaches. It became a point of reference. Its sheer existence already brought a lot of reflections on the topic around the importance of food in the cultural and artistic field and inspired some programmes in museums and galleries. Moreover, I really believe that culture is a way to synchronise our bodies, as well as our intellect. Its strength is especially that it is not moralistic or solution oriented. If you think about the planetary crisis we're in, it's safe to say that it is not an issue of lacking information or knowledge, but one of a deeply felt conviction that how we act in and with the world has to change on a very fundamental level. It is crucial to find ways to gather information, understand systemic structures but also to let these insights become part of your being and cultivate them on a small-scale daily basis. If you have a community who is sharing this approach one can change a lot on a regional level. Seeing these exchanges, solidarities, discussions and the motivation to contribute happen on this scale is very rewarding and nourishes our ability to connect to other regions, especially where raising these topics are a personal high-risk and high-stake choice of facing struggles.iv

Endnotes

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COMMUNITY MUSEUMS IN INDIA: ROOTED IN CARE

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Abstract This reflection explores the role of community based museums in India through two communities- the folk artists from Kathputli Colony in Delhi, and the fishermen communities in Mumbai. It illustrates the identity struggles of folk and tribal artists in India, their marginalisation in urban development and the precariousness of their livelihoods, and advocates for community-rooted museums that have a grounding in social justice, enabling ownership and active engagement of these communities. The emergence of community-based museums and grassroots initiatives in India, such as the Tandel Fund of Archives in Mumbai, is presented as a caring and hopeful response.
Keywords: community, museums, identity, ownership, care

"Are we folk artists, or are we poor people?"

A traditional Rajasthani puppeteer, Puran Bhaat would often ask me this question. It was 2013, and I was working with him and his neighboring communities in Delhi's Kathputli Colony. Kathputli Colony was a unique complex of more than twelve communities of indigenous performers and artists, as well as miscellaneous professionals from around India. This included puppeteers, dancers, acrobats, musicians, magicians, bangle makers, rope makers, toy makers, healers, poets, embroidery artists and glass designers, among others. Once nomadic, some of these communities had settled there more than seventy years ago. It was thus an ecosystem enabling continuity of skills, as well as exchange and collaboration. This continuity was supported not only through practice and proximity of diverse communities, but also the contextual architecture. The residents' requirements such as storage, and space for exhibition, practice and performance were met through the functional architecture of houses built by them.

Puran Bhaat's question resonated with the dilemma of the entire Colony. Kathputli Colony's residents represented India in festivals and cultural institutions around the world, but their home was identified as a slum by the city authorities and therefore illegal. Due to this lack of legal status as residents, but with official recognition as heritage practitioners, the Colony found itself in a tangled web of culture, profession, land and urban dwelling identities. Laws against busking in the city further added to their anguish. The artists' struggle for recognition and dignity intensified when the colony was slated for demolition due to a Public-Private Rehabilitation Project supported by the Delhi Development Authority. The proposed

rehabilitation did not consider the residents' particular needs of architecture and open space, and was enacted without any community consultations. I joined the residents as founder of Friends of Kathputli Colony Delhi, a voluntary initiative that brought together diverse stakeholders to understand and support the residents in their demand for a fair rehabilitation. Workshops, lectures and demonstrations were organized so that the Kathputli Colony residents could connect with and share their narratives with the wider public in the city. The initiative also facilitated collaborations and employment opportunities for the artists. During several engagements and community meetings the residents of Kathputli Colony voiced a desire for a museum or museum-like-space at the Colony that would offer work and affirm their place in the city and the nation, recognizing them as official living heritage. Despite many attempts at dialogue with relevant stakeholders, Kathputli Colony was demolished in 2017. The residents now live in transit camps, still awaiting rightful rehabilitation.

"Are we folk artists, or are we poor people?" is not a question that echoes in the transit camp alone, it encapsulates the everyday complexity of folk and tribal artists across India. They navigate through economic and social barriers, market trends, ethnographic studies, a sense of otherness represented in cultural institutions and design and craft development initiatives. They exist somewhere in between these demands and their deeply rooted cultural responses intertwined with their individual perspectives. From dressing in traditional attire to questioning their positioning as frozen heritage1; from wanting to be recognised as contemporary, yet the value of their work derived from being seen as authentic and traditional; from entrepreneurial pursuits to history of patronage, India's landscape of heritage is complex. They are professionals, they are also poor and struggling. They require newer skill sets, such as internet education, marketing and communication, intellectual property rights, creating digital content, yet often they are expected to be grateful for philanthropy that is not responsive and considerate of changing needs. Where can they express their needs?

Meanwhile state-run museums in India are often negligent, even when dedicated to the welfare of particular communities. In 2015, Mithila artist Ganga Devi's mural paintings at Delhi's National Handicrafts and Handlooms Museum were mistakenly painted over during renovation. What is the impact of such a loss on current artists who might be exhibiting their work at the museum? How does it position them in the cultural industry? During Covid 19, an eco-museum in Bhopal dedicated to different tribes and their cultures laid off the very artists from these tribes who depend on it for identity and employment. Where are the museums that can respond ethically and responsibly toward these communities? Where can folk and indigenous artists find reciprocity?

As a researcher, I find possible models in emergent community-based museums in India, such as The Tandel Fund of Archives. Representing the Koli (fishermen) communities of Mumbai, this institution documents and exhibits the community's indigenous knowledge and

sustainable practices. Envisaged as a socially relevant archive, it was initiated because the Kolis did not find representation in the city's official museums. As a grassroots initiative situated within the community, the archive functions with a genuine intent to care, and fosters a sense of pride and belonging, while providing a place for education, conservation efforts and advocacy. It serves as a site for dialogue and solidarity, challenging dominant narratives and reclaiming a place for its communities in the city. Perhaps a similar model of rootedness could be relevant for the Kathputli Colony artists. As they search for their social and professional identities, a museum of this type could offer support by enabling ownership and community cohesion, and providing a sense of belonging and dignity. Perhaps this rootedness in care is what could untangle Puran Bhaat's question by understanding the communities' complex lived realities as a whole, by reclaiming their place as residents and professionals with aspirations.

Notes

1 Often folk and tribal artists are represented as frozen in time, instead of looking at their practice and their lives as responsive to their changing contexts.

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‘THE POMPIDOU OF IGUAÇU’: CULTURAL IMPACT AND RECONFIGURATION OF THE ART SYSTEMS IN SOUTH AMERICA

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Abstract Exploring the history of Centre Pompidou and its global influence within 21st-century art systems, this article analyses its museological model and expansion strategy, focusing on plans to establish a Brazilian outpost in Foz do Iguaçu, located in the triple border area between Argentina and Paraguay. Drawing on recent literature and media coverage, the study addresses soft power relations and the so-called Bilbao Effect as key concepts in this operation. It highlights similarities with the global rise of private art museums and examines the hybrid public-private nature of the enterprise in Brazil. The article compares this initiative to other Centre Pompidou expansions in Spain, China, and the United States, discussing concerns raised by academics in these regions regarding the display of major private collections and public art policies in contemporary South America. Finally, the cultural impacts of this expansion are explored, focusing on the potential homogenisation and exoticisation of local cultures, framed as part of a re-colonial process that commodifies cultural differences.

Keywords: Centre Pompidou expansion, global art systems, Foz do Iguaçu art museum, museological models, cultural impact.

The Centre Pompidou arrived in the Americas! This was the headline featured in the newspaper El País in 2021 (Vicente, 2021), giving an epic tone to the news in the culture section. This headline could be about a French explorer, ‘Pompidou the Great conquered the Americas!’, or announcing the installation of a large automobile factory in the early 20th century: ‘The Pompidou Bigode2 will be the first car produced in the country!’. But this conquest is somehow different. The newspaper refers to the arrival of the first branch of the Parisian art museum in the state of New Jersey, United States, representing the first outpost of Centre Pompidou across the Atlantic. In the same article there was a reference to the brand's subsequent expansion plans, concerning Latin America, considering Colombia and Mexico as hosts.

In a turn of events Brazil came to be the probable destination as the next outpost. The protocol of intention, an instrument that aims to establish initial negotiations between the parties to promote scientific and academic collaboration, was signed in June of 2022 by

the governor of the Brazilian southern state of Paraná. The official press of Paraná announced the agreement between the State and Centre Pompidou (AEN, 2021), foreseeing the construction in Foz do Iguaçu under the name of International Museum of Art of Foz do Iguaçu, a city on the Brazilian side of the triple border with northwestern Argentina and Paraguay, also the location of the Iguazu Falls. This will be the first art museum in the 300,000 inhabitant city and a staple of contemporary art in the most populous border region in South America.

New Jersey and Foz do Iguaçu are part of an extensive expansion plan of the French state-owned brand. Currently, outside of France there are Pompidou units operating in Málaga, Brussels, and Shanghai, with indication of a new branch in Dhahran, Saudi Arabia in the next few years. Since the 2010s, Pompidou has been installing units in different strategic points around the world. The public discourse attached to the projects' promotion is often tied to the tourist, economic, and urban development of the regions that host them, with an emphasis on the expansion of contemporary art, which aligns with the mission of Centre Pompidou. These establishments mean a significant reconfiguration in the contemporary art system's weave of the host countries involved, with a strong knot of binding to the French art systems and its global influence.

Concerning South America, this specific triple border of Foz do Iguaçu (BR), Puerto Iguazú (AR), Ciudad de Leste (PY), is a unique point of intersection. The region has a long history of border conflicts, migrations, free trade areas, organised crime and land claims by indigenous peoples. Foz do Iguaçu also houses a National Park listed as a world heritage site, and is the Brazilian headquarters of Itaipú Binacional, one of the largest hydroelectric dams in the world, which, when constructed between the 1970s and 1980s, caused a total urban and social reconfiguration, wherefrom local communities still face the adversities caused by the environmental impact and exclusionary practices emerging from a construction of that size. This situation will be exacerbated in some respects, such as the inflation of the property market and the gentrification of areas where museums are installed, which directly affects socially vulnerable populations. In addition to these historical circumstances, the worsening climate crisis has also been transforming the art world and its engagement with society. Climate activists have been targeting valuable and iconic works of art to draw attention to the message that there is no art on a dead planet. The development of major museum projects today needs to be rethought in order to align with environmental emergencies in trying to keep the integrity and future of the art world itself.

In terms of art systems, this region is located outside the high-flow axis of Brazilian, Argentinian and Paraguayan contemporary art. This is not to form a centre-periphery

relationship, which in itself reaffirms colonialist traditions, but to point out that in this region there are few initiatives aimed at producing, exhibiting, debating and marketing works of art. Despite the region's commercial potential as a trade zone and the presence of museums dedicated to other sectors of culture, there are no significant spaces dedicated to art. This situation favours the building of an art project from the ground. Therefore an even more significant reconfiguration of the art systems, as further addressed.

In the 21st century museums have been progressively tasked with enabling the examination of themes related to control, influence, possession, as well as the inclusion/ exclusion of particular stories or perspectives. In times of instability and severe world conflicts, the decolonial turn in Brazilian arts (Paiva, 2021) and the global rise of private art museums (Kolbe, 2022), what are the opportunities, risks and consequences to the creation of a new international art museum in that area of South America? Considering the current debates concerning the integration of Latin America as a political and cultural autonomous block (Rubim, 2023), how should a public museological plan be presented to be able to corroborate with the public interest? Can the 'Pompidou of Iguaçu' be considered a public museum?

By approaching these questions this article analyses the possible cultural impact and reconfiguration the installation of the museum may cause to South American contemporary art systems in that region. Through a review of the recent theory, public media sources and news outlets, this research observes how the French state-owned museum keeps establishing the parameters for contemporary art-making and cultural heritage worldwide, and the contrasts with decolonial scenes of resistance and public policies for the arts in South America today. The choice to focus on South America rather than Latin America was made in order to ensure better geographical, political, social and cultural precision based on the historical relations established between the countries of this bloc rather than a wider approach, given that Latin America involves parts of North America and the Caribbean that would need special attention with regard to systemic art issues.

The Model Pompidou

The Centre national d'art et de culture Georges-Pompidou is a French state-owned enterprise popularly known as 'Beaubourg', referencing the Parisian region where its main headquarters is located, given the significant impact of its creation on the urban landscape of the French capital. Beaubourg is also the title of the film by Italian film-maker Roberto Rossellini, released in 1977, the year of the museum's inauguration and coincidentally the film-maker's death, making it his last produced film. The 16 mm film showcases the

magnitude of the modernist building's architecture, constructed by a team of architects selected through a public competition, which interestingly had the renowned-Brazilian modernist architect Oscar Niemeyer as one of the judges. The high-tech architectural project led by Richard Rogers aimed to make the metallic structure of the building apparent, revealing its interior, blending the inside and outside of the construction. This is also a central aspect in Rossellini's film. The film is filled with long shots contrasting architectural details of the new building with the classical landscape of Paris, emphasising the dawn of new times for the city. It also depicts the audience interacting with art works from the first exhibition, featuring pieces by French artist Marcel Duchamp. The film is a tribute to urban development, cosmopolitan culture, and French modern art, illustrating the patriotic sentiment that surrounded the cultural complex's inauguration. The construction of Centre Pompidou was the result of a policy proposed by the French Minister of Culture André Malraux. Approved by President Charles de Gaulle in 1968, the project was adopted by his successor Georges Pompidou, who completed and named the work. For the French capital, the opening of the cultural complex brought together in one space a state-of-the-art library and a modern art museum, along with numerous cultural and artistic activities housed in the building. The success of the project boosted the Beaubourg region, placing it as central on the tourist itinerary and establishing it as another iconic landmark for the city. Currently, the museum boasts the largest collection of contemporary art in Europe and one of the largest globally3. It is also one of the most visited art museums4, solidified as a powerful influence in the field of contemporary art worldwide.

The construction of the French complex in Paris took place almost 30 years before the emergence of what is known as the Bilbao effect, alluding to the iconic building of the Guggenheim Museum designed by architect Frank Gehry in the Spanish city in 1997, which generated a wave of similar constructions around the world from the beginning of the 21st century. The US museum's initiative is similar in terms of using architecture as the flagship of its operation. However it generated an innovation in terms of expanding influence, occupying territory and as a funding strategy. The city, provincial, and regional governments where Bilbao is located would cover construction expenses, and would assist with acquisitions and operational costs. The Guggenheim Foundation would provide its name, artworks from its permanent collections, and oversee management and curatorial services.

The Pompidou model is not limited to, but incorporates market trends that have emerged since the Bilbao Effect, and it has served as a blueprint for previous generations of French politicians. In 1981, Jack Lang, Minister of Culture under François Mitterrand, known as a superstar of French Culture (Bernstein, 1985), was so inspired by this success that he

famously declared 'Culture is the oil of France'. Nowadays, forty years later, Lang's oil analogy sounds problematic before the tension raised by soft power structures in the art world, and exemplifies how art matters are connected to the biggest political issues of our time. It certainly resonates with the numerous attacks on famous artworks that have happened in the last decade in French museums and around the world. In 2023 for instance, protesters from the British environmental activist group Just Stop Oil committed a new attack on Diego Velazquez's 17th century painting The Rokeby Venus (c. 1644 - 1648) at the National Gallery in London, which was famously slashed by suffragette Mary Richardson in 1914.

These attacks on artworks, not intended to harm the physical pieces which are protected by glass, are aimed at the symbolic relevance art has as cultural goods and as monuments of soft power, a term introduced by Joseph Nye in 1990. Nye emphasised this alternative concept of power, which involves persuading others to align with your viewpoint through the cultivation of empathy, admiration or self-recognition. According to Nye, 'Culture both high and low reflects a society's meaning and signals its values, which together with its practices and policies comprise its core soft-power resources' (Nye 2008, pp. 95–96). Art museums therefore have increasingly been perceived as establishments of international soft power in the 21st century, considering their weaving with institutions and governmental instances and the potential of their collections to define main aspects of culture.

The Pompidou model has been refined since its establishment, incorporating new market trends and aligning itself with a Neo-liberal policy of territorial expansion that has become common practice in the global art systems of this century, identified as the global rise of the private museum wave (Kolbe, 2022). Although other similar initiatives already exist in South America, the arrival of Pompidou represents a new format. Considering various aspects such as the ownership of the building, the management model, the ownership of the collection and the different funding sources, it operates in a constant dynamic relationship between the public and private sectors, making the International Museum of Foz do Iguaçu more suitable to a private-public hybrid model (Ibidem, 2022).

The public-private relationship in the museum sector has been the centre of debate over the last decade, pointing to the difficulty of establishing a unified nomenclature. The existence of a hybrid public-private museum blurs the boundaries between these sectors and hinders the transparency of financial operations, making it more difficult to enact public funding policies and putting the interests of the public sector at stake. Although this model is common in countries like the United States (Kolbe, 2022), transferring it to South America risks conflicting with the public policies emerging in the region, which is going

through a time of conflict over the return of democratic interests in the face of the advances of the extreme right, with its strong anti-democratic stance over the past decade (Rubim, 2023:22).

The path leading to South America

The Centre Pompidou's mission is stated as making culture and creation accessible to as many people as possible. However, we must broaden our perspective when considering the concept of culture beyond national borders. In this article the notion of culture is aligned with the scholar Antonio Rubim, a sociologist and professor at UFBA – Universidade Federal da Bahia in Brazil.

> The concept of culture used in the text has an expanded dimension, involving not only heritage and the arts, but also popular or digital cultures, world conceptions, ways of life, world-views, values, etc. The proposition of the expanded notion of culture at the World Conference on Cultural Policies (Mondiacult), held 40 years ago in Mexico City, has made this term increasingly evident in cultural policy studies and practices around the world. The institutional strength of Unesco made this expansion possible, even though expanded notions of culture were already in force in some areas of knowledge, such as anthropology, and had even been developed in some countries in the region (South America) (2022:13).

This concept of expanded culture is relevant to the fact that the Pompidou model is being presented in regions of the world that are very different from each other, with diverse geographical, historical, social and cultural characteristics. In order to avoid the flattening and homogenisation of local cultures, the point of view of expanded culture becomes a necessary transversal analytical tool for the application of this model in such varied areas, as it has been happening.

In 2010 Pompidou opened its first branch in the city of Metz, east of Paris, where it currently exhibits excerpts from its permanent collection. Between 2011 and 2013, there was a project for a mobile art gallery that travelled through regions of rural France in a circus-inspired model, where a tent remained set up for several months at each location, showcasing selected pieces from the museum's collection. In 2015 the operation arrived in Spain. The museum set up a steel and glass structure called El Cubo in Málaga. According to the Spanish newspaper El País, the project cost one million euros per year and was funded by the city of Málaga, in a five-year contract granting the French brand's use and the loan of its collection (Cañas, 2018).

In 2017, the KANAL-centre Pompidou was created in Brussels, Belgium, with financial support from the Belgian government and the French car manufacturer Citroen, as reported on Centre Pompidou's website. This time, the ten-year contract, in addition to granting the brand concession, was supported by an urban revitalisation project in the Brussels region. In a similar format, a branch was established in Shanghai in 2019, the Centre Pompidou x West Bund Art Museum. Both projects are still in operation, thus achieving their initial objectives and strengthening the French Museum as a reference in the contemporary art market.

The West Bund Museum became a significant contemporary art venture in the new century. The project is celebrated by the Chinese government as an important affair with France, as we can read on the West Bund Art Museum website.

> In this perspective, the Centre Pompidou and the West Bund Museum signed a Memorandum of Understanding in 2017. It was taken as the highest-level cultural cooperation project between China and France, and was included in the Joint Declaration between the People's Republic of China and the French Republic in 2018. And in 2019, it opened to the public at the special moment of the 70th anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic of China and the 55th anniversary of the establishment of Sino-French diplomatic relations (West Bund Museum, 2024).

The museum is located in Shangai's West Bund Cultural Corridor (WBCC), a cultural project involving private and public initiative, with massive participation from the Chinese government. The construction of the mega-project, which involves several cultural centres and museums, has had a significant impact on Shanghai's real estate industry, and has raised criticism from local scholars regarding its ambiguous public-private partnerships, the granting of land for the buildings and the central nature of the cultural project, showing private and/or foreign collections (Tu, 2022). These concerns raised about the showing of massive private collections in public spaces resonate with how symbolic power is built within the art systems and its influence on the economic value of the art pieces.

Analysing the Pompidou West Bund Museum's exhibition projects from 2019 onwards, there have been three consecutive semi-permanent exhibitions of highlights from the Pompidou collection, each lasting approximately two years and one year for the current display. These semi-permanent exhibitions were interspersed with exhibitions of contemporary Chinese artists, among other shows. In this format there is a very important aspect of soft power, which is that of comparison and self-recognition. The fixed or semi- permanent reference point is the Pompidou's collection. The entry and exit of other

shorter exhibitions proposes an inevitable comparison, validating Chinese art against the standards set by that collection.

When it comes to the overall value added to cultural goods, including monetary, the biggest profit is on the French side, even if the collection itself is made of international art works. The acquisition of art pieces created by Chinese artists by the Pompidou collection reinforces the logic of soft power, since in the long term it validates the collection more than the artist in relation with their original culture. The Chinese government pays for the production of the works when it supports its artists, it pays for the construction of the museum and the concession of the French brand, and it grants the symbolic value attached to Chinese cultural goods to the Pompidou's collection, which continues to grow and expand its influence.

In 2021 and 2022 respectively, the contracts for brand concession or intention were signed in New Jersey and Foz do Iguaçu. The AEN - Paraná State News Agency announced the partnership with Centre Pompidou in July of that year, as in Brazil the agreement was made by the southern state government, not the national government itself. The article outlines the following:

> Brazil will be the first country in Latin America to establish an agreement with the Centre National d'Art et de Culture Georges Pompidou, from Paris, France, for the construction of an international museum. One of the acting governor's greatest aspirations will come to fruition in Foz do Iguaçu, in the western region, where, on the afternoon of this Monday (27), protocols of intent were signed with representatives from Renault of Brazil, Itaipu Binacional, and the municipality of Foz do Iguaçu (AEN Paraná, 2022).

The process is similar in New Jersey, where there were also issues related to the operation. Community leaders have spoken in the media of the disconnect between the building plans of the museum and local needs. Some information about the funding of the project was published by the New York Times in 2021.

> In signing on to host the Pompidou satellite, Jersey City has agreed to assume the financial burden of renovating the building and operating the museum, which will be called Centre Pompidou x Jersey City. The city will also pay the museum an annual fee that covers project development, branding and the organisation of exhibitions. A spokeswoman for the city said that the city has agreed to pay the museum an annual fee that phases up to $6 million over the course of the contract to cover project development, branding, educational programming and the organisation of exhibitions (Jacobs, 2021).

Similarly to Málaga and New Jersey, in Foz do Iguaçu the Pompidou's proposal is to licence its brand and collection rights for five years in a building constructed with public funds from the host country, with partial funding of private French multinational companies and Itaipú Binacional. The contract renewal is not guaranteed and is tied to the success of public engagement in the project's initial stage, as seen in Málaga. Although not all agreements involve an urban revitalisation project as it did in Belgium, the host cities are subjected to a significant change in the real estate landscape. In Foz do Iguaçu and its region, considering the still-developing urban situation, historically reported social disparities, and the position of triple border, the accelerated increase in housing costs would certainly have a problematic impact on the emergence of new migratory processes. Probabilities such as this must be taken into account since the discourse supporting the museum's establishment is focused on urban development. But here we are faced with the risk of a common historical repetition of the displacement of local communities for the modernisation of urban centres in South America. Urban reconfiguration in favour of development is part of the scope and one of the taglines of the project, but who will be responsible for dealing with the consequences of implementation if the project operates on the blurred boundaries between public and private? In good 'South American' French this feels like a déjà-vu.

The cultural impact in the triple border area

Foz do Iguaçu is a city that was restructured around the construction of the Itaipu Dam just over 40 years ago, an epic project unprecedented at the time. Its construction took place during the 1970s, coinciding with that of the original Centre Pompidou. There is also, similar to the Beaubourg, a government-commissioned film about the dam's construction created by French filmmaker Jean Labib, called "Les Grands travaux du monde: le barrage de Itaipu" (1979). In a cinematic style similar to Rosselini's approach to photographing Pompidou in 1977, Labib's film takes a patriotic look at the grand work of the hydroelectric plant and praises development, a common trait in the propaganda of that decade.

This period encompasses accelerated and disproportionate population growth, massive deforestation, the death of thousands of animal species, climate changes, expropriation of land from riverside populations, numerous environmental crimes reported, and neglect of the region's culture impacts. The construction of a museum is very different from a hydroelectric plant, but forty years is not a lot of time when it comes to cultural recovery from such impactful events which have formed the landscape where the museum is supposed to be constructed, bearing in mind that Itaipu Binacional is one of the project's announced investors.

Historically, the triple border of Brazil, Argentina and Paraguay has been impacted by political, economic, ethnic, social and environmental conflicts that give it a unique degree of complexity. Brazilian social scientists have been pointing to interdisciplinarity as one of the main focal points in border studies, in dialogue with anthropology, geography and history, with the aim of finding an appropriate way of approaching these regions as unique places for the production of meaning, as a museum is fathom to operate.

> (…) In this sense, a relevant starting point is to approach border regions as unique spaces built from multiple relationships of transit and belonging. Border regions between national states can therefore be seen as specific places where meanings, relationships and representations are produced. These places, especially urban spaces, are territories of power, social experiences and movements crossed by short distances between countries and legal limits between territorial sovereignties. They are not isolated places and closed border communities, but spaces of experiences and memories articulated with various scales of regional, national and global interactions (Cardin, E. G.; Albuquerque, 2018).

The border as a place is an intercultural space for the production of identities. Border dwellers constantly live with multiple relations of inequality, and a development project for these areas should seek to minimise the consequences for the community, not strengthen them. As an exhibition plan, keeping an art collection like the Pompidou's on permanent display sets a standard to which temporary exhibitions will be measured against. When South American art is presented in this context, it is placed in a situation of comparison, which in the long term can result in aesthetic homogenisation and the exoticisation of local culture as a side effect. The involvement of curators, artists and creative communities from diverse and representative backgrounds in the triple border area could alleviate this situation. However, the structural problem remains the same, namely the need to use the French brand and collection to propel art in the region. State investment in building a museum, creating educational programmes and acquiring a collection could be implemented directly, without the participation of foreign multinationals. A project based on a decolonial matrix and historical reparation needs more time to prepare and implement, but would have better results.

An important aspect concerning the art system’s reconfiguration is the role of exoticism in the homogenisation of culture in the era of globalisation. The Brazilian Studies Magazine at the University of São Paulo, published a text by Kusuk Yun pointing to this topic. "We wonder then if exoticism, generated by cliché and stereotype, acts as an aesthetic criterion in the contemporary art world, allowing peripheral artists to be more easily discovered by the Western world.' (Yun, 2018:316). She refers to how important institutions in the world

of contemporary art, including the Centre Pompidou, began to promote, after the boom in globalisation in the 1980s, exhibitions that showed a blending of cultures that promised a horizontal vision between countries and continents, a flattening of the cultural landscape. This flattening or homogenisation occurs through what the author defines as exoticism, which reveals a particularly ethnocentric attitude that distinguishes the centre from the margins. The representation of the cultural specificity of "the other" is created by a Western point of view that reduces different cultural landscapes to a tourist vision fantasised by mass media. The installation of a contemporary art museum on the triple border of Foz do Iguaçu needs to set clear goals to prevent the culture of local people being exoticized in favour of tourist propaganda.

Centre Pompidou Foundation's most recent acquisition of work by a Brazilian artist was in 2021. Carta ao Velho Mundo (2018-2019) and Na Terra Sem Males (2021), from contemporary artist Jaider Esbell, of Macuxi origin, have been added to the collection under the indication of Brazilian curator Paulo Miyada, assistant curator for Latin America at the institution. As much as this acquisition should be recognised as important for contemporary Brazilian art, it is worth highlighting the words of Brazilian visual artist and author Jota Mombaça on the re-colonial scenes of valuing difference and how these purchases can represent re-signified colonialist postures.

> Recently, after the 2019 Paraty International Literary Festival (Flip), a headline was repeated several times on Brazilian social media: "Of the five best-selling authors, four are black and one is indigenous". The meaning attributed to this narrative was one linked to the Politics of Representativeness, in which this fact appeared as a sign of the collective "empowerment" of black and indigenous people within the framework of contemporary knowledge production systems. For me, this headline did not fail to evoke, with each appearance, the ghost of value as a device deeply implicated in the arsenal of Raciality (Mombaça, 2021:7).

The author goes on to talk about re-colonial scenes of valuing difference, which include the buying and selling of cultural goods produced by racialised people, or people of origins other than those of Western Europe. It feeds the art systems and is definitely necessary to the survival of the art economy, but the final and biggest profits from these operations and, above all, the added symbolic value, which represents an important part of validation within art systems, continue to be attributed to the museum's maintaining institution. The South American countries are footing the bill to create a new international art museum, but in the long run, what narrative remains in the archives of art history for future generations?

Reflecting on the future, whether in artistic or theoretical practices, is a necessary political action. Brazilian philosopher and anthropologist Eduardo Viveiros de Castro often criticises the Western model of progress and development, proposing that we learn from indigenous cosmologies, which have a more balanced and respectful relationship with the world (Viveiros de Castro, 2002). This awareness can facilitate new strategies for handling present-day problems and foster the rise of art museums that incorporate a forward-thinking epistemology for emerging art.

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Notes

1 MA in Visual Arts with an emphasis on History, Theory and Criticism of Art from UFRGS -Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil, CAPES CNPQ researcher and independent curator.
2 In the year 1919, the Ford auto-mobile manufacturer established itself in Brazil and announced the first car to be made in the country, nicknamed the "Ford Bigode. (moustache), that became very popular within the country's mass culture at the time."
3 The Centre Pompidou's modern art collection has more than 120,000 works of art, making it the second largest in the world, behind only the collection of the Moma - Museum of Modern Art in New York, which has more than 200,000 works, according to the websites of both institutions in 2024.
4 A study of the most popular art museums around the world, published by The Art Newspaper (Cheshire & Silva, 2024), points to the Centre Pompidou among the 20 most visited museums, having received more than 2.6 million visitors in 2023. The National Gallery in London received 3.1 million visitors in the same period.

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BORDER GRASSROOTS MUSEUMS, MEMORY ACTIVISM, AND RADICAL PUBLIC HISTORY: CHALLENGES AND POSSIBILITIES

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Abstract
The El Paso/Ciudad Juárez region has long served as a vibrant contact zone where diverse communities intersect, coexist, and sometimes clash. This article explores Museo Mayachen, a grassroots museum established in 2008 by La Mujer Obrera, a nonprofit organisation addressing the needs of displaced garment workers. The museum was created in response to the lack of Mexican and Mexican American representation in the city's historical narratives and the ongoing gentrification of working-class neighbourhoods. Situated in a former garment factory, the museum serves as a space for preserving community heritage and memory through initiatives like workshops, community assemblies, and a community archive. The article explores how grassroots museums, particularly in contested areas like the U.S.-Mexico border, empower marginalised communities to reclaim and represent their own histories despite the challenges involved.
Keywords: Memory, Community Museums, Representation, Public History

This article explores how grassroots organisations can become vital to developing alternative museological practices, activating collective memory, and fostering community engagement through public history and cultural revitalisation. This exploration examines the formation of a community museum in the United States-Mexico border region, in the city of El Paso, Texas, one of the most unique and complex regions of the world, the locus of neoliberal economic policies, inequality, anti-immigrant rhetoric, and regional disparities. Amidst complexities, this border city is characterised by a thriving cultural life, fostering the surge of social activism and public history movements.

In 2009, La Mujer Obrera (The Working Woman), a local grassroots organisation with a rich history spanning over three decades, inaugurated Mercado Mayapan (Mayapan Mexican Market), a cultural and economic centre, as part of their community development initiatives aimed at creating economic opportunities for women in the border region, particularly those displaced by the maquiladora industry, while also functioning as a cultural hub where neighbourhood residents and visitors could experience the rich heritage and traditions of the Mexican culture and the border region. Strategically situated in a 40,000-square-foot warehouse, the market revitalised a deindustrialised landscape reminiscent of decades of prolific garment manufacturing in the border city of El Paso,

Texas. The choice of the site was a statement to emphasise the power of ordinary urban landscapes that nurture people's public memory and the politics of place construction, public culture, and memory in the process of (re)defining public pasts and (re)claiming what public historian Dolores Hayden refers to the power of place; the power that ordinary urban landscapes hold to nurture citizen's public memory, to encompass shared time in the form of shared territory(Hayden, 1995:9).

A vital component in this effort towards preserving Mexican and Border heritage through the preservation of urban landscapes and activation of public memory was the development of a grassroots museum or community-based museum. The initiative drew inspiration from the concept of 'restorative history,' a term emerging from the grassroots museum movement of the 1950s. This approach sought to reclaim and present a people's history that emphasised the contributions and sacrifices of racialised communities, which had been systematically marginalised in mainstream historical narratives. Also inspiring was the movement's feature that empowered teachers, social workers, civil rights activists, students, and volunteers to lead these museums' direction, coordination, and management. These individuals worked closely with their communities, deeply understanding their needs, and used this insight to raise awareness about the historical, cultural, and economic contributions of marginalised groups to the social fabric of the United States. Moreover, the grassroots model laid the foundation for the concept of a 'participatory museum' (Ruffins, 2022), emphasising the urgency and commitment to view the community as the central actor in preserving and safeguarding its cultural heritage.

This initiative commenced around 2002 and stemmed from various conversations involving a committee composed of long-time labor and community activists, community organisers, workers, neighbourhood residents, and members of La Mujer Obrera (Olvera, 2010). Even though the committee changed throughout the years, the goal remained the same: the creation of a space for the learning of history and culture that engages the community it serves and that acknowledges the presence and history of Mexican and Mexican-American people as a product of centuries of struggle, resilience, and triumph in the border region. i

From its inception, Museo Mayachen—named after an ancient town in the Yucatan Peninsula—was envisioned as a space to preserve and reclaim Mexican and Chicanx working-class memories and voices. It aimed to serve as a tool for fostering self- determination and a sense of belonging within communities grappling with poverty, inequality, displacement, and discrimination. Understanding the pivotal role Mexican and Chicana women garment workers played in shaping the socio-economic landscape of their communities and the industrial fabric of the United States, the museum placed their

memories as the core of this project.ii Their stories, often relegated to the margins, overshadowed by broader narratives of industrial development and economic growth, and forgotten in the context of deindustrialization and capital flight, became the backbone of the museum. This collective remembrance sought to reclaim the 'deindustrial sublime'— the aesthetics of urban abandonment—(Apel, 2015:18) and recover the collective memory of deindustrialization, as it was explicitly embodied in racialised and gendered labor.iii Given this, I suggest that this model of a community museum in a border city expands the practice and experience of cultural citizenship by activating collective memory and transforming industrial ruins into sites of consciousness.

Activating the Memory of Deindustrialization

As a result of the Border Industrialisation Program of 1965, the border city of El Paso, Texas, experienced a significant surge in population, labor force, and job opportunities, primarily driven by the rise of a thriving apparel industry. This growth trajectory was fuelled by significant manufacturers such as Levi Strauss, which established its first plant in El Paso in 1965, employing thousands of young Mexican immigrant and Mexican American women on its assembly lines.

Contrary to the standard narrative of export-oriented development stemming from the Mexican side of the border, the emergence of maquiladoras in El Paso presents a unique variation in the formation of the 'frontera historica' (historic frontier), particularly concerning the fluidity of capital and the regulation of labor across the border. The South Central/ Central area of El Paso became the heart of this burgeoning manufacturing garment industry, earning the city the title of 'the blue jean capital of the world' in the 1980s. Within this dynamic landscape, the stories of the women who worked in these garment factories became intricately woven into the fabric of the South Central/Central barrio. Their resilience, struggles, and daily labor infused vitality into this locality, propelling the broader El Paso economy and the greater U.S. economy.

However, the implementation of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) on January 1, 1994, marked a seismic shift, triggering a dramatic process of deindustrialization that reverberated across the region. The consequences were stark and far-reaching: more than 25,000 workers, predominantly women, were left unemployed, and the South Central/Central barrio fell into disrepair and neglect. Capturing the devastation, both urban and social, of this once-thriving area from the perspective of the women workers whose lives were irrevocably altered by the forces of free trade became a primary focus for the museum. Documenting and restoring visibility to this historically marginalised workforce was essential in reframing the narrative of economic progress and recognising their contribution to the history of labor rights.

A consensus emerged after a series of discussion assemblies involving workers, community organisation members, and the museum's team: the project would begin with a permanent exhibition entitled 'Women in the Garment Industry of El Paso.'iv The exhibition seeks to commemorate these women's contributions to the garment industry by amplifying their voices, illuminating their stories, and fostering a deeper understanding of the complex socio-economic dynamics that have shaped their lives and communities. By centring the voices of women workers, the exhibition sought to directly challenge dominant narratives that often erase the contribution of immigrant working-class communities, particularly women of colour. More than a tribute, it was conceived as an act of historical and memory justice, providing these women a platform to reclaim their place in local and national histories.

Embracing the democratising and community engagement principles of community museology, the museum's team facilitated discussion assemblies where workers could share their stories, challenge dominant narratives, and assert their agency in shaping collective memory. Active participation in the exhibit's curation empowered these workers to engage in processes of self-representation. These processes included creating a timeline tracing women's involvement in the garment industry, linking their labor back to those who worked in laundry services as early as the 1920s, mapping El Paso's changing and decaying industrial landscape, and gathering mementos and memorabilia from their time in the industry. Anthropologist Sherry B. Ortner contends that achieving 'adequate representation of subjects in the attempt to understand resistance' (Ortner, 1995) goes beyond improving portrayals. It entails formulating and executing projects where subjects actively sustain and transform their social and cultural environments - exemplified by the workers who curated this exhibit.

The Intimate Archive of Capitalism

Two crucial elements profoundly shaped the exhibit's design: oral histories, which offered a rich archive of emotions and narratives of struggle, and what the team identified as social sites and objects of memory. These included photographs, documents like diplomas and certificates, work tools like scissors, threads, aprons, video recordings, ephemera, and other artifacts that the workers deemed significant and valuable. These items served as tangible representations of their daily experiences, struggles, and decision-making processes influenced by corporate power, national interests, and the gender logics embedded in the maquiladora industry. Together, they provided a multifaceted lens through which visitors could explore the complexities of these workers' lives and the broader socio-political context in which they operated.

Through oral histories, workers formed a nostalgic connection to a past and place shaped by the intimacies of industrialisation and global capitalism. They played a pivotal role in fostering recognition and inclusion of diverse voices, identities, and memories. As Alicia Schmidt-Camacho articulates in Migrant Imaginaries: Latino Cultural Politics in the U.S-Mexico Borderlands, the testimonies of maquiladora workers illuminate the multifaceted lived experiences of obreras (women workers), transcending their depiction as mere labor inputs (Schmidt-Camacho, 2008:256). Among the many testimonies collected, some recounted their involvement in the historic Farah Strike of 1972-1974, while others expressed loyalty and gratitude to the factory for the financial stability it provided to themselves and their families. Most women shared harrowing accounts of exploitative working conditions, including low wages, strip searches, verbal abuse, and sexual harassment. Yet, contrasting narratives also emerged, highlighting benefits such as health insurance (in Ciudad Juarez, Mexico), Christmas bonuses, and vibrant New Year's celebrations organised by the factories.

Despite the diversity of their experiences, the worker's testimonials converged into a collective memory marked by anger and sorrow when reflecting on their current circumstances. Social sites of memory, such as photographs and documents, provided a visual and material backdrop for their personal accounts and emotional landscapes. These artefacts enriched the narratives, adding historical and cultural context layers to the exhibit. By juxtaposing testimonies with tangible objects from the worker's daily lives, the exhibit aimed to create a more immersive and comprehensive understanding of the complexity of their experiences. Moreover, the emphasis on oral histories and social memory sites highlighted the exhibit's participatory essence. Rather than presenting a static narrative imposed by external curators, the exhibit actively encouraged the workers to shape and contribute to the representation of their history. Drawing from James Scott's concept of the 'hidden transcript' and the emergence of disguised forms of dissent, it becomes evident that these testimonials and the preservation of memory objects provide insight into experiences of subordination, domination, and vulnerability. At the same time, they foster an environment conducive to mutual understanding and solidarity (Scott, 1990: 112), all within the context of displacement from the labor market and the bicultural, transnational lifestyles within a region characterised by violence and precarity.

Currently, displaced workers from the textile industry in El Paso represent a demographic increasingly unlikely to secure reemployment opportunities. The rigid work structure within garment factories hindered the worker's ability to pursue further education or achieve proficiency in English, leaving many unable to integrate into the already fragmented social fabric of El Paso, which poses additional barriers to their reintegration into the community. Compounding their exclusion from the labor force is the detrimental impact of Ford's

repressive automated production system on the health of garment workers in the short and long term. While Devon G. Peña argues that Mexican workers displayed autonomy, resistance, and creativity on the shop floor (Peña, 1997:6), the realities of job specialisation, repetitive tasks, and the fast-paced assembly lines led to significant adverse health consequences. Many workers experience chronic physical and emotional ailments exacerbated by the monotonous and often strenuous nature of their roles.

One of the defining characteristics of factory work is its labor intensity, a nearly ubiquitous aspect of the maquiladora system. Workers are continually pressured to meet standardised quotas, which creates a high-stress environment. A critical component of the exhibit Women in the Garment Industry was the simultaneous generation of a report on the health-disease process of Mexican women in the garment industry, drawing on insights from their recorded oral histories. As highlighted in their testimonies, the quota system is central to this system of repression and exploitation. It compels workers to intensify and accelerate their pace to meet predetermined production targets. Failure to fulfil these quotas resulted in penalties, such as salary reductions or extended working hours to achieve the goals. This culture of fear, underscored by the constant threat of fines or job loss, served to increase production in a manner reminiscent of colonialism's control mechanisms (Cesaire, 200:41).

Rosa's testimony, a worker at Levi's factory, poignantly illustrates the intensity and rigidity of the work environment: 'We could not talk, we couldn't even turn to see our neighbour, as it meant falling behind on production. We had to be present all day. Even going to the bathroom was considered a setback. The job demanded sacrifice. Yes, we were compensated, but it came at a great cost.' The excessive workload and prolonged periods of repetitive tasks have resulted in numerous health issues, including stress, cardiovascular diseases, musculoskeletal disorders, and compromised immune defences. This commodification of women's labor exacts a considerable toll on their physical well- being, as evidenced by Karl Marx's assertion that 'the physical deterioration, widespread bodily suffering, and premature death of the working people accompany the success of manufacturing.'(Marx, 2000:25). Such conditions underscore the inherent exploitation within the maquiladora system, revealing the start of trade-offs between economic gain and the health of labourers.

In addition to the physical deterioration of their health, women workers also experienced significant emotional and psychological effects. Nearly two decades after the implementation of NAFTA, testimonies reveal the profound devastation experienced by the workers. Maria Fernandez, a machine operator, articulated her experiences by stating:

> The North American Free Trade Agreement destroyed us not only economically but also morally. At that time, we thought that our life was over. We were so involved in the dynamics of the factory that it became our whole world; there was nothing we could do outside of that world. It destroyed us morally because we felt incapable of functioning in any other work. We were and continue to be rejected from other jobs because we are not young enough. Employers think we are not useful because we are old. The feeling of being rejected always hurts.

Drawing on the examination of 'knowledge practices' by Casas-Córtes, Osterweil, and Powell, which emphasises that knowledge is actively produced and reproduced through social practices and shaped by local realities (Casas-Córtez, Osterweil, Powell, 2008), the testimonies of women workers evolved into a rich form of knowledge. These insights transcended mere personal narratives, transforming into theories and political analyses that critically address how neoliberalism commodifies humans, rendering them as disposable entities. Furthermore, the testimonies illuminate the lived experiences of workers, who often face subjugation and re-contextualisation solely to serve the demands of the capitalist market. These narratives encapsulate the profound human toll of economic restructuring, serving as poignant reminders of the intricate connections between global trade policies and local communities. Oral history interviews played a crucial role in activating the public memory of women workers whose lives and labor contributed to establishing El Paso, Texas, as the 'blue jean capital of the world' from the 1960s to the 1990s.

In conjunction with the oral histories, the sites of memory enriched a visual representation of social memory. The museum cabinets were filled with an array of artefacts—scissors, threads, measuring tapes, thimbles, photographs, aprons, diplomas, buttons, and more—that the women had carefully preserved from their days in the factories. Many of these artefacts had been kept for over two decades, underscoring their deep emotional significance. One of the most poignant contributions to the museum was a home video documenting the final day of operation at the last Levi Strauss jeans plant, which closed its doors in 1998. In this farewell footage, the cameraperson moves through the workstations, capturing women as they bid their final goodbyes. An operator distributes the last paycheques and final compensation at one particular moment. Displayed in the exhibit, this video had the power to transport visitors to that pivotal moment in history, evoking what sociologists call 'mnemonic synchronisation'—the complex process through which a community grapples with differing memories and perspectives, rarely achieving full consensus on a particular past event (Zerubavel, 1996).

Recognising that the significance of deindustrialization is inseparably linked to the urban landscape, it becomes clear that 'place memory' and 'body memory' are crucial elements, with locations imbued with shared experiences of homes, public spaces, workplaces, and

the paths traveled between home and work. While public historians argue that conveying these memories in an exhibit is challenging, the women, as custodians of knowledge and memory, embraced the concept of 'socially lived theorising'- the agency of individuals and communities in theorising about their circumstances-(Casa-Córtez, Osterweil, Powell, 2008)" by participating in the design and organisation of two distinct displays.

Figure 1. Museum display featuring a visualisation of production labor and a map of garment factories in the South Central Area of El Paso (Source: the author 2010)

The first display featured a city map meticulously marked by a group of women, highlighting the locations of over 100 maquiladoras that operated before 1994. In the second display, two pairs of jeans were prominently showcased under the heading 'Who Made Your Jeans?' (Figure 1). This inquiry encouraged visitors to critically reflect on the individuals behind producing these iconic garments. By weaving together fragments of oral histories and data from telephone questionnaires (gathered from workers affiliated with La Mujer Obrera), the Museo Mayachen team crafted a visual representation showing the minimum number of workers required to assemble a single pair of jeans. Their analysis

revealed that at least 50 workers were involved in various roles, excluding those responsible for the dyeing and ironing.

The active involvement of women workers throughout the planning and design stages of the exhibit challenged the traditional culture of museum-community relations. These dynamics often result in identities being defined, denied, excluded or included, overrepresented or misrepresented within the museum space. By resisting this hegemonic culture, the women highlighted the museum's potential to exercise power by creating and disseminating knowledge more equitably and inclusively. The Women in the Garment Industry exhibit made visible the stories and experiences of women navigating the survival circuits of global economic processes while also reclaiming the significance of what may be considered 'industrial ruins' (Apel, 2015:69) as sites of memory.

The narratives of struggle captured in the Museo Mayachen exhibit and archive go beyond academic frameworks that often reduce women's lives to concepts of disposability, social death, and trauma. In the factory context, resistance extended beyond disrupting productivity, organising against sexual harassment, and abuse, or seeking to improve working conditions. The workers' culture became a locus of resistance and resilience, fostering social bonds and nurturing a sense of community. Acknowledging that knowledge practices are deeply intertwined with power dynamics and resistance, the Women in the Garment Industry exhibit embodied the feminist call to recognise and validate knowledge originating from 'marked' locations. It positioned activist and subaltern knowledge alongside archival memories, creating a space that fosters the capacity to aspire – to claim agency, envision alternative futures, resist the erasure and invisibility imposed by capitalism, and reclaim the significance of their labor and experiences within a broader historical and economic narrative.

Conclusion

In essence, the community museum discussed in this paper explores the intricate relationship between everyday public spaces and narratives of struggle, viewed through the socio-cultural and political lens of Mexican and Mexican American working individuals and their families. Museo Mayachen embodies an alternative process wherein people's discursive social narratives—both personal and collective—not only imbue public spaces with meaning but also possess the capacity to shape and reshape cultural structures while envisioning alternative futures. Rooted in the ethos of rural community museums, these institutions embrace the participatory role of community members, including elders, activists, and immigrant workers, in constructing and interpreting local narratives. This inclusive approach extends to developing a new museology, where the community is not

merely a subject but an active participant in the design and development of museum exhibits. It adopts a bottom-up approach to curation, allowing the stories, artefacts, and narratives to be shaped directly by those who have lived them.

Situated in the Ciudad Juarez-El Paso border region, this community museum amplifies the voices and experiences of marginalised populations, challenging dominant narratives within the American urban landscape. Community museums along the U.S.-Mexico border function as inherently politicised spaces, where representations of place and identity are neither predetermined nor fixed but are actively constructed and contested. This project highlights the strategies and potential of Latino cultural politics in resisting neoliberal development initiatives, emphasising the vital role of museums as sites where culture, memory, and community can actively engage in shaping and redefining spatial and social landscapes.

Notes

1 Museo Mayachen developed a series of newsletters to engage the community of South-Central El Paso, Texas in the multiple iniatives and participatory practices. These materials along with a broad collection of politcal pamphlets and periodicals from the region, are preserved in the archive of grasroots organization La Mujer Obrera located at 2000 Texas Ave. in El Paso, Texas.

2 For discussions on the significant contributions of Chicana and Mexican American women to labor history in the United States, see Vicki L. Ruiz's From Out of the Shadows: Mexican Women in Twentieth-Century America (1998), which offers a comprehensive account of Mexican women's activism in labor movements, focusing on their roles as agricultural and factory workers, as well as their efforts to improve working conditions. Similarly, Patricia Zavella's research on cannery workers, particularly on her book "Women's Work and Chicano Families: Cannery Workers of the Santa Clara Valley" (1987), examines the experiences of female cannery workers in California. For an in-depth exploration of Mexican and Mexican-American women's labor history in the region of El Paso, Texas see The Mexican Women of El Paso, 1880-1920: A Case Study, in which Mario T. Garcia delves into the lives and experiences of Mexican and Chicana women that participated in the El Paso laundry strike of 1919; a pivotal moment in the history of the Chicana movement.

3 In the book Beautiful Terrible Ruins: Detroit and the Anxiety of Decline, art historian Dora Apel explores the notion of the deindustrial sublime to describe the emergence of an aesthetic of industrial ruination. She presents the city of Detroit, Michigan, as a case study to understand the commodification of ruin imagery resulting from industrial disinvestment and capital globalization. Like Detroit, Michigan, the city of El Paso, Texas has experienced the profound impact of deindustrialization, leaving marginalized communities that once depended heavily on industry for their economic stability in extreme poverty as those industries disappeared. In Detroit, the decline of the automotive industry led to widespread economic hardship, as many working-class neighborhoods were left without the jobs that had once supported them. Similarly, El Paso, which relied on the maquiladora industry from the late 1960s until the early 1990s, faced significant challenges when this sector diminished. Both cities share a common narrative of industrial decline leading to economic despair in marginalized communities. Dora, Apel, Beautiful Terrible Ruins: Detroit and the Anxiety of Decline (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2015),18.

4 The model of discussion assemblies was inherited from the organization's Marxist practices of participatory

democracy, which emphasizes the direct involvement of the working class in decision-making processes. In this case, workers gained a sense of ownership and control of their stories, objects of memory, and representation.

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CAMPUS AS A MUSEUM: THE INTERLACING ROOTS OF KALA BHAVANA, SANITINIKETAN

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Abstract As a counter argument to colonial art education system in India emphasised through the agencies of institution 'building', Tagore experimented with a hypothesis of space vis-à-vis place, through a system of community creation and radical pedagogic processes. The paper will navigate the overlapping zones of the spatial art historical markers across the campus of Kala Bhavana, the fine-art institute of Visva-Bharati which was ground zero for radical modernism in Indian art during the first half of the twentieth century; and the pockets of tribal and migrant communities emerging from it and around it, vis-à-vis the public perception of viewing this campus as a heritage site appropriating through the lens of capitalist semi-urban aspirations. The binary of the campus space is noticeable in its seclusion and exclusivity which artists' studios or institutional premises require, and also as a site of public display and discourse, at the focal point of Santiniketan's tourism map. As a result of prolonged auto-ethnographic observation through lived experiences, the paper takes under considerations aspects of the institution's formative history which expands on Tagore's vision and argues on the scope of viewing methods, spectacle-spectator conventions and interventions.

Key Words: campus, art pedagogy, museum, lived-space, auto-ethnography, Indian modernism, popular culture, tourism, heritage site, UNESCO, Kala Bhavana, Santiniketan

> `…institution should be a perpetual creation by the co-operative enthusiasm of teachers and students, growing with the growth of their soul; a world in itself, self-sustaining, independent, rich with ever-renewing life radiating life across space and time, attracting and maintaining around it a planetary system of dependent bodies. Its aim should lie in imparting life-breath to the complete man, who is intellectual as well as economic, bound by social bonds, but aspiring towards spiritual freedom and final perfection.' (Rabindranath Tagore, 1922)

The premise of this paper grew out of a degree of auto-ethnographic process - first from my own experience as a student of fine arts at Kala Bhavana and through my constant

questioning of the relationship between pedagogy and art practice demarcated by regional distinctions, and of the gap between artistic aspirations and their implications in post independent India. It is further provoked by the changing cultural landscape and ethos of the campus and its adjoining localities. The geographical parameters of Santiniketan grew out of a barren rural terrain, sparsely populated by (santhal) tribal settlements and landlords in the late nineteenth century. But since the formative years of the institution, there have been a steady influx of people and cultures from around the globe, creating a true cultural and intellectual cauldron, which best describes Santiniketan.

However, a hundred years later Santiniketan has also witnessed a commercial boom, particularly in the last three decades, where the varsity town transformed into one of the most popular tourist destinations in the state of West Bengal, as well as became a preferred destination for real-estate market. This has laid out two drastic ways of life, gaze and order in the area, where the campus spaces of the university are demarcated by boundary walls and protocols, while the popular identity of Santiniketan outside the university campus prevails through its quota of amusement. The place of Santiniketan in its current identity has therefore been created through a complex stratification of a site of education, iconised as a site of heritage, negotiated for the popular imagination of tourism. It is here where cultural symbolism of the elite, the popular and the indigenous breathe and grow together, and project a glaringly complex question of what is 'heritage'.

Is heritage a static identity which needs to be preserved and immortalised as an object? Or can heritage be argued through the lens of its ability to evolve and stay relevant and at the heart of its community? Particularly in case of Visva Bharati, which is an active academic institution as well as the cultural capital of the region, should the scope of its heritage identity be understood only through its tangible territorial markers of the campus? The idea of 'hybrid' heritage evokes the imagination of the intangible aspects of a 'space', separating it from the palpable markers of a 'place' and change as a focus in understanding historical dimension of a cultural practice (Bortolotto, 2007, Jong 2009). Due to my long and intimate association with this campus, I have been in a position to study the evolving nature of the campus, where there is a constant conflict between the rootedness one feels with their alma-mater, the rootedness in the experience of art and art historical anecdotes which gave shape to this campus and the intangible knowledge accumulated outside the classroom scope, its rich cultural recourse and precedence, and the vulnerabilities of the larger social fabric. Based on this core conflict of an insider's perspective of Kala Bhavana campus, as opposed to the spectator's perception of a heritage site on view, the paper will demonstrate a broader unique scope of what the site of Kala Bhavana campus, its art historical markers and methods of viewing it as a museum, entails.

Visva-Bharati in Santiniketan is a public university of national importance in the state of West Bengal, India, as it was enacted by the Indian parliament in 1951.i Prior to its university status in the pre-independence context, the scope of pedagogic experiments since 1901 spearheaded by Rabindrnath Tagore, first grew as a school in the form of a Bramhacharya ashramii, parallel to the territorial evolution of the land, the landscape, eventually giving shape to a distinct campus, and by extension a porous community of thinkers and scholars from across the world. Here social systems were built on the philosophy of universal brotherhood with a common goal of community living, interdisciplinary engagement of scholarship and knowledge regeneration for socio-economic sustenance, instead of hierarchical educational system and streamlining of profession based on class, caste and discrimination of ethnicity and gender. The aim of the Visva-Bharati, was to create an institution of an all India character and to concentrate in this institution the different cultures of the East and the West, 'especially those that have taken their birth in India, or found shelter in her house to establish a new education on the basis, not of nationalism, but a wider relationship of humanity' (Annual Report, Visva Bharati 1923). Between the background setting of Gandhi's Non-Cooperation movement in 1920 and the Quit India Movement in 1942, Tagore launched his own non- political movement of cultural confluences in Santiniketan where Visva Bharati was formally established in 1922, and Tagore chose a Sanskrit verse as the institution's motto 'Yatra Visvam Bhavatieka Nidam', which translates to, 'where the whole world meets in a single nest' (Figure 1).

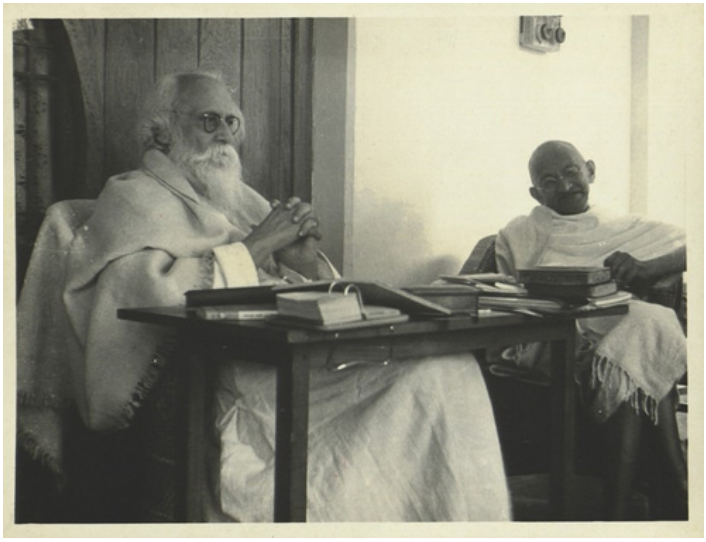

Fig. 1: Rabindranath Tagore meeting M.K. Gandhi at Santiniketan in 1925. Source: Ravindran Havana Archive, VB

Moving away from the commodity centred colonial knowledge-system and its classification of regions and territories; Tagore projected pedagogy as a universal knowledge network, which one could argue initiated a potential process of decolonisation within the Indian cultural milieu. The social and cultural purpose, aim, value and practice of culture and its objects, its use and identity in the society changed drastically during eighteenth and nineteenth century in India. Along with it changed the projection of urban cosmopolitanism and provinces and the sharpening of region-specific cultural and material representations of India to the outer world. As a counter argument to colonial institution building aligned around the new urban centric aspirations, Tagore used pedagogy and rural reconstruction as the tools which activated a new community and public sphere in Santiniketan by facilitating critical engagement and a multicultural learning scope.

The dominating agencies and power structure used in colonial knowledge accumulation were essentially located within the surveys and educational institutions. Regional peculiarities and merits were being increasingly recorded, accounted and analysed in this process of knowledge consolidation. Archaeological surveys, art collections and museums, art exhibitions and art historiography –all in the process of documentation and knowledge production - had widened the gap of territorial cultural orientations and regional artistic traits, within the country. The cultural perception of the country became more categorical, inwards and narrow, as Bernard S Cohn breaks it down further –

> 'It was the British who, in the nineteenth century defined in an authoritative and effective fashion how the value and meaning of the objects produced or found in India were determined. It was the patrons who created a system of classification which determined what was valuable, that which would be preserved as monuments of the past, that which was collected and placed in the museums, that which would be bought and sold, that which would be taken from India as mementoes and souvenirs of their own relationship to India and Indians.' (Cohen, 1996)

The beginnings of Santiniketan and the institution of Visva Bharati can be seen as an inaugural moment of critical pedagogy in modern India, where 'the oppressed unveil the world of oppression and through the praxis commit themselves to its transformation' and 'pedagogy ceases to belong to the oppressed and become a pedagogy of all people in the process of permanent liberation' (Freire, 1968; English trns., 1970)iii. In the case of Visva Bharati, both the stages described by Freier, are noticeable but as two separate histories of the institution, more specific to the growth of Kala Bhavana. Tagore situated the scope for Kala Bhavana as the intellectual core of the institution's pedagogic design that would reframe the cultural orientation of the entire set-up at Santiniketan. In Tagore's inaugural

speech introducing the purview and ideal of Visva Bharati, he underlines three factors that would constitute the core pedagogic praxis of the institution – i) to perceive the university as the site of knowledge production, instead of instruction; ii) to perceive culture as a comprehensive social and intellectual reference for pedagogy, instead of projecting difference in religious, political and moral entitlements; and iii) to perceive pedagogy as a social tool instead of a professional one (Tagore, 1919). These fundamental shifts introduced by Tagore in 1919 strongly resonated with the future pedagogic possibilities, as argued by Freier. Out of this concern for knowledge stagnation and cultural passivity, Tagore inspired a shift in teacher student dynamics in the institution. The ashram or the residential unit of the institution was intended to facilitate teacher-student relationship that would go beyond the formal purview of the classroom.

With these radical shifts implemented by Tagore, the campus of Visva Bharati became a site of social and pedagogic experiment in dialogue with the world at large, leading to the counter argument for colonial art education system in India, which was emphasised through the agencies of institution building. Tagore experimented with a hypothesis of space vis-à-vis place, through a system of community creation and radical art pedagogic practices. His elaborate work on rural reconstruction through the formation of Sriniketaniv on one side, along with the intellectual pursuits through the multiple facilitators and scholarly departments of the Santiniketan campus, led to a panoptic purview of post independent and modern institutional approach.

The model of art pedagogy which developed in Kala Bhavana was based on a constantly evolving and fluid curriculum. The formative phase of Kala Bhavana started with an open format of learning from its immediate surroundings, the distinct arid landscape of the region, ethnographic studies developing over time, a scope of pedagogical projects which gradually shaped a distinct language of visual and cultural aesthetics in Bengal, which was in complete contrast to the other most crucial art school of Bengal, the Government School of Art, Calcuttav, and that of the Bengal School idiom of visual aesthetics spearheaded by Rabindranath Tagore's nephew Abanindranath Tagore.

The articulation of modernism, as projected by the artistic and cultural practices in Kala Bhavana have been largely addressed through individual artistic and intellectual figures of eminence, which the institution produced during its first four decades. That historiography has established people as the main markers of its history, and has prioritised individual artists above a larger inclusive ideology of a community that was formed through Kala Bhavana. R Siva Kumar established the scope of Contextual Modernism (1997)vi, situated within the artistic and pedagogic scope of the institution through individual artistic careers of Rabindranath Tagore, Nandalal Bose, Benodebehari Mukherjee and Ramkinkar Baij.

However, the larger purview of the artistic practices which happened in Santiniketan between 1920s to 1950s, with unique architectural styles, murals, and outdoor sculptures, across the campus, demonstrate the larger purview of this paper, where artworks were being liberated from conditioned viewing of a gallery space and was being created as a response to its immediate surrounding and with the urgency of relocating art as a social facilitator, than an elite preoccupation. Disassociating from the idea of artwork being primarily an object for viewing, art practices in Santiniketan instead developed towards becoming an experiential process rooted in its site of making, as well as in its thematic position. This was gradually inculcated through a mode of harmonious dialogue with nature, the changing seasons of the land and collective participation of the people who came from various parts of the world as well as locally from multiple indigenous groups. Tagore also displaced the idea of festivals being religion centric in India, replacing it with the purpose of celebrating environment and its conservation through annual ceremonies like Vasanta Utsav, Varsha-Mangal, Briksharopan and Halakarshan vii(Figure 2). All of these tied together became, and continues to be significant cultural markers of the region, which has made Santiniketan and its campus a site of unique intellectual exercise and a tremendous public spectacle. In the hypothesis of space vis-à-vis place, Tagore recognised as well as created elements from the immediate topographical as well as environmental characters as resurgent symbols of cultural integration, which expanded the place called Santiniketan to a space where intellectual and cultural rhetoric can be tested, applied and amplified. Briksharopan and the other seasonal ceremonies as mentioned before have had been always open to a larger community participation, beyond the ambit of students and teachers of the institution. These are festivals for which Tagore have penned a considerable collection of songs, designed cultural rituals and protocols around it, which with years have only piqued public interest and fascination for the spectacle. These ceremonies are now recreated and observed in numerous parts of the country and the world, in schools, as well as within socio-cultural organisations.

Fig 2: (Top panel) Vaitalik procession mural by Surendranath Kar; (bottom panel) Vasanta Utsav (Spring Festival) mural by Nandalal Bose. Source: Santiniketan Murals

Santiniketan has been recognised as a UNESCO World Heritage site since 2023. Over the century, it has emerged as one of the most popular tourist destinations on the cultural map of West Bengal. UNESCO summarised that 'Santiniketan embraced a unique brand of internationalism, that drew upon ancient, medieval and folk traditions of India as well as Japanese, Chinese, Persian, Balinese, Burmese and Art Deco forms to create a rich tapestry of art, architecture, interiors, furniture, landscape and campus design.'[viii] While identifying the unique cultural value and environmental significance of the campus of Santiniketan, the negotiations between a lived space of a campus vis-à-vis a controlled and regulated territory that is now reckoned to be a site of world heritage, is rife. The lens through which these cultural and environmental connotations have had developed has its own binaries. For ashramiks (people who are and has been associated with the university, like current and former students, teachers, and university staffs) and locals of Santiniketan, there exists a distinct narrative of occupying and projecting the markers of the history of the campus. This often happens through a variety of trees which have been at the centre of the campus, at the heart of the university grounds and even at the centre of its pedagogic process, and have been the primary witness of this institution's legacy for over a century now. Instead of being a passive bystander, trees and plants in the campus of Visva Bharati actively contribute to the community and its celebrations. They have their own anecdotes and their own history, much like the verifiable histories of people

associated with the campus, its architecture, murals and outdoor sculptures, and their inter-relations. Contrarily, for tourists, much like in case of most predominant museums structures and heritage sites, the subjects of the spectacle is distant, described and usually positioned in time through its historical accounts, and further asserted by popular iconography. In the tourism sector, heritage is perceived through ceremonial objectification and as a relic. However, a campus has life of its own, not distantly located in a time period, neither conforming to the prevalent popular narratives of its perception that is trending among the local self-claimed guides, often stimulating the metaphor in the 'cabinet of curiosities' further challenging the politics in the collective gaze, that is returned. The arbitration between the order of the heritage-ness and the intangibility along with the vulnerability which come with a habituated place, like Santiniketan, firmly push the boundaries of 'space as the experience', 'space as the spectacle', and 'space as the cultural marker.

Site as a Metaphor

Fig. 3: Old Nandan or the first house of Kala Havana. Currently it has been converted as the Printmaking Department of the Institution. Source: Ravindran Havana Archive, VB

Kala Bhavana functions from its current campus since 1929ix, where it initially had a singular central symmetrical structure, designed by Surendranath Kar and the house was named Nandan by Rabindranath (Figure 3). Prior to that for a decade, the studio of the institution performed from multiple shared locations within the broader campus. The structure has evolved with time, and so has the pedagogic purposes of the space. It has a central hall with glass protrusion on its terrace creating an unique system of ventilation. The space was used as a museum space to store and periodically display art works. It was also used as common gathering room for faculty, students and guests of the institution. What was once the ceremonial front of the building is now however out of sight. The front of the structure now holds a two-part mosaic mural done by Somnath Hore between 1977 and 1982. It now houses the Printmaking department of Kala Bhavana and is referred to as the Old Nandan.x And the mural plays the role of a backdrop to the evolution of the campus.

Fig 4: The Ficus Viren tree, popularly known as Cheena Bot in Kala Bhavana Campus, in front of Old Nandan (currently Print-making dept.). Source: Author, 2024.

The majestic tree which holds its ground at the centre of the campus is a Pilkhan or Pakur tree, but colloquially called Cheena Bot in Kala Bhavana. (Figure 4) The etymology of cheena bot is not known however there is an anecdote. When the pioneering artist Nandalal Bose, also referred as Mastermoshai (Master) in Kala Bhavana, was planning to move base from Calcutta to Santiniketan, Abanindranath gifted him a Ficus Viren bonsai, brought from Japan (Panchanan Mandal, 1968). In one of his trips to Santiniketan from Kolkata, Nandalal carried the bonsai with him and decided to liberate it from its constraining pot (Figure 5). The popular narrative is that in the hands of Nandalal, the tree grew to its full capacity. The nucleus of a modern and independent identity and voice in Indian art, launched by Abanindranath Tagore through the Bengal School of Art, bloomed through Nandalal Bose, who took the movement forward and liberated the pedagogical methodologies and artistic projections associated with Abanindranath, after coming to Santiniketan. The metaphor is hard to miss. The oral history or reminiscence about the tree is inconclusive, but its allegory with the formation of the institution, stands strong, and marks the configuration of a space, that would be the habitus of Kala Bhavana.

Fig 5: Nandalal Bose with a group of students with the Cheena Bot sapling in the middle. Source: Rabindra Bhavana Archive, VB

Just as the Bramhacharya ashram started under the Chhatim treexi, nature and its elements habitually became a key component in the learning process at Kala Bhavana. BenodeBehari Mukherjee recollects that their curriculum had neither a measured routine nor specific class hours (Mukherjee, 1984).xii Students were free to loiter around the campus and sketch whoever they came across. Unlike the Govt. Art School in Calcutta (now, Kolkata) where every subject is allotted a specific studio and the academic methodologies associated with it, students in Kala Bhavana found their subjects all around their campus – life study, flora and fauna, animal study, all were studies through coexistence. Here students were encouraged to go beyond the formal visual aspects of anatomy, to understand nature and scope of that coexistence. Mukherjee added, 'It was only when we would translate our learning to art forms, that we would shut ourselves in a room'. The pedagogic thrust of Kala Bhavana was heavily grounded on nature study with seasonal changes providing natural tools for art and environmental engagement.

The fluidity in the methodology of the pedagogic applications and the process of practicing art as a student of Kala Bhavana were not restricted to the ideological nature of intellectual aspirations. The fluidity was also in the spontaneity in the design and distribution of the campus and its character. This often prompted spontaneity interpersonal relationship among teachers, students and often visitors and tourists, breaking certain authoritative barriers of public, private, social and cultural identities of space. I have often encountered groups of tourists walking past the sculpture or design studio to keenly observing the process of making art, where I and my fellow batch mates were working. As opposed to the direction of gaze in a conventional museum scope where objects of art cannot look back, here is this campus, the spectacle of what the public perceives as a heritage university, is beyond the perceptible connotations of its architectural structures and its cluster of murals and sculptures. But it is in the intangible collective knowledge of and from this campus which has been passed on from generation after generation of students and teachers as inheritance, which makes Kala Bhavana as a site of art historical repository.

Campus through its Markers and Makers, as a Museum

Tracking the trajectory of habitual spaces like students hostels, a vital project in which the entire community of Kala Bhavana embarked on, was the project of building Black House in 1938. Initiated primarily as an infrastructural need, faculties of the institution like Nandalal Bose, Ramkinkar Baij and others along with their students transformed the dearth in resources to an opportunity (Figure 6). Black House stands as one of the most important collective art projects of Kala Bhavana, which started as a functional need, and emerged as a unique pedagogic experiment. Driven by a purpose of occupying the space by the senior art students after its completion, the project cannot be analysed through the method of formalism in art historical analysis. The experiences of engaging with the structure, its rooms and its relief murals are intimate and immersive for a person who occupied that space for a longer period of their life, vis-à-vis a person who approaches the architecture as a heritage spectacle – the latter will not discover the layers of ingenuity in equal measure. Nor will the scope allow them to gauge the expanding scope of perceptibility in methods of viewing and experiencing art.

Fig 6: Black House, Kala Bhavana Campus. Source: Author, 2024

In sync with the geographical location, Black House is a mud house, coated in tar, with a thatched roof – adapted and expanded from the method and material of vernacular architectural design, prevalent in Bengal. The humble structure of the Black House is in complete resonance with the surrounding villages, which diminishes the institutional elitism and bridges the gap of social standing of artistic intervention of the institution. There are about thirty-six relief sculptures done on the walls of the Black House. Among them eleven relief panels are selected portions from the Mattancherry Palace mural "Marriage of Shiva' and dwarpala figures based on Aihole sculptures. On the northern side of the Black House are relief copies of Egyptian, Assyrian Lion, Indus Valley Bull and examples from Bharhut, and Pallava art traditions. Drawing from this varied range of art historical illustrations, Black House becomes a profound pedagogic paradigm in the hypothesis of place vis-à-vis space and positions 'museum viewing' as a discourse for the students and faculty of Kala Bhavana. With Tagore's goal of institutions being a place of continuous knowledge regeneration, instead of knowledge distribution and instruction, the example of Black House resoundingly demonstrates that the practice of art, and the appreciation of art is not restricted by conditioned viewing, but by active engagement and inclusivity. It breaks the hierarchical cultural authority on art as objects of extreme value, which are 'out of reach' for any common visitor or spectator, as established by traditional

museums protocols, and instead positions it at the heart of the community and campus. The polarities here are between a sanitised idea of what should be deemed as a cultural heritage marker and what the way of life was, once. In recent turn of events, it has been administratively determined that the Black House will no longer accommodate art students, since it challenges the preservation of the structure and the relief murals. However, it will still remain to be an art historical marker with the campus, open to public viewing.

In context of living space being active sites of art practice, another significant marker is the Kala Bhavana Boy's hostel murals. Between 1938 and 1949, a series of murals were done inside the Kala Bhavana Boys hostel, which stands opposite to the Kala Bhavana campus. Among many blocks of clustered rooms, three blocks were selected to execute murals on, as class project. The first mural was executed in the veranda of the North Eastern block, under Benode Behari's supervision, in 1939. The mural is an assortment of various indigenous forms and motifs, along with characters from the campus and its surroundings. Spread across the ceiling, walls and columns, the composition is not a coherent one but plays to the quirks of the space. Breaking away from the academic constructs of composition, balance and thematic parity, Benode Behari encouraged multiple participants' perspective with multiple forms, projected on the space. The mural underlines the coexistence of diverse forms and entities, breaking away from the scroll format of traditional mural compositions. These murals go a long way to show how Kala Bhavana was displacing the preeminent methods of engaging with a public space, and blending place of work with place of living as a place of artistic intervention. The murals at Ajanta or Bagh, or the temple sculptures in Orissa or Khajurahoxiii, exist in the architectural or spatial scope in which they were created. The practice of separating sculptures from its shrines was a practice which had been regulated through colonial institutions in the pretext of museum collection. Through the larger project of mural paintings, Kala Bhavana restored the artistic energies back to the campus and the larger community of Santiniketan (Figure 7). Due to the rise of urban spaces since the British rule, location of art too had shifted from cultural or ritualistic experiences to gallery and museum spaces. The method of viewing art too was evolving with it, and so did its relation with the mass. Therefore this alternate ambit of site, space, geography, and environment amplified through the practice of mural painting in Kala Bhavana, stands to be of vital significance in the conditions of viewing modern and contemporary art in India.

Fig 7: (Left) Portion of a mural class project under Benodebehari Mukherjee, inside Kala Bhavana Boy's Hostel, depicting the music students of the institution. Source: Author, 2019. (Centre) Demonstration and description of every stage of mural painting evolved and practiced in Kala Bhavana, housed inside Havel Hall. Source: Author, 2019. (Right) Early Kala Bhavana students working on wall frescoes for the Design studio of Kala Bhavana. Source: Rabindra Bhavana, VB.

This larger-than-life scale of art works began to displace smaller formats of painting in the Kala Bhavana campus. The practice of mural paintings in various scale remained a persistent device of activating the odd corners of the campus. Ramkinkar Baij, credibly India's first modern sculptor, inspired by this idiom of scale and monumentality and local resources, created 'Sujata' in 1935, the 'Santhal Family' in 1938, 'Lamp Stand' in 1940, 'The Harvester' in 1943, which are some of the most significant markers of the across the larger campus of Visva Bharati (Figure 8). However, the campus quirks as established through Baij's free standing larger than life sculptures and Benode Bahari Mukherjee, Somanath Hore and K.G. Subramanyan's murals loudly demonstrate that the process of making art, the location of making art, and the viewing of art evolves through a singular platform, which offers a redux to the purpose of making art and connects it more acutely with its environ and its community. In the broader discourse of 'site-specificity' since global postmodernism, the phenomenon of Kala Bhavana campus substantially expands the field of survey for critical interventions.

Fig 8: (left) Raminkar Baij in front of this sculpture of the Santhal Family. Source: Rabindra Bhavana Archive, VB. (right): Mill Call by Ramkinkar Baij, 1956. Source: Author, 2024.

In the argument about 'space' and its formation as a key constituent of Kala Bhavana campus, the most vital contribution was by Surendranath Kar, who shaped a conducive atmosphere for the creating the entire expanse of Santiniketan campus into an expansive and inclusive site through his distinct design aesthetics projected through Santiniketan architecture. Much of modern Indian art history has been written focusing on the formalism of object, than on the experience of it. The kinds of intervention that the artist and student community in Kala Bhavana were exercising require a different approach of analysing its cultural impact. As one of the first faculty members of Kala Bhavana, Kar's involvement with the institution can be tracked along with the progressive shifts in its pedagogic orientation. And Surendranath Kar's most important work has been in projecting and planning the architectural style of Santiniketan.

Fig 9: (left) Department of History of Art on the left and the Department of Design on the right, inside Kala Bhavana Campus. Source: Author, 2024; (right) K.G. Subramanyan's Black and white Mural on the walls of the Design Department, Kala Bhavana. Source: Author, 2024.

Surendranath Kar planned the architectural design of Rabindranath Tagore's houses in Santiniketan called Udayan, Konark, Shyamali, Punashcha, along with Chaitya, Kala Bhavana Nandan, present Patha Bhavana and all the furniture housed in Udayan.xiv Surendranath Kar, Arthur Geddes and Rathindranath Tagore devoted themselves to give shape to Rabindranath's vision of not erasing environmental energies from that of human habituation – a criterion that is acutely reflected across his songs, poems, spiritual and pedagogic philosophy. The unpretentiousness of its architecture that evolved naturally with the flora of the campus, the surrounding khoaixv at its peripheries, the rust earth, and the pedagogic pursuits – all the components together gave shape to the distinct and comprehensive cultural site of Santiniketan, which offers a distinct spectacle prompting the allurement of a heritage site.

Conclusion

The institutional configurations and pedagogic orientations in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, defined Art as a new field of study and practice, and radically redefined the identity of the artist and the nature of artistic professions pre-existing in India. Along with it, the system also reconfigured the social standing, purpose and perception of what a work of art projects in modernity. The formation of any institutional identity and authority comes with a certain grade of bureaucracy, which streamlines the scope of experimenting with its objectives and method. Instead it aspires to achieve standardisation in the praxis within a field of study. The fence of bureaucracy becomes particularly detrimental in case of visual and performance art, which has proven to choose conservatism over progressive channels, which conveniently justifies cautious policy configuration for the field of art practice and its multiple stakeholders.

Fig 10a&10b: Examples of artwork display of Kala Bhavana students, using the campus space. Source: Author, 2019 and 2024.

Mooring the argument of this paper on the purview of thinking about an institutional space beyond the schemes of its red tape, and testing it only through its intellectual grounding, I have repeatedly found myself in resonance with Rogoff's propositions:

> 'If this (art schools) was a space of experimentation and exploration, then how might we extract these vital principles and apply them to the rest of our lives? How might we also perhaps apply them to our institutions? Born of a belief that the institutions we inhabit can potentially be so much more than they are, these questions ask how the museum, the university, the art school can surpass their current functions?' (Irit Rogoff, 2008)

The paper started with a long quote from Rabindranath Tagore, which answers these questions resolutely. The first fifty years of Kala Bhavana, Santiniketan provides an effective argument on the necessity of intellectual vulnerability in creating an institution that which respects knowledge as work in process instead of a benchmark. The open format methodology of seeking a curriculum by responding to its environment, instead of imbibing a distant school of thought and practice, resulted to a vital moment of modernism, which was neither borrowed nor imposed.

Though Kala Bhavana holds an extensively rich collection of Southeast Asian art through its museum collection, here again the purpose and methodology imbibed in the collection of art had been rooted in its pedagogical process of research survey and documentation.

Therefore, this collection is counterintuitive to the projection of institutionalised cultural power, as most conservative spheres of museum making offer. Instead, the repository functions as a reference collection, and upholds a porous campus which manifested the practice and profession of art as a process, instead of it being object-centric. Therefore, art historical intervention in critically engaging with Kala Bhavana demands a broader, and a more compassionate reading of the phenomenon.

Since art education policies in India have been increasingly emphasising on the accountability of deliverables from the education programme, there remains limited room for porosity in its pedagogy. The impacts of the institutional policies are gradually observable in the short-sightedness of the intellectual output of a considerable section of art institutions, across the country. Invoking Rogoff's arguments on institution's potentiality of performing and improvising beyond bureaucratic armature, institutions must adopt avenues through which the practice, process and perception of art is more rooted in its cultural context. Since 1973, Kala Bhavana organises Nandan Mela, the annual art fair inside its campus. Primarily out of the need to raise fund for students in need, the fair have over the years earned a legacy of distinct artistic and intellectual camaraderie among the larger art fraternity across the country. The entire and extended grounds of the campus transforms in to a site of installation and performance, along with multiple stalls with showcase and sell works by teachers and students, for two days in winter. This allows the broader community of Kala Bhavana, which includes former students and teachers to engage in the practice of art making beyond the modules of method and material distinctions. It further stimulates the scope of engaging with the campus space as the site of making and showing art, carrying forward the lineage of its cultural history. On these two days of Nandan Mela, the campus remains open to public access from morning to night, blurring the lines of exclusivity of art and its access. It allows one to engage with the campus beyond the decorum and discipline of an institutional space and transforms into a site of larger public intervention, where the entire process of making, displaying, perceiving, critiquing and selling art can be experienced at the site where it is rooted, creating opportunity for a more inclusive discourse on the potential scope of the future of institutional paradigms.

Fig 11: Installation by students during Nandan Mela in Kala Bhavna campus. Source: Author, 2021

The campus which grew on the grounds of intellectual and spatial response to pedagogic needs for aesthetic projection, liberated artistic identity and in harmony with its environment, without landscaping its elements, stands as a testament to sustainable and time-tested artistic vision, which has its root within an individual experiencing it. From conducting classes and discussion sessions under its many magnificent trees, to displaying class works under the filter of light and shade that they provide and studying their changing forms with the change of seasons, the campus of Kala Bhavana provides an all- encompassing knowledge experience without class and classifications.

Notes

1 See, Visva Bharati Act No. XXIX of 1951 (The statutes of the University, incorporating amendments up to May, 2012)

2 The Santiniketan Bramhachariya Ashram was initiated as a residential school for young students to engage towards a new direction of learning methodology directed towards environmental and social awareness. In contrast to the conventional religious scope and purpose of ashrams or hermitages in south Asia, Santiniketan Ashram was conceived with the sole purpose of inducing an inspiring atmosphere of community living based on the objective of creative and intellectual enrichment, which inculcates the tendency to critically intervene existing but inept systems of cultural and social standing. This nucleus idea of radical learning methodology led to the formation of the primary school of the university called Patha Bhavana, and all other departments of higher learning known as Kala Bhavana (Institute of Fine Arts), Sangit Bhavana (Institute of Music & Performance Art), Vidya Bhavana (Institute of Humanities), Shiksha Bhavna (Institute of Science), Palli Shiksha Bhavana (Institute of Rural Reconstruction), Bhasha Bhavana (Institute of Linguistic Studies) and many more.

3 Pedagogy of the Oppressed.

4 Sriniketan is the Institute of Rural Reconstruction of Visva-Bharati, and was formally established in 1922 at Surul at a distance of about three kilometres from Santiniketan. Leonard Elmhirst, a British philanthropist and agronomist and a close associate of Tagore, was the first Director of the institution. The chief object was to help villagers and people to solve their own problems instead of a solution being imposed on them from outside.

5 The Government School of Art, Calcutta was established in 1854 under the aegis of the British India government. It is now known as the Government College of Art & Craft, Kolkata.

6 Contextual Modernism

7 Vasanta Utsav is the festival to celebrate spring. Briksharopan is the annual ceremony of plating saplings in and around the campus of Visva-Bharati; Halakarshan is the annual ceremony of ploughing the fields for farming; Varsha-Mangal is the annual festival to celebrate the season of Monsoon, since Santiniketan is located in the district of Birbhum, known for its dry red laterite with low alluvium soil.

8 See UNESCO – Executive Summary, p XII

9 Prior to 1929, Kala Bhavana functioned out of various borrowed space within the larger campus of Visva-Bharati.

10 The administrative office of Kala Bhavana has also been named as Nandan building; therefore the previous structure is now called the Old Nandan, for its historical significance.

11 Chhatim tree (Alstonia scholaris), holds crucial significance in the cultural milieu of Santiniketan. It is known that Rabindranath Tagore's father, Maharshi Debendranath Tagore, rested and meditated under this particular tree, and it has since been considered the soul centre of Visva Bharati campus. The place has been since known as Chhatim-tola, which means under the Chhatim tree. Each year every student who graduate from Visva Bharati, is given the digitate leaf of Chhatim, as a reminder of their intellectual roots in the institution.
12 Benode Behari Mukherjee. Adhunik Shilpo Shikhha (Modern Art Education). Aruna Prokashoni. 1984 13 Ajanta, Bagh, Konark and Khajuraho are few among the most significant art historical markers of medieval Indian history.
14 Udayan, Chaitya, Konark, Shyamali, Punashcha are all the residential quarters of Rabindranath Tagore, inside the Visva-Bharati campus premises. The architectural planning and furniture designs were conceived in collaboration with Rabindranath Tagore's son Rathindranath Tagore and Arthur Geddes.
15 Khoai in Bengali refers to a geological formation specifically in Birbhum, Bardhaman, and Bankura districts of West Bengal, India and some parts of Jharkhand, India that is made up of laterite soil rich in iron oxide, often in the shapes of tiny hills. This canyon like terrain is caused by wind and water erosion on red laterite soil.[1] Khoai is called part of the India's natural heritage.

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BEYOND BORDERS: NAVIGATING CULTURAL SENSITIVITIES IN PRESENTING TULU RITUAL OBJECTS IN WESTERN MUSEUMS

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Abstract

The Tulu region of Karnataka has evolved various forms of performance-based rituals invoking the native guardian spirits, heroes, animals, etc. One such major seasonal festival of this region, Bhutakola, celebrates the several guardian spirits and tutelary deities (called daivas and bhutas) who protect the villages of Tulunadu. These deities are manifest during the festivals through ritual objects–in particular, masks, breastplates, and anklets–that are worn by a human performers. However, these objects have been displaced and displayed at American Art Museums through art collectors, enthusiasts, and the art market. I study the material dimensions of the Bhutakola ritual and its ritual efficacy, and its subsequent of these objects and their subsequent display in museums. I then ask: how might the identities of these objects change once they are displaced and displayed? To borrow from Richard Davis, what are the "disruptions and transformations" of these objects from their previous lives?

Keywords: Bhutakola, Tulunadu, Museum Objects, Masks, South Asia

Introduction

The Tulu region, or Tulunadu in the Southwestern region of India, comprising present-day Dakshina Kannada and Udupi districts of Karnataka and the northern parts of the Kasaragod district of Kerala up to the Chandragiri River, has evolved various forms of performance-based rituals invoking the native guardian spirits. Located along the lines of the Konkan Coast, this tropical region is bounded by the Western Ghats and the Arabian Sea. Bhūtakola, a major annual(2) festival of Tulunadu celebrates the several guardian spirits and tutelary deities (called daivas and Bhūtas (3) who protect their villages. This ritual involves a medium or performer who receives the invoked spirits and answers practical questions, solves quarrels, and thus acts as a judge whose words go unchallenged. These deities are manifest during the festivals through ritual objects–in particular, masks, breastplates, and anklets–that are worn by human performers. Thus, Bhūta kola also reflects the interaction between the participants and the dancer who receives the invoked spirit through these objects during the ritual.

In this paper, I investigate how the nature of such ritual objects evolves as they are removed from their original (4) ritual contexts and displayed in museums. To borrow from Richard Davis, what transformations or disruptions occur when these deities of the Tulu land are displaced and displayed in American Museums? While it is widely acknowledged

that religious objects accrue new meanings and significance when their contexts are shifted (5), this study seeks to investigate this process further. The three key points of this paper include: 1) The objectives pursued by curators while exhibiting a ritual object; 2) How curators and museum personnel, as well as the institution of the museum building itself, contribute to the creation of new interpretations and symbolic values associated with these objects; 3) Finally, understand the culturally sensitive ways in which indigenous, non-western, religious objects, along with narratives, are curated, shared, and experienced within a western museum space, thereby creating invisible networks that aim to perceive, value, handle, care for, interpret, and preserve heritage through culturally rooted efforts.

I specifically focus on the Bhūta Kola objects that are displayed in art museums in the United States and Europe. The museum collections I have surveyed so far include Los Angeles County Museum of Art (South and Southeast Asian Art), Smithsonian Institute, Washington DC (South Asian and Himalayan Art), Philadelphia Museum of Art (Asian Art), Brooklyn Museum (Asian Art), New Orleans Museum of Art (Indian Art Gallery), and The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (Asian Art), Rietberg Museum, Zurich, and the British Museum, London. I rely on their digital collections/archives as well as permanent displays.

The Ritual Context of Bhūta Kola

Firstly, to understand the objects itself, it is essential to discuss the ritual setting of the objects under study. The Bhūta Kola is a complex ritual held during an annual festival, where a human embodier (6) willingly allows themselves to be possessed by a deity. In this state, they execute dances that portray certain events from the myth surrounding the deity. These stories are derived from the rich tradition of Tulu oral epics known as the pāḍdanas. Heidrun Bruckner (1995, 2009) as well as Peter Claus (1989), emphasise that ritual performances and oral recitations are embedded in the real-world context of the Tulu region. These deities are intimately connected to places in particular villages, wherein the Tulu realm, the lived world, and the environmental context of the Tulu region, reflect the realm of the spirits. The lived realm of Tulu land, which comprises the cultivated lands is often disrupted by the wild animals that inhabit the forests. The disruptive wild animals have corresponding bhūtas in the spirit realm as Panjurli (the boar), Maisandaaya (the bull), Pilichamundi (tiger) etc. Other categories of the bhūtas also exist whose origins can be traced back to Hindu gods and goddesses as well as heroes who died protecting the land. Bhūta kola, then, reflects the interaction between the audience and the dancer who receives the invoked spirit through these objects during the ritual. Through the voice of this performer, the bhūta answers practical questions, solves quarrels and thus acts as a judge whose words go unchallenged. These narratives and discourses take its root from

the pāḍdanas. Even though mainly carried down orally by successive generations, they inform the ritual performances.

Apart from these oral narratives and the human performers, the ritual objects such as masks, breastplates, anklets, etc. plays a central role in this ceremony. These objects are highly significant to the local community — their appearance, materials, and design all carry symbolic meaning that reflects the community's culture, history, and beliefs. So, to understand the relevance of these objects, an elaborate description of the ritual functions of these objects, their appearance in the ritual context, and the methods of reverence used by participants are essential. Since I have not yet conducted direct ethnographic research in South Canara, I rely on secondary ethnographical materials (Bruckner 1995) as well as media sources of several Bhūta kola rituals that are available online for public viewing.

Sanctification and darśan of Bhūta Objects

The objects are integral to the ritual performance in the festival. They sometimes act as conductors of spirit possession, elevators of the ritual to its next stage, or representations of the deity and their weapons or other material attributes. Traditionally, objects meant for the rituals, especially the masks, undergo a final ritual at the end of the manufacturing process during which the spirit of the deity is infused into the mask, also known as prāṅa pratiṣṭha among Hindu temple rituals (7). This process, as Heather Elgood states, is the ritual through which the image is recognised as god and "a particle of the divine whole, the divide perceived not in man's image as a separate entity but as a formless, indescribable omnipresent whole" (Elgood 2000). The divine is manifest not through eruption, but through spontaneous adhesion (Eck 1998). We see similar infusions during the Pujo rituals in pandals in Kolkata and even in the Kalamezhuthu Pāttu to call forth Bhagavatī in North Kerala, which takes place in ephemeral festival spaces where the Goddess is asked to take up residence in the images and vivid drawings especially made for each year's festival, and at the end of the festival she is invited to depart, whereupon the images and drawings are disposed of ceremonially. Similarly, during the Bhūtakola the deity is momentarily requested to be present in the objects, who then possesses the dancer, and acts as a divine judge. Here, in case of such non-permanently consecrated objects, the bidding and dismissal constitute the temporal boundaries of the life of the object. Devotees actively participate in Hindu festivals, immersing themselves in the festival space to obtain a visual encounter with the divine image or sacred object. Such an encounter, known as "auspicious sight" or darśan, holds immense significance within the Hindu ritual complex, as it highlights the notion that Hindu worship transcends prayers, offerings, and devotional dispositions of the heart (Eck 1981). According to Hindu beliefs, the deity

resides within the sacred image, imbuing it with divine power and presence. Therefore, the act of visually perceiving the image holds great religious significance. This visual apprehension of the image is considered a form of worship, through which the viewer is believed to gain blessings from the divine. The exchange of sight between the viewer and the image is seen as a transformative act, with the viewer being bestowed with divine blessings in return. The Bhūta Kola ritual, with its meticulously crafted setting and the objects associated with it, exemplifies these characteristics well. The visual engagement with these objects serves to emphasise the importance of such encounters in the pursuit of spiritual fulfilment within the Hindu tradition.

The human performer, who is transformed into an embodiment of the bhūta, comes to be animated by the deity through these objects. Before these objects are donned by the human medium who serves as a receptacle or channel for the divine presence of the deity, they are worshiped in a ceremonial manner, either at the domestic level or at the shrine. At the domestic level, they are placed in either the landlord's homes, where the masks and other regalia are placed on raised platforms or wooden swings. They are also placed in guttumanes (guttu homes), which used to be the administrative unit of Tulunadu in pre-colonial times. They do not hold any administrative powers now but continue to house the ritual objects which are taken out once a year for the festivals. They are ceremonially brought into the bhūtastāna (the bhūta shrine) for the festival days.

Phases of Ritual Possession

The objects in the Bhutakola performance are thus sanctified and are manifested by the deity, including masks, breastplates, anklets, torches, swords, belts, bells, and the semi-circular arch (ani) tied to the performer's shoulder. They play an integral part to the ritual process and a vital role in animating the human performer and embodying the deity. The ritual process through which the human performer comes to be animated by the deity (possession) is marked by three distinct phases punctuated by the incorporation of particular objects and adornments, such as the anklets, masks and the ani. The concept of possession here is also a mediated one, where there will be attendants who intervene and assist the performer in his every step. This is described by Bruckner (1995) as "movement", which includes sudden jumping, walking, rhythmic dancing, etc. There is no set repertoire. These movements are maintained over a long period of time by the embodied figures of the deities within the framework of a largely fixed choreography, which involves a sequential adornment of ritual objects.

Gaggaradechidu: Phase one is marked by the adornment of the anklet (gaggara), also known as gaggaradechidu, when the deity enters the performer's body through the anklet. In this phase, the anklets are the focus. It is traditionally made of silver and has hollow

tubes with metal balls inside that produce a clunking sound as the performer moves. This phase is marked by a lot of rapid movements, gestures and dance. We often see the dancer rocking and swinging the anklet by hand to produce different rhythms. The deity does not speak in this phase, but motions through the object. These movements last for about 1-2 hours. Sometimes, we also see the performer jump and flip around the festival area, while the participants are seated around in a circle. There is no preset manual or rule for what sort of music accompanies these movements. Instrumental music of random songs from films or popular devotional songs from anywhere can be played. There are percussion instruments and local pipes that play the melody.

Pic 1: A Pair Of Gaggaras Currently In Rietberg Museum Storage (Photo By The Author)

Manidecchidu: It is when the performer is bestowed with objects such as silver belts, bells and/or swords. Amongst these, the bell (ghante or mani) is often kept in the shrines and used for day-to-day offerings as well as for special occasions such as the annual festivals. The other two objects, rather large than the bell, are the sword and the silver belt. They are only meant to be used during festivals by the performer or the priest and are kept in the landlord's house or guttumanes for safekeeping. They are held in the same respect as an image of a deity and are ceremonially worshipped during the annual festivals. According to the Special Study Report on Bhūta Cult in South Kanara District under the Census of India, 1971, these locations are administered by the temple management or the landlord himself (Padmanabha 1976). These administrative powers and duties of the landlord are also translated to his own authority as the festival supervisor. These festivals are, in a way, justifications for the social power he holds. The festival reinforces these social relationships and the hierarchy.

Nemadecchidu: The third and final phase is when the performer is bestowed with the ani (a half-halo-like structure made of metals, as well as areca, cloth, or tender leaves of coconut palm hooked to the back of his head), and the mask (muga), marking the complete possession deity. The display of the ani and muga, marks the final stage in the manifestation of the deity. Now the deity is present in the adorned performer and ready to speak to the devotees assembled at the festival. In short, it is the object that initiates the manifestation of deities.

Object and Agency

The emerging discipline of material culture studies represents a paradigm shift in the investigation of the human construction of artefacts by considering the reciprocal impact of material objects on individuals and society (8). This approach encompasses an analysis of how material culture serves as a medium for social interaction, and importantly, recognises the potential for inanimate objects to possess subjectivity and agency, thereby influencing human behaviour and social dynamics. This is in part also borrowed from Alfred Gell; we may consider these objects as having agency, and not just in terms of their formal or aesthetic value or appreciation within the culture that produced them, nor as signs, visual codes to be deciphered or symbolic communications. Gell begins his book by arguing against the existing anthropological studies of art, wherein they focus more on the issues such as aesthetic values or the way artworks encode culturally significant meanings. However, he argues that this approach lacks anthropological study. He stresses on focusing on the "social relationships" in which the art mediates social agency (Gell 1998). Within the context of Bhūtakola, a ritual performance that recounts the legends of protective guardian spirits safeguarding the village against disruptive forces, the objects employed in the ritual materialise these intentions by facilitating possession, allowing the human medium to become a receptacle or channel for the divine presence of the deity.

As Nicholas Thomas pointed out in his Foreword to Gell's Art and Agency (1998), "For many scholars, and indeed in much common-sense thinking about art, it is axiomatic that art is a matter of meaning and communication. This book suggests that it is instead about doing." Therefore, we may define these objects in performative terms as having an 'affective agency' in their capacity to provoke emotional and embodied responses in recipients. Artworks were not symbols, but social agents, or the equivalent of persons (Gell 1998). Gell introduces the concept of "distributed persons" to elucidate the manner in which these entities facilitate social agency. These "distributed persons" encapsulate a portion of the represented entity, particularly its image or simulacrum, and effectively "bind" that aspect of its identity to the artwork. Similarly, in the context of Bhūtakola, the objects themselves can be perceived as "distributed persons." They assume a pivotal role in the ritual performance by embodying and manifesting the intentions of the deity.

Through this process, the objects become conduits for the divine presence and facilitate the interaction between the spiritual and human realms. The objects are thus not mere theatrical props or decorations, but are active participants in the ritual performance, enabling the performer to embody the deity and become a conduit for their power.

Pars Pro Toto – Representing the whole by a part

Contemporary museum curators face numerous challenges in effectively conveying the essence of a culture within the constraints of limited collections and exhibits, particularly when dealing with non-Western cultures in Western museums. Darielle Mason (2022) studies the complexities involved in communicating complex narratives through museum collections, using the example of the sixteenth-century South Indian temple hall installation at the Philadelphia Museum of Art. Mason highlights the deliberate choices made by curators to present specific cultures through carefully selected displays.

Some of those choices raise these key questions: Whose voices do museums prioritise? How much consideration should be given to contentious perspectives? Additionally, who advises curators on these matters, and how much of the narrative is inevitably omitted or edited? Despite the inherent challenges, museums fulfil a vital role as institutions dedicated to promoting cultural literacy and expanding public understanding through their exhibits. Consequently, it is fascinating to explore the various methods that curators have employed to convey the "living context" in which these objects originated, as noted by Kurin (1991). By doing so, he says, the museum is publicly conferring legitimacy—of knowledge, of an aesthetic, of a sense of the history of cultural value (Kurin, 1991). This section aims to evaluate how Bhūta Kola objects are presented in Western museum exhibits and to what extent such displays enhance or alter our understanding of Tulu culture.

The inclusion of Bhūta Kola objects in museum displays necessitates an exploration of the underlying motivations and considerations that drive curators to showcase them. Museums, as institutions, are deeply rooted in Euro-American cultural and intellectual history. Scholars such as Findlen (1989) and Taylor (1995) have extensively examined this history to glean insights into the evolving Euro-American perceptions of "exotic" peoples. Contemporary museum displays serve multiple purposes, often encompassing intricate and multifaceted objectives. However, in the case of Bhūta Kola objects, their exhibition in museums typically occurs within a broader context, rather than as part of a specialised exhibition. They are often presented alongside collections of bronze objects or artefacts from India. This juxtaposition highlights the fact that Bhūta Kola objects are not accorded dedicated or specialised displays but rather form part of a larger narrative encompassing the broader cultural heritage of the region. Unfortunately, this lack of focus on the context

surrounding these objects means that their cultural significance may be overlooked in favour of examining their "intrinsic features" alone (Ambrose and Paine, 2012). Intrinsic information includes the object's shape, its colour, its material and its condition. All of this may tell us a great deal about the physicality of the object. However, it's crucial to understand these objects as part of a larger cultural context and consider what "extrinsic information" may be derived from outside the object: where it came from, who owned it, how it was used, etc. Paine also highlights another important category of understanding the object: significance. He describes this as the meaning ascribed to the object, rather than explicit and implicit meanings. Significance relates to its value or meaning to a person or community.

> "Significance means the historic, aesthetic, scientific and social values that an object or collection has for past, present and future generations. [It] incorporates all the elements that contribute to an object's meaning, including its context, history, uses and social and spiritual values. When you consider this information you can draw informed conclusions about why an object is significant. Significance is not fixed—it may increase or diminish over time." (Russell and Winkworth 2009)

This understanding of significance is often enveloped and replaced by a newly formed museum value when the object is placed on display in a museum. It modifies the significance it has to its users in a ritual ground to an object that derives its value from the visual aesthetic of a museum object. More specifically, the masks and breastplates, objects that attract ritualistic response from the participants, now metamorphoses themselves as an object that waits for the visitors' "secular" response. They hardly convey any significance, and convey the intrinsic information that can easily be extracted from their material, colour, shape, etc. For instance, at the MET (Fig. 1), the Jumadi mask is displayed among the South Asian Hindu-Buddhist and Jain Sculptures along with other bronze objects So by placing the objects in the section on South Asian artefacts, the visitors infer a simplistic meaning and hardly any further.

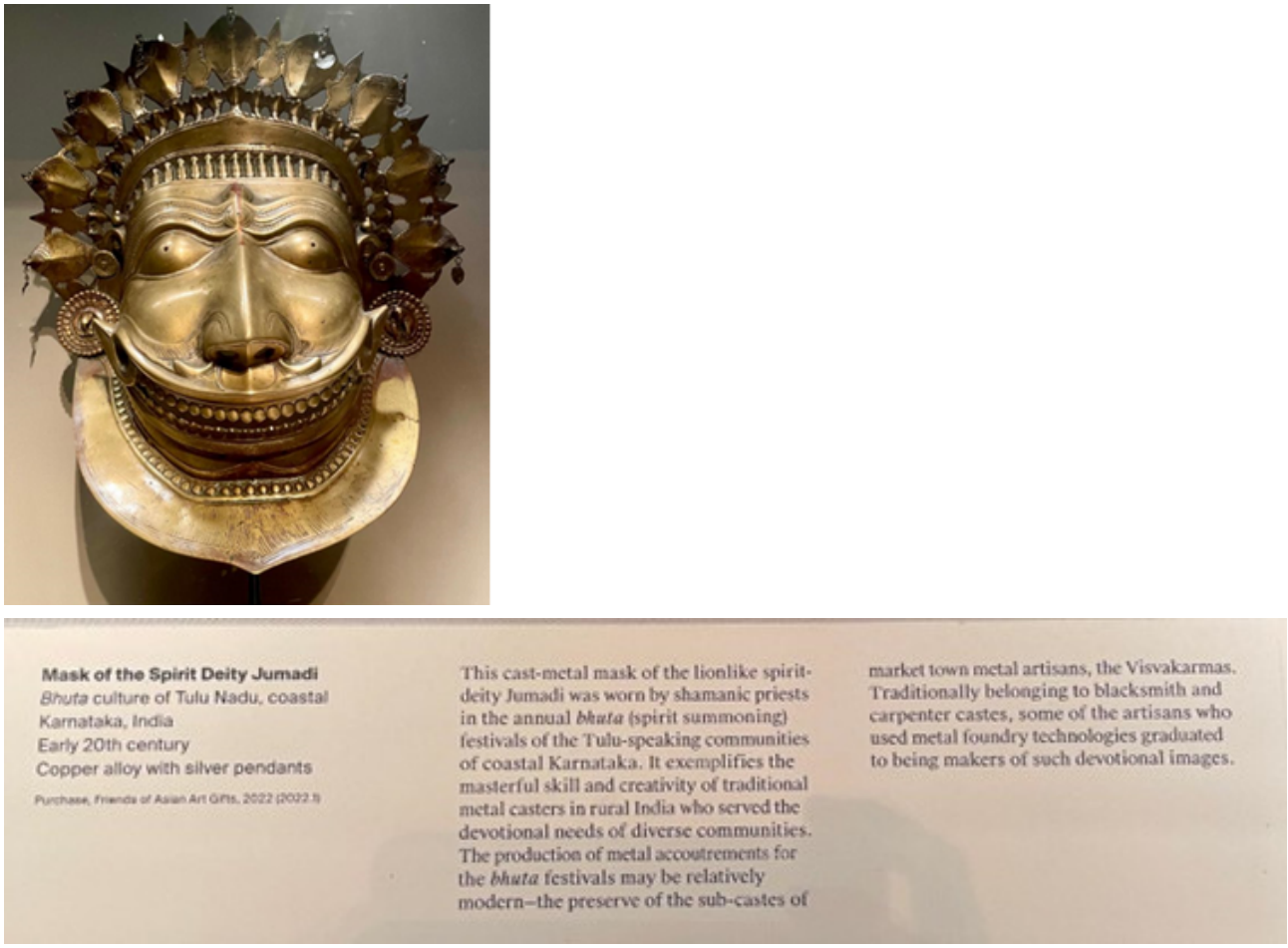

Figure 1: Jumadi Mask (Photo By The Author)

In Figure 1, we see the display at The MET of a Jumadi mask. Here, as soon as it moves from an ambience of worship and reverence to one of an art display, it acquires new meaning, a new value, and a new personality that more or less overlays the previous one. The mask becomes an art object that needs to be interpreted for its aesthetic value rather than its previous status as an object of ritualistic value. Tapati Guha-Thakurta goes a step further and asks in what ways do the western art museums function as complex site for the production of new orders of "religious" value around Indian images (Guha-Thakurta 2007). Because there is no clear cut transformation of these "religious" objects into "aesthetic" objects; these values are only extended, overlapped, and superimposed. The label still explains the festival context, however, the spotlight is on its artistic characteristics. The insufficiency of details on what constitutes a Bhūta Kola or the lack of any reference to how the mask is used as a medium of spirit possession decontextualises and isolates the objects, limiting the audience from fully comprehending the significance of this artefact. It is presented as an object with "every day-aesthetic value", rather than ritualistic value (Leddy 1995). The museums, thus, mask the meaning of the object

(significance), often closely tied to its use (functional) and to its place, both physical and conceptual (syntactical) (Grimes, 1992).

The Question of Art vs Cultural History Museums

Art museums present us with a peculiar case of displaying objects of ritualistic value. As previously noted, the institutional design of a museum replaces the "cult value" of an object with "exhibition value" once it enters a museum (Benjamin 1973). This replacement is informed by the museum's decision, which subsequently affects the visitor's conception of the object. When the objects feature in the collection of an Art Museum, like all our examples, they are clearly meant to be viewed for their aesthetic value. Art Museums are often praised for their role in being the flag-bearers of conserving and preserving objects that may be forgotten from human memory. However, when an object of religious value is displayed in these museums, especially of living traditions, what ends up happening is an act of amnesia. Once the object enters the Art Museums, the object is fossilised to preserve its artistic endeavours, having forgotten its lived realities. In the case of all Bhūta Masks and Breastplates, they become the bastions of Bronze casting from South Canara. This "Museum Effect" of turning all objects into works of art then also comes with the inevitable amnesia of the subsidiary experiences and skills derived from settings external to the singular experience of appreciating the object (Karp 1991).

In contrast to art museums, anthropology museums have always taken religion seriously, as it is practised, and as it reflects and inspires patterns of living (Paine 2012). Religious objects may also sometimes feature in "folk" and "cultural history" museums. However, this distinction needs a critical revaluation. Even though it is at the heart of the curator's job to unlearn and deconstruct this misguided dichotomy of earlier generations, it also appears that society as a whole is complicit in hiding the underlying assumptions that inform a museum's displays, thereby obscuring the activity of its objects. The museum is, more often than not, a reflection of the worldview of its society. This also includes other Museum interlocutors such as its board of trustees, museum learning staff, as well as the academic community of museum professionals. The discussions on the role of religion in museums and of museums in religion in the context of material culture have only been recent. Scholars such as Grimes (1992), Paine (2000), and publications such as Material Religion: The Journal of Objects, Art and Belief started in 2005 have all gradually contributed to this discourse. Therefore, more prosaically, the museum community has been reconsidering earlier perceptions of museum practices. If that is to be taken into account, then the Bhūta Kola objects in the above American art museums also await reassessment.

The Pāḍdanas

The ritual performance of Bhūta Kola is typically accompanied by the Tulu Pāḍdanas. The Pāḍdanas are oral epics that narrate the creation myths and the adventures of the deities that embody the objects during the festival. They are an example of "multi-story" traditions (Blackburn 1989) and they convey variations of details of each deity's life history depending on the specific physical locality of the epic. These pāḍdanas are the primary sources of the spirits that possess the performer through the object, such as Jarandaya, Panjurli, Pilichamundi, and the approximately four hundred deities of the Tulu land. Despite their importance, these textual corpora are often absent from museum labels.

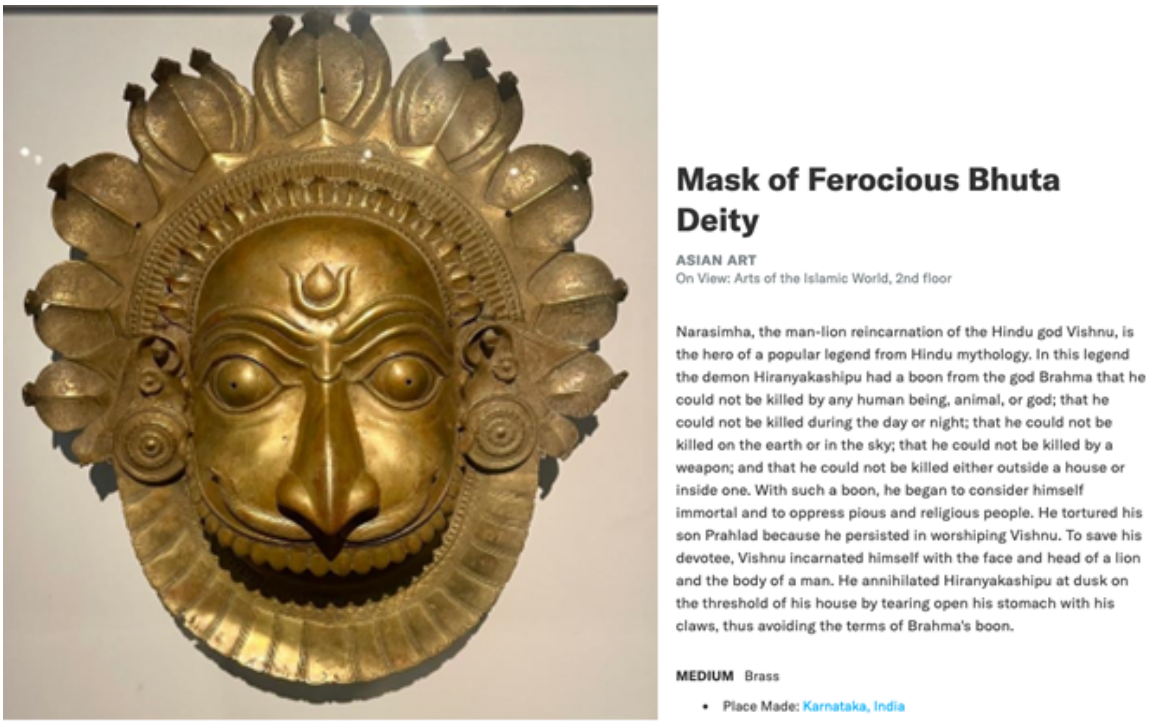

Figure 2: Bhuta Mask, Brooklyn Museum (Photo by the Author)

As an example, let us look at the "Mask of Ferocious Bhūta Deity" at the Brooklyn Museum (Fig.2), which is accompanied by a label that narrates the story of Narasiṃha and Hiranyakaśipu, does not provide information regarding the context of the ritual performance. It assigns a new meaning to the mask, despite its conventional designation as Viṣṇumūrtī among Bhūta kola practitioners. The label, however, fails to acknowledge this or the mask's ritual function and efficacy, opting instead for a narrative summary derived from canonical Sanskrit texts such as the Harivamśa and the Brahmā Purāṇa. This approach overlooks the specific vernacular narratives found in Tulu pāḍdanas, which convey divergent stories and hold critical significance for the communities in which they are performed. The disparity between museum labels and the cultural context of the objects they describe highlights the need for a more nuanced and culturally informed

approach to the interpretation of such artefacts. The objects do not speak of these cultural specificities and establish the link between such accounts and the objects.

Uncertain Provenance: How did it end up here?

In the above discussions, we have established the role of curation in carefully selecting, assembling and organising the museum collections. We might note at this point that there are also other museum personnel who affect how objects are understood. For instance, such understandings also depend on the collectors who donate or sometimes sell them to the museum in the first place. Museums in the past have not given adequate attention to this detail and are rarely explicit. Provenance is often given secondary or tertiary importance, this is in part evident from the many incidents in the past where museums had to return or repatriate objects that were looted and sold to them by art collectors (9). Very often a "decorative art" reflects not the research interests of the museum today or even in the past, but rather the enthusiasms, whims and preferences of its original collector (Paine 2012). The distortions caused by this can have a significant impact on the narratives conveyed by museum collections.

This leads us to the question of the provenance of the Bhūta kola objects at the American Museums. How did these objects come to be displayed as part of museum collections? Of the objects with a clear provenance cited, all the donors are private art collectors and enthusiasts. There is also no secondary provenance on where they acquired the object from, which begs the question of the life and afterlife of these objects away from their cultures. It is clear from earlier ethnographic records that once the masks are taken off by the performer after the festival season is over, they are kept safe for the next festival. But the evidence from the masks suggests that they were not entirely made for aesthetic pleasure—or that like other forms of divine images in Indian religions, their aesthetic qualities are linked to their status as divine images/objects. And the question remains as to what was the exact route by which these artefacts found their way from altars and festivals to collectors and later to museums.

Bhūta Objects in a non-local Western Museum and Indigenous Ontologies

The Bhūta Kola artefacts may not resume their former role as ritual objects, unlike certain other Indian images. Tapati Guha-Thakurta refers to the Chola bronzes as wonderful examples of those Indian images which seem to be able to move strategically in and out of different concurrent identities, negotiating the demands of both their artistic and religious (re)inscriptions in the present (Guha-Thakurta 2007). A rather new approach is to look at the categories of 'religious' and the 'artistic' as less fixed and stable values, and more as a shifting, transmuting ground for the positioning of these sculpted icons (Guha-

Thakurta 2007). Similarly, the Bhūta Kola objects may also negotiate their shifting values and serve as an example of the blurring lines between "art" and "religion".

Though not yet requested to be returned to the Tulu region, they now occupy a liminal space, navigating multiple identities as objects that once held religious significance while currently conveying aesthetic value. Despite this, these objects could prove to be valuable resources for future study. Bhūta Kola provides an ideal context for examining the interplay between religion and geography, as the performers transform the space into an intimate and sacred place. Religious expressions, as demonstrated in Bhūta Kola, offer a window into cosmological beliefs and their relationship to the natural world. The objects used in these rituals serve as vessels for the manifestation of deities and are integral to the performance. Therefore, while the Bhūta Kola artefacts may not return to their previous role as ritual objects, they still hold significant cultural and religious value. It may be fair to say that these objects raise questions not only about their own identities but also about the ways we understand the religious traditions in which these objects were created and which they represent in museums today.

Moreover, these objects also serve as one of the many examples of non-local, indigenous objects in Western museums that provide immense potential for incorporating the study of indigenous ontologies. Over the last two decades, scholarly advancements across various disciplines in the humanities, natural sciences, and social sciences have converged into what is commonly referred to as an "ontological turn" (Holbraad & Morten 2017). This term denotes a shift away from the epistemological critique of knowledge production, which was deeply rooted in the prior "linguistic" turn (10), emphasising texts, discourse formations, social constructivism, and cultural representation. Instead, there is a move towards a radical reconsideration of the ontological foundation of reality itself, along with the diverse forms of "life" (entities, relationships, and materialities) that both inhabit and constitute reality (11).

A shared foundational critique of the Western Enlightenment unifies these movements, specifically targeting the centrality accorded to the individual, intentional "subject", and various dualisms such as culture-nature, subject-object, spirit-matter, animate-inanimate, mind-body, and human-nonhuman (Harman 2002, Coole & Frost 2010, Sahlins 2013, Tallbear 2017, Harraway 2016). The overarching goal of these studies is to reassess the conventional model for historical inquiry by challenging the notion of the singular, physically bound autonomous human as the primary form of life and agent of history. Instead, these movements seek to reorient the study of history by re-examining the human within emergent, distributed, and relational networks that encompass a diverse array of human and other-than-human entities, agencies, and materialities. This re-

evaluation aims to transcend traditional boundaries and embed the human within a more holistic understanding of interconnected and dynamic relationships. Therefore, in this exploration of material culture, how can we grasp the ontological significance of the objects in question within the community? This interrogation underscores the need for a more culturally embedded and contextually informed approach, encouraging a re-evaluation of scholarly frameworks and paradigms to better align with the perspectives and insights emerging from the communities and practices being studied. This paper is a preliminary study that traces the presence of Tulu ritual objects in the museums, while upcoming work will focus on the materiality, craft, and iconography, and how these aspects will impact their presence in the museums.

Notes

[1]This project has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation program under grant agreement no. 101054849 (PURANA) as well as the Gonda PhD Grant by the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences.

[2] It is typically conducted annually between the months of December and February right after the harvest season. However, there are also instances where it is conducted once every two, ten, fifteen or twenty years by families.

[3] Bhūta is a past passive participle from the root bhū 'to have been or existed'. The term is used also to refer to the spirits of deceased people or ancestors.

[4] The word "original" here does not stand for any inherent or essential characteristics but as the location of origin, where the object was used in a ritual setting.

[5] David Carrier explores the concept of 'metamorphosis' in his book Museum Skepticism (2006), highlighting how a museum artifact undergoes a transformative process to become a 'work of art'. He emphasizes the collaborative efforts between art writers and museum curators in shaping the 'envelopes' that define and enhance the presentation of art. This is also further emphasised in Paine 2012, Buggeln et al 2017.

[6] The word embodier, performer, god-dancer, are all used interchangeably here.

[7] Eck (1981) calls it "Sanctification by adhesion", wherein "breathlife," is infused into the image during this rite, "establishing the breathlife." This was in the context of temple images of the Hindu pantheon, however, a comparison may be made to showcase the similarity of concepts.

[8] Kopytoff 1986, Tilley 2006, Hoskins 2006; Latour (2003) also emphasises the non-human agency in his Actor-Network Theory (ANT).

[9] For example, one golden coffin of Nedjemankh, purchased by New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art in 2017 was repatriated in September 2019, after the district attorney's office discovered it had been looted from Minya during the 2011 revolution. From there, smugglers trafficked it, allegedly restored it and furnished fake export papers. It then went to France, where antiquities dealers arranged its sale to the Met for $4 million.

[10] The linguistic turn originated with Wittgenstein's Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus (1921). In the 1920s and early 1930s, the logical positivists deepened the turn through their outright rejection of metaphysics; in line with their scientific outlook, they also sought to merge it with 'ideal language philosophy'.

[1] This shift towards ontological considerations is also situated within a broader and more expansive framework known as the "material turn," encompassing diverse interdisciplinary movements collectively termed "new materialisms." These movements, including "object-oriented ontologies" (Harman 1999), "speculative realism" (Bessier 2006), "actor-network-theory" (Latour 2005), "new vitalism" (Bennett 2010), and "thing theory" (Brown 2004), are informed by a synthesis of poststructuralism, post-Marxism, posthumanism, feminism, and queer theory.

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IN SEARCH OF OUR ROOTS. ON THE HISTORY OF SENEGALESE PAINTINGS

Anna Helfer

Ken Aicha Sy is a Senegalese French curator based in Dakar, Senegal. Her curatorial research project Survival Kit aims to create a tool, Magalogue (1), for understanding the history of contemporary Senegalese art, particularly from the 1960s to the 1990s. Hundreds of paintings, graphics, films, and archival documents from the École de Dakar are housed in European museums. At the same time, communities in Senegal have no access to their cultural heritage. Survival Kit takes up the urgency that people need to know their cultural roots, allowing collective remembrance of history to envision the future. Her four-year research into Senegal's artistic heritage took her to Germany and England, where she collaborated with the Weltkulturen Museum, Iwalewa House, and SOAS University of London. While conducting her research, she sifted through museum depots and interviewed several key figures from the cultural art scenes of Europe and Africa. She gained significant insights and perspectives on European and African museum institutions and the artistic activities and networks of that time in Senegal. Notably, the artistic and museum practices of collectives Huit Facettes and Laboratoire Agit'Art have significantly impacted Ken Aicha Sy's view of museums as a venue that responds to the community and cultural rootedness. Consequently, returning cultural heritage from Europe to Africa is closely linked to the need for museums and archives to transform themselves to adapt not only to the absent objects but also to the cultural and societal environment of the place of origin.

AH: Ken Aicha, you are conducting a research project called Survival Kit which focuses on the history of the arts in Senegal, particularly from 1960 to the 1990s. The project aims to provide an Afrocentric perspective, as European institutions and museums dominate most research about this period. Additionally, the project has a personal approach as your father, El Hadji Sy2, is one of the artists of this period and a member of the collective Laboratoire Agit'Art. Could you please explain how the project came about?

KAS: The idea of Survival Kit started with thinking about what kind of history and knowledge I wanted to transmit to my kid about his grandfather. Returning to my history and family's history was a cathartic step. The project is linked to being a mother and the urgency of passing on our history.

[1] The Magalogue is a booklet combining historical information about museums, university archives, and art centers within the transcultural connection between Senegal, Germany, and England. It is written in French, English, and German and includes interviews with art historians, curators, journalists, artists, and experts in the field. Additionally, the booklet features reproductions of works and an image bank, particularly Senegalese art, which serves as a visual reference for the principles and concepts.

[2] El Hadji Sy, also known as El Sy, was born in 1954 in Dakar, where he currently lives and works. He studied at the École Nationale des Beaux-Arts in Dakar from 1973 to 1977 and is a part of the second generation of Senegalese artists who emerged after the renowned École de Dakar. Along with filmmaker Djibril Diop Mambéty, dramaturg Youssoufa Dione, and philosopher Issa Samb, Sy co-founded the trans-disciplinary art collective Laboratoire Agit-Art. In this collective, he created the spatial environments and visual language for their performances. Sy has also been a key figure in developing several artists' collectives, including Tenq and the interventionist group Huit Facettes, which was featured at Documenta 11.

Since I did not grow up with my father and my mother died, the question came up: "Where do I find information about my family and about the culture I grew up in"? Due to the lack of a father-daughter relationship, I had to visit the family and institutional archives to obtain the missing information. My father had not passed on this knowledge, so collecting it was up to me. It sounds sad, but I am also grateful because otherwise, I would not have started this project. Another entrance to this project was the personal archive of my late mother, Anne Jean Bart, a journalist and cultural writer for the newspaper Soleil in Dakar. She wrote extensively on the art and cultural scene of Senegal. After her passing, I stumbled upon many articles she wrote from that time. This prompted me to visit the Soleil archive, where I found more of her writings about the art scene. However, her personal archive at home was more iconographic, with many pictures, memories of that time, and about El Hadji Sy's family. So, finding all these documents, articles, and photos inspired me to embark on a personal project, Survival Kit, which then, over time, developed into much bigger projects. Another aspect, as you mentioned, was that most of the catalogs and books of Senegalese art from the 1960s to the 1990s, were written by scholars and institutions from outside of Senegal, mainly Americans and Europeans. Although books like Elizabeth Harney's or Joanna Grabski's 3provide thorough research on the subject, they don't offer a Senegalese perspective or involve collaboration with scholars or artists from Senegal. There is one exception I am aware of where Senegalese artists were involved in the knowledge-making process: the Anthology of Senegalese Contemporary Art by the Weltkulturen Museum in Frankfurt and its former curator, Friedrich Axt. In this case, El Hadji Sy contributed to the book's content and invited other artists to contribute to this publication. So, from that experience, I wanted to comprehend the history of visual arts in Senegal and, most importantly, to rectify any narratives or perspectives that may have been misrepresented, twisted, or misinterpreted. As a result, I began conducting interviews with the actors from this period to tell their own stories. There was a sense of urgency to this task, as no one is immune to the passage of time, and these artists pass away. However, I also needed to see the artworks to understand this fully. That brought me to Europe, mainly Germany, where most paintings are.

AH: The Weltkulturen Museum has many of your father's artworks, El Hadji Sy, because of his close collaborations with Friedrich Axt during the 70s and 80s. When Axt died, he gave his archive to the museum, which they are now taking care of. Iwalewa House on the other hand, collected very generously a lot of art from the École de Dakar and the Senegalese genre of "sous verre" behind glass paintings. When you began researching, did you know what was stored in the depots and museum cellars? Can you describe how it was for you to discover Senegalese culture or your father's work far away from your place of origin?

[3] Harney, Elizabeth (2002): In Senghor's Shadow: Art, Politics, and the Avant-Garde in Senegal, 1960–1995. Durham: Duke University Press; Grabski, Joanna (2001): The Historical Intervention and Contemporary Practice of Modern Senegalese Art: Three Generations of Artists in Dakar. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

KAS: I was initially curious about what they had, but I had yet to learn what I would find. To my surprise, I discovered many things: paintings, paperwork, articles about the artists, documents related to the deal, money transactions, and transportation. I also came across many negative photos documenting various artworks and events and flyers promoting exhibitions and other events. But most of all, discovering artists and their paintings was the most exciting. For example, when I discovered Amadou Bâ[4], it was eye-opening. I finally understood the aesthetics and philosophy of Négritude and what Senghor was trying to accomplish with it: to bring Senegalese and African culture into the spotlight. I am fascinated and touched by Amadou Ba's artistic style. For me, he represents the École de Dakar movement. Upon discovering my father's work, I realized that he served as a catalyst for the art scene in Senegal, promoting numerous other artists but himself. At the same time, visiting the museum's depot and archives was, in many ways, very violent. As I looked at all the cultural artefacts and wondered why they were being kept there, I felt sad; in some ways, I was angry and frustrated. I questioned myself: "Do they think we cannot take care of our own artefacts?". It was shocking to discover the extent of the museum's collection as I delved deeper into the archives and depots. Despite the question of which museum has the right to host which artworks, my research made me realise how incredible it is that so many unique artworks and documents are locked away in bunkers where no one can access them.

AH: How could you access these depots and archives or depots, museums, and archives?

KAS: Most of the time, I could easily access the depots because my father's works were stored in these collections. So to speak, the institution had no choice. They had to grant me access to the materials related to my father. However, there were moments when I could not access certain areas. One of the German museums I contacted during my research residency at the Z/KU did not respond favorably to my request. Despite repeated reminders via email and phone, I was never granted access to their archives. This is a major issue. I saw this gesture as a hostage-taking of a memory that doesn't belong to them. Furthermore, I came across a disturbing realization that the archive is monetized. For example, at SOAS, I had to pay 200 pounds to access a digital copy of a film SOS Culture, featuring my father's performance. This experience made me ponder what would have happened if I hadn't had the money to access it. This led me to question how students from all backgrounds would access this information and raised concerns about the ownership and management of such archives and museums. Shouldn't we consider decolonizing these spaces and developing a new approach to moving archives that would be accessible to all?

[4] Amadou Bâ is an artist and belongs to the first generation of the Ecole de Dakar. He gained popularity in Europe, especially in France, after his artwork was showcased in the exhibition L'art sénégalais d'aujourd'hui at the Grand Palais in Paris in 1974. Bâ's paintings blend traditional and modern styles, depicting nomadic and rural life in Africa. He is deeply rooted in his Sahelian hometown in Senegal, and his paintings revolve around the Sahel region.

AH: Your question goes to the heart of the debate about coloniality in museums. Historically, the construction of the European nation in museum discourses and collections has been intertwined with the creation of "otherness". As institutions of modernity, museums were both instruments of the nation-state and colonialism. Today, European museums are responsible for rethinking their legacy regarding ownership, representation, and accessibility. Survival Kit takes part in this debate as it questions this museum's legacy and wants to liberate Senegalese art from these depots, one-site narratives, and the captivity of otherness, making it accessible to the society where the artworks emerged. So, there is this aspect of restitution within Survival Kit. The project not only seeks to return art but also questions the concept of museums as isolated spaces where the future of these objects is preserved. Could you elaborate on that?

KAS: To answer this question, first, we must make ourselves aware and realize why encountering cultural heritage is so important and why we need places to encounter our history, culture, and epistemic systems. Countries with colonial pasts, especially, must have access to their past; only by connecting to the past can a society shape its future and profoundly impact people's consciences and perspectives. Having places that connect us to our past and roots is essential, not just for the duty of memory but also for learning from the events depicted, the development of creativity, the sense of aesthetics, and critical thinking. These are crucial qualities that help us face the world with the dignity of our ancestors. Second, regarding museums in Senegal, we must be aware of the museum as undoubtedly a problematic, inaccessible, and foreign space. The first museums in Dakar came after the model of Western museums through Léopold Sédar Senghor, the first president of Senegal and promoter of culture from the 1960-1980s. In the name of the Négritude philosophy, he established an academic art school, the École de Dakar, as I mentioned earlier. He also held significant exhibitions of European and African artists like Pablo Picasso, Henry Matisse, and Iba Ndiaye at the Musée Dynamique. His institutionalisation of arts serves as a means of promoting and disseminating a cultural heritage through propaganda and presentation, which, on the other hand, had less to do with how various aspects of Senegalese culture were practiced outside these walls.

Back then and today, many people perceive the museum as a curious and outdated place that mainly appeals to foreigners or the Senegalese elite. We have, therefore, to distinguish the status of museums in Europe from those in Senegal or even West Africa, as the local population are not encouraged to explore them. Consequently, the issues surrounding museums need to be considered in democratizing access to art, art education, and conservation. These questions about the Museum have been explored in Senegal by the artist collective Huit Facettes, who believed that art should be taken out of the cities and confront rural populations in their daily lives to fulfill its primary functions of awakening and developing a critical sense. For others, like the artists of the Laboratoire Agit'Art, artworks need to break away from walls, leave museums and galleries, and be

presented in the street, in spaces accessible to all people, share their practice with society to develop new perspectives, social values, and critical engagement with social-political contexts. So, confronting the public with a low threshold is essential, mainly because most don't have this kind of institutional art education. Therefore, a museum space must be where history, culture, and innovation converge. It should serve as a venue for inquiry and engagement, where we can learn about ourselves and connect with others. We need to involve more people in planning museum content to better understand the objects we exhibit rather than isolating them in boxes. The museum must be reimagined, made accessible to everyone, and focused on welcoming the future as much as the past. Otherwise, it will become an outdated witness to a regrettable past. The Survival Kit raises essential questions about the purpose of such spaces. What happens to collections after exhibits? How do we access archives, and what kind of expertise do these institutions have in understanding past events? Isn't it time to add an Afrocentric perspective to these issues that directly concern us?

AH: I understand from your experience that there is a discrepancy between how the artists at that time perceived art and its performance space versus the modern museum concept, where art is predominantly exhibited and locked away. Consequently, following the ideas of Huit Facettes and Agit'Art, who envision the museum space as a place where everybody can engage with art, be confronted, and where art can respond to and resonate with the public, your approach to circulating art back from Europe to Africa also means then to transform the museum radically?

KAS: Yes, exactly. Looking at these artistic practices means engaging with a long tradition of questioning the normativity of museum spaces and opening to formats that take art out of its isolation and into showcases hanging from walls. In this sense, I am also referring to Clémentine Deliss, whom I admire and who mentored me. She has been questioning the museum, especially the ethnographic museum, for a long time and was always ahead of her time. In criticizing those places as vestiges of the horrors of colonisation, she conceptualized the "metabolic museum" (5) as a way of rethinking these spaces as places of encounter. More precisely, she wanted to bring the collections back to life, remove them from storage, show them, question them, and work with them. As the director of the Weltkulturen Museum, she invited artists to work with the primarily stored objects in black boxes. She led them to develop different approaches to engage with them. Initially, touching, feeling, and manipulating those objects felt unusual, but it created an opportunity to move beyond their customary or conventional use. For the artist, it was also to work on new

[5] In her book The Metabolic Museum (2020) Clémentine Deliss discusses how European ethnographic museums have been pressured to justify their existence for some time. The themes of their exhibits and the histories of their collections, which are often rooted in colonialism, have been under scrutiny. Change is necessary. Deliss combines personal experience and academic research in her novel on modern art and ethnology. She shares her insights as the director of Frankfurt's Weltkulturen Museum and her conversations with influential artists, filmmakers, and writers. The book also explores the current state of contemporary art and introduces the Metabolic Museum, a laboratory that experiments with innovative art and showcases collections for future generations.

material, forms, and substance. That is why it is so essential that the Senegalese society has access to these artworks to work with them. In her book The Metabolic Museum (2020) Clémentine Deliss discusses how European ethnographic museums have Let's examine art practices outside of Europe, where art is integrated into daily life, to reimagine museums as spaces that reflect social realities and dynamics. From that point of view, I think there is a twofold requirement for Africa's cultural heritage: European museums must open their archives and depots and transform themselves into open spaces where people worldwide can work with them. On the other hand, African museums must leave the legacy of European museums and reinvent themselves regarding their tradition of art and culture.

AH: In that sense, Survival Kit will be the special guest at the IFAN Museum, Dakar, at the exhibition Branching Streams. Sketches of Kinship. The exhibition is part of "Re-Connecting-Object," a major research project led by a transnational research group between 5 countries on the African and European continent. The project aims to de-center Eurocentric perspectives and allows for multiple epistemologies, fostering the generative power of locally anchored practice and knowledge on all levels of the project's development. You display Survival Kit as a work-in-process project with different materials, including interviews. Originally, you wanted to show the original artworks, but due to cost and insurance problems, you can only display photographs. What is the importance of originality in your project, and how does it relate to the museum? And finally, does this exhibition format reflect your ideas of a museum space?

KAS: The way I want to present my work is linked to the discussions I had during the project process. At every step, I had small presentations of the research, and I asked my audience: "What do you think?", "How do you want to receive the information?". After collecting all the feedbacks, it became apparent that there is a requirement for utilizing different mediums. As a result, the exhibition Apologue de la peinture contemporaine sénégalaise at IFAN is an additional step to present my project to a more specific audience, including students, art professionals, and people who engage in arts from all over the world. I will present different materials, photographs of the paintings, and, foremost, the movie SOS Culture. This is more accessible to a broader audience. Doing that is a kind of democratization of art and the way to access art. Additionally, all the scenography, which I closely developed with the scenographer Carole Diop, is linked to my experience of working with the archives in Europe. When I choose only to display prints of the original artworks, it is also a way to say something, the underlying connotation of "I don't have the right to do the exhibition; they don't give me the right to present." The archive containing the cultural heritage of Senegal is a powerful tool for maintaining control of the economy around the archive. Ownership of the archive is linked to political power. Therefore, those who cannot afford to buy back the archive don't have power. As I do not have the means to

purchase it, I am displaying prints instead to showcase the cultural heritage. In this sense, I built up the Magalogue to overcome these archival powers and the hegemony of museum spaces to find a more modern way, so to speak, to democratize knowledge about Senegalese cultural history. Answering the other question about originality: I like this question because it's what's important. Originality? Isn't it just as important to remember a deficient general memory of the past? The originality of this exhibition, beyond the form of the rendering, is the subject itself. The approach to it. This personal history that ultimately becomes the history of all. This memory and the problems associated with its loss or possession by a third party. I like the idea of showing the difficulty of access, the interminable labyrinth to finally reach something that belongs to us. The story itself is important, but so are the means of accessing it. And finally, what will remain of this story? How are we going to carry it through the centuries? Why should we talk about Picasso and not the works that inspired him? Why should we talk about Banksy when Elsy has been trying to get the works out of museums for 40 years? What are the limits and who sets them? Why should our history be less important than yours?

Artist El Hadji Sy

Founder of "Survival Kit" Ken Aicha Sy

Paintings of El Hadji Sy. Depot of Weltkulturen Museum, Germany

A Behind glass painting "Sous Verre" by Mor Gueye depicts Cheikh Amadou Bamba walking on water. Depot of Iwalewa House, Germany

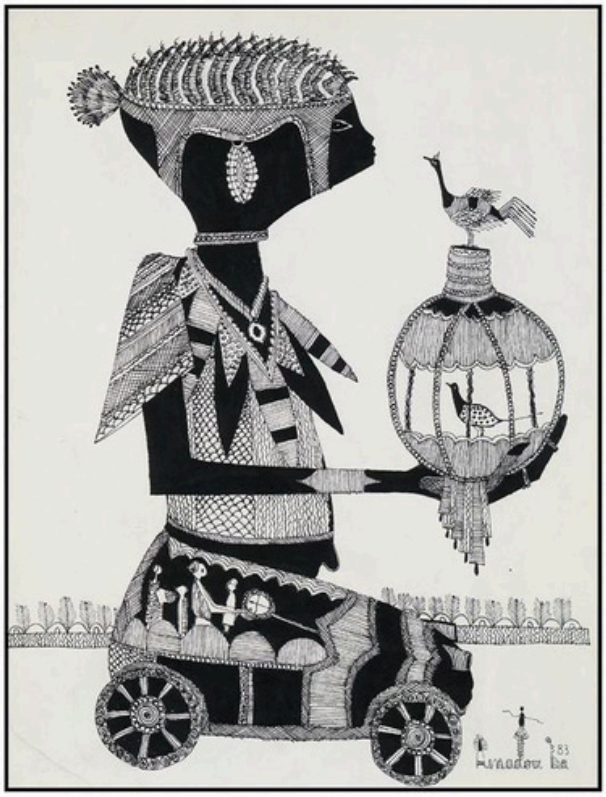
SURVIVAL KIT

APOLOGUE DE LA PEINTURE CONTEMPORAINE SÉNÉGALAISE

DANS LE CADRE DE L'EXPOSITION « FLUX RAMIFIÉS - ESQUISSES DE PARENTÉS »

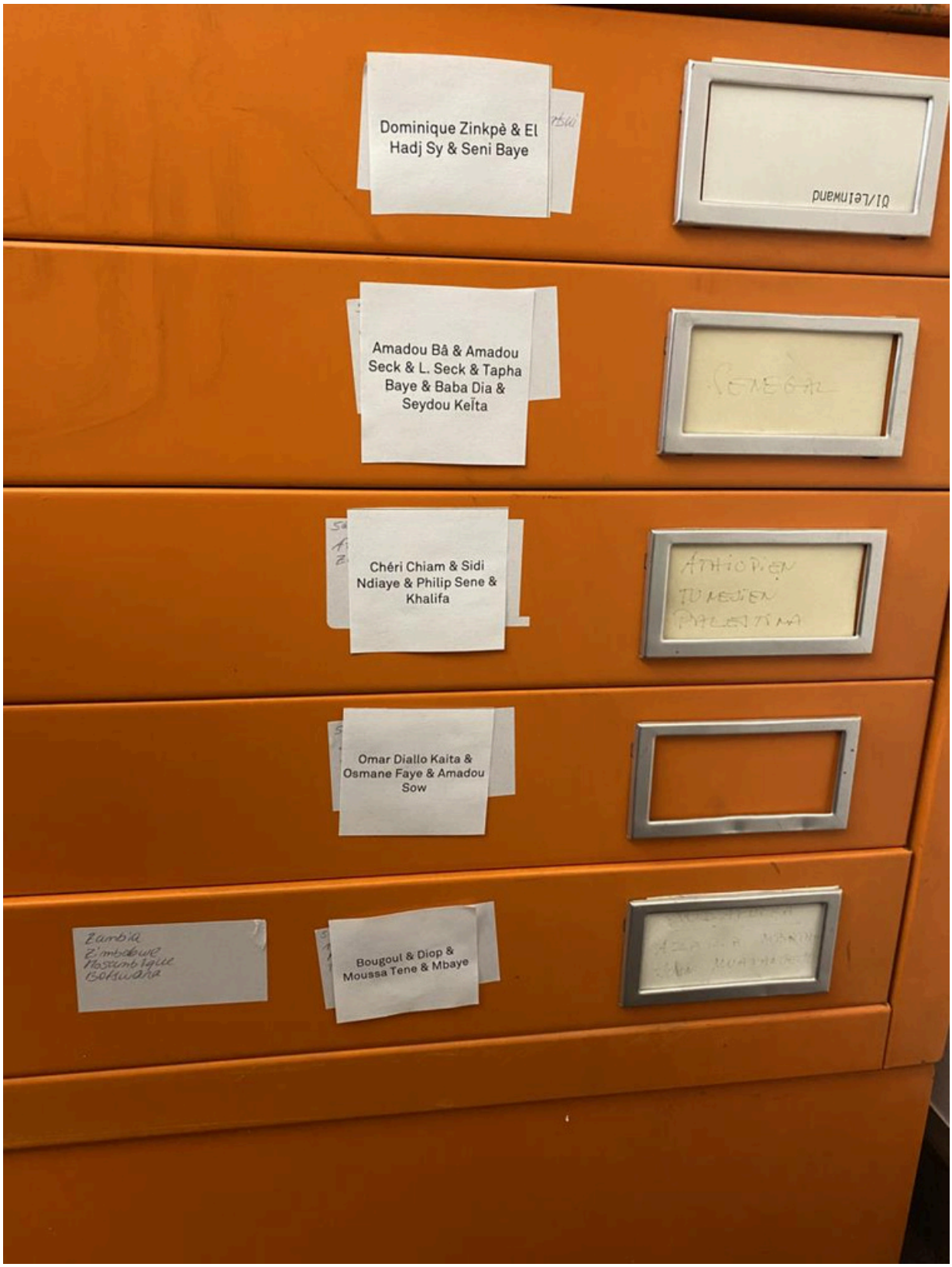
DU
18 MAI
AU
15 SEPT.
2024

MUSÉE
THÉODORE
MONOD



Amadou Bâ «La vendeuse d'oiseaux» 1983

WELTKULTUREN MUSEUM



Archive register about the various Senegalese artists

LINKING ART AND BETTER-BEING THROUGH A SENSITIVE APPROACH TO ARTWORKS. ISSUES AND REFLECTIONS ON THE THERAPEUTIC ROLE OF THE MUSEUM (1)

Muriel Damien

Art historian, head of the collections at Musée L (UCLouvain – musée universitaire de Louvain, Belgium), initiator of Art en corps which offers sensitive mediation in museums (general public and people suffering from burnout or anxiety).

Never before in human history have we had so much brainpower available. Thanks to the development of our knowledge of the world, the improvement in our quality of life, advances in medicine and lifestyle as well as productivity, humans have freed up space in their brains for other possibilities. This cerebral availability could encourage a mental availability that has never been seen before. For sociologist Gérald Bronner, however, this plus précieux de tous les trésors is in jeopardy (Bronner, 2021: 62-86). The author blames screens, which monopolise our availability and prevent us from waiting and daydreaming. For him, another factor, and not the least, is the colossal mass of information and new knowledge in which we are immersed, and that has increased exponentially over the last twenty years. According to Bronner, 90% of the information available in the world has been written in the space of just two years (Bronner, 2021: 89-97). Our overdeveloped countries are in the grip of a major problem: this increase in available information is no longer leading to a shortage of material goods, but to a shortage of attention (Citton, 2014: 21-29, 45).

Scarcity would no longer reside in the sphere of production and material resources, but in an absence of the attention essential to consuming these goods. Attention therefore seems to have become a fundamental resource for humans in today's society (Citton, 2014: 29-33). This problem of attention is compounded by a lack of time, which manifests itself in an acceleration of the pace of our increasingly busy and demanding lives, in which we are constantly running out of time (Rosa, 2013; Rosa, 2014: 13-32). Given this state of affairs, the technologies that are supposed to save time ultimately lead to a form of alienation (2) in our relationship with the world (Rosa, 2014: 114-135). This fast pace, often experienced in the urgency and frenzy of everyday life, inevitably leads to stress which, in the long term, damages health and generates states of malaise, even illness.

The World Health Organisation (WHO) defines mental health as 'a state of mental well- being that enables people to cope with the stresses of life, realise their abilities, learn well and work well, and contribute to their community. It is an integral component of health and well-being that underpins our individual and collective abilities to make decisions, build relationships and shape the world we live in. Mental health is a basic human right and it is crucial to personal, community and socio-economic development'(3). At present, the main cause of sick leave in Belgium relates to mental health: psychological disorders such as anxiety, depression and burnout are on the increase. Indeed, between 2016 and 2021, cases of burnout and long-term depression rose by 46% in Belgium(4). Although research into burnout has increased in recent years(5), it has mainly focused on establishing and evaluating diagnoses, and museums are not immediately integrated into care programmes.

Sensitive mediation resonates with the world

In the face of the ecological crisis in the world, Baptiste Morizot proclaims the need for a return to sensitivity. Our way of interacting with living things has deteriorated due to a lack of availability, by the degeneration of our capacities for attention, sensation and perception, reducing our connection with living things (Morizot, 2020: 17-35). Reconnecting with our senses and our sensations, including through art, therefore seems to respond to the major ecological and societal issues of today, and would make up for our society's lack of time, attention and knowledge. I

n its 2019 report, the WHO indicated the major role and involvement of art in health and well-being by reporting a series of components related to artistic activities promoting health and well-being, the majority of which fall under a sensitive and sensory approach (Fancourt and Finn, 2019: 1-6). Indeed, we can read that art involves the aesthetic engagement of the visitor, the participation of the imagination, sensory activation, and the evocation of an emotion, which emerge as factors encouraging mental and physical health – in support as well as in prevention – and social interactions (Fancourt and Finn, 2019: 2-4; Juslin, 2013: 235-266; Fancourt 2017). In the museum sphere, this return to sensitivity is a necessity, according to the new definition of museums approved by the International Council of Museums (ICOM) on 24 August 2022 in Prague (6). The inclusion, experience and sustainability that appear in it bear witness to this desire to see the museum as a place that is open to new approaches to mediation. As the philosopher Charles Pépin suggests, it therefore seems crucial to take an interest in what beauty does to us (Pépin, 2013) and to develop sensitive mediation tools.

Currently underway at the Université catholique de Louvain (UCLouvain-Belgium), a PhD research project in art history entitled 'Entering into resonance with a work of art: developing a pedagogical tool for a sensory experience of a work' aims to create a form of museum mediation based on sensitivity and sensoriality. The theoretical pillars of this research (Damien, 2024) are based in particular on the theory of resonance envisaged as a relational posture towards the world and developed by Hartmut Rosa (Rosa, 2018). What's more, according to Rosa, this theory of resonance offers a solution to one of the major challenges facing society today: our relationship with time (Rosa, 2013).

Through a variety of exercises that can be adapted to all museum and heritage institutions, the mediation tool developed is based exclusively on a physical, sensorial, sensitive and emotional approach. There is a deliberate absence of any content-based information that could be used to analyse, understand or interpret the work. Conceived as an encounter, the visit is an experience that allows us to connect with ourselves and to approach art using all the information transmitted by our five senses, our body and our sensitivity: forms, materiality, colours and textures in particular. In this way, visitors become fully involved in the experience, using their bodies as tools for the visit. This mediation system is designed to be accessible to all audiences.

And what if, given its specific characteristics and the state of mental health in the population, this tool could be of use in the therapeutic sphere?

A pilot project: the Processus de reconnexion à soi par l'art

Figure 1: Introduction to sensitive mediation through tactile stimulation © Art en corps/Anne d'Huart.

According to the WHO definition, burnout affects people's physical sensations through a state of exhaustion or extreme tiredness, and a feeling of being overworked; their cognitive state through a lack of mental availability and a sharp drop in concentration; and their emotional state through emotional exhaustion, withdrawal and physical sensations(7).

The pilot project Processus de reconnexion à soi par l'art hosted at Musée L - musée universitaire de Louvain (UCLouvain, Louvain-la-Neuve, Belgium) was born in 2022 from the meeting of this research on sensitive mediation with a front-line psychologist (8), affiliated to the Réseau 107BW, a mental health network based in the local province. This network acts as a local actor to improve the mental health of the people concerned and their families in Walloon Brabant, the province in which Musée L is located. Carrying out this process within Musée L was also an obvious choice, since the doctoral research project is affiliated to the Institute for the Study of Civilisations, Arts and Letters (INCAL), an intersectoral platform to which the museum, which works closely with the university's research and teaching, is itself attached.

The objectives of this Processus de reconnexion à soi par l'art are manifold. It aims to bring out the different bodily sensations in works of art through a sensitive, sensory approach. It also aims to bring out emotions and feelings through a sensitive approach. The aim is to give patients a moment of relaxation and intimacy with themselves, and to

Figure 2: Relaxation and a change of perspective during sensitive mediation © Art en corps/Anne d'Huart.

develop their imagination. As the process is carried out in a group, it encourages patients to share their experience with others and to find social support from both their peers and the two facilitators: one a psychologist and the other an art historian who has herself experienced burnout, thereby facilitating dialogue between patients. In addition, this process aims to find another channel for addressing their symptoms and resources. It aims to discover or deepen an activation of well-being in the present moment and brings patients closer to museums, which can then be counted on as resources for coping with their mental health problems and preventing them from worsening.

Figure 3: Attention to sound stimulated during sensitive mediation © Art en corps/Anne d'Huart.

The project is conceived as a genuine therapeutic process in that the sessions are designed to be progressive. The first stage consists of an individual interview conducted by the psychologist with patients wishing to begin the process. The aim is to assess the burnout sufferer's aptitude to join a therapeutic group and to understand their motivation. The sessions are spread over five weeks, at the rate of one session per week.

Although the three processes carried out so far have evolved in order to improve and readjust their content in the light of patient feedback, the general outline of each session remains similar. Each session begins by taking stock of the patient's physical and emotional states, as recorded by a round of questioning. From the outset, participants are invited to put themselves at ease in a comfortable posture (lying down or sitting up, with or without shoes). Then, in a secluded and serene area of the museum, they are given a guided meditation based on breathing exercises, a body scan and an exercise in tactile approach with a pebble, carried out with their eyes closed (Figure 1). This essential stage provides an opportunity to awaken the senses and stimulate the body to be more receptive, and also to shift into a slower rhythm, calm the mind and become aware of being in the present moment. This is followed by a series of exercises performed in the museum's permanent exhibition space to begin the sensitive mediation, which ends with a quiet moment when patients lie down next to a chosen work (Figure 2). The session ends with a moment of exchange with peers, during which everyone is invited to share their experiences and emotions with the psychologist and art historian. Each proposal put forward is an invitation that patients can freely accept or reject as they see fit.

Examples of sensitive mediation exercises with the benefits and difficulties encountered

Among the various tools created as part of the doctoral research into sensitive mediation, several were offered to burnout patients. They were integrated into the process in such a way as to establish a genuine progression in the sensitive approach, starting with the primary senses and then moving on to the notions of empathy and presence.

Attention to **sound** is one of the first exercises, and at Musée L it is approached through the kinetic sculpture of 49 boules de même couleur sur un plan incliné mais surélevé by Pol Bury (1922-2005), created in 1966 (Figure 3). Patients are invited to sit close to the work and then quickly close their eyes. For a few minutes, in addition to the ambient noises, they hear slight arrhythmic sounds coming from the invisible mechanism of the 49 attached balls moving subtly on the inclined surface. Only then are they invited to open their eyes to see the work, adding a new dimension to their sensory perception of it. This is an opportunity to note the contribution of sound, an approach less preferred than that of sight - over-stimulated in today's world. Often, because of the subtlety of the movement of the balls, the movement and sound of the work go unnoticed by the average visitor. With this exercise, patients reconnect with their senses of hearing and sight. This distinct and successive approach enables them to distinguish the contribution of one sense from the other, and to confirm or refute the data captured by the senses. In addition, this exercise allows patients to refocus on themselves while disconnecting from the outside world. While this proposal systematically arouses wonder, it nevertheless awakens a

certain anxiety in some people, linked to the mechanical sound and its unknown origin, due to the absence of sight.

Figure 4: Activating memory during sensitive mediation © Art en corps/ Anne d'Huart.

Sensitive mediation then offers an opportunity to comprehend a work through the sense of **touch**, stimulated in an indirect way. Patients are invited to choose a work that appeals to them from a limited area. By standing facing the work in the case of a painting, drawing or engraving, or by choosing a point of view in the case of a sculpture, patients use a viewfinder to select a detail (Figure 4), followed by a memorisation exercise, then close their eyes and explore what they memorised. They repeat this operation several times to refine their memory, but above all to see what their memory retains - or not - about the detail. The mediator invites the patients to carry out this process in a spirit of kindness towards themselves and their abilities, without being judgmental but rather observing the experience. Patients are then invited to reactivate the sensations in their hands and imagine what it might feel like to touch the detail with their fingertips (Figure 5). In this way, patients can savour the full richness of a detail, taking the time to focus their attention on it, in the context of a work that may seem overwhelming to grasp in its entirety. This allows them to become aware of the memorisation process, without being judgemental towards themselves, and above all to grasp the tactile aspect of the work without actually touching it. While this experience fills the patients with wonder, above all it helps them to refocus, develop their attention span and become aware of the time it takes to discover a detail in a work of art. Indeed, slowing down and taking the time to observe a detail makes patients aware that globality and speed are not the only possible options in life. Nevertheless, for some patients, making a choice remains a real difficulty, which the mediator can remedy by restricting the space and the range of works to

reassure patients. In addition, the slowness and duration of the exercise calls for prolonged attention to the senses, which can prove difficult to maintain without distracting thoughts taking patients out of the exercise.

Figure 5: Activating the sense of touch during sensitive mediation © Art en corps/Anne d'Huart.

The **sense of movement** is tested in an exercise in which patients are invited to move in relation to the shape and movement of the work (figure 6). After observing these aspects, they use their hands, one or both arms, or their whole body to perform the movement evoked by the work. Through a process of repeated body movement, the gesture is gradually refined and integrated by the patients. After a few minutes, by closing their eyes, the patients transfer the movement inside themselves or around their bodies. They are then invited to explore the sensations and emotions created by the experience. This experience enables the patients' bodies to be placed in partial or total movement, and in this way establishes their bodies as a tool for a formal approach to a work. This exercise energises and revitalises the patients. Experiencing this movement in a playful way gives them a sense of security and a feeling of being encompassed by the form, which is generally experienced in a positive light. Patients tell us that this experience gives them access to another dimension. Daring to move their bodies in front of others can be complicated for most patients, and in this case the solution is for each patient to propose "their movement" to the group, who experiment with it in turn.

Figure 6: Sense of movement during sensitive mediation © Art en corps/ Emmanuel Joly.

Proposing an **anchoring and bonding** exercise is also an interesting experience for patients suffering from burnout, introducing a tool that can be transposed into their everyday lives. By looking at a painting depicting vertical ochre lines gathered around a thick royal blue central axis, the patients transpose both the momentum of the plastic forms and the anchoring of their own bodies. In an upright, dignified posture with their feet firmly planted on the ground - if possible without shoes - the patients become aware that they are both carried by the ground and connected to it. They are then invited to observe the central vertical line, solid as an axis around which the whole work is built. In the image of this line, the patients are encouraged to imagine, inside their bodies, a solid, robust, unshakeable and powerful mast to which they give a material, a tint, a texture: to imagine their own mast inside themselves. This powerful exercise allows them to refocus and at the same time feel anchored and connected. The personal mast imagined becomes a real tool to which patients can attach themselves when they are going through a storm or turbulence in their daily lives. Experimenting with **changing points of view** in front of a work of art has benefits in terms of how you look at a situation in your daily life and how you look at it from another perspective, especially for someone suffering from burnout who quickly feels overwhelmed. The exercise consists of choosing a work of art and then varying the body's position in relation to it, first standing in front of it, then sideways to it, then with your head upside down, and finally lying on the floor (Figures 2 and 7). Experimenting with point of view really does enable us to acquire new and different knowledge with each position we adopt in relation to the work. Becoming aware of this broadens the patient's perspective on a situation. In addition to the often unprecedented nature of lying down in a museum, which allows you to discover the place anew, this posture brings relaxation

Figure 7: Reversed posture to open up to a change of point of view during sensitive mediation © Art en corps/Muriel Damien.

and considerably slows down the rhythm of the session and the body. Among the difficulties encountered by the patients, two elements stand out: the difficulty of choosing a work, and the mirror effect created, which reflects back the patients' own experiences.

Figure 8: Attention focused on the presence and materiality of the work during sensitive mediation © Art en corps/Anne d'Huart.

The presence and materiality of a work of art are explored at the end of the process through an experiment in which patients are invited to look at a sculpted group with its various figures in the round. They then choose one of them to 'meet'. By looking closely at a sculpture (figure 8), the patients experiment with proximity and distance, moving slowly as close as possible to the work, then as far away as possible, until the link with the work fades or even disappears. The exercise is then completed with the eyes closed, imagining the absence of the work. The benefit for patients lies in the development of a sense of presence of themselves in the world through the presence of the work and an approach to its materiality. In the space of a few minutes, this experience allows them to feel connected. The major difficulty lies in experimenting with movement without guidance, as the instructions are given beforehand, so they have to do it alone, which leaves room for the mind to come back in force. Imagining the absence of the work can also awaken traumas in some patients who are experiencing bereavement.

Figure 9: Experience of empathy during sensitive mediation © Art en corps/Anne d'Huart.

At the very end of the process, patients are offered the experience of **empathy with a form**. Based on the choice of a sequence of folds or a detail of a sculpted drape to which the patients feel drawn, the exercise focuses an attentive gaze on this drape (figure 9). The patients are invited to grasp and identify what attracted them to this form. Was it the crescendo or decrescendo of the folds, the play of light and shadow, the treatment of the surfaces, the clumsiness or rather the sophistication, the depth, the finesse of the selvedge, the symmetry or the organic character, the softness, the voluptuousness or the constructed weave of the drape that caught their eye? Afterwards, while continuing to focus their gaze on the drapery, the patients are invited to relate this formal detail to a part of their body or to connect it to a near or distant memory, and then to probe their emotions. As well as developing an attentive gaze and working on attention span, this experience allows the viewer to feel a deep, bodily and intimate connection with a work of art. In particular, it helps them to put into words the difficulties they have experienced. Nevertheless, it is complicated to manage the intense emotions experienced when the exercise is fully completed, just as it can remain complex to experience for someone in a burnout situation.

This therapeutic process enables patients to verbalise their experiences and the emotions they have gone through by sharing their experiences with the group. The group effect has proved to be very beneficial; patients feel less isolated and the testimonies of their peers echo their burnout, for which they often feel misunderstood by those around them. Setting weekly appointments stimulates a regular rhythm and is beneficial for giving structure to burnout patients who often lose their bearings. The temporality of the process enables us to respond to the burnout syndrome that sets in gradually and from which patients only gradually emerge. This process, based on attention and slowness, improves mental availability and concentration, two cognitive benefits directly linked to the symptoms of burnout. In addition, this process puts patients back into the social fabric by going to the museum and opens them up socially through sharing and talking, which improves their social life and restores the link with patients' emotions and physical sensations. Finally, some of the exercises give patients back their energy, which is really beneficial when they are exhausted.

Since a sensitive approach to works of art provides a sense of well-being and enables people to reconnect with their senses, embrace their emotions, slow down the hectic pace of daily life and put the mind in the background for the duration of a visit, couldn't the tool created as part of art history research help patients suffering from other pathologies linked to mental health? Couldn't the pilot project developed at Musée L be replicated in other cities and countries, helping people with psychological problems or mental disorders to improve their well-being? After all, while the WHO talks about the role of art in achieving better-being, isn't the process tried out at Musée L aimed more at a state of improvement that gradually, step by step, leads to better better-being?

Museums are now seen in the context of social issues, particularly those relating to the health and well-being of society and its citizens. In the United Kingdom in the 2000s, recognition of the health benefits of art led to the emergence of therapeutic museums, a term that has since been adopted by many English speaking countries. The development of a holistic vision of an individual's health, impacted by environmental and social factors, has encouraged public health policy to include museums as players in their own right. The United Kingdom, followed by the United States and Canada, has since served as a model for care through art and collections (Nauleau, 2018: 4). The field of museum therapy - which is defined as a therapeutic method of using the museum environment to promote physical, psychological and social well-being (9) (Legari, 2020: 277-278) - continues to develop, and a number of inspiring therapeutic projects are emerging. The aim today is clearly to open up and decompartmentalise the museum, to use the expression coined by Ewa Maczek and Angèle Fourès (Maczek and Fourès, 2020: 27) so that it becomes a resource for the well-being of its users.

Given the state of health of the Belgian population, we are delighted that on 8 March 2024 the Sénat de Belgique adopted a resolution on a complementary cultural and non-medicinal approach to mental health care and, more specifically, the caring museum (10). The federal government is therefore invited to take concrete measures to improve information, take-up and access to non-medicinal therapies; to encourage museum prescriptions; to promote a cultural approach to healthcare; and to invest in research in the field o art and health. This stage, in which many strategic policies have yet to be developed and projects created, nevertheless represents the beginnings of a political commitment to a therapeutic museum in the Belgian museum landscape.

While evidence-based practice is still needed to continue and justify the type of project developed at Musée L in the eyes of the subsidiary health care authorities, feedback from the patients concerned is encouraging the development of new mediation tools based on sensitivity and with a therapeutic orientation. Recently, Musée L welcomed patients suffering from anxiety and/or related disorders to take part in a "managing my emotions" module for a test phase (again in partnership with the 107BW network and supervised by a psychologist, and an art historian who had experienced burnout). The main objectives of this module were to experiment and learn how to listen to, understand and recognise an emotion and how it relates to feelings and sensations in contact with art, while building up one's own toolbox for dealing with emotions in everyday life. If we know what a powerful channel art is for dealing with emotions and feelings, the museum as a place can structurally provide access to art, enable patients to find peer support and become a resource for coping with their mental health problems or preventing them from getting worse. What's more, the museum can legitimately design mediation modules with a preventive and not just curative approach. A project is currently being developed to use a sensitive approach to art to support students' emotions during their studies at university, and should soon see the light of day at the Musée L.

In addition to the fact that by developing a sensitive approach to the museum we are helping to awaken a more global sensitivity to the living world, the sensitive approach through resonance, which is based on slowing down the rhythm and developing the qualities of presence with the senses, helps to improve mental health and is therefore part of a sustainable transition. Daring to use sensitive mediation for therapeutic purposes means opening up the institution to new players and partners, such as psychologists, social workers, psychiatrists and youth support centres, to help vulnerable groups and develop local solutions. It's certainly also a way for the museum to be more in resonance with its environment and its public.

Notes

1 This paper was presented at the annual congress of the International Committee for Education and Cultural Action (CECA) of the International Council of Museums (ICOM) on 22 November 2023 in Singapore. This article was supported by the Institute for the Study of Civilisations, Arts and Letters (INCAL) and the Group for Early Modern Cultural Analysis (GEMCA) at UCLouvain.

2 Hartmut Rosa takes up the concept of alienation developed by Karl Marx and the Frankfurt School, in which man is dispossessed of his power to act as an individual.

3 WHO (2022). Mental health. Avalaible at: https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/mental-health-strengthening-our-response. (Accessed 15 April 2024).

4 According to figures referenced by the Institut national d'assurance maladie-invalidité (INAMI): INAMI (2024). Long-term incapacity for work: How many burnouts and long-term depressions? What cost for compensation insurance? Available at: https://www.inami.fgov.be/fr/statistiques/statistiques-indemnites (Accessed 15 April 2024).

5 These include: Research on burnout in Belgium (directed by Lutgart Braeckman at the University of Gent-UGent); The BParent research program (directed by Isabelle Roskam and Moïra Mikolajczak at the Catholic University of Louvain-UCLouvain); Burnout Assessment Tool (directed by Hans De Witte and Wilmar Schaufeli at the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven-KUleuven in Belgium and the University of Utrecht-UU in the Netherlands).

6 ICOM (2022). ICOM approves a new museum definition. Avalaible at : https://icom.museum/en/news/icom-approves-a-new-museum-definition (Accessed 15 April 2024).

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8 Since 2021, Belgium's National Institute for Health and Disability Insurance (INAMI) has been providing front-line psychological care for children, adolescents and adults. The aim is to build resilience and self-care or, if necessary, to provide treatment that goes beyond building resilience.
9 According to the Grand dictionnaire terminologique de l'Office québécois de la langue française. Office québécois de la langue française (2020). Museotherapy. Avalaible at: https://vitrinelinguistique.oqlf.gouv.qc.ca/fiche-gdt/fiche/26557613/museotherapie (Accessed 15 April 2024).
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GROWING, HEALING, KNOWING, AND SHARING: THE COMMUNITY MUSEUM OF TRADITIONAL MEDICINE OF HUANCOLLO, BOLIVIA EXHIBITION REVIEW

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The community museum of traditional medicine is in the centre of Huancollo, in the Bolivian Altiplano. The building, a repurposed single large room made of adobe (fig. 1), is next to both the Andin Spa, a health facility for traditional Indigenous remedies, and the community's meeting building. As an ayllu originario, Huancollo holds a status unique for Indigenous communities(1) in Bolivia, meaning that the community, though dependent on Tiwanaku municipality, practices a form of Aymara government based on rules, procedures and collective responsibilities (Ayllu Originario Huancollo, 2013). Huancollo's community museum was created through adhering to the Qhapaq Ñan(2) network of community museums.

Huancollo community museum gives us the opportunity to examine rootedness in three ways. The first are the literal roots, the plants collected and used by the comunarios, the community members, for healing. The second foundational roots are Huancollo's role resisting the erasure of ancestral knowledge and preserving it through its healers. The third are the interdependent roots through which the museum was created, that is the present-day international heritage sector, and the precolonial roads and communications that have shaped Andin cultures and ecosystems for centuries. By examining the displays in the museum, I will analyse these three roots in the context of Huancollo and its museum.

To begin, I will examine the use of medicinal plants in the museum. In the middle of the museum, a display of harvested plants floats over the visitors' heads. Inside transparent cylinders, plants have been dried and labelled with their name and use (fig. 2). Next to this installation, there is a panel shaped like a colourful wheel picturing plants and their medicinal uses (fig 3). Andin plants such as wira wira and muña are displayed next to more common ones, like garlic and peppermint. The museum focuses on the knowledge behind the uses, regardless of origin or how common the exhibited plants are. By not distinguishing in the museum narrative and objects between what would appear as 'authentic' and 'ancestral' and the 'contemporary' and 'every-day', the community shows its long history and interaction with plants and knowledge that have travelled and enrooted themselves, through trade or colonisation, in the Bolivian Andes.

To become museum objects, the plants go through a process of conservation and exhibition. Huancollo museum uses tools of display that spotlight them, inviting visitors in, while keeping at an appropriate distance. This contrasts with the second part of the visit, where one leaves the museum space to go next door, to the Andin Spa, guided by its doctor. The Andin Spa is a treatment centre, created in 2009 through the national government with international financing (Los Tiempos Digital, 2009). Officially, it is not an exhibition space, and conventionally, a museum visitor would not expect to be taken there. However, visiting it provided a different type of relation to the plants and their users (doctors and patients). Behind the counter of the Andin Spa's pharmacy (fig 4), there are multiple bags full of leaves, roots and bark. The doctor/guide takes a handful from a random bag, says what it is and answers any questions the visitors have – 'Where does it grow?', 'What is it used for?', 'Will it heal me?' This tactile action, which differs from the normative distance in museums between people and objects, enables a closer encounter between visitors and guides mediated by the healing plants. The medicinal plants become agents that assign the community as healers, custodians and transmitters of knowledge.

The fact that community guides blur the line between exhibition and healing space during visits(3) demonstrate that the theme of the community museum, traditional medicine, is rooted in Huancollo's social practices. In the museum, the knowledge and practice of traditional medicine is presented mainly through panels of treatments for illnesses (fig 5) and spiritual practices. In the centre of the room a big conical panel states the name of the Law that recognised traditional Indigenous medicine in Bolivia in 2013. While Indigenous knowledge and spirituality has been consistently repressed and erased by colonial and republican authorities into the 2000s (Loza, 2010), it has also been the subject of scientific research and acknowledged as intangible world heritage (4). However, the museum does not narrate the acts of resistance, but focuses on the institutional recognition of traditional medicine.

The traditional ancestral knowledge represented by Huancollo museum is not unique to this community. It represents Aymara communities and is held by numerous healers. The guides explain that all families held this knowledge and transmitted it throughout generations. While the goal is not to exalt the uniqueness of Huancollo as custodians of traditional knowledge, the museum displays portraits of key members of the community in this area: Victor Nina (naturopath healer accredited by the Health Ministry), Amauta Lucas Quispe (spiritual leader member of the Tiwanaku Amauta council), and Maura Nayra Quispe Limachi (a chiflera (5) who has a stall in the city of El Alto) (fig6). Aymara collective knowledge is thereby locally embodied in the museum's portraits of Huancollo community members who serve as branches, connecting local knowledge at a national level.

Finally, reframing Huancollo museum in terms of heritage-making, it has chosen to exhibit traditional medicine, that is intangible heritage, but has relied on material heritage for its creation. Huancollo intersects with two Bolivian World Heritage Sites: the spiritual and political site of Tiwanaku, and the Qhapaq Ñan Andin road system. It is through the latter, by means of the network of Qhapaq Ñan community museum, ASOREMUC-QÑ, that Huancollo's community museum opened (Paton, 2020). The proliferation of rural community museums in Bolivia in the 21st Century may correspond to the development of communities as political institutions with public services and public budgets (Klein, 2021), the expansion and consolidation of global community museum initiatives (Brown et al., 2024) and their recognition in the Bolivian Heritage Law of 2014. In Bolivia, these initiatives intend to cover heritage preservation needs as well as become tourist attractions for national and international visitors, but they struggle to recognise themselves as the former, and are not visible enough for the latter.

In Huancollo community museum, international heritage-making strategies appear in panels as fertilisers that intertwine the social practices of traditional medicine with complementary cultural heritage nutrients. The first panel displays a list of names and organisations that have made the museum possible, and the second one displays a map of South America showing the complete road system (fig7). Though Huancollo does not appear in the map, a picture labelled "Tiji Punku mountain in Huancollo" on the side may imply it represents the road within Huancollo territory. It is hard to represent a centuries- old path, whose traces are subtle or that has transformed into a modern road. It comes to life through its use by the comunarios of Huancollo and their relations with the other communities along the road, in this case, through heritage management. The historical ties of these Aymara communities are rebound through the community museum network, in training, fund-raising and the organisation of inter-community meetings (APC Bolivia, 2023)

Huancollo community museum of traditional medicine embodies a cultural heritage forest that seeks to connect the foundations of Indigenous knowledge with its visitors, mainly urban Bolivians, as myself, who seek unique, historical and alternative ways of being in the increasingly consumerist Bolivian society. It shows the potential coherence between Indigenous knowledge and present-day heritage-making strategies partnerships and national policy. Finally, through the encounter with community museum guides, it encourages visitors to cultivate more spaces to connect, collaborate and care for cultures. And it is in this spirit that Huancollo Museum of Traditional Medicine became a case study for my doctoral thesis6.

Exhibition Review – Figures Credits: All pictures have been taken by the author.

Figure 1. The entrance to Huancollo community museum

Fig.2 Exhibition of medicinal plants

Fig. 3 Diagram of medicinal plants and uses

Fig. 4 Pharmacy inside the Andin Spa, full of medicinal plants

Fig. 5 Exhibition panel presenting ailments and treatments

Fig. 6 Panels and installation of a chiflera's stall

Fig. 7 Panel displaying the map of the Andean Road System, Qhapaq Ñan

Notes

1 In 1994, the Bolivian State recognised rural Indigenous communities as Organización Territorial de Base. Through this status they receive public funds and govern themselves through their traditional practices.

2 Qhapaq Ñan, is a precolonial road system that traversed the Andes. In 2014, it was inscribed in UNESCO's World Heritage list by Argentina, Bolivia, Chile, Colombia, and Ecuador. The Bolivian route inscribed goes from Desaguadero to Viacha.

3 The author has visited the community museum four times from Nov 2023 to May 2024. Each time, the visit included the Andin Spa.

4 Andean cosmovision of the Kallawaya was inscribed in the Intangible Heritage List in 2008 (originally proclaimed in 2003).

5 A chiflera is an Aymara expert in traditional medicine, who sells traditional healing and ritual products. The thesis is ongoing and due to be submitted in October 2026. This exhibition review is based on a visit that took place in November 2023 while doing exploratory fieldwork.

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(UN)LEARN MUSEUM ARCHITECTURE – A CRITICAL EXAMINATION OF MUSEUM ARCHITECTURE REGARDING THE NEW ICOM DEFINITION* OF 2022

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Abstract
Although the architecture of museums often radiates dominance and power, the spatial aspect is frequently neglected in the current critical debate on museums. This contribution illustrates in different ways a critical look on museum architecture – regarding the latest museum definition of the International Council of Museum (ICOM) from 2022. The concept of (un)learning – discarding old structures or rethinking them – therefore takes a central position to develop transformative, spatial conditions for museum architecture. They are later applied to two museums from North-Rhine-Westfalia – the Museum Abteiberg and the Kunstmuseum Bochum.
This work shows on the one hand the potential of spatial interventions in a process of change and on the other hand wants to encourage the reader to question the extent to which these spatial and institutional boundaries can be overcome.
Keywords: museum architecture, (un)learn, ICOM museum definition, spatial interventions, institutional critique

*'A museum is a not-for-profit, permanent institution in the service of society that researches, collects, conserves, interprets and exhibits tangible and intangible heritage. Open to the public, accessible and inclusive, museums foster diversity and sustainability. They operate and communicate ethically, professionally and with the participation of communities, offering varied experiences for education, enjoyment, reflection and knowledge sharing.' (icom.museum, 2022)

According to the latest museum definition of the International Council of Museums (ICOM), museums are inclusive, diverse, open and sustainable places for our society. Regarding today's museum landscape, the definition is more of a vision than a description of the current situation, which would be instead: elitist, unreflective, inaccessible, commercial, and not sustainable for our society.

Like most today's institutions, museums are under enormous pressure to change – and with good reason, as museums are themselves monuments to a burdened past based on exploitation, violence and power. In this context they left and still leave out the stories and narratives of many people. It is therefore not surprising that they are being called upon to change. Criticism of its conception of content and administration is particularly prevalent in the public debate. The original core tasks of a museum are collecting and preserving. For several decades now, the restitution of so-called 'Nazi-looted art' in

German museums has called into question this permanent preservation – the demands for the return of cultural artefacts from colonial contexts in European museums even call into question the institution as such (Schulz, 2022).

Individual museums are already trying to respond to the demands of this change. In some museums, for example, critical contexts are now emphasised alongside selected paintings or individual rooms are dedicated to the provenance of permanent collections. Some try to not only in terms of content, but also administratively – by opening up the profession more and more to marginalised groups.

These steps are long overdue and are taking place very slowly – yet they are a little sign of change. But what about the architecture in which these changes (should) take place?

In this complex debate about the role of museums today, the critical architectural perspective on museums is often underestimated. Museums have a considerable relevance for the urban form as many museums are massive buildings with a very strong presence in public space. Current topics in museums such as restitution, climate neutrality, accessibility etc. are supported by architecture – or not. Large, iconic star architectures proceed to emerge and museum construction continues to be hyped as a means of solving urban problems – but aren't they themselves difficult urban places?

For a new (spatial) understanding of museums

The guidelines formulated by ICOM apply to museums in their entirety – i.e. also to their architecture and therefore as well impose spatial requirements. Nevertheless, the architecture appears unshaken by all the debates that have taken place.

To find the few signs about the provenance or the critical historical context of individual art works one often still has to squeeze through a single entrance into a temple of art, pass through several security gates, a spacious, infinitely high foyer and climb a spectacular staircase. If one wants to take a short break from all this, there are either seating options only at the end of the exhibition or, if one is lucky, a few isolated hard, uncomfortable benches in the white, cold exhibition rooms. For the most part, the museum still seems to be a long way from fulfilling the latest ICOM definition in its entirety.

But how can the museum become a non-profit, sustainable, inclusive and diverse place in the sense of the ICOM definition if the architecture, the so-called hardware, already represents a barrier on several levels?

Solutions to this question can be found less in today's museum landscape than in the 1960s to 1980s: At that time, the museum institution was also questioned in the course of a general critique of representation and a process of (un)learning was initiated. Outdated institutional characteristics were to be unlearned, i.e. discarded, and new, more democratic structures learnt. The museum buildings created at this time were intended to

support this process architecturally. But to what extent do these architectures still fulfil the requirements of society today?

Economisation versus the temple of the muses

To answer this question it is necessary to take a closer look at the institution behind. The museum still holds the position of being a neutral, apolitical institution. Since its inception as a politically motivated and publicly accessible institution, the museum has always been a political instrument: during colonialism for the exploitation and extermination of oppressed population groups; during the National Socialist regime in Germany as an expression of state power and a manifestation of an ideologically infused conception of culture; and today as the supposed collective memory and as a solution to urban planning challenges with the frequent consequence of accelerated gentrification. This contradicts the fact that museums, through their role as carriers of collective memory, have a social, and therefore also political, power beyond the past – for the present and the future (Griesser-Stermscheg et al., 2023: 24). In addition, as we understand it today, successful museums are always measured by the number of visitors – in other words, by their economic success. This economic focus and the associated dependence on sponsors show that the neutral, apolitical stance is hardly ever realised.

The number of visitors that come to a museum always depends on various criteria: the location, including the urban community and political orientation, the collection, the programme and the museum management. How the museum functions is therefore mostly a question of economics, management and local culture – but the last of these aspects seems to be fading more and more into the background. As we understand it today, most successful museums are already successful before they are even built – thanks to a location that is rich in tourism, their integration into a museum complex, a well-known foundation or a star architect. The big, famous museums usually fulfil several of these criteria. The Guggenheim Museum Bilbao, for example, was created as part of the world-famous Guggenheim Foundation by star architect Frank Gehry – and is still sold as an outstanding urban example for the Basque city Bilbao. The Vitra Schaudepot – as a star architecture by Herzog & de Meuron – is embedded in a campus consisting solely of buildings by internationally renowned architects. The other category are museums, that become successful though sponsorships, donations or extensions by star architects over the course of time. The Schirn Kunsthalle in Frankfurt am Main for example became more successful under the direction of Max Hollein and his new museum management based on conceptions of sponsoring and marketing in the art world.

From an economic point of view, however, the admission prices generated by high visitor numbers as the primary source of income are not nearly enough to ensure economic success. Rather, this comes from the number and generosity of sponsors that a museum attracts. Without sponsorship, it would be difficult to finance the demands placed on museums today – the high energy consumption of growing collections or the elaborate, eventful exhibitions. As most today's German museums are run by local authorities or associations (statista.com, 2020), which often only have limited and small budgets at their disposal, they are increasingly dependent on sponsors. Building up a broad base of

supporters is extremely helpful to implement changes and innovations in museums – especially when the respective sponsors are unable to take on these financially.

On the one hand, this means saving and paving the way for more opportunities – on the other hand, there is the pressure to fulfil expectations. Many museums see themselves under pressure to keep up with the growing demands. This requires more financial resources – in other words, more sponsors if public funds are not enough. Maintaining a balance between your own statement and the influence of sponsors then becomes a major challenge. After all, it should not be forgotten that this need for external funding means that museums are at least partially under the influence of mostly large companies or powerful private individuals. This does not mean that they are exploiting their power per se, but the dependency structures cannot be denied. This is demonstrated by formats such as sponsor dinners and pre-vernissages – exclusive events in favour of supporters. There is no longer a balance when the satisfaction of the sponsors overshadows the content itself due to high visitor numbers (Lautenschläger, 2021).

But how can museums keep a balance? What are the bad, alarming developments and what is necessary to stay in tune with the zeitgeist – or rather to get there?

The concern and criticism, mostly from academic-intellectual circles, that museums transform into participatory organisations and entertainment temples (Schulz, 2022) is numerous – but so is the rush of visitors to precisely these places (Wurth, 2020). If museums are more active, livelier and also more accessible, they have the potential to be more democratic, because visitors do not walk past paintings by great masters in awe. The problem, however, is that this new way of experiencing art is not primarily the result of a motivation to democratise museums, but rather for economic reasons.

The complex situation of museums today makes the process of democratising difficult. Whilst they are trapped in financial limitations, they are at the same time supposed to fulfil a definition that is far away from their current state. Since ICOM represents today's museums as an international network and is not an external association – i.e. most members of ICOM primarily work in the museum field themselves – the definition can, as already mentioned at the beginning, also be understood as a goal in itself and as a motivation to work in this direction. The definition can also influence the economic aspects by creating new funding programmes or adapting existing ones to topics that were previously not so present – such as participation, sustainability, diversity or integrity.

Critics of the new museum definition see concerns about the ‘progressive transformation of museums into participatory organisations’ (Schulz, 2022, translated by the author) confirmed in precisely these concepts of current social developments. They describe topics such as participation, sustainability, diversity and integrity, which have received little attention to date, as ‘core concepts of the current ideological whirlwinds’ (Schulz, 2022, translated by the author) and as a danger to the museums original task of collecting.

On the one hand, the concern seems justified, because many new museum buildings are still being built and are getting bigger and bigger. Trapped in capitalistic constraints they

prioritise entertainment and experience above all else to increase the number of visitors. However, the criticism focuses on the wrong terms, so that 'a hard-earned critical vocabulary is often emptied into a label' (Griesser-Stermscheg et al., 2023: 11, translated by the author) – as it is also known from other political discourses. The institution, which is already encrusted, thus persists in an understanding that doesn't corresponds to the present day and instead of answering the questions of our time only seems to raise more.

An uncontemporary attempt to build a contemporary museum

In the media, images of the planned Museum der Moderne at the Berlin Kulturforum show an attempt to build a contemporary museum in the sense of the ICOM definition. The building, designed by Swiss architects Herzog & de Meuron, promises to be 'a much more sustainable building – also in social terms' (bundesregierung.de, 2023, translated by the author). Federal Government Commissioner for Culture and the Media Claudia Roth describes the yet unrealised museum as a 'future house for everyone' (bundesregierung.de, 2023, translated by the author). This house will connect the surrounding culture and open to a wider society through several entrances on different sides of the building, longer opening hours and admission-free areas.

However, it is questionable whether the oversized barn architecture will really turn the urban island of the Kulturforum into a place for Berlin's broader urban society. It will certainly solve some specific urban planning problems, but not the general question of the relevance of a new museum.

Planning a contemporary museum building means acting in accordance with the requirements of the present – in terms of architecture: no more (unnecessary) new buildings!

So why is a new museum building costing over 350 million euros being realised in times of climate crisis, war, inflation and material shortages? And in a place that is already well served by museum buildings?

The new building is intended to create space for the previously hidden, highly political collection of modern art (Messmer, 2019) at the Neue Nationalgalerie. This is not to doubt that the collection should be exhibited, but does a new, huge star architecture have to be built for it? What about the many vacant buildings in Berlin? When it comes to museum buildings, status and success still seem to supersede the actual mission, otherwise truly contemporary concepts would be considered, that are more sustainable, participatory and democratic.

Deconstructing the usual - approaches to a renewed (un)learning

The concept of unlearning is essential for a new way of thinking about museums and a transformation of this institution. Léontine Meijer-van Mensch, Director of the Grassi Museum für Völkerkunde in Leipzig, makes clear that people working in the museum field have a lot to unlearn in terms of their own expertise – to then engage with new professionalisms and perspectives. Connecting the museum with urban society and other public institutions should be part of the process – but always with a view to ensuring that

participatory education programmes do not overshadow the unlearning of the museum institutions themselves (Meijer-van Mensch, 2023: min. 06:55 – 07:25). Museums must organise themselves self-critically and be prepared to respond to criticism and feedback from outside – especially from people whose stories have been left out – 'as learning institutions and to incorporate new themes and tasks into their work' (Greve, 2022: 338, translated by the author).

Looking at the African continent – the laboratory of the future according to Lesley Lokko – exciting movements and forms of interaction are emerging that embody new ideas about what a museum is, should be or can be (Karanja/Mutegi, 2022: 257).

However, the search for new museum forms in African countries – as a constant starting point – take into account that the museum is actually a foreign body there. It is a construct of the colonialists spatialising their power and exploitation and then establishing this kind of institution in the exploited countries themselves. It is a concept that the local people did not need and did not want for their cultures (Karanja/Mutegi, 2022: 256). These are often based on artefacts and rituals that were not intended for exhibitions but were often part of everyday life – and still are today. The artefacts were (and still are) degraded by the colonial powers, deprived of their purpose and exhibited in distant, rigid, white rooms. This contradicts many African countries' own concept, which, according to architect Kabage Karanja, is centred on life and the appreciation of real existence, teaching children what it means to live in a real environment and in a communal setting (Karanja/Mutegi, 2022: 256). In terms of the collective design of museums, European institutions must also take a look at the many projects in South America – where community-based projects have grown very quickly without large funds, in competition with large projects.

European museums should learn – with a clear emphasis on learning instead of adapting – from these concepts outside Europe to unlearn their problematic structures.

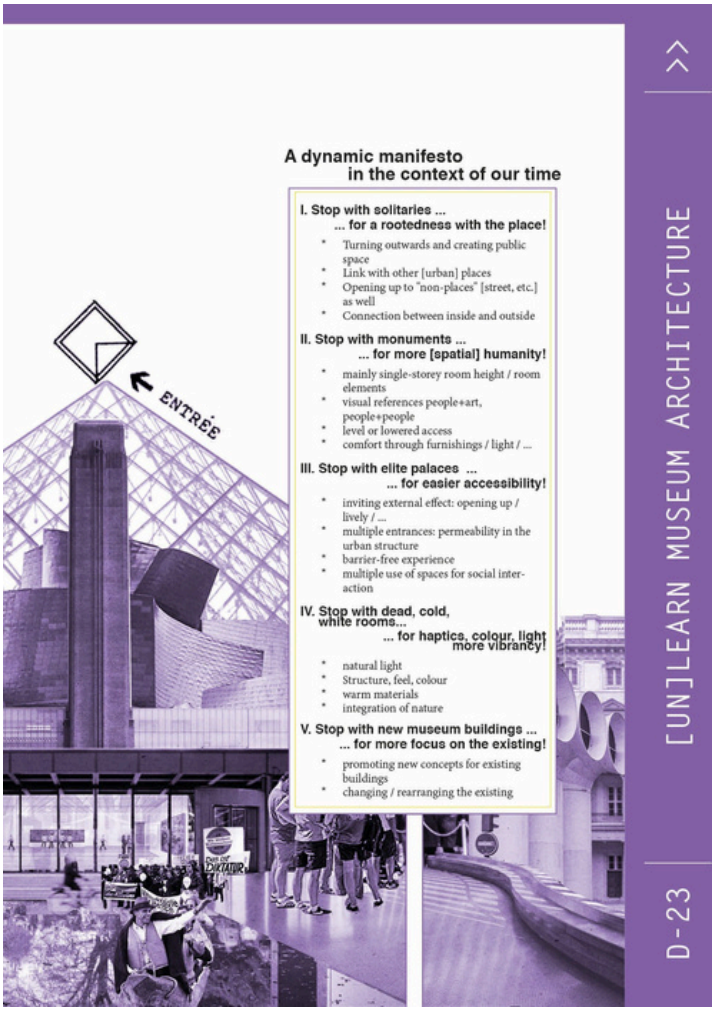
From theory to practice – to a visible (un)learning

The problems that museums must contend with today and which they repeatedly encounter when attempting to make changes are structural problems. No matter how great the work of a museum is, as long as the limitations of these old structures continue to exist, they will continue to come up against them. The economic success of successful museums ensures their existence in the end – it is irrelevant whether they overcome the institutional boundaries or come up against them.

But what about the less successful museums that have not learnt to assert themselves in capitalist competition?

These museums will not survive much longer unless they realise that they must take a different route to survival than the large, successful museums. To be relevant again in today's museum landscape, they must unlearn their encrusted institutional structures and see or develop their own focal points to act much more strongly as local institutions.

But how can the bridge be built from theory to practice – to a visible (un)learning? Many issues that have been fought for years or decades – such as intersectional feminism, anti-racism, institutional critique, decolonial and queer theories or environmental policies – are now also more present in institutions, but the necessary structural changes associated with them are either not taking place at all or only very slowly (Griesser-Stermscheg et al., 2023: 11). The vision of ICOM also hovers over museums as a path to a museum of the future, but 'everyone knows the theoretical critical approach that seems to call for an "ideal state" and cannot be realised in practice' (Griesser-Stermscheg et al., 2023: 13, translated by the author).



Demands within the framework of a dynamic manifesto for a new (spatial) understanding of museums.

(Un)learning in Mönchengladbach and Bochum

To illustrate the attempt of a process of (un)learning, two selected museums in North Rhine-Westphalia are chosen to develop spatial interventions: the Museum Abteiberg in Mönchengladbach, built by the Austrian architect Hans Hollein and the Kunstmuseum Bochum in the Ruhr region, built by the Danish architects Jørgen Bo and Vilhelm Wohlert – both in the 1980s.

The two categories Update and Upgrade define two types of intervention in this work. An update is an actualisation, a continuation, a successor model or an improvement. In contrast, an upgrade significantly expands an object with new functions. If a museum

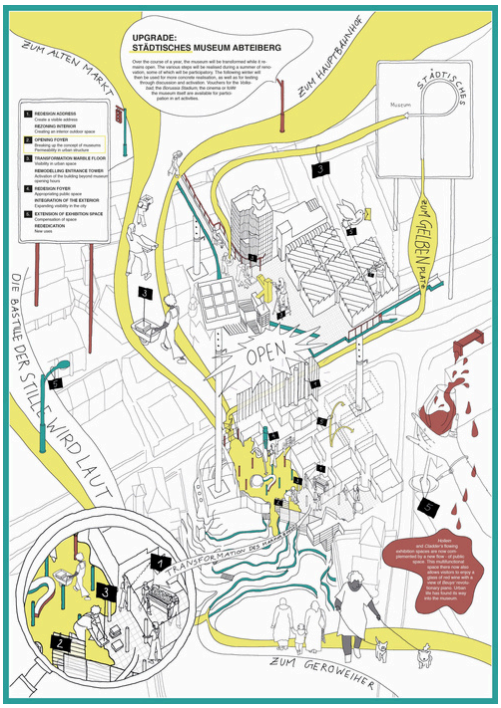
requires an update, this means that the interventions build on, strengthen and supplement something. If, on the other hand, a museum needs an upgrade, it requires interventions that change the location more radically and add new focal points.

In Mönchengladbach, there is a need to transform the Museum Abteiberg on a larger and more complex scale. Despite its originality and potential, the museum, which initially attracted a lot of attention as a media event in the 1980s, seems to have been almost forgotten nearly half a century later. This is very much related and connected to the urban development problems of the city. However, to promote the qualities and potential, the museum must unlearn its inward-looking position and open up more to the outside on all sides.

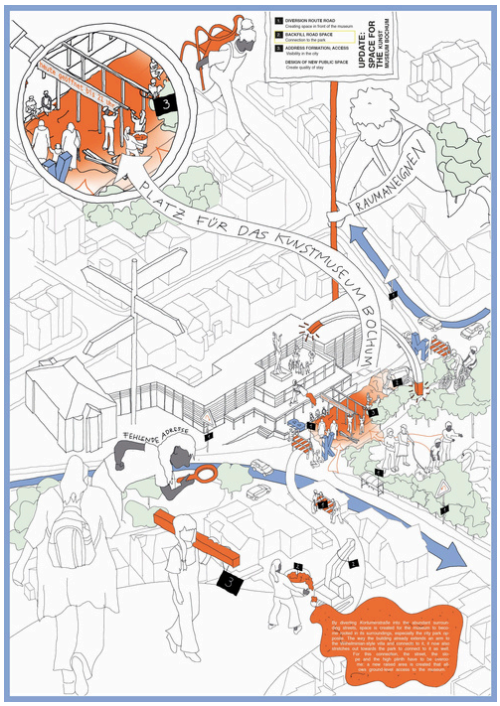
The upgrade places a new focus on the urban aspects of the Museum Abteiberg and makes it accessible to Mönchengladbach's wider urban society. The starting point is the opening of the foyer as a new public, permeable space inside the museum. This space will be structurally and thermally separated from the exhibition rooms to create more room for manoeuvre but will remain visually connected to them. Following spatial measures as the conversion of the entrance on the roof terrace into a typical regional kiosk results in a certain way from the first intervention and supports it.

While the transformation in Mönchengladbach starts from the interior, the update at the Kunstmuseum Bochum starts in the exterior space. The continuation of existing architectural elements should in turn make the interior visible to the outside. The intervention updates the museum by connecting the building with the city park opposite and creating its own address. By redirecting the road that separates the museum from the park, space is created for the museum to become rooted in its surroundings. The qualities of the museum – what it can already do – are taken up and continued. Thus, the intervention does not fundamentally change anything about the museum building, but simply expands on its existing potentials.

Both interventions ultimately create new public space – linked to the institution but focussing on the space outside it. Even if this public space is located inside of the museum building, as in the case of the Museum Abteiberg intervention. This new public space is actually intended to make the institutions more accessible. At the same time, however, it also calls the relevance of this institution into question to a certain extent showing that the space outside the institutional borders is more accessible, qualitative and human.



Spatial interventions at the Museum Abteiberg in Mönchengladbach: a process including participatory, administrative, artistic and constructional steps.



Spatial interventions at the Kunstmuseum Bochum in the Ruhr area: a process including participatory, administrative, artistic and constructional steps.

Unlearn museum (architecture)

The finding from the two interventions that spatial changes at both museums mean focussing more on the public space and thus in a certain way breaking out of institutional boundaries leads to a reshaping of the question posed at the beginning of the paper. Instead of asking how the museum can become a non-profit, sustainable, inclusive and diverse place, the more fundamental question needs to be raised: can the museum institution ever become a non-profit, sustainable, inclusive and diverse place in the sense of the ICOM definition as a whole?

Architecture can definitely support a process of change through interventions and help to use the spatial and urban potential of museums (Szántó, 2022: 20).

But in the end the question remains whether museums, as we would like them to be according to the ICOM definition, are really possible within the existing institutional structures. Can we ever trust the ground under our feet in museums, places that are based on oppression, exploitation and power and that are today trapped in the constraints of capitalism? Can these places ever be spaces of rootedness and responsibility as long as they are held by these structures?

Breaking out of the spatial and institutional boundaries, integrating the public space and interweaving with it is in the end only possible in reality if the institutional boundaries shift or even more radically – dissolve.

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THE FERAL GARDEN OF THE MORE-THAN-PANORAMA MUSEUM

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Abstract
This essay relates the story of a panorama museum's care and response to Los Angeles' multi-layered urban development and surplus materials from its most understudied space: the back garden. Connected to the rear of LA's Union Theatre, which houses the nineteenth-century Euro-American style Velaslavasay Panorama (VP), is a garden of thick, entangled plants, with stone paths snaking beneath string lights. As the visitor traverses the 'jungle', she glimpses architecture like the Pavilion of the Verdant Dream with a wooden door and ornamental lattices, and the green hexagonal Arulent Gazebo with a copper-tiled roof. The garden instantiates the 'feral' DIY LA art that the VP curators practice, transporting the visitor from a site of virtual travel to a site of 'rootedness' in the moment. Centering on the concept of 'feral', this essay presents the Velaslavasay garden as an organic experimental part of the more-than-panorama museum.
Keywords: Feral art, painted panorama, heterotopia, neighbourhood, Los Angeles

And now we are approaching the garden from the theatre's exit. When you pass through the dark hallway, you can see a diorama of the old panorama building, the Tswuun-Tswuun Rotunda, as it was in 2001 on Hollywood Boulevard. In the diorama is a sparkly sign, tiny palm trees, and bougainvillea vines surrounding this miniature round structure. While looking at the diorama, you experience the sounds of the real garden, just to your left. You can hear many birds. Then you pass through a mosquito net and enter a very green abundant space – vines over bountiful aloe plants almost as tall as Sara and Ruby. The garden is a heterotopia of other Los Angeleses interlinking neighbourhood lives, memories, and cycles of creation and re-creation.

In 2000, Sara Velas founded the Velaslavasay Panorama (VP), a non-profit art space and museum, at the erstwhile Tswuun-Tswuun Rotunda in Hollywood. The rotunda was originally built to be a Chinese takeout restaurant that took architectural inspiration from traditional Chinese temples. Velas's own 360-degree painting, Panorama of the Valley of the Smokes, which depicts the LA Basin 200 years ago, was on display for almost four years. Outside was a garden featuring lava rocks, which inspired architectural historian Chris Nichols' description of the site's style as 'Tiki-Chinese-Roadside-Funk' (Howser,

2001), an 'exotic' space to catch the eye of the potential driving customer to pick up Chinese takeout, such as chu-chu egg rolls, listed in a Ralphs newspaper advertisement circa 1960s. In the otherworldly garden, feral parrots roosted in the two huge canary island date palms and could be heard in the late afternoon, like in so much of the city. Inspired by the parrots' visits, Velas and her sister made the Avian Alcove, an installation in the garden with a painted backdrop and an ambient bird soundscape as a virtual presence in case the 'real' parrots were not around. When the Rotunda was scheduled to be torn down to build a mixed retail development project, Velas moved the panorama to its current location in 2004, LA's century-old Union Theatre. In 2009, Ruby Carlson, writer and cinematographer, joined the organisation and continues to play a key role as co- curator.

Fig.1 Snapshot of the Union Theatre back parking lot (2004). Future site of the Velaslavasay Panorama's garden. Photograph by Sara Velas.

In this essay, we walk you through the garden of the current Velaslavasay Panorama that was once an empty parking lot behind the Union Theatre. [Fig 1] As you listen to the birds chirp, admire the tall wild plants, smell the flowers and fruits, and sometimes the neighbours' burgers and barbeque, and pick the winding stone paths through this small but infinite jungle in the city centre, we point you to where all these lives, sounds, smells, and architectural features came from, and read them as an archive of the 'native' LA lives south of Hollywood. In 'native', culture and nature coexist, and the human and the more- than-human build each other. Not excluding but juxtaposed with the 'foreign' as (if) on a theatre stage, 'native' emphasises the ecological vitality, productivity, and inclusivity of

land as the vernacular milieu of life and art (Foucault, 1986: 25). 'Native' means nothing is waste. The dirt, rocks, plants, shells, art surplus, refuse, composts, and human companionships that make the VP establish a remembrance of the city's layered pasts and presents of industry, immigration, and urban development.

The Velaslavasay garden presents a Foucauldian heterotopia. It grows with, and is responsive/response-able to, LA's multispecies, multigenerational, multiethnic, and multilingual ecosystem in interlinked cycles of creation and re-creation. For this reason, we call it a 'feral' space. 'Feral' denotes three main parameters of local museum-making alternative to LA's Hollywood spectacle: the repurposing of institutional art training for artist-built folk art environment, the immersion in modestly controlled botanical milieu as a method of displacing and decentering the logic of contemporary art with a capital C, and the propagation of grassroots commons and commoning from which grows a rhizomatic 'panorama public' – a loose but robust network of panorama enthusiasts outside the art and scholarly academy. This 'field trip' to the Panorama garden will showcase how it is derived from, and embodies, the sympoiesis of LA's 'minor neighbourhoods' (Clark, n.d.). This text plays with multiple voices and memories of the organisation's history, values, and aesthetic practices. The narrator is polyvocal but sometimes breaks into the singular voice of Sara Velas or Ruby Carlson to showcase a specific thread, or graft, of the nonlinear iterations of the VP as an alternative art – or even 'anti-art' – space (Manta, 2016) more than a museum of painted panoramas.

The Pix Plaza: Feral Web of Organisations

We push open the mosquito net and walk into the garden in early April. To our right, a scraggly apple tree is starting to produce leaves at the cusp of spring. There is a heart-shaped Dutchman's pipe vine (Aristolochia gigantea) cascading from the garden wall on the right. You can tell there has been rain recently. The concrete floor is moist with evidence of moss. There is a citrus tree bearing gigantic fruit (Pomelo/Citrus maxima) to our left, a result of grafting-gone-awry, as the tree was intended to be a Buddha's hand, also known as fingered citron. Walking forward, we are in the centre of the Pix Plaza. A giant illuminated 'P' hangs on the theatre's backwall, with an 'ix' below. 'P' stands for Panorama and for Pix Theatre in Hollywood, where the sign originated from the mid-80s when Carlson's mother, Mary Rodriguez, salvaged it as the theatre changed its name to The Fonda. Over 30 years later, Rodriguez donated the 'P' to the Panorama, upon which the VP's technical collaborator and designer Oswaldo Gonzalez restored it and hung it in the garden. Rodriguez donated the remaining 'ix' for the Panorama's An Evening of Neon

event, celebrating neon history and restoration work in LA. In 2023, David Starkman and Susan Pinsky of LA 3-D Club, a 70-year-old organisation of Southern California-based 3D stereoscopic photographers and enthusiasts, donated light bulbs to fully illuminate the 'Pix' sign.

The illuminated letters reveal a pattern that repeats itself in this essay and in the structure of the VP's feral garden, where remnants of the past are composted and repurposed to create a root structure linking together organisations, landscape, history, and people. In front of the 'Pix' sign, a giant cactus grows as tall as the pomelo tree. They are intertwined and growing with each other, striving for the sun, as though the pomelo tree grew cactus branches. Next to them is a volunteer pomegranate tree (Punica granatum) that is beginning to blossom. The smell of grilled meat flies in from Pete's Burgers, the neighbourhood diner since 1972. Looking up, we spot an airplane through the thick leaves overhead. It is descending to the LAX airport.

Fig.2 Attendees gather in the Pix Plaza after a film screening at the VP (2018). Photograph by Forest Casey.

This central meeting point below the 'Pix' is a nexus for the panorama public to gather after viewing interior exhibits or attending an event, offering a dual experience of invented landscapes from the proto-virtual of the panorama to the constructed reality of the garden. [Fig 2] A crowd will form and huddle together in this spot, weaving a web of places and histories the garden brings together from Pix to Pete's, and as the next few

sections show, the constellation of feral 'peculiarities' (Sepúlveda, 2005: 3). Through the garden, the Panorama makes entangled, 'continuous enrootings' (Diedrich, 2024: 134) of companionship in the soil, water, air, and light of LA.

Fig.3 Performers of Pursuing the Verdant Dream in the VP Garden (2011). Photograph by Larry Underhill.

The Pavilion of the Verdant Dream: Compost as Method

Then we come to the Pavilion of the Verdant Dream, a curved seating courtyard with an intricate penny-and-stone laden floor and lantern-lit steps leading up into a slate-colored rockery grotto, adorned with octagonal windows, a fountain spring and ferns. Looking up, a giant fig tree is overhead. Next to it is a loquat tree that will soon produce fruit. Visitors are invited to enter the Pavilion, if they brave the cobbly concrete fragment steps, and sit opposite a waterfall feature. The stone and tile floor is inspired by the Classic Chinese Suzhou Garden style. Velas, Gonzales, designer Evelyn Kiing, and the Chinese visual artist and the VP's long-term painter Guan Rong, collaboratively designed the floor pattern. Parts of the stone floor were salvaged, including slices of the 'composted' tiles, from the original Hollywood Boulevard site. Before the Tswuun-Tswuun Rotunda was gone, Velas rescued

the concrete tiles without an immediate idea of how to reuse them, until a set of Chinese Opera demonstrations were planned in August 2011 for a two-day event, Pursuing the Verdant Dream: Two Afternoons of Kwun and Yueju Opera. The long tradition of connecting gardens with theatrics in the history of Chinese operas was naturally evoked as the Chinese artists toured the Velaslavasay garden. [Fig 3] As a result, The Peony Pavilion (1598), one of Chinese operas' most exemplary tributes to the theatrics of gardens, was selected for performance. As if a feedback loop, the performance then inspired the creation of the Pavilion. In the years to come, it would attract to the garden dreams of city lives on the silver screen that would have otherwise been lost in their journey in time.

At the Pavilion, our intention is not to recollect how 'Chinese' performative and visual cultures became part of the Panorama or the garden, which would risk being Orientalist without unpacking the complexities of 'Chinese' and questioning its presence in this organisation. Instead, you will hear about compost as a method of creating alternative cultural spaces: how different building materials are recycled and repurposed as new relationships with LA are inspired by a native garden, and how those relationships obscure the line between artists and audience and leave behind a mark, a memory, and musing that will grow into new art programs at the VP and beyond. Defying the impulse to position 'Chinese' as foreign and 'other' in space-time against the perceived 'native' and 'local', the Pavilion represents the continuous process in which their incompatibility is not hastily resolved. Instead, it symbolises a heterotopic and peculiar LA of many 'other spaces' and 'other times', a metonymy of what Foucault calls 'the epoch of simultaneity [and] juxtaposition, the epoch of the near and far, of the side-by-side, of the dispersed' (Foucault, 1986: 22). Juxtaposed in the Pavilion are also the virtual and lived environments as the VP focuses on this architecture the light and shadow of a variety of 'show industry', from panorama and garden to theatrical play and film. It converges many cities, including Beijing, Shenyang, and LA, in ephemeral film productions through the generations of filmmakers and panorama painters who devote their lives shuffling, and who themselves shuffle, between faux and real landscapes. The artist becomes the spectacle and the spectator the artist in cumulative cycles of engendering 'Chinese' cinematic temporalities.

Like a prism on the outskirts of Hollywood, the Velaslavasay Panorama refracts its blinding corporate fame and propagates heterogeneous waves of connection with the Chinese film industry. A three-part screening series in 2021, a belated celebration of the VP's twentieth anniversary, drew the attending crowd to 1930s Hollywood-influenced Shanghai glory, an idyllic southern Chinese melancholy produced in Hong Kong on the cusp of the Communist Revolution, and Beijing streets – and Peking Opera house and public bathhouse – after the Mao era captured by filmmakers known as the 'Sixth Generation' (Electric Shadows, 2021).

The three films celebrated the reopening of the Shengjing Panorama, a 360-degree landscape painting of the semi-colonised Shenyang (circa 1910-1930) in northeastern China, debuted in 2019, but closed during the COVID-19 pandemic. Through juxtaposition and superimposition, Chinese cinema across sixty years casted its ghostly 'electric shadows' on the VP garden, then turned into an open-air theatre, creating a multi-world effect for the audience in which 'China' and 'California' blurred, multiplied, and became confused (VP and Livonian Cinema, 2021). [Fig 4]

Fig.4 Electric Shadows on Penglai Mountain outdoor film screening at the VP (2021). The Isle of Penglai is visible in the foreground. Photograph by Forest Casey.

During the screening of For Fun (1992), the Pavilion was turned into a Beijing-style 'bathhouse', referencing scenes in the film. [Fig 5] Spectators passing by the Pavilion to feel the 'steam' and overhear the clubhouse men talking in the 'bath' experienced the same scene/screen as the old opera connoisseurs did in early-1990s Beijing. A similar experience of walking into the screen accompanied the film, Spring in a Small Town (1948), where the audience realised that during their tour of Shengjing Panorama, they had just set foot on a replica of a war-torn city wall in early twentieth-century Shenyang, resembling the replica wall the heroine of the film walks along in southern China, twenty years apart in the panorama or eighty years apart in the garden. Neither was more real or virtual than the other. The architectural replicas in the Guandong (near Shenyang) and Beijing Film Studios from which Shengjing and For Fun partially came from, respectively,

are both stuck in the cycle of demolition and reproduction. The former was partially burnt to a crisp in 2019 on the eve of Shengjing's debut, and the latter gave way to Universal Studios Beijing, which opened in 2021. But their spectres have danced in the panorama garden lit by Hollywood's forgotten glow.

Fig.5 Pavilion of the Verdant Dream activated as a "bath house" for an Electric Shadows screening of Ning Ying's For Fun (2021). Photograph by Forest Casey.

The Penglai Isle: An Archipelago of Celestial Collaboration

We step out of the Pavilion, follow the adobe brick wall built with the original parking lot's decomposed granite too expensive to dispose of, pass the Penglai Isle (Hōrai in Japanese) – a rockery made of refuse, concrete bits, and broken pottery on a hypertufa base – and reach the other end of the feral garden where the stone path stops at the moon gate. [Fig 6] Wearing a hazy hue under the sun, the Isle is a miniature of the mythological Penglai Island, the home of the Daoist immortals in Chinese and Japanese legends floating in clouds and waters. Representing paradisiacal delight and timeless friendship unburdened by the mortals, the famed island in the distant mountains and seas has not only inspired the literati but also designers, landscapers, and architects of gardens across the greater Sinophone world over a millennium.

Fig.6 An aerial, August view of the Velaslavasay Panorama's Garden (2021). Photograph by Forest Casey.

The Velaslavasay garden once held a reading of The Monkey King in an occasional book club led by artist and VP collaborator Paula Peng in 2007. The transient literary gathering germinated the idea to create a rockery in the garden when half of it was waiting for a story to open a portal to other worlds. To this request, 'Penglai' brought the celestial union of eternity and ephemerality, represented in the earthly bodies of rock and water. Designed to evoke an ethereal and nebulous imagination, the Isle was adorned with velvet elephant ear (Kalanchoe beharensis), dusty miller (Jacobaea maritima), white alyssum (Lobularia maritima), and purple sage (Phlomis purpurea). Its terrain is composed of tiny seashells, bits of rock and concrete, fragments of porcelain and opalescent oyster shells retrieved from the Studio City House Saloon in the San Fernando Valley. [Fig 7]

Fig.7 An evening, illuminated view of the Isle of Penglai (2013). Photograph courtesy of Velaslavasay Panorama.

VELAS: The island used to have a few lit areas. I have really fond memories wiring up LED modules with Oswaldo Gonzalez and Mimi Soo-Hoo, who was one of our summer Getty interns who continued her involvement. Once having dinner together while we were working on the Isle, I thought to myself 'This is what this is about, just working on this thing.' I had a strong revelation that the work itself is the key reward for me, not the 'final' product.

Process is so vital to the VP's longevity, among other factors, that it simply carries a project over its closure point. A fundraising dinner to inaugurate the Penglai Isle launched the 'Velaslavasay Panorama Enthusiast Supper Club' series in 2009. The Supper Club then moved focus around the moving panorama, The Grand Moving Mirror of California, an interdisciplinary presentation of Dr. L.E. Emerson's 1853 script for a moving panorama, a tale of the California Gold Rush led by a crew of a narrator, a pianist, crankers, and craftspeople (Grand Moving Mirror of California, 2010). The supper series steadily built a panorama public that would germinate a variety of lasting partnerships, one of which

formalised in the VP's collaboration with LA's Forest Lawn Museum on the exhibition of Grand Views: The Immersive World of Panoramas in 2023 (Supper Club, 2010; Forest Lawn Museum, 2023).

The Penglai Isle is another example of a multi-phase, multi-year project that involves many of the VP's ongoing 'cast of characters'. Paula Peng joined the painting work of the Arulent Gazebo (discussed more in the next section) and organised a VP concert of the Bulgarian Polyphonic Choir. The sculptor of the Isle's bridge and mountain returned four years after the Isle's initial completion to add a waterfall and pond. An artist and friend of the VP donated mosquito-eating fish to the new pond. Now in 2024, the Isle is in a revival phase with new plants sowed like bridal veil (Nigella papillosa). An interesting analogy for this network of collaborations could be the 'Studio System' in earlier Hollywood where actors would have an ongoing relationship with a particular studio. While the Hollywood model became exploitative at points and was disbanded, the VP is rooted in localised peripheral histories and labour, the contingencies of everyday life, and collective and response-able practices that establish 'sympoietic [and] more-than-human' (Haraway, 2016:52) storytelling of the minor neighbourhoods south of Hollywood.

The Arulent Gazebo: The Cycles of Feral (Re-)Creation

Looking back at the garden from the moon gate, we get a full view of the Arulent Gazebo nested in thick vegetation. Wearing a copper roof with a spike on top and hanging copper flare on the bottom, the green hexagonal wooden architecture resembles none other than the Tswuun-Tswuun Rotunda. The stone path branches off from the Penglai Isle and leads us to the Gazebo, our last stop. Its fence shares the architectural patterns with the houses in the immediate street surrounding the Union Theatre. We climb into the Gazebo where a large gourd dangles above the entrance. We sit down on the wooden chairs around a picnic table. Now is time to meditate, contemplate, and articulate the feral-ness of the panorama garden. [Fig 8]

Art as social conjuring serves as a type of medium to channel ideas and create immersive experiences in the immediate way of something like Watts Towers, Rubel Castle, or Grandma Prisbey's Bottle Village. These places have their own internal logic, facets, and windows into their own manifestation of reality. A creator, or a set of collaborators, may not be explicitly conscious in an intellectual way of one or many meanings of the work they are doing. Creation comes before explanation.

Fig.8 The Arulent Gazebo with hanging gourds (2021).
Photograph by Forest Casey.

VELAS: My sense in art school, at least in the 1990s, is that there was a feeling that an artist might need to be pre-aware of a 'message' intended for the audience, and then goes about creating 'the thing' to get this idea across. With folk art environments, the 'reason' for doing feels different. It exists because it needs to exist, regardless of embedded meaning. For the creator, the work comes when it 'feels right', and is being channeled through frequencies less talked about or even difficult to acknowledge.

In the garden, there are a few specialty features made 'on purpose' with a design forethought. But even among these on-purpose fabrications, considerable happenstance with materials that appeared easily or circumstantially to a great extent drives the design process. Rather than a top-down design process, the tenet is 'make first, discuss later'. This inverted order of making art and museum rebels against, yet is still informed by, the 'White Cube Path' indoctrinated by art institutions – the void of individuality insulated from the messiness of community-based creation. In contrast, the VP's ongoing cycles of DIY artist-built folk art environment appears not unlike the growth of the feral garden:

Creation/manifestation → growth → discussion/reflection → stagnation/'death' → compost/recycling/re-seeding → nutrient absorption → back to creation/manifestation and circle again

Institutional art training perhaps arises in conversations between the co-curators, reflections with or from other people close to the VP, observations on how the public is interacting with the VP's works, and ruminations on projects not by the VP but which feel adjacent (or even not). A pragmatic, and somewhat political, manifestation of this rebellious repurposing that informs this cycle of (re-)creation has been to question the underlying structure that supports and homogenises the 'art world' economy. And yet, a non-profit organisation like the VP also cannot afford the naiveté that fantasises a 'free paradise' outside this world either. Standing strategically in the margins, the VP embodies art-grafting gone awry, a collective practice of 'making-with' neighbourhood environmental assemblages and being responsive to 'the heterogeneous webbed patterns and processes of situated and dynamic dilemmas' (Haraway, 2016:58).

CARLSON: The institutions – schools, grant makers, foundations, galleries – are constantly trying to mold a certain type of artist or art institution, asking and answering the same questions, with a set basis of knowledge and approach, but the graft did not take as intended. Instead, with the work of the VP, this other thing grew, like a circus tree from Axel Erlandson.

Liberating creation from a narrowly determined purpose sanitised from the 'dirt' of community enables the growth of 'feral dynamics' between the VP and the many individuals and organisations of and by whom the garden is made. 'Feral dynamics' suggests not only an ecological phenomenon, where 'anthropogenic landscapes [are] set in motion not just by the intentions of human engineers but also by the cascading effects of more-than-human negotiations' (Bubandt and Tsing, 2018: 1), but also a critical and

deliberate embrace of sympoiesis, which keeps invigorating the more-than-panorama museum's nonlinear cycles of production.

The More-than-Panorama Museum: A 'California Native' and Grassroots Commons

Fig.9 Adobe wall and log sitting stoops in the VP Garden (2022). Photograph by Forest Casey.

Into the panorama garden the city flows, often invisibly, by nature or by human, prompting the unending phases of the garden's development (Kučan, 2024). A bird drops a few seeds that grew into an apple tree. A raccoon repeatedly unplugs the pendant lights in the grotto. A dwarf specialty citrus tree unexpectedly starts fruiting gigantic pomelos. A pomegranate tree appears, seemingly out of nowhere. A panorama fan sends an unsolicited shipment of plants. Occasionally, people drop off potted plants under the marquee at the front door. Stumps of a huge tree cut down in the neighborhood became 'stoops' near the Arulent Gazebo. [Fig 9] A chance encounter driving through mid-city, Velas came upon a pile of 'pencil cactus' (Euphorbia tirucalli) and packed it into her yellow Volvo for the garden, leaving bits of sticky sap permanently in her car.

In these silent conversations with the neighbourly lives in the city, the VP speaks the vernacular language of 'California natives' spoken by the 'soil, watershed, climate, native plants and animals' – and humans – that mark the biospheric coherence of the bioregion (Berg, in Glotfelty and Quesnel, 2014: 62). These conversations also mark a 'terrain of consciousness', the cognitive, intellectual, and creative engagement of being with/in a place (Berg and Dasmann, 1977: 399). These artistic, ecological, epistemological, and social underpinnings of the VP have nourished a grassroots commons that repurposes the centuries-long tradition of the European and American panorama-and-garden relationship that has facilitated the colonial impulse of collecting one of everything exotic.

The panorama and the botanical garden – two distinct immersive landscape fabrications – both convey human beings' desire to domesticate and claim the knowledge of the world since the late eighteenth century. They both draw a multiplicity of places, lives, and experiences to one enclosed space not only to 'showcase culture and science', but to also classify, capture and own the claim and knowledge of 'foreign' land, in contrast to a normative 'home' the all-seeing traveler can always return to. Botanical gardens attached to panoramas, museums, and world fairs assist these theatrical institutions to construct a metropolitan cultural imagination that produced a public around the imagery of the European Man who was superior to, and confident in studying and taming, the lands, species, and peoples in the empire's distant peripheries, even decades after colonies became independent states.

Because of the feral nature of the garden and how it represents the VP's ground-up, place-based art-making, we call the Velaslavasay Panorama a more-than-panorama museum that is immersed in, and also immerses others (its staff included) in, the vibrant native environments of California. 'Native', defined not in essentialist terms but by the ecological, conscious, and collective practice of 'living-in-place', juxtaposes and mediates – though not without the burden of experiencing its own Othering – colonisation and (im)migration. Bounded but porous, it lives the totality of the local in which the global and the planetary reside. It decolonises the institutional production of the knowledge of land and landscape that sanitises the messiness and chaos of place for the interest of a scalable space of capital growth (Tsing, 2015).

The 'native garden' and panorama connection sprouts from the English horticulturalist, botanist, and landscape designer Theodore Payne (1872-1963), who played a crucial part in shaping the notion of Southern California terrain as though the region were a singular, cohesive ecological exhibition (Theodore Payne Foundation, n.d.). Payne assisted with horticultural installs at the Crystal Palace Exhibition and en route to Los Angeles docked in Chicago to attend The California Pavilion at the World's Columbian Exposition of 1893. It

was a pivotal event in panorama history that informs projects at Velaslavasay, including the Nova Tuskhut installation, a 'living exhibit' of an Arctic trader's hut designed to invert the colonial gaze of the 'Esquimaux Village' of the Midway Plaisance at the 1893 Chicago Expo (University of Chicago Library, 2023:5).

In 1916, Payne's masterpiece, the California Wild Garden at Exposition Park, just over a mile from the VP, opened to the public 'to awaken a greater interest in our native plants and endeavor to persuade people to use them more frequently in planting gardens, parks and public grounds' (Payne, 1919). The essential nature of Payne's business was to promote a semi-mythical entity known as 'California'. The idea of 'native' plants that grew only within its boundaries reinforced the imagination that Southern California was 'an idyllic "land of sunshine" of unlimited possibility' in the progressive era (Guerrini, 2021: 260). Payne's positionality as an English entrepreneur attempting to mold the experience and discourse of 'native' California landscape was inevitably entangled with the state's emergence from settler colonialism, the Gold Rush, and the construction of the transcontinental railroad that relied predominantly on Chinese indentured labor (Chang, 2019). Therefore, it is crucial that gardeners, museum and cultural workers, and artists open up the otherwise mythologised perception of 'California native' described by Payne to accommodate the situated triangulation of settler, Indigenous, and immigrant identities (Day, 2016) in the work of plant-based landscapes.

In 2021, the Velaslavasay Panorama carefully adapted Payne's tradition of distributing seeds on vacant lots over the greater Los Angeles by mail (Sunset, 1918) when it sent gourd seeds harvested from the garden to over 100 addresses of the panorama public, reaching an array of locations from long-term collaborators in Seoul, South Korea, to grotto preservationists in Neshkoro, Wisconsin. The gesture was part of the Union Square Florist Shop, an immersive theatrical performance wherein the gourd played a symbolic role of personal betterment. The project fabricated a later 1960s-era florist shop as a mixed media installation that promoted a 12-step system of 'floral arrangement for new beauty', appending to the mythic role plants have played in California from Payne's 'native' notions, to the commercialised imagery of the orange fruit, to plant usage in new age movements. The VP's gourd crop originated from a seed packet purchased in Seoul during the exhibition of the Grand Moving Mirror of California in 2015 at Songwon Art Center. The seeded offspring then returned to Seoul six years later, perpetuating the cycle of regrowth and rerooting the feral network.

Coda: Afterparties and Afterthoughts

The garden is different at night. As darkness blankets Los Angeles and the Union Theatre, we end our tour with the garden transforming into a space of possibilities and potentials. Although the theatre's events from inside the Panorama, be it a film screening night or a New Year's Eve party, may have a programmatic ending moment [Fig 10], the garden continues to foster a rhizomatic and heterotopic community that extends the experiences inside. Guests take their own roots in the different spaces of the garden to linger, converse, think, and commune together under the soft illumination of the suspended used-car-lot lights over the 'Pix' sign. Thoughts wander and interact with the green environment, finding places in the garden to be heard, and more desirably, to be grown with and into the wider places of the city and across time and space. New relationships stem from this grafting gone-awry.

Fig.10 In the Velaslavasay Panorama garden at night (2020). Photograph by Weiling Deng.

The garden serves as a wild, living record of the organisation's history, values, and aesthetic practices. At the same time, it exists as a semi-public green-space within the contested botanical imaginaries and realities of its neighbourhood, city, and region of Southern California. Both of these aspects speak to how art and museums can be deeply rooted in and intertwined with place. Here the audience becomes more than just spectators, rooted in the broader community that the Panorama cultivates and propagates. This community, which we have deemed both feral and DIY, is part of a larger constellation of ground-up art, museum, and exhibition spaces, where things are happening outside the normative modes of LA art and event. Future events will continue this work, bringing more people into the orbit of the Panorama and the garden.

We push open the mosquito net and leave the garden. The Tswuun-Tswuun Rotunda diorama emits a gentle warm glow on our left to bid goodbye. The smell of the old wood floor of the Union Theatre encompasses us. We walk past the staircase that spirals up to the Panorama Rotunda where train horns blow from 1910s Shenyang and 2010s LA at once. We keep walking through the dark hallway, pass the Union Square Florist Shop's plaque and the Nova Tuskhut, and step out of the building. Lights, music, and laughter pour on us from the Panorama Play Street Festival. The happy crowd surrounds the booths of Bob Baker Marionette Theater, 24th Street Theater, 3-D Space, Community Services Unlimited, West Adams Heritage Association, Los Angeles Breakfast Club, and more. Into LA's evening aroma and the festive conviviality we blend.

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THE DIRTY PATRONS: ENVIRONMENTAL RESPONSIBILITY AND MUSEUM SPONSORSHIP

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Abstract Over the past two decades, societal pressure over and scrutiny of the ethics of museum funding have grown exponentially, particularly regarding sponsorship from the fossil-fuel industry. This spotlight, fuelled by environmental concerns and accusations of 'greenwashing,' has prompted significant changes in museum/oil company relationships. For instance, protests by climate activists and artists led to the end, in 2022, of the 30- year partnership between BP and the National Portrait Gallery in London. Whilst flagship museums such as the Louvre and the British Museum are still renewing oil-funded partnerships, the evolving landscape suggests a growing environmental responsibility in sponsorship models. In order to facilitate an understanding of the ongoing shift, this article explores the impact of environmental and art activism on museum/fossil-fuel connections. By using mainly primary materials, it emphasises everyday practice over theoretical analysis, encouraging a reflection on museums' links with their sponsors, and highlighting ideas of trustworthiness, accountability, financial independence, transparency, ethical decision-making, and social and environmental responsibility.

Keywords: Museum sponsorship, ethical funding models, institutional critique, museum activism, environmental responsibility.

This article traces a timeline of the shifting relationship between museums and their patrons, focusing particularly on the evolution and the complexities of the controversial links between museums and fossil-fuel industries. In doing so, it aims to facilitate an understanding of the impact of societal pressure over the ethics of museum funding. It describes the ways in which, over the last two decades, the increase in public scrutiny, together with the protests carried out by climate activists and artists, have put sponsorship deals linked to fossil-fuel industries in the spotlight on an international level. It also evidences the ways in which environmental concerns and accusations of 'green washing' have ultimately pushed towards substantial changes in the bond between museums and oil companies, thus paving the way for more transparent and responsible models of museum patronage.i Methodologically, the text examines primary materials such as contemporary press releases, museum reports, environmentalist investigations, and activist performances. This approach aims to put the focus on the different actors and

ingredients of the conflict, highlighting the practical elements of museum everyday work and offering a multi-faceted account of a complex issue, rather than a detached, theoretical analysis.

Museums and Their Environmental Responsibility: an Evolving Positioning

Before delving into the evolving relationship between individual museums and their sponsors, we will allude to the environmental positioning of the museum as a sector more broadly, as this will enhance the understanding of existing complexities and contradictions. Traditionally, museum industries have not been particularly 'green' institutions per se. Commonly hosted in large buildings with open-plan halls, often designed in historical periods in which environmental concerns were not a priority, they have tended to consume copious amounts of energy in the form of heating and lighting. Moreover, major museums usually act as tourism magnets, a status often emphasised by temporary blockbuster exhibitions relying on international loans, and attracting thousands of visitors flying in from all over the world. These dynamics increase their already large carbon footprint.ii

Environmental awareness within the sector, however, has been growing exponentially, with the last few years showing ample evidence of specialised conversations on the topic, together with major steps being taken towards sustainability. The International Council of Museums (ICOM) is currently featuring environmental sustainability prominently in its agenda. For instance, in 2018 the institution created its Working Group on Sustainability, implementing its Agenda 2030, which acknowledged the environmental impact of museums, and established measures to reduce it, as well as to enhance the vital role museums should and can play in taking action against the climate crisis. Following this trend, the theme chosen for World Museum Day 2023 was Museum, Sustainability and Well-being. Related recent ICOM initiatives include the creation of sustainability awards and a call to action for Cop28 (ICOM, 2023a and 2023b).

Additionally, museums have begun advocating for greener buildings: a landmark example is the new Science Museum in the Swedish city of Lund, scheduled to be completed in 2026. With its wooden structure and zero C02 emission target, the building is expected to become a model of environmental sustainability at an international level (Cobe, n.d.). This rethinking of museum architecture and operational logistics has come hand-in-hand with a move towards a more rational use of museum collections, exhibitions and knowledge, in order to encourage audiences to make positive environmental changes. The newly gained awareness in exhibition topics and practices is not limited to science museums. A fitting example is the exhibition Waste Age, which took place at the Design Museum in London in 2021-2022, and which promoted the ideal of living without waste, whilst trying to imagine a more resourceful world for future generations (The Design Museum, 2021).

Observing this rapid sectorial move towards environmental responsibility, one would be inclined to assume that museum sponsorship would have already been included in the conversation, as a natural component of the sector's increasing self-awareness. However, the following paragraphs aim to demonstrate that the shift towards greener funding models has not strictly come from within the museum sector itself. Instead, it has been led in great measure by growing societal pressure and external scrutiny.

The Impact of Art Activism

Action groups composed of artists and climate activists have been denouncing fossil-fuel patronage in museums since at least the turn of the 21st century, with broader coalitions such as the UK-based Rising Tide beginning to form as early as 2004 (Art Not Oil, n.d.). Amongst them, the group Liberate Tate has stood out for the visual power of its actions. The collective, born in January 2010 within the context of a Tate-commissioned workshop on art and activism, described themselves as critical of but friendly towards the gallery. The group emerged as the Tate curators tried to prevent the workshop attendees from expressing criticism against Tate sponsors. The resulting frustration fuelled the participants' desire to continue working together on their denounce of ethical issues within such sponsorship (Liberate Tate, n.d., b).

Over the following six years (2010-2016) Liberate Tate staged a series of highly provocative performances and protests demanding an end to BP's sponsorship of the Tate. One of the earliest unauthorised events taking place inside the Tate Modern and Tate Britain buildings was Human Cost (2011), featuring a naked activist curled up on the marble floor of Tate Britain's marble hall as oil was poured over them.iii The performance, concurring with the first anniversary of the BP Deepwater Horizon oil spill and its ensuing environmental tragedy, was followed a year later by The Gift (2012), a work of performance art in which over 100 Liberate Tate activists carried a 16.5 metre-long wind turbine blade into the Tate Modern's Turbine Hall. The activists unsuccessfully attempted to donate the enormous object to the Tate's permanent collection, as a gift to the nation 'for the benefit of the public'. In 2015, Liberate Tate carried out another two striking actions. The first one, Time Piece, lasted 25 hours, from high tide on the 13th of June (11.53 am) until high tide on 14th of June (12.55 pm). During that time, 75 members of the collective used charcoal to write passages from books on climate, art and oil on the floor of the Turbine Hall, urging Tate to drop its BP sponsorship deal before the Paris Climate Summit that was to be held in December that year. Later in 2015, Liberate Tate organised Birthmark, a makeshift tattoo parlour at Tate Britain, where each performer was tattooed with the atmosphere's carbon dioxide level on the year they were born.

During its six-year existence, Liberate Tate generated copious media attention, succeeding in pushing the underlying presence of fossil-fuel sponsors in cultural institutions to the centre of public debate. By 2016, and after receiving petitions from over 8,000 Tate

members and visitors, and from over 300 artists and cultural workers, Tate Director Nicholas Serota ended the gallery's 26-year sponsorship deal with BP (Khomami, 2016). Several collectives born in the mid-2010s, such as the Netherlands-based Fossil Free Culture NL and the UK-based BP or not BP, took inspiration on Liberate Tate's highly- mediatic, mass-participation performance style to bring about further significant milestones against fossil fuel sponsorship. For instance, later in 2016, Edinburgh Fringe theatre festival ended its 34-year BP partnership (Donnelly, 2016). Then, in 2019, the Royal Shakespeare Company dropped its BP funding, being soon followed by the National Theatre's break-up with Shell (Kolirin, 2019). In Norway, Statoil ended its music sponsorship programme in 2013, whilst the Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam concluded its 18-year sponsorship deal with Shell in 2018 (Plets and Kuijt, 2022).iv More recently, in February 2022, the National Portrait Gallery in London ceased its 30-year BP sponsorship: by 2023, its annual Portrait Award was already newly sponsored (Harris, 2022).

New and Continuing Fossil-Fuel Sponsorship Deals

As the previous examples demonstrate, the pressure exerted by activist groups over the past twenty years has been key in attracting public attention towards museums' existing sponsorship deals with fossil-fuel companies, and in ultimately pushing toward their termination. One might assume that museums would be already taking the lead to cancel existing sponsorship deals with oil firms, and that they would be reluctant to initiate new ones. However, there is fresh evidence of both new and continuing fossil-fuel partnerships amongst several major museums. For instance, in 2022, Greenpeace France won an action before the Paris Administrative Court to obtain disclosure of the partnership between the Louvre Museum and the TotalEnergies Foundation (Le Journal des Arts, 2021). The documents obtained demonstrated continuing subsidisation of the Louvre and the Foundation du Patrimoine, in spite of the mediatic actions performed by the artist collective Libérons le Louvre. Inspired by the provocative aesthetics of Liberate Tate, the French activist group carried out scenic performances, such as laying black cloth down the steps of the Louvre, creating a symbolic river of oil; or covering the Louvre's iconic pyramid with black handprints. However, neither activism nor public pressure prevented the museum from establishing a major partnership with its notoriously oil-funded Abu Dhabi branch, which is scheduled to last at least until 2037. This decision aroused strong public outrage throughout the cultural sector in France, with a petition signed by nearly 5,000 curators and art historians.v

The number of oil-funded museums, galleries, art collections, cultural events and temporary exhibitions remains large indeed. Amongst them feature, for instance, both the Getty and the Guggenheim foundations, with their several international branches, as well as the British Museum, which in December 2023 signed a new ten-year, £50-million partnership with BP (Kendall Adams, 2023a; Kerr, 2021).vi The latter news came as

particularly shocking, and even prompted the resignation of the museum's deputy chairwoman, Muriel Gray (Kendall Adams, 2023b). With this new partnership, the museum demonstrated its disregard for the longstanding pressure exerted by the activist group BP or not BP, which since 2016 has been carrying out distinctively high-profile performances, and which even attempted to occupy the museum, being cut short by means of police intervention. Their most dramatic performance was the thirteen-foot-tall Trojan horse carried to the museum in response to the exhibition Troy: Myth or Reality (2019). The event, comprising nearly 1,500 participants, was supported by members of the Public and Commercial Services (PCS) union at the British Museum, representing the museum workers, as well as by former trustee Ahdaf Soueif, who had resigned from her post on the museum's board earlier that year, following museum director Hartwig Fischer's renewed endorsement of BP (Brown, 2019).

In Italy, the oil company Eni is still frequently involved in arts sponsorship, not only within the Italian territory, but also in major foreign capitals such as New York and Paris. For instance, it financed the restoration of the Basilica of Collemaggio after the 2009 earthquake at L'Aquila, in a move that involved renaming the park in front of the church with the name of Eni's founder, Enrico Mattei (Comune de l'Aquila, 2013). Exemplifying an intertwining between oil sponsorship and state politics, the annual Eni Awards (the company's international prize to research projects in the fields of energy, sustainability and the environment) are delivered directly by the President of the Italian Republic at the Palazzo del Quirinale, despite the fact that article 9 of the Italian Constitution obliges the Republic to protect the environment. In Norway, Statoil (now rebranded with the more environmentally friendly name of Equinor) is still a major art patron, owning a collection of over 1,400 international contemporary artworks, sponsoring temporary exhibitions at the Oslo National Gallery for Contemporary Arts, and funding festivals such as NordNorge and Bergen International (Evans, 2015). Equinor also sponsors museums abroad. It is, for instance one of the patrons of the Science Museum in London, together with the coal company Adani and with the nuclear power company Urenco. As we will later discuss, conditions of sponsorship can include problematic gag clauses – as is the case with Equinor-funded exhibitions at the Science Museum -, thus impacting the museums' institutional credibility (Crisp, 2023).

Symbolic Capital and Social License in Fossil-Fuel Museum Sponsorship

Scholars such as Bargenda (2004), Kirchberg (2003), Lund & Greyser (2015), O'Hagan & Harvey (2000), and Oesch (2002), have investigated the motivations that guide private company investments in the cultural sector. Without going beyond the scope of this article, it is worth reflecting more specifically upon the potential benefits obtained by fossil-fuel corporations in sponsoring museums. A first advantage would be what Haacke (Bourdieu, Haacke and Johnson, 1995: 17) designated as 'symbolic capital', and which in more recent

research and environmental activism outputs has been coined as 'greenwashing' (de Freitas Netto, Sobral, et al., 2020; de Jong, Huluba & Beldad, 2019). With art sponsorship, fossil-fuel companies gain public exposure and positive brand associations, such as an improved corporate image. By tying their names to art and culture, oil industries create 'clean' impressions amongst consumers, who tend to link business corporations with the institutions they sponsor. A fitting example would be BP's sponsorship of key British cultural institutions such as the Tate Modern, the British Museum, the Royal Opera House, and the National Portrait Gallery, which over the years have provided the firm with a platform for marketing, branding and public presence amongst cultural institutions (BP Press Office, 2011).

Secondly, as Cornwell and Maignan (1998) describe, governments often reward arts and culture sponsorship with tax exemptions, which can make museum patronage not only more impactful for fossil-fuel companies than their regular advertising campaigns, but also more cost-effective. Environmental activists have criticised such tax-relief models, on the grounds that they allow oil companies to take 'much more from the public purse than they are 'giving back' in sponsorship', and that 'a proper tax system' would instead cover 'not only for full public funding of the arts, but better public healthcare, education and welfare systems too' (BP or not BP, n.d.). Thirdly, when signing deals with science museums, oil companies gain what has been coined as 'a social license to operate' - a term referring to an increased social perception of credibility and trustworthiness, which Evans (2015) criticises as a way of masking the environmental impact caused by the sector.vii This 'science-friendly' image has been considered to distract public attention from the sectorial efforts to block new research on more environmentally sustainable energy sources (Macalister, 2015).

Last, museum sponsorship has been described as a means for the CEOs of oil companies to join museum boards of trustees, thus allowing them to intervene in the planning and design of educational programmes, events, and exhibition contents, so that their industrial activities can be showcased in more favourable ways (Janes and Richard, 2019). Likewise, Evans (2015) considers museum sponsorship as a gateway for oil companies to carry out political lobbying, such as holding meetings with politicians at exhibition openings and cultural events. These meetings can, thus, become platforms to cultivate strategic relationships that benefit industrial activities and business operations. An example would be the Indigenous Australia: Enduring Civilisation exhibition (2015) sponsored by BP at the British Museum, which took place in the context of the company's attempts to drill in the Great Australian Bight. As demonstrated via an Art Not Oil investigation in 2016, this sponsorship granted BP representatives access to meetings at the Australian High Commission.

Impact of Fossil Fuel Sponsorship Upon Museums

After analysing the benefits obtained by fossil-fuel companies on their museum patronage, it is worth asking why museums have been slow or reluctant to abandon fossil-fuel sponsorship. The most straightforward explanation would be an economic one. The museum sector is known to struggle with financial sustainability, so one may be inclined to assume that fossil fuel patronage crucially boosts these money-starved institutions. However, research carried out by environmental campaigners belies this assumption. For instance, when in 2015, after a three-year legal battle, Tate was forced to disclose publicly the financial terms of its BP sponsorship deal, it came to light that the museum had been receiving from the oil giant £150,000 a year between 1991 and 2000, and then £330,000 a year from 2002 to 2007 (Brown, 2015). Such amounts represented only around 0.5% of Tate's overall operational income during the period, and since 2000, less than 1% of Tate's self-generated income (i.e., donations, sales and sponsorship). Similarly, in 2016 Art Not Oil reported that BP's funding of the British Museum for that year was equivalent to less than 1% of the annual income of the institution. Likewise, in 2016, and in response to pressures by the environmentalist group 350.org, the American Museum of Natural History disclosed that less than 2% of the institution's $650 million endowment was indirectly connected to oil, coal and natural gas companies through pooled investment funds (Stoddard, 2016). These data have been used by climate activists to claim that fossil-fuel funding is not as vital for museum survival as presumed (BP or not BP, n.d.), which begs the question of ongoing sponsorship. For instance, the Fossil Fuel Culture NL manifesto, read out by activist Naomi Pieters as part of a performance at the Van Gogh Museum in 2018, suggested political associations and multifaceted networks of interests and favours, by alluding to a 'revolving door that fossil fuel lobbyists use to move between business, political and cultural sectors, pedalling their poisonous influence' (Fossil Free Culture NL, 2018).viii

Leaving aside the financial benefits obtained by museums on these sponsorship deals, discussions have long been ongoing about the damaging effect that sponsorship models societally perceived as unethical may have upon museums. Such models can potentially harm museums' capacity for knowledge production and education, as well as their institutional credibility, thus creating a reputational damage that may outweigh any potential monetary gains (Alexander, 1996; Cameron, 2011; Shymko and Roulet, 2016). Fossil-fuel sponsorship can threaten museums' credibility in multiple ways. In the case of art museums, artists have expressed their concerns about being linked to 'dirty patrons', which they have seen as damaging for their personal reputation and harmful to the integrity of their artistic message. On this regard, the platform Oil Sponsorship Free has gathered nearly 400 artists and culture professionals, and over a hundred art collectives, who explicitly refuse to have their work associated with fossil-fuel sponsors. Similarly,

artists Reem Alsayyah and Zoe Lafferty contested the presence of their work in the BP-funded British Museum's 2019 exhibition 'Troy: Myth and Reality'. In a letter to the museum, they lamented having been placed in an impossible position, where we must decide whether it is worse to try and remove our work from the exhibition … or to allow our work to help art-wash the impacts and crimes of BP, a multinational oil and gas company that has wreaked havoc on this planet and its people' (Alsayyah and Lafferty in Selvin, 2019).

For science museums, the association with polluting sponsors may pose even greater risks. It can potentially undermine the credibility of their exhibitions, influence policies and programming, incite self-censorship, and even create conflicts of interests, via the inclusion of 'gag clauses' and the presence of representatives of oil companies in museums' decision-making boards (Crisp, 2023; Evans, 2015; Macalister, 2015). On this regard, the long-standing connection between the Smithsonian's National Museum of Natural History and the billionaire fossil-fuel industrialist David Koch, is instructive. Societal pressure forced Koch to resign from the museum's directing board in 2016. His 23-year tenure had been extremely controversial, as the Koch family reportedly spent millions funding climate crisis-denier groups and disinformation campaigns, causing outrage throughout the scientific community in the United States (Leonard, 2019). Given that academic research and sector reports consistently show museums are among the most trusted institutions in society, it would be crucial for them to preserve their credibility, especially in the current climate emergency.ix Museums do not only possess the informed storytelling skills, but also the ability to educate, increase awareness and open up democratic debates on climate-related topics, all of which are currently needed in order to increase audience engagement and to 'put human face on climate change' (Newell, Robin & Wehner, 2017). Beyond the physical space to display objective and reliable scientific data, the current climate challenges would require museums to demonstrate, more than ever, a commitment to social and environmental responsibility (Janes in Knell, MacLeod and Watson, 2007).

Towards An Environmentally Responsible Funding Model

Having described the evolution in the relationship between museums and fossil fuel sponsors, unpacked some of its many complexities, and highlighted its varied impacts, it is time to consider the potentialities of oil-free funding models to strengthen museums as socially and environmentally responsible institutions. On this topic, we must highlight that each major museum mentioned heretofore already has efficient mixed-funding models in place. The Tate, for instance, receives around 35% of its funding from government grants, whilst the rest is 'self-generated' from private donations and earned revenue from space rental, ticket and retail sales, and investment income (Board of Trustees of the Tate

Gallery, 2022). The Smithsonian Museum obtains two-thirds of its funding from public money, whilst the rest comes from its own endowment, corporate and individual donors worldwide, and from advertising, sales in the museums' cafes, and licensing agreements (Smithsonian Dashboard, 2015). The institution has also raised hundreds of thousands of dollars through Kickstarter campaigns.

UK government agencies such as Arts Fundraising and Philanthropy, and grassroots organisations such as Julie's Bicycle, Culture Hive, Live Art Development Agency, and Platform, amongst others, offer resources, training and information to cultural industries who wish to navigate toward more ethical sponsorship models. For museums, the focus lies on developing and strengthening ethical fundraising policies, which can then be used to form and renew sponsorship agreements. The Ethical Fundraising Policy of the National Portrait Gallery in London provides a suitable example: it includes a list of due diligence questions and a process for evaluating potential donors. The policy, made publicly available in 2017 through a Freedom of Information Act request prompted by a Culture Unstained campaign, grants the gallery the right to refuse donations in specific situations. For example, this includes instances where the donor is considered to be closely associated with a regime known or suspected of violating human rights (Romer, 2017). Likewise, grant agencies such as the John Ellerman Foundation require museums submitting funding applications to develop environmental sustainability policies (Ahmad, 2022). The foundation, a signatory of the Funder Commitment on Climate Change since 2019, encourages museums to conduct eco-audits, and provides funding to implement the resulting recommendations. Their website's many case studies exemplify their interest in the potential of arts, culture and heritage to engage audiences with climate-related challenges (John Ellerman Foundation, 2024).

However, while such funding options have pushed museums to reflect on and to develop their ethical and environmental policies, encouraging a search for less controversial sponsors, the core of the discussion remains whether public museums should depend at all on private funding for their survival. Organisations such as PCS Union - which represents over 5,000 workers in UK museums and galleries - have laid out alternative proposals exploring ways in which the arts could be funded without the need for corporate sponsorship (Tannock, 2023). Following up on ideas of social responsibility, and recognising museums as vital for social change, and as guarantors of free and democratic access to culture, education, and wellbeing, it is thus crucial to separate them from the free-market system (Janes, 2009). Only by making sure that museums do not rely on external, private funding – with their associated biases -, citizenship can ensure that museum exhibitions, policies and curatorial practices stay focused on serving their communities, and away from underlying conflicts of interest. This idea aligns with ICOM's 2022 definition of museum, where the ethical commitment of these institutions towards promoting sustainability takes central stage:

A museum is a not-for-profit, permanent institution in the service of society that researches, collects, conserves, interprets and exhibits tangible and intangible heritage. Open to the public, accessible and inclusive, museums foster diversity and sustainability. They operate and communicate ethically, professionally and with the participation of communities, offering varied experiences for education, enjoyment, reflection and knowledge sharing.

Conclusion

This article has described the evolution of museum sponsorships by fossil-fuel industries over the past two decades, highlighting the pivotal role of climate activists and artists in advocating for more transparent and responsible models of patronage. It has also explored the complexities of fossil-fuel sponsorship and its impact on the public image of museums. Lastly, it has discussed the potential for oil-free funding models, and invited reflection on the ethical role of museums as environmentally and socially responsible institutions.

As a conclusion, we must consider that historical shifts in sponsorship models within museums have often been initiated by critical voices, such as artists, campaigners, academic experts, and broader societal actors. A well-known example can be found on the oeuvre of the artist Hans Haacke (b.1936), one of the founding fathers of the institutional critique movement (Alberro and Stimson, 2009; Wallis, 1986). In his Cowboy with Cigarette (1990), Haacke collaged tobacco-related press clippings and Philip Morris company documents in order to transform Pablo R. Picasso's (1881-1973) Man with a Hat (1912) into an advertisement against cigarette-smoking. In doing so, Haacke criticised Philip Morris's corporate sponsorship of the MoMA Museum in New York, demonstrating that corporate patronage is not solely guided by disinterested benevolence. Marlboro was, indeed, one of the major corporate sponsors of museums and performing arts at that time, until the combination of societal pressure and international health laws prohibiting tobacco advertisement finally led institutions such as Tate Modern, the National Gallery, and the National Portrait Gallery to put an end to their tobacco-linked sponsorship deals (Bailey, 2023). In a related, albeit more contemporary perspective, Nan Goldin’s award- winning documentary All the Beauty and the Bloodshed (2022) has recently led major museums internationally to cancel their deals with the drug company Sackler.x In all the cases mentioned above, new funding sources were quickly secured, allowing the museums to continue operating without major setbacks. The same has happened with institutions such as Tate, the Edinburgh International Festival, The Royal Shakespeare Company, and the National Portrait Gallery, all of which have ended their oil-related sponsorship deals in recent years (BP or not BP, n.d.). Activism has, thus, succeeded once again in changing patronage models, prompting museums to reflect on their ethics and

societal goals. With mounting social pressure on museums and increasing scientific evidence of the catastrophic impact of fossil fuels on the environment, it is perhaps time for museums to proactively commit to social and environmental responsibility, honouring the trust put in them by their communities, and thus, eliminating the presence and influence of fossil fuel industries.

Notes

i Cambridge Dictionary defines 'greenwashing' as the 'behaviour or activities that make people believe that a company is doing more to protect the environment than it really is.' (Cambridge Dictionary, 2024).
ii For instance, in the UK, the museum sector accounts for almost a quarter of the CO2e (carbon dioxide equivalent) emissions of all Arts Council England NPOs (Julie's Bicycle, 2020).
iii The data and descriptions featured in this section are based on the images of Liberate Tate's performances over the years, available on Liberate Tate (n.d., a), 'Performances'.
iv Plets and Kuijt (2022) have delved into the significance and impact of oil funding in the Dutch heritage and museum sector in view of the creation of museum narratives favourable to the agenda of the gas and oil sector.
v The full implications of the partnership involving the Louvre's Abu Dhabi branch have been detailed in Graebner (2014).
vi After multiple delays, Guggenheim Foundation's new Emirates branch museum is set to open in 2025. The Getty Trust, founded in 1953 by famous oil tycoon J. Paul Getty, is worth more than $10 billion nowadays (ProPublica, 2018).
vii The term 'social license to operate' was first used by Jim Cooney in 1997, within the context of the attempts of the mining industry to gain trust and respectability from local communities (Thomson and Boutilier, 2011).
viii During the performance, the activists hung a 12-meter-high text installation that read 'End of fossil fuel age now', urging the museum to cut its ties with Shell (Fossil Free Culture, 2018).
ix Research commissioned by the American Alliance of Museums in 2001 found that almost nine out of 10 Americans find museums to be trustworthy— no other institution rated a similar level of trust (American Alliance of Museums, 2021).Similar findings can be concluded from the reports issued by the Institute of Museum and Library Services (2008), Reach Advisors (2015), IMPACTS Research (2017), Wilkening Consulting (2018), and IMPACTS Research (2020).
x For a more detailed analysis of Goldin's activism group Pain, and her quest to remove the Sackler name from museums, after the opioid crisis that has killed nearly half a million people, see: Alesandrini (2020); Glazek (2019); Jobey (2019).

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LEARNING FROM LISTENING TO A CITIZEN BOARD

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Abstract

Listening is a skill that goes beyond hearing another person's words. It is an attentive communication process that deeply acknowledges individual backgrounds in making sense of the world. In this paper, we propose a listening approach to museums in their conception as social spaces in the service of society. Departing from the museum's historic to contemporary concerns for citizen participation, we detail our work with a citizen board in the 'Right to the Museum?' project within a comparative study of five Viennese museums. Engaging in intense dialogue through accompanied museum visits and post- surveys, we present our learnings regarding citizens' situated interpretation strategies in permanent exhibitions and potential discrepancies between museum missions on paper and perceptions on-site. Based on the responses by the citizen board to museum and exhibition scripts, we also reflect on how such a listening approach can be used to pluralise perspectives on cultural heritage and its societal value.

Keywords: museum missions, exhibition scripts, citizen board, listening, identity politics.

If museums are considered public and to be used by diverse audiences, the question is how they can better understand citizens' viewpoints and cater to their needs. Framing museums as social spaces, or as in this issue as 'spaces of rootedness and response-ability', we propose to apply a listening approach. Listening is a skill that goes beyond simply hearing another person's words. Far more, it is about actively seeking to understand their meaning and the person behind them in an attentive communication process. The paper builds on our work with the citizen board in the 'Right to the Museum?' project that investigated changes in museums' concepts of the public and current public perceptions of museums in a comparative study of five Viennese museums (Reitstätter and Galter, 2023). Ranked by the year of their founding, these were the MAK – Museum of Applied Arts (*1863), the Kunsthistorisches Museum Vienna (*1891), the Austrian Museum of Folk Life and Folk Art (*1895), the Belvedere (*1903), and the House of Austrian

History (*2017). On the one hand, we engaged in archival research analysing institutional self-descriptions from historical founding statutes to current mission statements. On the other hand, we investigated the perception of these museum concepts and responses to exhibition scripts from a citizens' point of view in intensive field research.

To explain our listening approach and share our learnings, the paper first theoretically contextualises the concern for citizen participation regarding the institution's public purpose, audience communication models, and the concept of the listening museum with examples of citizen boards. In the second step, we present the methodology of our project 'Right to the Museum?' detailing how we invited for participation, composed the citizen board, conducted the accompanied museum visits with the subsequent survey and vignette interviews, and worked on our data analysis. In the third step, we outline our findings on situated interpretation strategies (within power and identity mechanisms) and the relation between museum missions and perceptions (analysing critical discrepancies). In conclusion, we discuss how citizens' responses to exhibition scripts and museum missions can be used for a diversified addressee policy and the pluralisation of perspectives on cultural heritage and its societal value.

Concerns for Citizen Participation

Within the many calls for democratisation and diversity in museum history, this literature review exemplifies the concerns for citizen participation by deciphering discrepancies between the museum as a public institution and inherent exclusion mechanisms, by showing shifts in museum communication models and audience conceptions, and by conceptualising the listening museum and giving examples of citizen boards.

The words museum and public seem to be related in a logical and long-lasting way. However, museum history shows how a citizens' 'Right to the Museum' inherent in the museum as a public institution shifted its semantic status from opening the formerly aristocratic collections to a broader public to dealing with contemporary identity politics today. As Jennifer Barrett (2012) outlines, the word public is often used loosely while missing a critical reflection on its etymology and political meaning within museum history from the founding of the modern museum to new practices of community engagement today. Applying Habermas' theory of the public sphere, Barrett stresses the need to align museums with civil society positioning museums as public spaces where public discourse takes place. In our research on museum self-descriptions from the first statutes to the most recent mission statements among five Viennese museums, we also found shifts in the public understanding of the museum with quite remarkable differences regarding museum types and individual museum histories. While for instance, the Kunsthistorisches Museum Vienna was opened to the public to bear witness to the wealth of the Habsburg

collections and enable scientific studies (and still very much stresses its splendour and academic rigour today), the MAK – Museum of Applied Arts, was founded without considerable collections but the aim to elevate the taste through the education of a wider audience within a new consumer culture (and a continuous focus on design education intermingled with societal concerns today) (Reitstätter et al., 2025).

Yet inherent exclusion mechanisms also need to be considered because even if the opening of museums in the course of the Enlightenment granted citizens a fundamental right to visit the formerly aristocratic collections, their opening should not be equated with democratisation (Krasny, 2016; McClellan, 2003). In particular, the prerequisite of visual literacy within the requirement of 'civic seeing' systematically excluded audiences from different ages, genders, races, and classes (Bennett, 2007), or at least museums functioned as 'spaces of controlled behaviour […] who would eject those who behaved in an unruly fashion.' (Hooper-Greenhill, 2000, p.14) Today, the still very bourgeois museum audience and the small group of only up to 15% of active cultural users (Eurostat, 2015) show the discrepancies between museum concepts targeting a broad segment of society and the limited use of museums by a few. In a recent survey of Austrian citizens, it was again proven that cultural capital is inherited pointing towards the continuous higher cultural participation of people with a higher social income and formal education. Factors for shrinking cultural participation in specific cultural sectors – as among museums where attendance (of at least once a year) dropped from 54% to 45% from 2007 to 2022 – were found in the ageing society and demographic change, the wish for socially framed cultural events (while missing companions to attend) and the risk of poverty in the current challenging economic circumstances (Schönherr and Glaser, 2023, pp.98–105).

Efforts to work against structural exclusion mechanisms have cumulated in the participatory turn at the end of the 20th century with the outcome that museum practice has been giving more emphasis on visitor-centred practices such as exhibiting and educating, community engagement, or social care (Black, 2018; Morse, 2021; Museological Review, 2022; Sandell, 2003). In questioning the sole authority of the museum where the institution speaks and the others listen, we can see a conceptual shift in audience communication from a linear transmission model to a dialogic cultural model (Hooper-Greenhill, 2000). In the transmission model, the museum communicates its wisdom and knowledge (according to the internal logic of the subject matter) to the visitors (envisioned as the general public) without considering their expertise and without knowing about their experiences due to missing research. This one-way or top-down communication model is also mirrored in what Zahava Doering (1999, p.3) coined the baby bird model of communication 'which regards the visitor as a relatively undeveloped appetite needing [the museum's] wise and learned feeding.' The cultural model, in

contrast, shifts from the mediation of content to visitors' active processes of meaning-making and the museum's task of facilitating access and participation in line with a constructivist learning approach.

In line with this general shift in audience communication and based on the behaviour, incorporation/resistance, and spectacle/performance paradigms from Abercrombie and Longhurst's audience characterisation, Theopisti Stylianou-Lambert (2010) captures museums and their visitors in a three-fold way: In the behaviour paradigm, the museum is seen as a mass communicator in a one-way communication process transferring a preferred message while the audience is seen as a mass public that receives this message and reacts to it directly. In the incorporation/resistance model, the museum represents the dominant cultural order transmitting skilfully coded messages while the audience is only capable of decoding these if they have the 'cultural capital' to do so. The new spectacle/ performance model shifts the museum concept further to an open work only completed by the visitor based on their personal experiences and sense of identity. While this last paradigm enables us to see visitors as skilful and active meaning makers, Stylianou- Lambert underlines the need to question these assumptions, taking into account institutional power mechanisms, empirical evidence on audience activities and the museum's responsibility in the construction of cultural narratives to not fall into the trap of romanticising this active model of museum audiences.

In this paper, we will try to see which communication models are empirically on stage working with the theoretical model of a museum script that encourages visitors to make use and sense of the given material setting but also limits them by proposing certain ways of doing and thinking. Within this double artefact-human relationship, the act of use, in consequence, neither means free interpretation nor is the act of conditioning to be equalled with fixed determination (Reitstätter, 2015, p.122). Far more, this model takes into account both the possible parallel existence of the three general communication models presented above as well as the potential agency of visitors in appropriating the museum space without neglecting inherent power mechanisms and the dominance of certain narratives. In this sense, we see museums and their exhibitions as spaces of meaning-making where 'the "social work" happens when museums, objects and people come together.' (Morse, 2021, p.11) As Alice Procter furthermore points out detailing her dialogic approach in guided tours that address the colonial nature of museum collections: 'We can use these spaces to encourage people, firstly, to develop critical thinking skills and critical engagement with history, but also to teach that you can hold multiple truths at once; that you have to hold that complexity and make space for nuance, uncertainty, and contradiction.' (Ferraro, 2022, p.71)

In a similarly oriented belief that museums acting as 'centres for learning, cultural rights and cultural democracy' make the strongest contribution to society, David Anderson (2009) argues for the concept of a 'listening museum.' While he bases his analysis on the epistemic injustice of the cultural institutions and the disadvantaged group of children, we can follow his general conclusion that museums have to develop their emphatic skills by actively seeking to provide opportunities for participation and by learning to listen to a variety of visitors to adequately fulfil their public educational role. In museum and visitor studies, listening has also been implemented as an approach by audio recording visitors' conversations. An early case of such research, departing from the premise that '[s]urprisingly little is known about the processes by which museum objects come to hold meaning for visitors,' is the PhD thesis by Lois Helayne Silverman (1990, p.vi) that marked individual and relational identities of visitor pairs in the shared process of meaning-making with the museum acting as a locus for negotiating cultural meaning. Gaea Leinhardt and Karen Knutson (2004) succeeded by closely examining museum conversations as socio-cultural ways of learning in museums as well as other researchers who analysed visitors' conduct and talk in multimodal detail (e.g., Christidou, 2018; vom Lehn, 2013). Alongside taking visitors' social interactions as serious material to study the museum as a social space, establishing a citizen board might be another valuable way to invite others to speak out and develop listening skills on behalf of the institution.

An early reference for citizen boards was the case of the Denver Art Museum (2001) which used visitor panels to improve their interpretative materials in the process of the rearrangement of their collections. The documenta 12 advisory board, in contrast, was set up in Kassel two years before the opening of the grand international exhibition to serve as a link between the local population and the contemporary art scene by imparting local knowledge to the documenta team, discussing the exhibition themes in the city's society and strengthening local initiatives (Wieczorek et al., 2012). Also especially addressing the city's inhabitants, the Museum Ostwall in Dortmund recently established its citizen board 'MO_Beirat' to engage in their participatory exhibition and collection work including acquisition decisions.i

Due to more diversity-sensitive museum work, a lot of examples of citizen boards can be found in the US, with for instance the C3 (Creative Community Committee) that acted as an intercultural leadership network at the Santa Cruz Museum of Art & History from 2012–2019 and has now evolved into several community groups.ii At the same time, especially children and teenagers (with the need to include young perspectives not present in the adult staff) are addressed in citizen boards to develop exhibitions and adapt special programmes (Zentrum für kulturelle Teilhabe Baden-Württemberg, 2023) as in the case of

Fig.1: Communication campaign 'Would you like to go to the museum with me?,' photos: Department of Art History, University of Vienna, Karl Pani.

Tate Collective Producers Teamiii or Junges Schloss Landesmuseum Baden Württembergiv.

In general, our enquiry showed that citizen boards in museums still rather tend to be the exception than the rule (in comparison to advisory boards with renowned experts), being rarely communicated prominently on museum websites or reflected in academic publications. Regarding their functions, our short overview of examples of citizen boards demonstrates that various forms of participation – from sharing opinions and feedback in the forum function of the museum to co-developing programs and activities to participating in the governance of the museum (although to a much lesser account) – can be embedded in museum's citizen boards, despite Bandelli and Konijin (2015) assigning public boards to the highest form of participation. Their survey research into public participation in science museums found that visitors' interest in the forum function depended on the museum's capability to enable citizenship while the interest in the engagement in the form of co-development or even policy-making was much more dependent on their previous engagement with science and frequent museum visits. In addition, their survey revealed that visitors positively view the establishment of a public board but are reluctant to support the idea that its advice should have a binding status for museums. However, visitors from countries with a more fragile infrastructure for formal public participation were more positive about this binding status, possibly explained by the hope for museums to be platforms for full participation.

Methodology of the 'Right to Museum?' Project

The citizen board in the 'Right to the Museum?' project was composed of 20 members representing the Viennese population and not the classic museum public. Therefore, the invitation 'Would you like to go to the museum with me?'v – shared via press, social media and in public urban spaces (see Fig.1) – did not only ask citizens to contribute to the project. It was also an activist claim to make use of one's own 'Right to the Museum.' While the visitor panel was framed as an open group of 200 people per museum who received free admission for feedback during one specific week in each museum, the citizen board was compiled according to the six diversity criteria of gender, age, educational level, migration background, disabilities, and museum affinity, being representative of the city of Vienna. Yet the 233 applications for the 20-member citizen board already showed the homogeneity of the interested group of people most of whom held a university degree (69.1%) and frequently visited museums (66.8%).

To counteract this tendency, the citizen board members were chosen from the responses to our call as well as through active search. A complex aspect was that we had to select fitting board members not just according to one but all six diversity criteria leading to a Sudoku-like challenge. Figure 2 shows the statistically ideal composition of the citizen board with 20 members as well as the final composition with 21 persons since a couple with disabilities shared a seat to facilitate participation. As the overview shows, we could fulfil most of the diversity criteria.

Gender	Age	Highest completed level of education	Museum affinity
Female: 10 | 9	18–29 years: 4 | 3	Compulsory school /Apprenticeship / Intermediate vocational school: 11 | 8	3 | 2 frequent visitors
Male: 10 | 10	30–44 years: 6 | 6	Secondary academic school / Higher vocational school: 4 | 6	9 | 9 occasional visitors
Diverse: X [1] | 2	45–59 years: 5 | 5	University / University of applied science: 5 | 7	8 | 10 non-visitors
	60–74 years: 3 | 5		
	75+ years: 2 | 2		

Migration background	Disability / disabilities
9 | 9 people with migration background	4 | 4 people with a disability / disabilities

Fig.2: Statistically ideal (left) and final composition of the citizen board (right) in the 'Right to the Museum?' projectvi

We engaged with the citizen board in intense field research via accompanied museum visits and two post-visit surveys, namely a museum diary, and a vignette interview. The 100 museum visits (all 20 members visited each of the five museums) took place from the 19th of May to the 5th of September 2021 and were conducted by the two authors as field researchers. In every visit, one field researcher and one board member (1+1) visited representative areas of the permanent exhibition to give an insight into the museum's collection as well as enable a manageable exhibition visit. Starting the accompanied

museum visits at the entrance of the museum and ending in a seating area for the survey parts, the museum visits were structured both by the museum and exhibition script as well as the needs and specifics of the respective board members. Methodologically, the accompanied museum visits (see Fig.3) combine participant observation with Thinking Aloud and Object Elicitation in a walking conversation (Burns et al., 2020; Reitstätter and Fineder, 2021; Zahner, 2021). While the citizen board member was asked to share their museum experience via thinking aloud, the field researcher took part in listening, only inquiring about certain statements in a conversational manner.

Fig.3: Accompanied museum visit, House of Austrian History, photos: Department of Art History, University of Vienna, Karl Pani.

The museum diary represents a survey based on forms of self-documentation (Alaszewski 2006) that we used to invite board members to systematically reflect upon their visit immediately after the experience. The museum diary was presented on a tablet and filled out by the board members on their own answering open and closed questions. Information was collected on the perception of visitor rights (such as feeling comfortable, welcome, or being offered an easy orientation), (un)appealing objects, the description of the visited museum with three characteristic adjectives, earlier visits to the specific museum and the wish to return to the museum or recommend it to others, the perception of the regular entrance fee as well as general appraisal and critique. Following the museum diary, a vignette interview took place (see Fig.4). A vignette is usually a story about a specific person, situation, or structure that serves as a conversation stimulus to collect people's opinions via a very concrete form of questioning (Hughes and Huby, 2004). In this project, three excerpts from historical to present-day museum missions collected in the archival research were contrasted with the visiting experience of the board member. In addition to the verbal elaboration, we also invitedThe museum diary represents a survey based on forms of self-documentation (Alaszewski 2006) that we used to invite board members to systematically reflect upon their visit immediately after the

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Fig.4: Museum diary and vignette interview, House of Austrian History, photos: Department of Art History, University of Vienna, Karl Pani.

On average, the joint visit through the selected parts of the permanent exhibition lasted 01:21 hours. In total, we spent around two hours with each board member at the museum, from the meetup to the exhibition visit to the museum diary, vignette interview and informal post-visit-talk. The accompanied museum visits were documented using an audio recorder and a small camera (GoPro). In addition to the audio (talk) and video (shared visual field), the collection of contextual biographical information and atmospheric impressions of the visit were documented in a protocol. The museum diary, executed in Qualtrics, was saved as an Excel file containing all answers per museum and as a single PDF of each board member's visit. The vignette interviews were documented as screen recordings and as screenshots to capture the annotation of each vignette. In the process of data preparations, the accompanied museum visits and vignette interviews were

transcribed or summarized. Data analysis was undertaken by deductive and inductive coding in Atlas.ti as well as in interpretative group analysis sessions in the process of data exploration.

Learnings from listening

In this section, we present our learnings from listening to the citizen board members accompanying their museum visits and exchanging a posteriori. More specifically, we focus, on the one hand, on situated interpretation strategies in the permanent exhibitions within power and identity mechanisms and, on the other hand, on the relations between museum missions on paper and exhibition experiences on-site deciphering potential discrepancies.

Situated interpretation strategies and identity politics

Already in its conception, our study aimed at examining museum perceptions by the population living in Vienna. The COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting absence of international audiences intensified this approach, as did the media debate about the insufficient addressing of the local audience and the neglect of museums' own collections in their exhibition work. Beyond polemical statements, it was our concern to provide empirical insights into this debate while discovering relevant issues for relationship- building with local visitors departing from the permanent exhibitions. In this sense, our study generally revealed high satisfaction with the museums and a revived interest in the cultural heritage of one's city. At the same time, local citizens remarked upon better visiting conditions due to absent international visitors, being able to claim space for themselves in the museum and become more aware of their right to exist in these spaces – recognising, one might say, their own 'Right to the Museum.' Also, when asked half a year later what they had taken away from the five accompanied museum visits, the answer of the citizen board was unanimous towards the appreciation of the museums' value, or as one member resumed, 'What great museums there are in our city.'

In these later reflections of the citizen board, it was also noticeable that the Kunsthistorisches Museum Vienna scored particularly well. For example, one board member recalled: 'During the visit, a splendour is developed that the average citizen does not experience in this way; the museum is extraordinary for the museum visitor.' The Austrian Museum of Folk Life and Folk Art, which other board members described as 'a bit outdated,' 'poor,' or 'not memorable in a striking way,' scored far lower in terms of retrospect impressiveness. From this importance of outstanding buildings, we conclude that visitors need extraordinary spaces for extraordinary museum experiences. But even if splendour can trigger this shift of attention towards the aesthetic museum experience, the

responses from the board members regarding their accompanied museum visits demonstrated that splendour is not enough on its own. We especially encountered critique on a missing common thread, the lack of contextualisation of certain objects as well as expectations regarding a more differentiated display of, e.g., artworks of famous Austrian artists or the inclusion of feminist perspectives. Pointing towards the obsolescence of the purely aesthetic exhibition, board members also wished for more varied presentations, or emphasised it as extremely positive when their needs for versatile medial address and emotional touch were met.

During the accompanied museum visits, we also noticed that the board members often saw themselves addressed as learners in line with the aforementioned baby bird model of communication. Many objects that required specific cultural-historical knowledge were classified as 'silent objects' in the museum diary after the visit, as was the case with Rubens' paintings at the Kunsthistorisches Museum Vienna where the exhibit labels presupposed certain Christian knowledge and art historical expertise resulting in a board member's telling summary: 'Sacred art, not enough prior knowledge.' In presentations that encouraged contemporary readings and individual connections in contrast, the board members often discovered 'talking objects.' These objects facilitated relations to matters such as family histories, interior design preferences or gender equality. For instance, one board member recounted the very personal experience of fleeing from the Bosnian War and her struggles to fit into Austrian society, acknowledging the exhibition's power to stimulate self-reflection based on other migration biographies presented at the House of Austrian History. Another member who grew up speaking Austrian Sign Language and had first-hand experience of the non-recognition of this language at school was satisfied to see that the same museum featured the successful fight for sign language as a human right. In the course of the five visits, it also became apparent that the members of the citizen board varied greatly in their interest focus showing individual preferences for specific object categories such as portrait paintings or subject matters such as travelling. At the same time, we generally observed changes from the first to the fifth accompanied museum visit, characterised by the increasing acquaintance with each other in this 1:1 situation while 'growing' into the role of a citizen board member whose perspective was put at the forefront in this listening process. From the third visit onwards, we noticed an increasing understanding and appropriation of the exhibition scripts, especially if members of the citizen board were not habitual museum visitors before. The more pronounced showcasing of individual visiting strategies included for example, more deliberately deciding not to look at certain objects, the focused use of exhibition texts to establish a first orientation, not seeing the need to know everything about the topics presented or the objects exposed, or making connections between different museum collections. Thus, the

board members were not trying to make their visit right anymore but to make the visit theirs, adapting it to their personal needs and individual interests.

Relations between museum missions and citizens' perceptions

As described above, we not only accompanied the members of the citizen board during their museum visits but also asked for their responses on the permanent exhibitions and museum missions. In line with today's more participatory museum conceptions, the contemporary mission statements of our five museums showcase a stressed focus on service, dialogue, and socio-political issues, aiming to 'think the museum […] from a visitor's point of view,' to be a 'place of information, of exchange at eye level,' to 'provide space for social interaction and discursive exchange,' and to open 'new perspectives and spaces of action' by thematising 'our future by confronting socio-politically relevant issues with perspectives and approaches from contemporary art, applied art, design and architecture.' When asked to characterise the museum they had just visited, the members of the citizen board, however, most frequently used the words 'interesting,' 'beautiful,' 'fascinating,' and 'informative' across all five museums,[vii] painting a rather conventional and not very agile cross-sectional picture of the museums. The far lower frequency of adjectives such as 'inviting,' 'engaging,' or 'courageous' thus also runs contrary to current mission statements, which accentuate inclusion, proximity to life, or desire for change in their public purpose.

More concretely, we found that phrases from mission statements specifically addressing these values were the ones that were often questioned or contrasted with the museum experiences. While especially the phrase 'art is for all' invited board members to reflect on economic and knowledge-based exclusion mechanisms, the phrase 'as many guests as possible,' for instance, triggered one board member to doubt the imperative of continuous expansion of visitor numbers. In line with the complaint on missing contextualization, several members questioned the museum's way of communicating in a 'credible, understandable and dialogue-oriented' manner or also commented on the good intention but maybe not sufficiently traceable 'driving force for positive change' throughout the whole exhibition programme. Occasionally, feelings of exclusion were also triggered when for instance an earlier mission statement from the Belvedere (2015/16) declared its mission as 'to explore the great [works] of Austrian artists and to honour them accordingly,' pointing towards the outdatedness of uncritical art historical tributes and national narratives in a post-migrant society.

At the same time, we could observe that some earlier missions still seemed to be valid or worth rediscovering for the citizen board members. The MAK's statement 'The objects on display in the museum [...] are to be made as accessible as possible for viewing, use and

study' from the founding statutes (1871) proved to be in line with the citizen's board's interest in multi-sensory engagement with the exhibits, despite the following disclaimer 'insofar as this is compatible with their safety and preservation.' The Kunsthistorisches Museum Vienna's declaration (1989) to be 'a grandiose monument to Western culture that is almost impossible to exhaust' seemed almost impossible to resist in line with the aforementioned appreciation of splendour. But also, the factual description of the House of Austrian History's mission 'to convey the contemporary history of Austria from the second half of the 19th century [...] to the present day in its European and international context' from a legal mandate (2016) was highly confirmed within the citizen board's educational desire. Interestingly, however, it was one specific sentence from the current mission statement of the Belvedere that triggered the most responses: 'They [the visitors] leave the museum richer than when they entered,' could convince the board members in so far as it opened a space for individual and identity-related museum engagement and the transformative potential that lies within.

Conclusion

Theoretically, we can conclude that we conceptualised the 'Right to the Museum?' project pointing towards the fundamental public character of the modern museum while questioning the institution's relation to the public based on changing museum conceptions and contemporary citizens' perceptions. By inviting Viennese citizens to make use of their museums and share their feedback after visiting, we aimed to let those people speak who museums are meant for in a sense of social responsibility. By establishing a citizen board representative of the city of Vienna concerning the six diversity criteria of gender, age, educational level, migration background, disabilities, and museum affinity, we especially targeted representation and identity issues working against the homogeneous and habitual group of museum audiences and existing exclusion mechanisms. Our methodology of the accompanied museum visits and the subsequent survey formats marks our listening approach by ascribing the expert status to the participating board members. Regarding existing museum communication models, we view the board members as active meaning makers while not neglecting power mechanisms at stance following the model of museum and exhibition scripts. Here, agency is both given to institutional narratives as well as visitors' meaning-making based on prior knowledge, interests, and expectations.

Our findings on situated interpretation strategies show that active meaning-making especially took place when board members did not feel inferior due to a lack of specialized knowledge (as in the transmission model) but when they were given space to relate their biographies to museum objects and histories (as in the dialogic cultural model). At the same time, we observed more opportunities for meaning-making when board members applied and developed their individual visiting strategies in the course of repeated visits,

appropriating the museum space and locating themselves in the exhibition scripts. Another benefit of working with a citizen board was the possibility of paying attention to those people who are often not taken into account in museum and exhibition studies: The so- called non-visitors, who rarely or never go to the museum but represent the majority of citizens. Listening to a diverse group of citizens thus helps to understand 'forms of difference (rather than an undifferentiated "public").' (Barrett, 2012, p.4) Findings on the relation between historic to contemporary museum missions and citizens' perceptions can furthermore show how much or how little these missions align with museum experiences on-site. Interestingly, the focus on service, dialogue, and socio-political concerns of current mission statements was often put in doubt due to feelings of exclusion, lack of contextualisation or missing contemporary relevance while earlier museum missions were partly better aligned due to their educational or multi-sensory appeal.

Limitations of our study are methodologically rooted in the fact that although we video- and audio-recorded the accompanied museum visits to assign conversations to certain museum areas and objects, we did not apply a multi-modal analysis which would have given us insight into multi-sensory responses to museum scripts and exhibition displays. We opted for this solution primarily to avoid pressure for the board members to perform in front of the camera but also due to the high amount of accompanied museum visits which already were a challenge to analyse by simply focusing on verbal expressions. Based on the composition and activities of the citizen board of the 'Right to the Museum?' project, we can conclude on a structural basis that while the board was established as a representative sample of the Viennese population responding to their museums, their activities remained in the forum function of citizenship giving feedback and advice (Bandelli and Konijn, 2015). To further move from the feedback function to co-developing programmes or even participating in the governance of the museum, it also became clear that a citizen board needs to be established by the museum itself and incorporated into the internal programme and management policies so that citizens' contributions can have a direct impact on the museum's mission and exhibition practice.

Regarding the implications on museum practice in the 'Right to the Museum?' project, we acted as mediators between the feedback from the citizen board and the five partnering museums selecting specific viewpoints and narratives from certain board members that proved to be adequate for visualising museum and exhibition perception patterns and points of critique. We presented and discussed our findings with each partner museum in internal presentations. At the same time, we shared the procedures and learnings from working with a citizen board at museum conferences, in our open-access report (Reitstätter and Galter, 2023) as well as in individual presentations to team members of other museums, including the consultancy of two museums that were in the process of

establishing a citizen board. However, the presentation and discussion of results also revealed that the awareness of necessary change does not necessarily lead to change. Practical difficulties in applying results from the work with a citizen board to museum practice are to be found in selective scepticism towards participatory work, insufficient resources, rigid structures, or also inexperience with the application of results to operating procedures (Reitstätter, 2022). More generally, we conclude that it is important to invite critique but not easy to listen to feedback and find ways of implementation while we believe that it is worth investing in this attentive mindset and mood for action.

Indeed, a citizen board, if implemented directly in a participatory museum's strategy, can have plenty of possible applications and implications. One application is the inclusion of the citizen board in summative evaluations of current programmes while aiming to discover general perceptions, strengths and weaknesses, or open questions that can help to refine or renew the museum's offers. Potentially, this can also lead to the co- development of museum programmes, such as exhibitions, workshops, guided tours, social events or digital communication activities together with internal team members. Involving a citizen board in these processes can be used to deepen the museum workers' empathy and understanding of different visitors' requirements and in turn allows them to (co-)develop appropriate programmes for the museums' different stakeholders. In other words: While making citizens' voices heard in this participatory work will contribute towards the museum's ability to listen to its audiences and better respond to their various needs, their contribution can also strengthen communities' attachments to the museum itself. In consequence, such a listening approach consciously applied in museums can pluralise perspectives on cultural heritage and foster its societal value.

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TO COUNTER-COLONISE BRAZILIAN HISTORY INSTEAD OF DECOLONISING IT: ON THE PROBLEMATICS AROUND DECOLONISATION IN MUSEOLOGICAL EXHIBITIONS

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Abstract
An observation from the perspective of Social and Experimental Museology on the interventions carried out in the long-term exhibitions at the Museu Histórico Nacional in Rio de Janeiro as part of the project "Decolonial Brazil: Other Stories." This article analyses the agents involved in the project, the history and context in which the national museum is situated, and introduces Nêgo Bispo's concept of 'Counter-colonisation' to highlight museological processes as tools for questioning the past and experimenting in the present.
Keywords: Museology; Brazilian History; Decolonialism; Experimental-Museology; Counter-Colonisation

There is a complex web of relationships between violence and Brazilian museums, with each institution bearing its own traces of bloodshed. This article aims to explore the power dynamics involved in representing decolonial perspectives in museums, focusing on the exhibition "Decolonial Brazil: Other Stories" at the Museu Histórico Nacional. How are Brazilian national museums responding to contemporary demands for decolonisation? How is colonial history being addressed, and which entities are involved in historical revisions within these museums? Who funds these projects? How can the path to decolonizing museums be forged in a country with such intricate entanglements of violence and profound social inequities? Drawing on the concept of 'counter-colonisation' by Nêgo Bispo and introducing experimental museology, this article seeks to broaden the discussion of decolonisation in museological exhibitions.

Colonialism in Brazilian Museological Thinking

Brazilian traditional museums are profoundly influenced and shaped by European Modernity, Enlightenment and Eurocentric perspectives. Like the British Museum and the Louvre, these institutions were established as mechanisms of modern states to validate their history by publicly showcasing heritage. Following the French Revolution, these spaces created modern fictions about the notion of a 'classic past,' thereby inventing a collective heritage and an 'Ancestral Past.' Museums represent a historical past, whether real or not, as continuous in the present (Brulon Soares, 2023).

By inventing an 'Ancestral Past,' these modern states used museums as pedagogical and disciplinary instruments. As Dominique Poulot states, the 19th-century museum symbolised the nation, serving to satisfy a desire for collective memory by presenting authentic objects within a positivist and rational narrative. This narrative was essentially arbitrary and exerted control over the modern subject (Poulot, 2013).

Even though European Modern Museums constructed their histories through the exhibition of cultural heritage, they could not have existed without the presence of colonies as sources for their objects of study. The construction of 'true, rational, and neutral knowledge' directly depended on the colonised lands and the bodies of colonised people. The imperial logic of political and material domination transformed colonies into suppliers of collections, driven by the concept of difference, or Otherness. As Brulon (2020) states, the first museum in Brazil materialised the Other in the colonial sense, as an institution deeply connected to colonial times and Cartesian epistemological thinking.

Museums, as Western modern institutions, wield power over the objects they display, giving material form to abstract ideologies. In this context, a European perception of history, aesthetics, and citizenship is presented as a symbol of modernity, disregarding other cosmologies and establishing a rational and scientific format for representations of reality. By showcasing 'Others,' museums prompt the public to reflect on their sense of identity and, more significantly, on who they are not (Karp, 1991: 15).

It is important to emphasise that Brazil was the first, largest, and most enduring slave-based society in the Americas, and the repercussions of this historical violence are still very much present today, both inside and outside Brazilian museums. As stated by Cunha (2008), in the universe of Brazilian museums, national culture, strongly shaped by 19th- century values, has achieved the utopia of whiteness through the selection of 'superior and civilised values.' This process leads to a portrayal of the 'Other' that decontextualises objects in both historical and cultural senses. Cunha affirms that this approach perpetuates the idea that the African diaspora is 'lost in time' or 'anachronic.'

Museums are institutions still rooted in European modernity and consequently shaped by the culturally specific notion of 'civilisation.' According to Brulon (2023), the prevailing notion of the modern museum is to serve the nation's goal of educating people about its history. Thus, the modern museum aims to transform the public into citizens by scientifically exhibiting their history, adhering to the values of Enlightenment knowledge. In territories marked by colonial history, ontological structures endure long after formal colonialism has ended, persisting as political structures of domination in the social imagination and methods of knowledge production. The coloniality that influences

museums and their modes of operation is described as a 'colonial order of power' (Quijano, 1990) or 'colonial matrix of power' (Mignolo, 1990). This social structure impacts not only the categorisation of knowledge but also the categorisation of people within postcolonial society. Decolonial theory asserts that the effects of coloniality do not cease when a territory gains independence from the colonising state; rather, the mindset of colonialism/modernity persists beyond territorial domination. Coloniality is thus a form of epistemological, cultural, and symbolic domination that operates through and within museums. This is of utmost importance when considering museums in Brazil.

National Western museums, such as the Museu Histórico Nacional in Rio de Janeiro, articulate narratives that have historically defined a discourse over the collective experience. This article addresses how the interventions in the permanent exhibition of the Museu Histórico Nacional, 'Decolonial Brazil: Other Stories,' attempt to confront the museum's narrative from a decolonial perspective. This effort challenges historical museum approaches to colonial history and practices of portraying 'others.' The analysis of this experiment reveals the complexities of constructing these narratives and how the confrontation with coloniality can be expressed in museological exhibitions.

'Decolonial Brazil: Other Stories' and decolonial intentions in museums The National Historical Museum, the Museu Histórico Nacional, is the oldest museological community in Latin America. According to Sá (2007), the museum served as a laboratory for practical and theoretical museological experience as one of the first Schools of Museology in the world. In the 1920s and 1930s, Brazilian museums reached a social position due to a new wave of nationalism that took advantage of museums as direct cultural symbols of this 'new' country, a country now industrialised and integrated with the world economy. The 'Museum Course' was announced with the opening of the museum but only founded 10 years later, in 1932, and it is the basis of Brazilian museological thinking.

The Museu Histórico Nacional, founded in 1922 in the context of the 100th anniversary of Brazilian Independence, had as its first main mission the preservation of the nation's history. The museum was initially directed by Gustavo Barroso (1888-1959) for more than 30 years (1922-1930 and 1932-1959). During this period, the museum exhibitions celebrated white heroes, primarily men affiliated with the State or military power, while relegating people of colour to a marginalised secondary position. Indigenous and black communities were limited to a representation of themselves as passive ‘presences’, reinforcing the victorious project of colonisation (Magalhães, 2022). As Magalhães notes, the museum has undergone significant narrative changes since the late 1980s, with a focus on revising its discourse and representation of racialised communities. Since 2015, it

has collaborated with members of black resistance movements and Afro-Brazilian religious communities to further this effort.

The project 'Decolonial Brazil: Other Stories' involves a series of transformations in the long-term exhibitions of the Museu Histórico Nacional. Through 19 interventions, the project aimed to shed light on how the museum can reinterpret its exhibitions and collection pieces from a decolonial perspective. The project is the result of a collaboration between the Museu Histórico Nacional and the project ECHOES - European Colonial Heritage Modalities in Entangled Cities. For this exhibition specifically, the Universidade Federal do Estado do Rio de Janeiro (Unirio), and the Center for Social Studies at the Universidade de Coimbra (Portugal) worked together within one of its six work packages, which aims to delve into the linkages between Rio de Janeiro and Lisbon, a relationship strongly marked by colonialism.

> 'ECHOES is a research project [...] that debates the European colonial heritage in Europe and other continents. Conceiving heritage as a legacy and also as a presence, we seek to understand how multiple reflections on this legacy have been silenced in contemporary societies.' (Cordis, 2017)

Funded by the European Union as part of the European Colonial Heritage Modalities in Entangled Cities project. Initiated in February 2018 and concluded in July 2021, it involved universities such as Aarhus Universitet in Denmark, Universiteit van Amsterdam in the Netherlands, Uniwersytet Warszawski in Poland, Centro de Estudos Sociais in Portugal, and Universite Rennes II in France, organised by the University of Hull in England. This project received 2,461,890.00 euros to operate in various museums and organisations internationally. The Amsterdam Museum and the Museum of Warsaw were also beneficiaries of the project.

Sharing these numbers and the list of institutions involved in financing the project 'Decolonial Brazil: Other Stories' is of great importance for reflecting on how agencies structure new power dynamics in projects that are self-titled and self-judged as 'decolonial' today. It is crucial to note that the project is funded by the European Union, including institutions such as universities, which, like museums, have been pillars of knowledge rooted in the Enlightenment, thus legitimising the colonial order and modernity. It is interesting to observe how the decolonial discourse unfolds and who are the enunciators of decoloniality. Where does it originate? Where does it radiate to, and who, throughout the process of decolonisation, will have the final say on how it should be carried out?

Among the interventions, there are changes in the wall texts, alongside indications of how certain pieces, displayed for decades, were inaccurately presented. The notable lack of thorough research conducted on the museum's collection points to a significant change from traditional museum practices. Historically, museums have portrayed themselves as unwavering authorities of truth, without room for self-doubt or the acknowledgement of mistakes. Throughout the four long-term exhibitions of the Museu Histórico Nacional it is possible to detect the power dynamics in hegemonic museums in Brazil, as indicated before.

Firstly, it is important to underline how the project understands the concept of decolonisation. As states in the curatorial text, "Decolonial Brazil: Other Stories" defines the verb "decolonize" as "to understand different meanings conferred by historically silenced subjects"; "creating ways for multiple stories to exist and confront each other"; "to move, to travel"; "to endure discomfort"; "to provoke people"; "making the past, present"; and "to recognise subjects where previously only objects were seen" (ECHOES, 2022).

The term "decolonisation" is a polysemic term, but in this museological context it can be synthesised as narrative reparation. Decolonisation is defined as narrative reparation in the exhibition by recognising oppressed subjects and instigating new readings of their collection.

For Mignolo and Vázquez, decoloniality represents an opening to overcoming modernity/coloniality (Mignolo & Vázquez, 2019, p. 2). According to ICOM Brazil, "decolonial" was one of the 20 concepts chosen by the Brazilian museological community in the 2022 Museum Definition. Decoloniality is seen as a stance and practice against material, symbolic, racial, and gender colonial oppression (ICOM Brasil, n.d.). Wash understands decoloniality as a praxis and a consciousness aimed at constructing other social realities (Wash, 2021). For Maldonado-Torres, the "decolonial turn" is a theoretical, practical, political, and epistemological resistance movement against modernity/coloniality, subverting Western modes of exploitation (Maldonado-Torres, 2007, p. 130).

The interventions of "Decolonial Brazil: Other Stories" challenge the museum's responsibility towards its collection, and in doing so, a number of complexities very easily arise. This is especially true for museums and collections with a long and intertwined history of colonialism and the formation of national identity through cultural policies. Although the objects and texts are now viewed through the lens of oppressed communities, the extent to which decolonisation can progress while still being tied to the

concept of Brazil as a Nation-State remains uncertain. Can a traditional museum truly offer participation and horizontality while maintaining the nation as a central figure?

Intervention's analyses

One of the interventions of the project is related to the artwork 'Maria Cambinda' showcased in the window that opens the exhibition module 'Portugueses pelo Mundo' (Portuguese around the World) (See Image 1). The artwork in question was acquired by the museum in 1928 and for decades was displayed as an object representing African culture. The caption accompanying the artwork simply indicated 'Sculpture made of Wood/ Africa/19th century'. Indeed, the artwork dates back to the 19th century, but after a review of its documentation, it was discovered that it was produced in Ouro Preto, Minas Gerais, a region of Brazil, and was used by members of the 'Irmandade de Nossa Senhora do Rosário dos Pretos'. It has not been produced in Africa, nor has it ever even been in the African continent.

As the name indicates, the history of Ouro Preto (Black Gold) is intricately linked to the history of gold and mineral extraction in the region. The mining activity in this region generated so much profit for the crown that thousands of enslaved people were brought to the region to work in the mines. The presence of a diasporic community in the region is once again intertwined with the history of colonialism. The sculpture of 'Maria Cambinda' allows the history of the people related to the piece to be presented in context. However, presenting it as 'African Artwork' allows an understanding of the previous lack of interest museums had in properly studying the heritage originating from Brazilian diasporic communities.

> 'More than an allegory to the African continent, Maria Cambinda is a vestige of the history of resistance to slavery, solidarity, and sociability of the Black people of Ouro Preto, who were active in the 'Irmandade de Nossa Senhora do Rosário dos Pretos'. [Author's translation] (Magalhães et al, 2022: 15)

The process of re-signifying the object is as important as the fact that the museum acknowledges its own fault in documenting and exhibiting it, within a process of museological decolonisation.

In the same display case, alongside 'Maria Cambinada', there is another sculpture, in white marble: the statue of the Indian Jupira, by Honório Peçanha. It did not receive the same attention and research regarding its documentation as the wooden sculpture. However, it

serves as an element for reflection on the transformation processes in the MHN exhibition. Indian Jupira, like 'Maria Cambinada', is located at the beginning of the exhibition 'Portuguese around the world', which aims to tell the history of the country from the arrival of the Portuguese and the colonisation of the territory now known as Brazil. The sculpture of the Indian exemplifies a set of literary, pictorial, sculptural, etc. works that instrumentalised the figure of the Brazilian native Indigenous Communities through the lens of colonisation.

Image 1: View of museum display in the exhibition 'Portugueses pelo Mundo' (Portuguese around the World) in Museu Histórico Nacional in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. Courtesy of Museu Histórico Nacional. Photo by Pedro Marco Gonçalves.

Utilising two racialised female figures as allegories to the Portuguese 'world conquest' represents how the museum once saw its role of narrating the nation's history and how the museological ideologies constructed align with social systems of oppression. The 'utopia of whiteness' created by museums Cunha (2008) stated, reinforces the urgency to exercise a narrative revision and the societal role that the museum plays in contemporary times.

Following a sequence of exhibition rooms dedicated to the State as a colonial and imperial construct, displaying different artefacts from the former Royal Family. Another intervention

was made in the text addressing slavery in Brazil. The old curatorial text is crossed out on the panel, with edits made immediately afterward, presenting the narrative corrections as a direct comparison to the misleading word choices of the previous text. The title "Wealth and Slavery" now has "Wealth and" crossed out, leaving "Slavery" as the text's title. Additionally, "heritage" has been replaced with "structure," changing "this colonial heritage" to "this colonial structure."

This textual interventions are displayed in a room with a wall of different torture instruments utilised against enslaved people throughout the almost 400 years of slavery in Brazil. Displayed against a red background, 16 torture devices of the MHN collection are exhibited next to a TV projector that shows newspaper articles about contemporary police brutality, refugees in Brazil and racism today. (See Image 2) It is important to emphasise the complexity of exhibiting 19th-century torture devices in a museological context. The legacy of a slave-based society is still present in Brazilian social spaces, politics, land distribution, and, of course, museums. This sensitive topic is presented to the public in half of one room, while the other half displays a collection of china from the museum's holdings. By replacing the words of the previous text with more critical language, the intervention clearly shows the corrections made. The text also allows the public to gauge the symbolic significance of these word choices and how they impact the intended narrative. Changing the words and representing past decisions as crossed out facilitates a clear understanding of how museological meanings are part of a social revision process.

Image 2: View of the exhibition 'Riqueza e Escravidão' in Museu Histórico Nacional in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. Courtesy of Museu Histórico Nacional. Photo by Pedro Marco Gonçalves.

Another text intervention addresses Duque de Caxias, the patron of the Brazilian army. Right behind the marble bust of Duque de Caxias, the text informs the public of his ties to slavery. Duque de Caxias (1803-1880) was a slave owner, and at the time of his death, he owned 12 enslaved people. The text reveals that the MHN collection includes his inventory list, where enslaved people are catalogued alongside his other material possessions, such as cars and animals. While the original document states the monetary value of each enslaved person, the curatorial intervention lists their names without revealing their cost, as a way to honour them and respect their memories. This intervention is important to complicate the public's perception of these "national heroes" and the significance of their legacies. Duque de Caxias is still the patron of the Brazilian army, with statues honouring him in Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo, and cities bearing his name. The intervention by the museum underscores how much of Brazilian social memory is directly tied to violence and, above all, how the MHN critically understands its own collection.

However, it is also important to recognise that these interventions are still limited and somewhat sporadic. The project "Decolonial Brazil: Other Stories' addresses parts of the MHN's exhibited collection but does not deconstruct the overall museological narrative. The central focus remains a historical perspective that heavily emphasises the Portuguese legacy and the Portuguese Noble Family. The self-awareness of the project coexists with a structure that reinforces the nation's history through traditional viewpoints, particularly emphasising D. Pedro I and D. Pedro II, the two Emperors of Brazil in the 19th century. Additionally, the project overlooks Brazil's two dictatorial periods, Getulio Vargas's Estado Novo (1937-1945) and the Brazilian Military Dictatorship (1964-1985), failing to connect them to their own colonial roots.

As shown, the project "Decolonial Brazil: Other Stories" primarily focuses on historical revision through documents. Although this is a fundamental process, decolonisation also requires the presence of diverse people, active participation, and alternative forms of knowledge. Only through collective experience can we re-imagine the possibilities of what a museum can achieve with public heritage. While "Decolonial Brazil: Other Stories" emphasises textual reinterpretation to acknowledge the museum's role in its past and its social responsibility, addressing the museum's role in contemporary society goes beyond the narrative realm. It is vital to give communities an active voice.

Counter-Colonisation and Experimental Museology

Antônio Bispo Santo, famously known as Nêgo Bispo (1959 - 2023), was a quilombola3 leader and one of the most important contemporary voices against colonial violence in Brazil. Bispo proposes a new perspective on colonisation and delves into the idea of counter-colonisation as resistance efforts that have always been articulated by collective action. Counter-colonisation, according to Bispo, is a process distinct from the theoretical concepts of the decolonial school of thought, such as those put forth by Walter Mignolo or Anibal Quijano. It is an ancestral practice of Afro-diasporic and indigenous communities dating back centuries. Independently from the geographic territory where a culture finds itself, Bispo believes on the importance of understanding all processes of invasion, expropriation, genocide, and subjugation of a culture by another, in order to comprehend the different processes of resistance and fight against settlers within colonisation. (Santos, 2015: 26).

Bispo illustrated various forms of resistance by African Diaspora groups in Brazil, manifested through their ways of life, their relationship with the land, and their participation in cultural expressions. 'Mucambos', 'Quilombos', and 'Retiros', are examples of communities that confronted colonial settlers, remaining important symbols and experiences of resistance to colonialism. However, these groups were often criminalised and subjected to strong violence by governmental institutions, being repressed by force but also being represented as allegories of Otherness in museums. Instead of decolonizing, Nêgo Bispo advocates for counter-colonising. To stand against colonial violence and 'counter' colonisation means affirming the ways of living of communities. It involves interacting with the environment and maintaining continuity with historical experiences of resistance. Counter-colonising is a defence, not an attack.

Experimental museology involves transforming museums into institutions that recognise and engage with social frictions and pluralities as reflections of social life. This engagement with social friction can act as a creative force, leading to a new museum process where reality is shaped by incorporating diverse perspectives and addressing their conflicts. In this way, museums become mediators in transforming social reality. As coloniality extends beyond the museum walls, the institution evolves into a platform for social participation, encounters, and responses to societal needs.

The importance of Nêgo Bispo's thought in the context of Brazilian museums, particularly in analysing interventions in the long-term exhibition at the Museu Histórico Nacional, lies in its demonstration that counter-colonisation, unlike 'decolonisation,' occurs outside

academia. It is carried out by agents who have historically been portrayed as the "other" in traditional museums. Through experiences in Experimental Museology, we observe an alignment with the concept of counter-colonisation.

In this sense, it can be suggested a parallel between decolonisation and the project "Decolonial Brazil: Other Stories" and counter-colonisation as the experiences within Experimental Museology such as the Museu das Remoções, Museu Memorial Iyá Davina Ilê Omolu Oxum, Museu em Movimento LGBTI+, Museu da Maré, and Museu de Favela do Cantagalo e Pavão-Pavãozinho (all located in Rio de Janeiro, like the Museu Histórico Nacional). These are examples of experimental museology that operate from the perspective of the agents represented in the exhibition narratives. Bispo's thought is highly relevant for addressing issues related to perspective and positioning within the context of national museums.

The Museu Histórico Nacional, as described at the beginning of this article, originates from a nationalist mindset that, since its inception, has aimed to represent the nation in a totalising and inevitably generalising manner. Traditional museums that attempt to portray the nation and its citizens face the challenging task of constant revision and persistent misalignment with their goals.

As Nêgo Bispo suggests, counter-colonisation is achieved through collective action. It involves affirming the livelihoods of communities that have long resisted colonial violence. In the museological context, counter-colonisation presents an opportunity to reframe narrative procedures by embracing a plurality of voices and sharing authority over heritage. This approach ensures that the meanings of objects remain open to interpretation and interaction. It fosters a constant dialogue with local communities and other museums, decentralising the power of institutions such as the Museu Histórico Nacional by redistributing it. This transformation aims to turn the museum into a democratic and open arena for self-representation, transcending modernist frameworks and providing a platform for the subaltern to speak. Counter-colonisation thus creates a new museum experience, independent of Western traditions.

Experimental museology - possible to exist in any format of museums - is both an empiric method and a possibility of relation without objectification or exclusion. A museological exercise that constitutes a continuous critical revision and in friction re-creates museums, a collective practice in the making of the museum a democratic pursuit (Brulon, 2022: 55).

The perspective of how other cosmologies, especially counter-coloniser communities such as Quilombos, address their heritage might offer new frames of reference for understanding the role of museums today. This ongoing process of change, revision and critique renders the museum a democratic and shared cultural tool. As museums judge, interpret and create realities, Experimental Museology emerges as an effort to perceive friction as a catalyst for revising established social values.

Through Experimental Museology, counter-colonisation offers a chance to democratise museums as public spaces. Analysing museological exhibitions through the lens of counter-colonisation involves redistributing authority by expanding the debate to promote the inclusion of civic participation in the museum's narrative. Inspired by Bispo's concept of counter-colonisation and the fights for freedom and justice of quilombolas and other aforementioned groups, promotes a continuously evolving interpretation of social reality.

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CHANGING WINDS: AN ACCOUNT OF THE BORA MUSEUM IN TRIESTE (ITALY) AS A SPACE OF ROOTEDNESS IN CLIMATE CHANGE

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Abstract
The Bora Museum in Trieste was founded in 2004 to celebrate the bora, the typical wind of Trieste, which for thousands of years has had an enormous impact on the city and the region in social, urban, economic, cultural and artistic terms. The museum has always been a space 'in progress', collecting testimonies of the wind and its changes. Since mid-2023, thanks to a major national grant, the museum has been working on opening a new exhibition space, the Borarium, designed as a centre for reflection on climate change. This contribution (presented here in the form of reflective papers or personal accounts) first aims to discuss the bottom-up and co-creation projects of the Bora Museum together with the citizens of Trieste, in particular Memories of bora, a series of videos dedicated to citizens' memories of this characteristic wind, and Changing winds: climate emergency and us, dedicated to the climate changes perceptible in the wind. It then describes the ongoing interactive experiences, the Borarium Interactive project to digitise the museum's analogue heritage, and initiatives to co-create content with visitors to support local processes of green transition and raise awareness of environmental choices. This work exemplifies a museum's commitment to rooted work, as evidenced by its partnerships and collaborations with local communities on environmental issues, as well as its shared practices with its fellow citizens.
Keywords: Museum, wind, climate change, co-creation projects, Bora, Trieste

The Bora Museum in Trieste

The city of Trieste, the last eastern outpost of the Italian peninsula and historically recognised as the maritime outpost of Central Europe, is especially known for the bora, an east-northeast wind typical of the northern Adriatic. The bora, a strong and ever-present wind, has for centuries been a fundamental feature both in ecological and climatic terms, as well as in the anthropological development of these areas (Tufano, 2023). The wind is also celebrated in the city through the experience of the Bora Museum/Magazzino dei Venti, created as a space 'of wind and fantasy'. It was inaugurated in 2004 and conceived as a space workshop and a museum 'in progress'.i The visit is a numbered transition between various activities related to the bora, which seek to bring order to the natural disorder of the wind. The experience moves in two directions that constantly intersect: memory and creativity, from the testimonies of the past related to the wind to new artistic

and social inventions on the subject, allowing visitors to give space to their imagination through various manual activities where they can familiarise themselves with the wind phenomenon in a playful way. The visits are personalised, with workshops organised for groups, and all the activities are designed to create a participatory experience for both locals and tourists.

Some collections have also been developed as 'participatory collections' (Cecalupo, 2017), the best known of which is The archive of world winds, a bizarre assortment of boxed winds (currently over 130) sent in by museum visitors from different parts of the world. There is no shortage of bora and wind curiosities, with various objects donated by citizens and linked to personal or community memories related to the wind. In this way, the museum/warehouse collects objects and memories from visitors and citizens without abandoning its role in documenting and describing the bora. The museum also houses a wind documentation centre with over 400 titles, whose main collections include an archive of photographs, scientific publications, newspapers and scientific instruments belonging to Silvio Polli, one of the greatest bora researchers.

In this sense, it is a hybrid and interdisciplinary space that exhibits a variety of objects from science, art, culture and society, presenting itself both as a place of documentation about the city of Trieste and as a point of exchange with the rest of the world, making the Bora a means of promoting the circulation and exchange of ideas. It is a museum that is as alive as its wind and, as such, does not hesitate to organise activities in the city outside the museum, wind festivals and tours of the Bora (see Fig. 1).ii

Fig. 1a-b. Public and visitors during activities in the city organised by the museum. Courtesy of Museo della Bora.

Given this focus on weather phenomena, the Bora Museum necessarily participates at a local level, as many small local museums often do, in the reflection on the climate crisis and sustainability. Weather and climate are always presented as two distinct concepts at the centre of each visit and museum activity.

Participatory climate-related projects and activities

From this brief overview, it is clear how the Bora Museum acts as a place of reflection on the city of Trieste's living traditions, climate and environment. Its activities are therefore conducted in these two directions: bottom-up crowdsourcing and co-creation projects. Several projects are currently underway at the Bora Museum in collaboration with the citizens of Trieste. I focus on Changing winds: climate emergency and us and Memories of bora, dedicated to the climate changes perceptible in and through the wind.

Cambiaventi: L'emergenza climatica e noi/Changing winds: climate emergency and us

The Changing winds: climate emergency and us project, which took place between 2021 and 2022, involved a series of training activities, meetings and workshops to raise awareness of climate change through various channels, especially among younger users.

Firstly, a series of open-access webinars were presented on the climate emergency in the mountains, the sea and agriculture, in particular on rising temperatures, melting glaciers and rising water levels in the Trieste region. Scholars from various disciplines contributed to both the webinar and the final open-access volume.iii People between 18 and 35 could

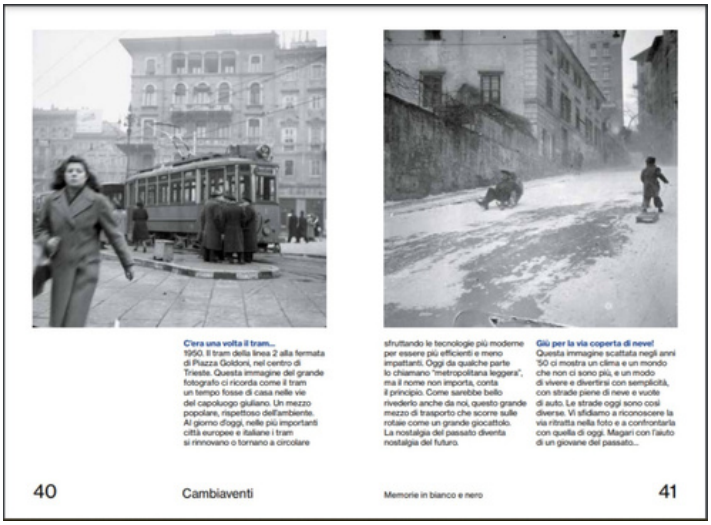

Fig. 2. Two pages of the final book of the project "Cambiaventi" (Lombardi, 2023).

register for the webinars (held via Zoom) and had time to interact freely with the scholars. They were also involved in online participatory climate workshops where they were asked to create visual and textual contributions on the topic.

In order to inspire the creativity of the participants and the public, an exhibition titled Tale of a past climate was opened, in which the museum's photographic collections, belonging to Professor Silvio Polli (1904–1990), Director of the Thalassographic Institute of Trieste, vividly documented the climate of the past. Selected materials from these activities were compiled in a 'social book' (see Fig. 2), a free, participatory book dedicated to the climate emergency in the region, curated by the Bora Museum and published on the project website in open access in February 2022 (Museo della Bora, 2022).

The book was written by all participants (researchers and the public) and is divided into three parts, reflecting as much as possible the work carried out in the webinars: the first part contains the scientific content of the webinars produced by the scholars, with links to the video recordings of the meetings; the second part contains the participants' contributions relating to the city's climate (photographs, personal anecdotes, proposals and thoughts on the future); and the third part is dedicated to old and contemporary photographs on the climate, proposals for action by individuals and works of art on the subject of climate change.

Although some of the content produced by the public may have been imprecise from a scientific point of view, it was preferred to preserve its spontaneity as a symbol of awareness and sensitivity in order to involve as many people as possible. In this sense, it is clear that activities of this kind in a museum can raise some critical questions regarding the dissemination of objectively correct scientific knowledge, which is certainly a central objective of museums but which very often clashes with the idea of leaving freedom of expression to the visitors participating in the activities. However, in a co-creation activity, it can also be useful to provide the participants with scientific content but then let them process what they have learned independently on the basis of their own experience without receiving an 'academic' evaluation of their thoughts. In practice, this means guiding visitors' ideas within a scientific framework but in an informal way, giving community members a voice in community issues, empowering participants and resisting the urge to act as a one-way provider of knowledge (Lynch, 2021).

Memorie di Bora/Memories of bora

The summer of 2023 was the hottest on record in the Trieste region, marked by rainfall and hailstorms, as well as sea storms and river flooding in the autumn. These climatic changes also impacted the inhabitants, the focus of the museum's interest. The project

"What the wind was like: memories of the climate" was developed by inviting citizens to send in a video of no more than three minutes about their memories of this characteristic wind in response to one of the following questions: "Do you have any special memories of the bora"? "In your opinion, how has Trieste's climate changed, or does the bora of the past no longer exist"? All these images and memories stimulate reflection on climate change, and it is the visitors themselves who become witnesses to the climate simply by using a smartphone. In any case, the Bora Museum continued to collect memories and testimonies, including texts, photos and videos. The project generally benefited from the cooperation of citizens and various institutions. The Istituto Triestino Interventi Sociali and the 'Danilo Dobrina' University of the Third Age provided invaluable assistance. The museum staff interviewed people and students from these institutes who shared their memories of the strength of the bora in the past and how they dealt with it in everyday life, using visual and written sources and objects.

Fig. 3. Page of the final book of the project "Memorie di Bora" (Museo della Bora, 2022).

In addition, they helped the museum collect interviews and materials with memories, thus revitalising the Bora Museum's memory heritage. Among the themes that emerged from the memoirs and interviews were anti-bora strategies, specific memorable episodes involving the city, and special and personal memories related to the weather. The interviews have been made freely available as videos on YouTube, and the personal stories, narrated by the individuals or museum staff, are available as short podcast episodes on Soundcloud and Spotify. The museum's website provides access to all this content. The result is a free collection of spontaneous memoirs and a short book (see Fig. 3),iv all of which are freely available online on the museum's website (Lombardi, 2023).

It is interesting to note how the majority of the older people delved into recounting how much colder it was in the past and how this colder climate affected their everyday lives, developing in the listeners a sense of a lost world that was wiped out by global warming. Many of the interviews, especially those recorded at the 'Danilo Dobrina' University of the Third Age, were made during general meetings with the students in groups, so they succeed in conveying a sense of shared memory, a collective practice of remembering a collective past that can only be passed on to the next generations through personal stories that find their way into the museum and help to reinforce and humanise the scientific message conveyed by the exhibition.

Towards new participatory projects

In recent years, the museum's expansion projects have been made possible thanks to funding from the Italian government's NextGenerationEU post-COVID Recovery and Resilience Plan. This funding requires that the beneficiary projects are closely connected to the EU's current issues with their communities.v To this end, the museum will soon open the Borarium. This new playful outdoor wind space will house real, digital and virtual attractions and provide a space for exhibitions, meetings and conferences in a suburb of the city. In this way, not only will the cultural offer of a peripheral area of Trieste, close to the border with Slovenia, be revitalised, but it will also be possible to offer content and activities that are open in terms of accessibility, inclusiveness and active participation to the people of Trieste, as well as to visitors from all over the world. The idea of creating an accessible and inclusive space is being realised in the Borarium Interactive project, which supports digitising the museum's analogue heritage by transforming its content co-creation initiatives with visitors into digital interaction design installations. These installations will make it possible to translate the values and knowledge related to the meteorological phenomenon of the bora for a much wider audience, regardless of language, motor skills or geographical origin (in particular, they

will communicate in multilingual Italian, Slovenian and English). Accessibility to the content will be promoted both physically through lifts and access ramps, audio content for the blind and visual content for deaf people, and digitally through visits to the web portal and the mobile application. The mobile application will allow those who cannot visit the museum in person to use it, provide a guide for visiting other indoor and outdoor spaces in the city and allow for remote interaction and learning. Indeed, the ability to interact digitally with the content on site or remotely is a fundamental feature of an exhibition space that pursues the concept of an accessible and inclusive museum for all visitors.

The mobile application also includes an area for user-generated content on bora and climate, making the user a co-creator of a truly diffuse experiential museum. This exchange of experiences forms the basis for creating a sense of belonging for the citizens and visitors to the climate reflection. As with all museum activities in general, the connection between the past and the present will be fundamental for the transmission of subjective experiences and the creation of a relationship between generations, both creators and users, through this intangible heritage linked to the climate, which so strongly characterises the local cultural identity. In this sense, the sections of the Borarium dedicated to the green concept will also be set up to reflect on climate change with ideas on sustainability to raise awareness of local processes of green transition and environmental choices for visitors of all ages.vi

Concluding Thoughts

The work of the Bora Museum is to tell the story of climate change through objects and documents, but above all, through the memories of people from different generations, by presenting examples, best practices and the direct involvement of visitors and local communities in the face of climate change. The underlying idea is to stimulate the visitor's emotional and physical participation, an example of a contextual learning model (Falk and Dierking, 2018), with several objectives: to help the visitor establish a direct relationship with the exhibits through direct participation and comparison or sharing with others.

The goal is to promote a connection to everyday life and contemporary issues (Godfrey, 2002), as well as socially constructed learning, where the presence of learning communities encourages the exchange of information and interaction between visitors (LaBarge, 2014). The aim is also to come as close as possible to the participatory function of the contemporary museum, as recently established by the International Council of Museums' (ICOM) new definition of a museum as a place of active participation, capable of accommodating a plurality of voices, centred on the visitor's experience as well as the collection it houses.vii

In these times, constant instability is a central theme. This appears to be an excellent example of rooted museum work, expressed in partnerships and collaborations with local communities on ecological issues, as well as in shared practices with their fellow residents. Communities can find roots and rootedness by learning and participating in the creation of content for the Bora Museum related to climate and weather issues inherent in the local tradition. To be sure, the museum follows the models proposed (Simons, 2010) for public participation in projects facilitated by the museum itself when it asks visitors to provide specific objects and ideas (requests for contributions, e.g. donation of objects related to the wind), to participate directly in the development of actions (proposals for collaboration, e.g. in the creation of open access books), and to work together (in co- creation) to generate content based on community interests (especially climate change).

By collecting experiences, memories and objects, the museum encourages active participation, reflection and interaction with the past to enable awareness of green topics (Monk, 2012, p. 66). Therefore, the museum constantly empowers visitors to actively participate in the creation of meaning by proposing activities that stimulate the recollection of memories without presenting information in a one-sided and unidirectional way that leaves no room for emotional and sensory involvement (Csikszentmihalyi & Hermanson, 1995, pp. 67–75).

The citizens of Trieste are a participating and active community in the process of collecting, interpreting, exhibiting and expanding knowledge to raise awareness of climate change. It is therefore a vital form of knowledge for understanding the historical, ecological and social reality of the city and region of Trieste, which the museum creates through partnerships and collaboration with local communities and shares with the global community in various ways.

Acknowledgements

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Notes

i https://museobora.org/ (Accessed: 10 April 2024).
ii Available at https://museobora.org/boramata.php (Accessed: 10 April 2024).
iii The scholars were affiliated with the WWF, local meteorological societies, national institutions of geophysics and oceanography, as well as an artist and a photographer.
vi Available at https://museobora.org/che-vento-faceva.php (Accessed: 01 August 2024).

v The museum project is in line with the design of NextGenerationEU in promoting the concepts of the green transition to renewable energy and sustainability by improving access to training in skills relevant to the future economy and supporting inclusive participation in growth, research and development for all. This is all also framed within the European Green Deal actions, especially when it comes to climate (the first climate-neutral continent by 2050) and environment (protecting our biodiversity and ecosystems).
vi Developing cultural strategies to raise awareness about the protection of our biodiversity and ecosystems, alternative energy sources and the effects of climate change. See Sutton (2023) for an overview.
vii According to the ICOM, "[Museums] operate and communicate . . . with the participation of communities, offering varied experiences for education, enjoyment, reflection and knowledge sharing", https://icom.museum/en/resources/standards-guidelines/museum-definition/ (Accessed: 08 August 2024).

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CHRONICLES FROM A CLOSED MUSEUM

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Abstract

This contribution addresses the strategies of public engagement, heritage reinterpretation, and knowledge co-production recently implemented by the MAET - Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography of the University of Turin. As with many Western museums founded in 19th and 20th centuries, it must contend with a legacy tied to the racist and colonial ideologies of its past. Its ethnographic collections, particularly those from non- European contexts, highlight critical challenges such as its colonial history, 'sensitive heritage' and the issue of 'archival silence'. The MAET has recently started a process of reassessing its non-European collections in an effort to deconstruct its institutional history. This paper will provide an analysis of the museum's efforts to engage local communities – students, citizens, and migrants – through a decolonial lens, focusing on projects like Around the World in 90 Minutes – an educational workshop for primary school students – and Voices from the Forgotten Collections – conceived to promote the exhibition Africa. The forgotten collections (Royal Museum of Turin, 27th October 2023 – 25th February 2024). Although small in scale, these activities prepare for the museum's future reopening and foster participatory museology.

Keywords: Museums; Ethnographic collections; Colonial heritage; Archival silence; Decolonisation; Public Engagement.

Museums have long been revered as repositories of human creativity, where the objects of our collective past are carefully preserved and presented for public contemplation. However, beyond mere repositories, museums serve as dynamic spaces that foster a deep sense of rootedness and response-ability within individuals and communities. Far from being stagnant warehouses of historical artefacts, museums can be vibrant hubs where cultural heritage, social consciousness, and environmental stewardship converge. They play a pivotal role in society as places in which history, culture, and contemporary issues intersect, and by gathering communities together they can offer spaces for people to share experiences and exchange knowledge and practices. This mission has now become central in the museum discourse involving anthropological institutions, pledged to valorise

the products of human material cultures and to engage with the subjects who produced them.

In today's globalised societies, characterised by a marked extent of superdiversity (Vertovec, 2007) in which (individual and collective) subjectivities with different backgrounds co-exist within shared territories, anthropological museums hold a critical role in acknowledging and representing cultural diversity. By incorporating multiple stories, traditions, and contributions into their narratives, these institutions not only promote a more inclusive understanding of cultural heritage but also create 'contact zones' (Clifford, 1997) where intercultural dialogue and social integration can be promoted (Amselle, 2016). Therefore, rather than 'heterotopias' (Foucault & Miskowiec, 1986)i that exhibit 'otherness', they aspire to become places of cultural exchange, through public engagement activities aimed at involving the public (Kreps, 2020: 11). Collaboration – both as co- production of knowledge and public involvement – has now become the cornerstone of museum anthropology (Isaac 2015), as 'originating or 'source people (Peers and Brown 2003) are increasingly involved as original producers of the exhibited collections (Ames, 1990: 161).

In this regard, the case of the Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography of the University of Turin (MAET) is significant to reflect on what strategies a museum can implement to take root in its territory, despite its inaccessibility to the public. In fact, as a closed museum the MAET also represents an example of a resilient museum, one still able to implement strategies to enhance and communicate its heritage.

The MAET: a delayed museum

Closed to the public since 1984, the MAET preserves numerous collections of different origins and provenances. It was founded in 1926 by the psychiatrist and anthropologist Giovanni Marro on the basis of an original nucleus of mummies, osteological and archaeological finds collected during his participation in the Italian Archaeological Mission in Egypt (1913-1914). It was here that Marro came into contact with Ernesto Schiaparelli, director of the archaeological mission and of the Egyptian Museum of Turin, who turned out to be a central figure for the establishment of the MAET's first collections. In fact, both the nucleus of mummies and human remains and the first ethnographic collections – from Africa, Asia, Latin America and Oceania – became part of the Museum thanks to Schiaparelli's intercession. Therefore, many of the artefacts stored at the MAET relate its history with that of other local institutions: first of all, the Egyptian Museum of Turin which shares with the MAET some Egyptological and anthropological collections acquired concomitantly in the same archaeological sites of Assiut and Gebelein; and secondly, the Museum of Antiquities of Turin – managed by Schiaparelli as superintendent of the

collections of antiquities – from which some of the oldest ethnographic collections arrived. Hence, although Marro founded the Museum, the figure of Schiaparelli could be considered even more relevant regarding the history of collections, since he was nearly always involved in donations and exchange practices between the MAET and the Museum of Antiquities. Nevertheless, to understand the MAET's current inaccessibility condition, the figure of Giovanni Marro cannot be overlooked.

Born in Limone Piemonte on 29th May, 1875, Marro's family moved to Turin in 1882, where he went on to graduate in Medicine and Surgery in 1900. Following his father's careerii, he dedicated himself to psychiatry and physical anthropology supporting positivist and racist theories (Marro, 1940b). This type of education, combined with the cultural fervour of the late nineteenth century, made Marro an eclectic and controversial figure. He soon joined the National Fascist Party (PNF), and thanks to his political orientation he established his academic position, gaining the chair of Anthropology for the Natural Sciences in 1923, and founding the Institute and the Museum of Anthropology in 1926 (Marro, 1940a; Mangiapane & Grasso, 2019a; Grasso & Mangiapane, 2022).

Marro's Museumiii was set up according to an evolutionary epistemology that looked at the material culture from 'elsewhere' as means to document the development of human societies. The ethnographic collections assembled under his direction were not the consequence of particular interests or aimed collecting strategies, but the result of donations from colleagues and acquaintances; however, they were nevertheless used as part of an attempt to apply an avowedly evolutionary approach to human diversity (Grasso, 2020). The research carried out by the Institute and the Museum of Anthropology therefore never delved into the historical and cultural contexts of the artefacts, but focused on the classificatory aspects of mankind that nourished the racist beliefs of Marro, who even signed the Manifesto of Race in 1938 (Marro, 1939; Grasso & Mangiapane, 2022)iv. In light of this orientation, it should not be surprising that non-European objects, as well as archaeological finds and artefacts from mental hospitals – the three main collections of the MAET – were considered as 'stuff' produced by 'primitives, savages and madmen' (Stocking, 1991; Grasso 2020). This approach had already been debated and overcome in other European institutions (Ames, 1992; Amselle, 2017; Karp & Lavine, 1991; Kreps, 2020; Stocking, 1985), but Italian museology lagged behind. In fact, considering its history, the MAET went through the typical phases of development of anthropological museums (Ames, 1992; Bouquet, 2012; Stocking, 1985; Sturtevant, 1969) but with a staggered chronology: although the Museum was founded in 1926, Marro gave it a nineteenth-century setting that other institutions had already overcome. This approach triggered a domino effect on museum practices that led to an effective 'rediscovery' of ethnographic heritage only in recent decades.

After Marro's death (1952), the scientific directors who managed the Museum did not bring any innovation to the practices of the collections' management and communication. From the 1950s to the early 1980s, the history of the Museum was rather characterised by a long period of silence embraced to hide the inconvenient past of its founder (Mangiapane & Grasso, 2019b; Grasso & Mangiapane, 2022). No publication or public event made mention of Marro's private life and political orientation – considered uncomfortable topics to deal with – and no critical reflection on previous and contemporary museum practices was carried out. Besides the new layout conceived by the director Brunetto Chiarelli in 1962 – which still revolved around nineteenth-century themes such as evolutionism and the natural history of mankind (Grasso, 2020) – the Museum entered a stalemate phase. There was no research activity to contextualise or explore the ethnographic collections and their biographies (Kopytoff, 1986), and non-European material culture continued to be overlooked or used as corollary to display outmoded ideas about human evolution.

Since the 1980s, the European debate initiated by the International Movement for a New Museology (MINOM, 1985) proposed a museum reform to get over the 'old museology' that was 'too much about museum methods, and too little about the purposes of museums' (Vergo, 1989: 3). Nevertheless, the MAET remained unaltered until it was forced to close in 1984, due to the stringent laws on public spaces safety. The Cinema Statuto fire, which took place in Turin in February 1983, imposed more restrictive regulations regarding the safety of public spaces, and in accordance with the new legal provisions, the MAET rooms – then located in the Palazzo dell'Ospedale di San Giovanni Battista – were declared unusable. Since then, the long period of silence that overshadowed the problematic debut of the Museum during the fascist period also assumed a material dimension, because the doors that gave access to the collections were locked and the objects placed in storage. Thus, the methodological delay started by Marro was further expanded, given that collections – especially the ethnographic ones – continued to be neglected.

The MAET of the Future: Realignment Strategies

The locked doors of the MAET – celebrating their 40th anniversary this year – certainly symbolise a physical border that divides the Museum from the society of which it is part (Simon, 2016), but also represent an opportunity for reaction and reform that can be implemented to lift from the condition of inaccessibility. If the closure seems to have little chance of being resolved soon, the museum has the potential to reach out to its target audience and citizens by using an adverse situation to its advantage.

In the last decade, the MAET developed strategies to finally 'open its doors' and build new and deep connections with people who potentially could self-identify with its heritage (Grasso & Mangiapane, 2021). When in 2017 the directorship passed to a cultural anthropologistv – the first after a series of physical anthropologists – the MAET inaugurated a new chapter of its life. In this phase, marked by a further move of the collections to the Palazzo degli Istituti Anatomici of the University of Turinvi, the Museum has faced (and continues to face) two main challenges: the problematic nature of its cultural heritage and the closure to the public.

As for the first issue, the MAET stores collections that can be recognised as 'sensitive' (Schorch, 2020: 2) and 'dissonant' (Tunbridge & Ashworth, 1995) due to the origins and evocative power of objects, sometimes related to memories and conflicting narratives of past traumas, violence or other negative historical events. In fact, though the Museum has never been explicitly colonial, the way of collecting some artefacts – such as the anthropological finds and photographic collections from Egypt or the objects from colonial contest in Africa – was typically colonialist (Mangiapane & Pecci, 2019: 6). For this reason, the MAET began to reflect on its past and heritage in order to deconstruct the history of collections from a 'decolonial' viewpoint. Christina Kreps defines the decolonization of museum practice as:

> a process of acknowledging the historical, colonial contingencies under which collections were acquired; revealing Eurocentric ideologies and biases in the Western museum concept, discourse and practice; acknowledging and including diverse voices and multiple perspectives; and transforming museums through sustained critical analysis and concrete actions (Kreps, 2011: 72).

In this regard, the process by which the MAET intends to be more inclusive, adopting multiple voices and perspectives, required a prior work of reconstruction and contextualisation of its history and practices, as well as their deconstruction in decolonial terms. This process was initiated with the reordering, study and cataloguing campaigns of both the material heritage and photographic collections and the historical archive. The latter has assumed a fundamental role, not so much in providing useful information about museum's history and heritage, but in revealing its gaps, omissions and biases. From the founder's death until the resumption of research activities, the Museum's historical archives underwent a gradual dissolution provoked by the neglect of those who curated the collections, and by a process of oblivion that avoided confrontation with the Institution's 'dissonant' past. The reordering activities made it possible to recover part of the archive, which, however, lacks Giovanni Marro's private correspondence – defined by his assistant Savina Fumagalli as an essential source for the identification of the

provenance of ethnographic artefacts (1961: 4) – and the acquisition records of the various collections. The museum is therefore devoid of documentation regarding Marro's relationships, contacts and exchanges with political and power figures of the time, as well as with local and national museum and cultural institutions. In front of the archival lacks, the analysis of the documents 'along and against the archival grain' (Stoler, 2009; Chaudhuri, Katz & Perry, 2010) was essential to recognise the need to focus on the partial nature of the archive (Fuentes, 2016), in order to critically address documentary absences.

The urge to break the deadlock of a 'missing' archive was pursued by reinterpreting the museum's own narratives and the knowledge produced about its heritage. The study of the historical vicissitudes of the collections and personalities that gravitated around Marro and the MAET proved to be anything but neutral. Thus, curatorial practices – such as inventorying and cataloguing – were set to be a first way of overcoming the barriers of what Michel-Rolph Trouillot called 'archival silence', confirmed in the MAET experience:

Silences enter the process of historical production at four crucial moments: the moment of fact creation (the making of sources); the moment of fact assembly (the making of archives); the moment of fact retrieval (the making of narratives); and the moment of retrospective significance (the making history in the final instance) (Troulliot, 1995: 26).

In the case of the MAET, the 'silence' dimension mainly concerns the collections of non-European material culture. The absence of the traces and voices of the 'source communities' and of those who collected and exported the objects is the legacy of past and outdated models and modes of curatorship that have affected the artefacts in more recent times – as discussed at the beginning of this contribution. It therefore seems possible to assume that the 'missing' archive not only speaks clearly of an 'unspeakable' past of the museum and its founder, but also of the subaltern position of ethnographic collections in relation to other materials. Under the assumption that the MAET was conceived and created when museums and non-European collections were places and pretexts for the definition of 'us' and 'the others', it has been for most of its existence an ethnocentric 'dispositive' (Foucault, 1977); a place where 'colonialist' and 'nationalist' ideology had a precise role in the choices of display and communication of the heritage. For this reason, a reform of the Museum became pressing and necessary, with the purpose of realigning it to new practices and contemporary discourses.

Inventorying and cataloguing represented a first attempt to contextualise and reconstruct the trajectories that collections have travelled from their contexts of production to the place of exhibition. The cataloguing process returns a precise or realistic identity of

cultural heritage, and it is regulated by the Central Institute for Cataloguing and Documentation – an institution of the Ministry of Culture (D.P.R. 805/1975) – which administers the general inventory of Italian heritage.

Considering that museums are not neutral places (Saumarez Smith, 1989) but reflect – as Georges Bataille argued – the identity of the nation in which they were built (Bataille, 1974), they elaborate real narratives on heritage through their practices. In fact, when an object becomes part of a museum collection it acquires a new status becoming a 'historical document' that no longer 'speaks the language of life', but a kind of 'metalanguage' adapted to another symbolic system (Clemente & Rossi, 1999). In this sense, cataloguing – although necessary to define, contextualise and legalise cultural heritage – is above all a 'constructed process', that is the result of mediation and re-elaboration by museum specialists (Price, 1989). For this reason, other valorisation strategies have been required to critically review museum collections and practices. In line with these goals, the MAET has undertaken activities of 'knowledge co-production' (Simon, 2010) with those 'source people' defined by Laura Peers and Alison K. Brown in Museums and Source Communities: 'the term "source communities" (sometimes referred to as "originating communities") refers both to these groups in the past when artefacts were collected, as well as to their descendants today' (Peers & Brown, 2003: 2). By involving migrant and diaspora communities, the MAET has developed collaborative projects in order to reflect on the methods of displaying, narrating and enhancing heritage – such as the African and South American collections which have been studied and contextualised with the local migrant communities.

This purpose led the Museum to cope with its second challenge: the closure to the public. In fact, the dialogue with 'source communities' has pushed the MAET to ideally plan its reopening and to carry out educational and exhibition programmes that can create connections with citizens. Since the reopening is still a hypothesis, because it requires concrete resources that fall outside the modern debate on museum practices and decolonisation (Kassim, 2017; Hicks, 2020), the Museum is currently focusing on temporary activities for the public.

Through the web, the MAET has started a variety of activities to engage audiences, promote its heritage and provide educational experiences. Since 2020, it has been curating a monthly column entitled Objects on shore leavevii, in which collections are presented to the public by means of short texts, video interviews and podcasts. This initiative, supported by other dissemination activities, has led the Museum to grapple with the virtual restitution of its heritage, a strategy that proved to be fundamental in order to ward off the social detachment imposed by the Covid-19 pandemic. Since then, the 'digital

presence' has become essential to create and maintain relationships with the public, and to resist and exist in the territory, as for the MAET.

Through the direct involvement of the public, the Museum has planned educational projects and temporary exhibitions. As regards educational projects, after the last relocation of collections, the Museum began to define activities for students and adults. A workshop entitled Around the World in 90 Minutes was created for children, with the purpose to raise awareness of multiculturalism in contemporary societies, reflecting on the various declinations of 'culture' applied to festivals, rituals, religions and food. On the other hand, guided tours dedicated to the history of the Museum and its collections have been planned for adults and university students and scheduled for lectures or special events.

Regarding temporary exhibitions, these represent another opportunity to make collections accessible and free objects from their condition of 'ineffability'. Since its closure, the MAET has organised and collaborated in numerous exhibition initiatives, aiming not to be forgotten (neither by the academic community nor by the general public) and to establish agreements and conventions with other public or private institutions that could ensure its partial accessibility. The partnerships established over the years have created a real network around the Museum, with local, national and international museums and associations, and have guaranteed its existence and activity. For example, the collaboration with the Piedmontese Center for African Studies has given back two watershed events: Language against Language. A Collaborative Exhibition (2008-2009) and Gelede. Our Yoruba Mothers (2018). Two exhibitions carried out with some exponents of Turin's migrant communities – actively involved in the choices of displaying and enhancing collections – and aimed at returning part of the MAET's heritage according to a decolonial perspective. These two events enabled it to root even more in its territory and society, and paved the way for other cultural initiatives organised with other local museums, such as the exhibition Africa. The Forgotten Collections.

The workshop Around the World in 90 Minutes

Within the educational offer of museums, workshops play a key role in enhancing the formative experience. These interactive sessions provide participants, whether children or adults, with a unique opportunity to engage directly with artefacts, artworks, and historical contexts in a hands-on manner. By incorporating activities such as art creation, object handling, role-playing, and multimedia presentations, workshops transform passive observers into active learners, stimulating critical thinking, creativity, and empathy. Through guided exploration and expert facilitation, participants delve deeper into the

subject matter, gaining a richer understanding of cultural heritage, scientific principles, or artistic techniques. Museum workshops serve as dynamic platforms for fostering curiosity, igniting imagination, and nurturing lifelong learning, thereby enriching the educational landscape of both formal and informal settings.

The MAET's workshop Around the World in 90 Minutes, addressed to primary school students, aims to educate in cultural heritage by stimulating inductive reasoning and sensitivity towards cultural diversity. Through the game dimension, children embark on a journey around the world discovering 'new' cultural, spiritual, musical and culinary traditions. In this way, the filter of culture as 'web' (Geertz, 1973) – which 'weaves' shared patterns of human behaviour – is deconstructed through 'cultural relativism', a theoretical perspective which suggests that there is no single 'right' way to live or organise societies, but rather a variety of valid and meaningful ways of doing so (Herskovits, 1972: 11). Since each lifestyle and vision of reality is rooted in the history, traditions and specific circumstances of a given culture, the workshop's game board doesn't represent a world map in its conventional position, because the idea of a 'global north' at the top and a 'global south' at the bottom are such trivialising and rigid categories to describe social complexity (Wolf, 1982). Even though these classifications have historically been used to outline socioeconomic divisions between industrialised countries (those in the north) and developing countries (those in the south), they do not consider the 'cultural creativity'[viii] existing within each society. Thus, by embracing the provocation of Joaquín Torres-García with his graphic work America Invertida (1943), the board shows an upside-down planisphere where children can move by following the game tiles and discovering the Museum's objects.

The educational purpose of the game is to 'collect' at least three artefacts, in order to learn their historical or contemporary use and to answer the final questions of the Tlingit totem – in the final tile of the board – which will decide the winning team. During the activity, children have the opportunity to directly see some MAET's objects and to reflect, through game trials and multimedia presentations, on the variety and complexity of cultural heritage. In fact, if the national school system imparts a certain heritage education, aimed at studying the tangible heritage made up of paintings and architectures, the workshop wants to bring students closer to the intangible heritage, consisting of festivals, rituals, myths and oral traditions. This is why the activity lingers on ceremonial events such as the Gẹlẹdẹ spectacle of the Yoruba in Nigeria, the Andean folk dance of the Diablada performed in Peru and Bolivia, or the Javanese shadow theatre (Wayang Kulit). Similarly, with regard to tangible heritage, the workshop presents students with ethnographic objects that reflect 'other' aesthetic tastes and ways of conceiving art. This is the case of African statuary – such as ntadi or nkisi wooden sculptures from Congo – or

South American ritual objects used during ceremonies connected to forms of worship which are very different from the liturgies of the best-known religions 'of the book'. In this manner, students learn to recognise the aesthetic value of 'other' types of tangible and intangible heritage, and familiarise with the notion of 'cultural diversity' – nay, 'cultural uniqueness' – applied to material cultures.

The project 'Africa. Voices from Forgotten Collections'

Another case study which demonstrates the MAET's strategies of resilience and rooting in the territory is represented by its latest exhibition event, concerning African collections. In the last two years, the Museum has taken part in a vast project aimed at studying and enhancing – also with local migrant communities – the African heritage preserved in Piedmont and not on public display. This project, promoted by the Royal Museums of Turin, the Piedmont Regional Directorate of Museums and the MAET, had led to the exhibition Africa. The Forgotten Collections (Turin, 27th October 2023 – 25th February 2024): an event that sought to re-establish the history of a less-known continent among the general public, reactivating geographical and cultural routes which lead back to times outside and inside our identity.

The exhibition displayed an almost entirely unpublished heritage – including weapons, sculptures, amulets, jewels, musical and ritual instruments – divided into various collections that bear the names of explorers, engineers, mechanics, soldiers and diplomatic attachés, and summarise a historical phase that for a long time has been concealed or forgotten: the colonial expansion in Africa at the end of the nineteenth century, which began through commercial incursions and ended as military conquest. The artefacts are therefore the results of the exploratory and consular activities promoted by the House of Savoy (the Italian royal family), the collecting activities of the Italians employed by the Independent State of Leopold II and later by the Belgian colony and, finally, the acquisitions in the former Italian colonies that brought to Piedmont diplomatic gifts and other material evidence (De Filippis, Pagella & Pennacini, 2023a).

The display project required an impressive multidisciplinary research work that involved curators and restorers with the aim of overcoming the lack of research and analysis that characterises the African heritage preserved in Turin – and generally in Italy (De Filippis, Pagella & Pennacini, 2023b: 12). The outcome was an itinerary that let the public to soak up the African culture and to explore the socio-political relations between Italy (and in particular the city of Turin) and Africa. The heritage on display had an important role to both connect the museum space to its dynamic dimension of 'forum' and convey images and memories through the objects, which are expression – today as in the past – of the 'source communities' and of the relationship with the 'otherness'. The contemporary

debate on heritage is increasingly questioning the role of cultural and museum institutions in facilitating the citizens' access to culture and heritage, problematising their uncritical practices and policies. This discourse, aimed at overcoming the idea of the museum as a static and ideal space of knowledge, mainly concerns the ethnographic heritage from non-European and colonial contexts. It needs, in fact, to be understood and communicated through sensitivities that leave space of expression to those (individual and collective) subjectivities that can self-identify in it. According to this approach, it is essential that contemporary 'voices' from those societies that were victim of colonial processes are involved in the practices of resignifying objects and sharing memories.

This was the framework for the public engagement project Africa. Voices from Forgotten Collectionsix, which launched and facilitated a heritage reinterpretation process through participatory and inclusive practices involving representatives of diaspora communities in Turin. More specifically, the Sudanese Association of Turin, the Association of Migrant Generations and the Association of Ethiopian and Eritrean Friends of Piedmont, all took part in the project coordinated by the Intercultural Centre of Turin and supported by the MAET and Royal Museum's curators. The activity wished to implement the layout itinerary of the exhibition and narrate the relations and exchanges between Italy and African communities, in the perspective of a participatory museum. It therefore proposed a redefinition of the artefacts chosen for the exhibition and a co-production of textual and video content for public use. From the selected objects, the project beneficiaries – together with the curators – were able to directly approach the heritage by proposing a personal and emic rereading of some objects.

The project also included meetings and focus groups to help the involved group to grasp the exhibition purposes and to encourage intercultural dialogue. During these meetings, some participants were involved in recording interviews in which they could share their perceptions, feelings, and memories about the heritage. The outcome was a video that blended the ten interviews carried out with project's participants and was included in the exhibition itinerary. Thanks to the video interviews, shared on the MAET social channelsx, the voices of those with migratory background became mediators between the African heritage and general public, expressing ideas and emotions produced from their encounter with artefacts. In addition, specific guided tours were planned for both 'source communities' and general public, with good feedback from participants. Advertising and sharing content on social networks, enabled to reach both direct and indirect audiences: more than 20,000 people visited the exhibition, while almost 90,000 users were reached through the Instagram, Facebook and YouTube channels of the institutions involved. In doing so, the exhibition was integrated with related activities, which firstly promoted

cultural accessibility and, then, allowed the public to reflect from different perspectives on Italy's controversial colonial past.

The involvement of local diasporic communities – who took part in the exhibition organising committee by interacting with the heritage and pondering both their own culture and the one which collected and resemantised the objects on display – also led to a critical reconsideration of heritage and museum practices. In fact, if, on the one hand, heritage has revealed its 'medium' nature, contributing to bring together different and distant sectors of society, on the other, museum practices have demonstrated their mediative nature. For this reason, the interviews revealed both the enthusiasm on the part of mediators to see something familiar on display, connected to personal life experiences, and the 'frictions' underlying the 'manipulation' of a sensitive and dissonant heritage. Thus, the exhibition was also described as 'a bit too European. An exhibition for you Italians'xi with a title that 'should be changed […]. For me, the adjective "forgotten" doesn't fit here! Because actually many people know that these objects exist. Voices are being raised for a return or cooperation between museums and communities'xii: words (and sometimes even long silences) that echo past tensions between colonies and colonial powers, and that also resound in the current tensions between, for example, Eritrea and Ethiopia, or in the internal conflicts in Sudan. In this sense, the diasporic dimension of both subjects and objects has taken on the appearance of an experience that was only apparently individual since it is, actually, profoundly collective. This was particularly evident in the participants' attention in providing detailed descriptions of traditional practices related to the objects, often reconstructed only by the contributions of the 'extended community', directly or indirectly engaged through historical images and photographs.

Conclusions: towards a reopening?

The MAET's history, retraced by focusing on its resilience strategies and rooting activities in the territory, has highlighted the critical issues that it is progressively facing. The attempt to overcome the approaches and methods of the past, heirs of Marro's first direction, has initiated new practices of contextualisation of heritage – carried out 'along the archival grain' (Stoler, 2009) and through the involvement of 'source communities' (Peers & Brown, 2003) – which are revealing the potential of the Museum and a new history of the artefacts; an unpublished history that provides a new awareness of the cultural value of heritage. This contribution moved from the awareness that is crucial to (re)think museum's spaces – physical and virtual – to facilitate a detailed reflection on the relationship between museums and the public and on the representation of diversified subjectivities and identities.

Ethnographic objects, having returned to the centre of critical reflections and research practices, are no longer 'exotic' documentation of human diversity, but a resource for knowing the 'others' and understanding 'us'. The case studies here presented are significant in order to consider the MAET's attempts to realign itself with contemporary museum discourses and good practices. Both the workshop Around the World in 90 minutes and the project Africa. Voices from forgotten collections demonstrate the great work carried out on collections, recontextualised and deconstructed through decolonial approaches, and made accessible – at the moment – through virtual (the website and social networks) and temporary (exhibitions, events and educational activities) restitutions.

These practices place the museum in the broader debate about the accessibility of museums, which often, while open to the public, face the challenge of enhancing and making accessible extensive or difficult-to-exhibit heritages. Indeed, even though the MAET is technically 'closed', is it actually more closed than other institutions? Given that most museums exhibit only a fraction of the collections they possess, resulting, from the public's perspective, more 'closed' than 'open', the MAET's experience is not that different. This condition has required digital access measures – such as virtual tours and online catalogues – and temporary initiatives – such as exhibitions and outreach programs – to display the 'invisible' heritage. Digital access became more crucial than ever during the Covid-19 pandemic, which forced museums to rapidly adapt to being 'closed' physically while trying to remain 'open' digitally.

The MAET is embracing these challenges by orienting its practices toward more co-participatory and interactive modes that do not, however, neglect the debate between academic discourse, museums and communities. The small-scale strategies it has implemented may constitute attempts to facilitate virtuous processes that allow to get over the inaccessibility of museum spaces. In this way, the heritage has had the opportunity to cross the doors of the repositories and to reach and involve wider audiences by activating processes of confrontation and research centred on the objects and subjects involved.

The MAET's chronicles make visible the possible 'contact zones' within the Museum, but also its historical contradictions and the methodological critical issues that still make it closed. The Museum's heritage is made up of vast and complex corpora that need to be reread, studied and valorised in the perspective of a shared knowledge of cultures. Therefore, the wish is to reopen a museum that is in line with today's museological discourses and capable of educating the public on cultural diversity, not only from a

material viewpoint but also from a historical and social perspective. The MAET of the future is an institution which aspires to become a real 'contact zone' (Clifford, 1997), where cultures can meet up and share memories and traditions, and where knowledge can circulate free, creating exchange and collaboration possibilities.

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"PRESERVING THE PAST OR THE FUTURE? TENSIONS BETWEEN MUSEUMS' TRADITIONAL MANDATE TO PRESERVE AND EXHIBIT CULTURAL HERITAGE, AND THEIR RESPONSIBILITIES TO THE PLANET AND FUTURE GENERATIONS"

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Abstract

This article attempts to examine the acts of civil resistance that unfolded around artworks in museum collections in 2022-2024, with the aim of stimulating a discourse on how museums have been able - and potentially could be - to respond to these actions and the underlying claims they make. It also explores more broadly the tensions eco-activist actions have highlighted between museums' traditional mandate to preserve and exhibit cultural heritage, and their responsibilities to the planet and future generations. This article examines how museums have responded to these actions and the underlying claims they make, while also considering the wider implications of this interaction between environmental activism and cultural institutions. It raises the central question of the responsibilities of museums as cultural institutions in a world facing unprecedented environmental challenges. This article finally provides some perspectives on how these historic institutions strike a balance between preserving the past and actively engaging in the struggle for the future of the planet.

Keywords: Civil Resistance, Eco-Activism, Ecological Transition, Degrowth, Conservation

Since 2022, several dozen instances of civil resistance actions promoting ecological advocacy have occurred across various museums in Europe, as well as in Australia and North America. These eco-activist actions have illuminated the tensions between museums' traditional mandate to preserve and exhibit cultural heritage, and their responsibility towards the planet and future generations. This article aims to interrogate how museums have responded to these actions and the underlying demands they entail, while also delving into the broader implications of this interaction between environmental activism and cultural institutions. It raises the pivotal question of museums' responsibility as cultural entities in a world grappling with unprecedented ecological challenges. How can these historical institutions strike a balance between preserving the past and actively engaging in the fight for the planet's future?

This article will first focus on demonstrating how museums, through their actions and institutional statements published on their website and in the press, contribute to the repression and stigmatization of these acts of civil resistance and the collectives that advocate for them. Subsequently, this article will scrutinize certain alternative propositions that museums, not necessarily directly targeted by these actions, may have implemented, through two case studies: the invitation made to Letzte Generation by the Kunsthalle in Hamburg to conduct readings on climate change and engage a dialogue with the museum and its audience; A Few Degrees More initiative by the Leopold Museum in Vienna, and a collaboration between the Climate Change Center Austria and the museums' curators. Finally, in a third phase, this paper will offer further reflections on how could museums go further in their own ecological transition. We will question their role in educating our eyes towards environmental aesthetics, the environmental impact of their collections, as well as the paradigm of growth that underpins the very principle of collecting and the need to re-examine our cultural relationship to the accumulation of objects.

This reflection aims to initiate a constructive dialogue on the role of museums in addressing the climate crisis and their responsibility as influential institutions within society. In his recent work, 'Museums and Societal Collapse', Robert R. Janes argues that museums can contribute to this transition as 'key resources in starting the conversation around a new story for our species - moving from the myth of continuous economic growth and human exceptionalism to the durability and well-being of communities and the natural world'i. Julie Grieshaber and Martin Müller (UNIL) recently published the results of an international survey conducted through questionnaires with over 200 leading cultural institutions, of which 43% were museums. The survey revealed that for 61% of respondents, sustainability considerations have only been integrated into their deliberations within the last five years. As Martin Müller and Julie Grieshaber write, until now, museums 'have generally enjoyed public goodwill and have avoided scrutiny by pressure groups. A wave of protest actions in 2022-2023-2024, during which activists have staged the defacing of artworks in major museums around the world to draw attention to the lack of divestment from fossil fuels, suggests that this period has ended'ii.

Museum Repression of Eco-Activism

'Art institutions need to become the adults in the room' The first of this wave of acts of civil resistanceiii (in the form of staged acts of vandalism on and around artworks protected by glass) conducted within museums by eco-activist collectives occurred on June 29, 2022, in the United Kingdom, when the artwork My heart's in the Highlands (Horatio McCulloch, 1860) was at the center of an action organized by the Just Stop Oil collective at the Kelvingrove Art Gallery and Museum in

Glasgow, Scotland. Emma Brown, a graduate of the Glasgow School of Art who participated in this action (during which two supporters of Just Stop Oil glued their hands to the frame of the painting while another read a statement), stated: 'I am taking this action because art is about telling the truth and connecting to our deepest emotions. But right now, when we need them most – art institutions are failing us. They seem to think it's enough to put on an exhibition about climate change rather than challenge the government's genocidal plans to allow new oil and gas. This is unacceptable'iv.

Museums have thus been directly addressed, on multiple occasions, by the perpetrators of acts of civil resistance that have taken place within their walls. Another example occurred after the action surrounding the artwork Thomson's Aeolian Harp (William Turner, 1809), on July 1, 2022, at the Manchester Art Gallery. Just Stop Oil, the collective that claimed responsibility for the act, stated that it was calling on artistic institutions to join them in civil resistance against climate change. One of the activists from Just Stop Oil who participated in the action declared: 'No one gets a free pass. By refusing to use its power and influence to help end this madness, the art establishment is complicit in genocide. Directors of art institutions should be calling on the government to stop all new oil and gas projects immediately'v. Simon Bramwell, co-founder of the Extinction Rebellion movement, who participated in organizing actions of the British coalition Just Stop Oil, emphasized that it was time for the art world to rally behind the climate cause, asserting that "art institutions need to become the adults in the room'vi.

Museums' Response: Denunciation and Condemnation

In response, most museums reacted through speeches and actions aimed at condemning these acts of civil resistance. On November 9, 2022, the leaders of 92 museums issued a statement primarily focusing on the potential damage to artworks: activists 'severely underestimate the fragility of these irreplaceable objects, which must be preserved as part of our world cultural heritage', reads the open letter. 'As museum directors entrusted with the care of these works, we have been deeply shaken by their risky endangerment'vii. However, it is noteworthy that a few days later, on November 11, 2022, the International Council of Museums (ICOM) issued a more nuanced statement, asserting to 'acknowledge and share both the concerns expressed by museums regarding the safety of collections and the concerns of climate activists as we face an environmental catastrophe that threatens life on Earth', expressing its wishes 'for museums to be seen as allies in facing the common threat of climate change'viii.

Alongside these collective statements, which exhibit varying degrees of recognition - if not consideration - towards the motivations of eco-activists, museum officials who have been directly targeted by their actions have tended to adopt a stance reaffirming the sanctity of cultural heritage, while simultaneously denouncing the activities of the eco-activists. 'We naturally distance ourselves from actions where art or cultural heritage risks being damaged. Cultural heritage has a great symbolic value and it is unacceptable to attack or destroy it, regardless of the purpose'ix, stated Per Hedström, acting director of the National Museum of Stockholm, after an action took place there concerning the painting The Artist's Garden at Giverny (Claude Monet, 1900), on June 14, 2023. Another example, 'We condemn the protest that took place in the museum. The works have not been damaged but the frames have suffered slight blemishes. […] We reject endangering cultural heritage as a means of protest'x, stated the Prado Museum in a press release following the action that occurred within its walls surrounding the artworks The Nude Maja and The Clothed Maja (Francisco de Goya, 1795-1800 and 1800-1803) on November 5, 2022. This type of statement unilaterally rejects the methods used by these collectives, without questioning their choice to target museums in relation to the cause they advocate. It does not reflect any stance in favor of the relevance of the fight against ecological collapse, nor does it consider the possibility of proposing alternative methods of action in response to this crisis.

The question of the legitimacy of the eco-activists' claims is seldom addressed, and the tone of discourse and statements from museum officials who have been the scene of such actions varies little. In any case, these declarations from museum officials have primarily aimed to denounce and condemn acts of civil resistance; a stance that we have observed materialize in the actions taken by museums in response to the eco-activists' acts of civil resistance, as illustrated by the statements following the action that took place at the Alte Pinakothek in Munich surrounding the painting The Massacre of the Innocents (Peter Paul Rubens, 1638) on August 28, 2022. While Bernhard Maaz, Director General of the State Paintings Collections of Bavaria, stated: 'It is not legitimate to damage unique testimonies to humanity's culture to denounce given climatic problems'xi, the museum's spokesperson asserted: 'We will of course assert our claims under civil law'xii.

Indeed, the museums that have been the stages for these eco-activist actions have overwhelmingly chosen to file complaints against those involved, which, as we shall see, constitutes a notable stance, potentially contextualized through a comparison with the treatment, over recent decades, of museum vandalism. Consequently, it becomes evident that through these verbal and procedural responses, museums actively contribute to the repression of these eco-activist acts and the stigmatization - or even criminalization - of the collectives advocating for them.

Legal Proceedings: Neither Mechanical Nor Insignificant Choices

Choosing to pursue legal action against eco-activists is a decision that the vast majority of museums, which have been the sites of the aforementioned actions, have made. Subsequent to these prosecutions, certain activists have been fined, such as Eilidh McFadden and Tom Johnson, who pied the wax effigy of King Charles at Madame Tussaud's museum in London in October 2022. They were each fined £3,500, with an additional £1,750 in damages. One received a twelve-month conditional discharge, while the other, who had previously received a conviction related to climate activism, was sentenced to a twelve-month community order. Others have been sentenced to prison terms, with or without suspension. For instance, Wouter Mouton and David S., the activists who staged an action on Vermeer's Girl with a Pearl Earring at the Mauritshuis museum in The Hague in October 2022, were each sentenced to one month in prison. Similarly, Emily Brocklebank and Louis McKechnie, who glued their hands to the frame of Vincent Van Gogh's Blossoming Almond Tree at the Courtauld Gallery in London in June 2022, were respectively sentenced to a 21-day suspended prison sentence with a six-week electronic curfew for one, and three weeks of imprisonment for the other. Guido Viero and Ester Goffi, on the other hand, glued their hands to the pedestal of the Laocoon Group (circa 40 BC) at the Vatican Museums in August 2022. They were fined €1,500 each, ordered to pay over €28,000 in damages, and received a nine-month suspended prison sentence.

In order to provide context for these punitive measures, it is instructive to draw parallels between them and the decisions made by museums that have encountered instances of art vandalism (rather than actions directed at works protected by glass or at pedestals, frames, and surrounding walls) within the same geographic areas in recent decades.

An international investigation into art vandalism between 1970 and 2020xiii has gathered data on the repercussions, in terms of legal or psychiatric interventions, of fifty-seven cases of art vandalism occurring in museums. When the consequences of the acts are known, in five cases the vandals were sentenced to a suspended prison term, in nine cases to a period of probation, and in four cases to community service or community work. In ten cases, individuals were sentenced to imprisonment, in five cases to pay a fine and/or to compensate, in nine cases, for damages. In fifteen cases, the vandal was subject to a care order or hospitalization in a psychiatric hospital, and in six cases, to a ban on entering museums or the museum where the act of vandalism occurred. Finally, seventeen cases of vandalism did not result in any legal or psychiatric intervention. It should be noted that in all cases, the acts involved damage to the physical integrity of

artworks, rather than vandalism of exhibition equipment (protective glass, frames, walls, and floors of exhibition halls), as in the case of more recent eco-activist actions.

As an example drawn from this corpus of acts of artwork degradation, not related to an artistic intervention, one can note that the man who, in December 1999, visited the Brooklyn Museum and went behind the protective glass of the artwork The Holy Virgin Mary (Chris Ofili, 1996) to splatter it with white paint, faced only a $250 fine in legal proceedings. The judge disregarded the prosecutor's recommendations for probation, community service, awareness training, and a restraining order prohibiting him from entering the museum where the incident occurred, stating that the attack 'was a crime committed not out of hatred, but out of love for the Virgin Mary'xiv.

Still in the United States, eco-activists who splattered paint not on the artwork itself but on the display case of the sculpture Little Dancer Aged Fourteen (by Edgar Degas, 1879-1881) at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, in April 2023, are currently under investigation by the Federal Bureau of Investigation's Art Crime Team. They face charges of "conspiracy to commit an offense against the United States" and damage to an exhibition or museum property, which carries a maximum penalty of five years in prison and a fine of $250,000. While these cases may not be directly comparable, and other factors are certainly at play, one can undoubtedly discern a form of strictness in the legal treatment accorded to these eco-activists.

Nonetheless, we can already observe a strong inclination among museums to pursue legal action against the eco-activists involved in this wave of actions. When we consider the discourse and actions that have followed the acts of civil resistance occurring in museums since the summer of 2022, we can lament the lack of attempts at dialogue from museums towards eco-activists. Some initiatives in this direction - albeit currently isolated - are nevertheless worth noting - even though the proposals that will be mentioned actually supplement repression and are far from replacing it at the moment.

Curatorial Strategies and Museum Counter-Proposals

Therefore, we propose, as a second step, to examine certain counter-proposals that museums - irrespective of direct implication in these actions - may have implemented. It seems pertinent here to present two examples.

A Few Degrees More, the Response from the Leopold Museum in Vienna

The first case study concerns the Leopold Museum in Vienna. On 15 November 2022, climate activists from the Austrian Letzte Generation group visited the museum, which was offering free admission on that day as part of Saint Leopold's Day, sponsored by the Austrian oil company OMV. The activists covered the protective glass of Gustav Klimt's painting Death and Life with black paint, denouncing the destruction of humanity by fossil fuels. In response, the Secretary of State for Culture, Andrea Mayer, stated that 'attacking artworks is definitely the wrong way to go'xv. The museum's director asserted that the activists' demands were justified, yet cautioned that 'attacking works of art is not an appropriate course of action.'xvi. In response to this action by Letzte Generation, the museum launched the A Few Degrees More initiativexvii, which involved tilting fifteen landscape paintings by a few degrees. The aim of this initiative was to draw the public's attention to the effect of rising temperatures and the fact that the targets set by the Paris Agreements, which limit global warming to +1.5°C, have been exceeded. The initiative's slogan is 'a few degrees more will turn the world into an uncomfortable place'. Each painting is tilted in proportion to the rise in temperature that the landscape represented is likely to experience according to different IPCC scenarios, in conjunction with scientists from the Climate Change Center Austria, a partner in the project.

For example, The Houses by the Sea (Egon Schiele, 1914) is tilted by three degrees and accompanied by the following label: 'An increase of 3°C in the global average temperature would cause sea levels to rise by around 70 cm until 2100. While this might not sound like much, it would lead to a huge loss of inhabitable land mass, causing hundreds of millions of people to literally lose the ground beneath their feet. Schiele's Houses by the Sea – no matter where they might be situated – would be gone'xviii.

Each wall label is accompanied by a series of proposals for measures to be implemented in order to address the situation. A range of issues are addressed, including the impact of rising sea levels, the increase and intensification of climatic events (floods, drought), and rising temperatures on land and in the oceans. The recommendations frequently address individuals, encouraging changes in consumption habits, the use of less carbon-intensive forms of transport, and the implementation of adaptation measures by towns and cities, such as the construction of dykes, the collection of water, and the creation of cooling islands. However, it is often stated that the most effective solution is the rapid reduction of CO2 emissions, yet without ever indicating how this is to be achieved and with a use of the word 'we' that dilutes any form of responsibility. This stance is at odds with the activist actions of the A22 network, which are designed to shock, denounce the guilty and formulate a precise and systemic demand. It is also worth questioning the effects produced by the A Few Degrees More project and the dissonant articulation between alarming factual scientific information (millions of climate refugees), the range of solutions

proposed (building walls) and the very timid aesthetic gesture whose intended discomfort consists of making us tilt our heads by three degrees. We can really wonder about the impact of these proposals in comparison to those put forward by Letzte Generation activists.

The director of the Vienna museum described the initiative as a 'cautious intervention' designed to encourage other museums and galleries to become 'climate ambassadors'xix. The spokeswoman for one of the German museums that participated in the initiative described in the following subsection, however, characterised it as a way of indicating that 'we are all for the same thing' but that 'dialogue is preferable'xx. It is unclear what the real intentions are behind these institutional gestures. While their discourse tends to position those museums as agents of social change, it seems that they try above all to defuse possible actions against their works and thus better protect their collections.

'Without Climate Protection, No Protection of Cultural Assets', The Strategy of the Kunsthalle Hamburg

The second instance pertains to an initiative undertaken by a network of museums in Germany, supported by the German branch of ICOM, which involved inviting activists from Letzte Generation to conduct readings on climate change within their premises. On May 21, 2023, at the Kunsthalle in Hamburg, activists occupied the foyer of the Galerie der Gegenwart for a non-violent civil resistance in the form of a 'permanent reading', as part of an event titled 'Without Climate Protection, No Protection of Cultural Assets'. They shared scientific data on the climate crisis, including a speech by the Secretary-General of the United Nations, António Guterres, on what the future might hold if effective measures were not promptly implemented. Participants also engaged in conversations with museum visitors, who were also encouraged to participate, particularly through readings of essays and statements.

'These are themes that concern us all, and as a museum, we must create a space for them. Today, it is also about showing that climate protection and the protection of cultural assets go hand in hand'xxi, explained Anja Gebauer, who coordinated the initiative at the Kunsthalle in Hamburg. A few weeks earlier, on March 29, 2023, an attempted action was carried out by activists from Letzte Generation concerning the painting Wanderer above the Sea of Fog (Caspar David Friedrich, 1818). The activists had tried to cover the painting with a reproduction reinterpreting the scene, depicting not a sea of fog over the forests of the Saxon Switzerland but smoke and flames - an allusion to the forest fires of the previous year in this region. Their attempt to affix the image to the protective glass of the

painting failed. The activists who carried out the action were brought to justice, but - not without ambivalence - the collective (which had warned the Kunsthalle that it would be the target of one of their actions) was able to express its demands in collaboration with the Kunsthalle shortly thereafter through the museum's invitation to this event.

On the occasion of the International Museum Day 2023, eight German museums collaborated with activists from Letzte Generation to initiate a dialogue on the theme of sustainability: similar events also took place at the Ludwig Museum in Cologne, the Ethnological Museum in Leipzig, the Zeppelin Museum in Friedrichshafen, the Art Gallery in Rostock, the European Hanseatic Museum in Lübeck, and the Museum of Communication in Nuremberg. 'It is a very important step for us to work with museums'xxii, said Irma Trommer, an activist from Letzte Generation (quoted in an article entitled 'German Museums Take a New Tack to Prevent Climate Activists Attacking their Art Inviting Them in', an aptly title that prompts reflection on the real motivations of museums).

Regarding these initiatives (those of the Leopold Museum in Vienna and those of the eight German museums that collaborated with activists from Letzte Generation on the occasion of International Museum Day 2023), one might wonder whether this demonstrates a victory for eco-activists in widening the so-called Overton windowxxiii of acceptability of ideas, or if it represents on the contrary a form of institutional recuperation of this movement. The aforementioned German museums appear to have gone a step further in their reflection by setting up spaces for dialogue and collaboration with eco-activist collectives. Museums, in order to question their positions and practices, could, it seems to us, benefit from the expertise and commitment of actors from civil society: such avenues for exploration certainly merit further investigation. The third and final part of this article offers some elements aimed at contributing to the necessary reflection on practices and the potential evolution of museum institutions.

Greening Museums: Technical or Cultural Issues?

'What is worth more, art or life? […] Are you more concerned about protecting a painting or protecting our planet and our people?' The actions of the A22 network challenge the deeply flawed and ecologically destructive notion that the products of culture are inherently more valuable than the forms of nature that inspire them. In light of the activists' question posed in front of The Sunflowers (Vincent Van Gogh, 1887), we propose in a third stage a reflection on the conservation of works of art in a context where the urgent need is to preserve the conditions in which the Earth can be inhabited.

Questioning Our Value Systems and (Re)learning to See

The actions of these activists demonstrate that the ecological crisis is undermining the modern system of values, which is based on a separation and hierarchisation of nature and culture. In the western world, one has learned to appreciate and care for works of art to a greater extent than we do for our ecosystems.

Actually, this falsely naïve opposition between art and life points to what Baptiste Morizot and Estelle Zhong Mengualxxiv have called a crisis of sensitivity. For these authors, the current ecological crisis is in fact a crisis in our modern apparatus of perception, a reduction in the range of affects, percepts and concepts linking us to living things. This impoverishment is crucially evident in our reflections on the aesthetic appreciation of nature and, ultimately, its preservation. We feel outraged when a (protected) work of art to which we attach a high symbolic and monetary value is damaged, or when a cathedral catches fire, but we have to admit that the collapse of biodiversity does not arouse as much emotion or mobilization. This returns us to Jacques Rancière's concept of the sharing of the sensitive, according to which the range of what enters the space of collective attention is always constructed by a society. In this regard, through their actions, these activists are contributing to a movement that is bringing back issues that had been excluded from everyday political attention. These actions are an invitation to extend our regime of attention and care beyond the museum walls. Consequently, it is not a matter of ceasing to view the works, or even worse, destroying them. Rather, it is a matter of recalling that there is no culture on a dead planet.

The Environmental Impact of Collections

Let us return to our paintings. Resistant to attacks by fluids of all kinds, watertight protective glass is proof of the mastery of conservation conditions for works of art in our museums. This Western science, which was born barely fifty years ago, makes climate control 'one of the key points of conservation', according to the vademecum of preventive conservation from the French Museums Research and Restoration Centrexxv. Consequently, 'museums have become sites for micro-experiments in climate control, the energy cost of which can be quantified by the inventory of the necessary infrastructures: thermo-hygrographs, psychrometers, heating systems and control, humidification systems, air conditioning, etc.'xxvi

As pointed out by the French think tank for the energy transition The Shift Projectxxvii, acquiring and conserving works of art therefore involves flows of energy and people, generates travel, and requires the construction of buildings that must then be maintained in appropriate climatic conditions. Despite their symbolic value, the works conserved have

a tangible material impact. The growing number of carbon footprints produced by museums and exhibitions over the last few months and years has highlighted the material impact of these activities and identified potential avenues for action, both in terms of professional practices and the standards that govern them.

Firstly, action must be taken with regard to transport, acquisitions and loans, as these are the sectors that contribute the most to CO2 emissions. This can be achieved by reducing distances, pooling journeys, using digital transport and decarbonising transport. Measures that have been trialled by the Palais des Beaux-Arts in Lille, for example, during the Goya exhibition in 2022, demonstrate the potential for reducing emissions in these sectors. It is recommended that the packaging of works of art be rationalised, as is being done by the International School of Art Logistics (Eiloa), which has launched a research programme on eco-packaging. Furthermore, it is proposed that conservation standards be made more flexible by introducing wider climatic ranges, as supported by the Bizot group, a group of curators from major international museumsxxviii. Another proposal is to renovate buildings or rethink the use of spaces according to the seasons to reduce energy consumption. This proposal is made by the Palais de Tokyo in its Short Treatise on Institutional Permaculturexxix. These are both ethical and preventive measures designed to ensure that institutions are robust in the face of the risks they run. We have already experienced the health risks, as well as the energy risks, which have, for example, forced some museums to reduce the number of hours they are open to the public, or even to consider moving when the bills are too high and energy renovation is difficult to envisage. However, anticipating climatic risks, such as the increased frequency and intensity of adverse weather events, such as floods, can also have an environmental cost when it leads to the construction of new buildings and the relocation of works to better protect collections. This is exemplified by the Louvre, which transferred part of its collections to Liévin in 2019. A total of 18,500 square metres of storage space has been constructed to accommodate 250,000 works, the majority of which were previously stored in areas prone to flooding.

Nevertheless, the relocation of collections, which contributes to the artificialisation of the land and increases the distances between conservation and exhibition sites, is more often the result of a lack of storage space linked to the constant increase in the size of collections than an anticipation of climatic risks. For example, the collections of the National Center for Visual Arts were relocated to Pantin, and those of the Centre Pompidou to Massy, in the suburbs of Paris. It is also worth considering whether the enrichment and conservation of collections are truly compatible with the challenges of sobriety. Even if we are virtuous in practising all the aforementioned actions, enriching collections on an ongoing basis is one of the permanent missions of museums in France.

Freeing Ourselves from Objects Rather Than Accumulating Them? Material Degrowth and Cultural Change

Many museologists are perplexed by the accumulation of works, the multiplication of reserves, and the impossibility of managing unlimited collections. Furthermore, there is a growing discrepancy between the size of collections and exhibition capacity. For instance, the Centre Pompidou exhibits less than 5% of its collections. In this context, it seems inevitable that we will have to consider the possibility of a shift towards a more minimalist approach to curation, whereby the ultimate form of curatorial activism might be one that fundamentally questions our relationship with objects and eventually stops acquiring and conserving works.

The relationship between humans and objects, and the cultural context in which this relationship is situated, is of great significance. Some cultures may have a much stronger connection with the past than in Western countries, a value placed on transmission rather than innovation, and innovation that does not necessarily involve the conservation of material evidence, and even less so in the museum modexxx. Perhaps the initial step is to move away from the prevailing narrative of modernity, which places a premium on innovation and infinite growth, and which, in its relentless pursuit of power, has ultimately led us to exceed the planetary limits – the very limits that allow us to existxxxi. Consequently, if we consider museums to be players in this cultural transformation, then we need to rethink the modern precepts on which they are based, both in their organisation and in their social function.

Furthermore, as art historian Bénédicte Savoyxxxii elucidates, the accumulation of objects, the production of knowledge, and the fantasy of universal domination are inextricably linked in the West. It is therefore pertinent to inquire whether, given that the preoccupation with accumulation and conservation in our contemporary industrial societies is a reflection of the capitalist ethos, the museum might not be the illusory antidote to a mercantile and extractivist society that is destroying any relationship with the past and any possibility of a future.

It is not a matter of halting all acquisition and conservation, but rather of rethinking them in terms of the uses to which they are put, rather than the heritage itself. In other words, we must consider the necessity of preserving it for present-day communities, and therefore also potentially removing it from storage and integrating it into everyday life. This would, for example, permit the reinvention of low-tech practices by reviving the know-how, objects and vernacular uses of the past. This renewed relationship with conservation and objects would then require a review of the status of collections and their

inalienability, a principle which has existed since the Ancien Régime and applies in particular to the collections of public museums.

In conclusion, as the philosopher Baptiste Morizotxxxiii reminds us, the act of living is to inherit, but more precisely, it is to activate, evade, or favour certain legacies. Consequently, when contemplating renewal and constructing narratives to be inherited by future generations, it is essential to prioritize resolution. This entails collectively determining the manner in which we wish to utilise our legacies, the aspects of our past we wish to preserve, and the manner in which we wish to convey them. In an unprecedented context, where the risk of losing the most vital conservation battle, that of the planet's habitability, is imminent, this resolution is of paramount importance.

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ROOTEDNESS: EXPLORING THE ROLE OF COLLABORATION IN CONTEMPORARY ART IN INDIA.

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Abstract
Collaboration is the key to the creative future of South Asian Art. Artists create a sense of belonging by transforming spaces, through representation, and by helping to nurture healthy, vibrant, and joyful communities where people feel welcome. This paper reviews my teaching experience in Fall 2024 at the Srishti Manipal Institute of Art, Design and Technology, in Bangaluru, South India titled: Collaborative Curating: Multi-Disciplinary Approaches, and its 3 group-curated exhibitions that challenge highly politicised subjects such as caste, free speech, and environmental degradation. These three exhibitions serve as case studies for three curatorial approaches: authoritarian, friendship-based, and antagonistic. All of them were most productive for rootedness and belonging.
Keywords: Indian contemporary art, artistic collaboration, rootedness, curating, graduate art education.

Collaboration is the key to the creative future of South Asian Art. Self-organised collectives of artists, curators, creatives, and activists are the force that will fuel the region's artistic momentum. Artists collaborate to create a sense of belonging by transforming spaces, through representation, and through public projects that positively impact their communities. They want to feel safe and ensure safety for others. In doing so they create togetherness, affiliation, connection, and kinship – the forms of situated knowledges, vital to understanding and becoming-with the realities of their place.

South Asian history is comprised of significant collaborations. Here, agrarian cooperation meant that collective efforts were rewarded with equal distribution of resources and profits were reinvested in the communities. Every harvest was celebrated with craftworks made collectively. For these communities, land was not a resource to exploit, it was the property of their ancestors and gods. It was the centre of life and spirit: its roots. Mahatma Gandhi reflected these values in his positive regard for Socialism. In contemporary India, the values of Marxist communalism are powerfully represented by the Communist government in Kerala State and the stunning success they have had in boasting social well-being compared to other Indian States. Contemporary social and artistic collectives draw on this historical rootedness in land and spirituality by activating resistances, and ecological perspectives in powerful, interpersonal ways. They know a specifically Indigenous mode of

relationality grounded in deep cultural and spiritual interconnectedness. (Hujatnika, 2020.)

Similarly, my desire for collectivity is rooted in history. As a Russian-born, New York City-based curator, my collaborative projects grew out of the utopian strivings of the early Russian avant-garde to build a classless community. I hold a deep respect for their idealistic aspirations. Brooklyn House of Kulture, the arts non-profit I founded in 2010, was inspired by their efforts to deliver culture to the most distant parts of Russia.i BHK was a personal endeavour to work collectively. Under its umbrella, I curated twenty exhibitions in the network of Brooklyn Public Libraries. Although I was the sole curator, my exhibitions engaged librarians, visitors, and many emerging artists. Since that time, I have understood collaboration as a complex effort to nurture an equilibrium of relationships. BHK was my way to put down roots in New York City, at a time when I was still a new immigrant. I was anxious to add my own mark to the vibrant art scene of Brooklyn and to find my community of place-makers and knowledge caretakers. The artists who I exhibited, like me transnational individuals, became my community.

I was given the opportunity to reflect on my personal experiences by teaching collaborative skills as part of my Fulbright-Nehru Senior Research and Teaching Award, in India. With the lessons I learned in the past, I began a five-week class with thirteen senior students, titled Collaborative Curating: Multi-Disciplinary Approaches, at Srishti Manipal Institute of Art, Design and Technology, Bengaluru. All my students were women, from middle-income families and upper caste. They lived close to campus in one of the suburbs of Bengaluru. ii Three curatorial and ten visual arts students conceptualised and unveiled three exhibitions: Art on Trial, Walk This Way, Something is Missing. All three exhibitions took place on campus, intending to establish learning communities, a sense of ownership and belonging. Unexpectedly, exhibitions revealed three methods of collaboration: leadership, friendship-based, and conflict situation.

In Art on Trial student curator, who had prior curatorial experience, adopted a curator-managerial role and exhibited work by two students and five professional artists. all of whom address violations of human rights in India. The exhibition was displayed in vacant office spaces. The curator was able to find sponsorship to pay artists' participation fees - a remarkable accomplishment especially in the context of virtually non-existent funding for the arts, and the short lead time. Her administrative success produced diversity and professional quality in the artwork displayed.

An exhilarating performance by the artist Dimple Shah was the highlight of the exhibition. Shah spread fine-grained turmeric onto a white floor cloth to 'delineate a sacred space and

to nurture faith in the healing environment,' as she explained in her statement.iii She performed ritual dance, while making sounds through the morchang iv creating a link between traditional and contemporary practices. (See Fig.1).

Fig.1. Dimple Shah, Performance documentation. Bangalore: SMI campus. Photo courtesy of the artist.

Highlights of the student contribution included: an embroidered iconic pointed finger of Dr. Ambedkar, which symbolically reinforced the meaning of democracy.v Two banners, blue and orange, together titled: 'What is right of right'. The orange banner carried embroidery. 'I can't display this without being called _____.' In reference to the orange colour that became a symbol of Hindutva reactionary movement (Sengupta, 2023). The blue banner displayed 'Don't conform to the pattern of this world but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.' This was the student's personal motto expressing her desire to give back to her community. The group curator shared with me her challenges of working on campus and the expanded sense of rootedness and belonging.

The exhibition Walk This Way exposed the collapsing eco-system of Bangalore's Lake Gantiganahalli. Students created paper cutouts of the butterflies and birds that still find their way into this remnant of nature that soon would be consumed by the sprawling metropolis. They projected images of the lake landscape onto the classroom walls thus creating an immersive and personal experience in an otherwise bare classroom. They scattered trash around the room to reflect the environmental neglect of the area. This group had initially included a plan to lead a guided walk to the lake, complemented by their narration of the neighbourhood history. Although circumstances prevented this, the exhibition conveyed that the lake is shared refuge for students and neighbours alike.vi (See Fig. 2).

Fig.2 Art On Trial, documentation of student exhibition. Bangalore: SMI campus. Photo Courtesy of Srishti Manipal Institute of Art Design and Technology.

Fig.3 Walk This Way, documentation of the exhibition. Bangalore: SMI campus. Photo Courtesy of SMI.

The students who produced Walk This Way entered the project as friends, which ensured the equality of their collaboration and allowed them to combine their different points of view into a productive force. Students in this group drew inspiration from our discussion of India's much loved, Raqs Media Collective, and their successful collaboration over the past thirty years: 'Disagreeing, when necessary, and agreeing, whenever possible. And by continuing to know that agreements and disagreements did not cancel each other out in a

zero--sum game, but spiralled instead to new levels of connectedness.'(Raqs, 2018). Similarly, but in another geographic context, the Russian curator Victor Misiano described a similar situation when, in 1992, a group of Russian artists befriended a group of Ljubljana artists in the process of producing an exhibition together. Misiano describes the creative tensions that developed by both criticism and creation, confrontation and care, and the friendships that evolved as a result. (Franceschini, 2013: 135) Misiano continued that 'Friendship also becomes the final shelter for culture in the situation of escalating political oppression.' (Franceschini, 2013: 250) vii Perhaps his words will be helpful for artists in India as well. (See Fig. 3).

The fact that Walk This Way took place in the classroom, where we conducted our class discussions and lectures, 'institutionalised' student friendship by providing space within the institution and by making it into the culminating part of their learning process. Offering suggestions for the next cohort, one student wrote 'Demonstrate patience when opposing opinions or ideas arise. Listen carefully!' This exhibition deepened students' roots on campus.

Something is Missing was a great success, especially in the way it reveals the conflict within curatorial collaboration. The exhibition sprawled through either bathrooms, populating them with drawings and photographs inspired by reflections on their identity. The works were sourced by an open call circulated among current Srishti students. (See Fig. 4).

Fig. 4 Something is Missing, documentation of the exhibition. Bangalore: SMI campus. Photo Courtesy of SMI.

Several contextually important facts shaped the idea of the bathroom being a suitable space for an exhibition. As part of the class, we examined the work by Russian artist Ilya Kabakov's work for Documenta 9 in 1992, where he re-created the entire interior of a Soviet communal apartment inside a toilet that he built on site. (Boym, 2023). In the context of India, students were already familiar with the bathroom as a symbol of progress and democracy. Historically, the question of sanitation in India has been a focus of public policies and many NGOs' efforts. The two visionaries of India's future, Mahatma Gandhi and Dr. Ambedkar could only agree on the issue of issue of sanitation. (Akhilsh, 2021). Students were introduced to the South Asian archive of bathroom signs titled unRestroom, mapping change in representations of gender & accessibility to sanitation in the region.viii Today, LGBTQ+ citizens fight for their own spaces by protesting against gendered bathrooms.ix The bathroom remains a gender identity battlefield in India, and was an ideal venue for students' reflections on their identity through art.

Use of the institutional bathrooms was a challenge. Students needed multiple approvals. They contacted janitors with the request to keep the artworks intact for the duration of the exhibition. Although many artworks were taken down almost right away. The art installation was ad-hoc since female students needed to enter male bathrooms surreptitiously to hang the artworks. Many works were hastily attached to the bathroom mirrors, which ensured their visibility, since it was the first thing people saw entered the bathroom. Many left their responses written on the mirrors. Something is Missing created a dialogical space for questioning the gendered nature of Indian society (which bathrooms are the mirrors of). As the Croatian painter, Dure Sedar said, 'The collective work cannot be seen as a form only as an effort,' highlighting the importance of the process rather than its final result, which is in the curatorial field – a well-organised and displayed exhibition.

But the process of Something is Missing was a nightmare for participants. As I found out from the students' reflections after the class, they have been critical of the 'curator' for not providing the expected leadership during the project. They resented the fact that they had to do the curatorial and artistic work themselves. As Raqs Media Collective teaches us 'the making of the collective art practice can never be reduced to the division and allocation of tasks which are distributed because of reasons of their volume and the efficiencies of scale… To be a … curatorial collective is precisely not to paint by numbers.' (Raqs, 2020) Unfortunately, this lesson was not in the minds of the 'bathroomers' during the exhibition process.

The artists in this group were guided by a formula of the curator as project manager, who has special knowledge and skills. However, their 'curator' was inexperienced in this matter, and they failed to create collaboration. Chantal Mouffe reveals the inherent nature of

antagonism within any group. 'Within the context of the political community, the opponent should be considered not as an enemy to be destroyed, but as an adversary whose existence is legitimate and must be tolerated.' (Mouffe, 2020: 69) Claire Bishop stresses that 'antagonism' is essential in democratic society and relationships constituted by art practices. (Bishop, 2021: 234) The antagonism must be embraced and analysed, as we did in the reflection after the conclusion of the semester. However, their conflict affected group relationships. Individually, it was very productive experience. The 'curator' took the lessons of Something is Missing to heart. The alternative and challenging exhibition spaces captured her interest. She is currently curating an exhibition in one of the campus elevators, challenged by the tension that arises between personal and institutionalised spaces. (See Fig 5).

Fig. 5 Something is Missing, documentation of the exhibition.
Bangalore: SMI campus. Photo Courtesy of SMI.

More than in the other exhibitions, Something is Missing became a dialogical space for questioning the discriminatory space of bathrooms, politics of the exhibition display, and the relationships within the group. Through its realisation and display, the exhibition achieved the goal of every curatorial project: it triggered participation and deepened belonging.

Altogether all three exhibitions allowed students to learn about themselves. Through shared experiences of making and reflecting, students created a sense of community between themselves. It made them aware that team-work will be an important skill in their career.

Even in the disagreements between 'curators' and 'artists', their antipathies became a productive force, since it helped students to learn patience and cooperation. Working relationally requires rigorous self-reflection and prompts me to reflect on my practices. This text is my first attempt where I chronicle our negative and positive experiences as intrinsic parts of the learning and rooting community. These experiences will become a part of academic discourse, but also collective professional consciousness. Irit Rogoff said that curation is the production of knowledge. (Rogoff, 2013: 245) x class manifested itself through relationships—among artworks, between students and artworks, between the institution and its spaces and among students themselves. What happened prior and during these encounters, what can we learn from these contacts – all these facts contributed to the output of these curatorial projects. What I understand now is the fact that Collaborative curating is essential for educating professionals who will join and inspire artists collectives, designer teams, and creative alliances.

Conclusions

In the contested reality of post-graduation, students must enter the workplace as team players. Collaboration must be taught. It requires pre-initiation through discussions and reflective surveys. Its finale entails reflection upon the process and thoughtful assessment.

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Notes

i Agit-trains and agit-boats are some the great experiments in public arts after the Revolution that circulated over all Russia spreading Revolution and revolutionary arts.
ii Shrishti is a private art school, with tuition fees 10 times more than a state art college. It is one of the top ten art colleges in India, which attracts students from around the country, although majority of students come from the two mega-cities - New Delhi and Mumbai.
iii https://dimplebshah.blogspot.com/ (Accessed: 11.05.2024).
iv A morchang is a Rajasthani folk music instrument that produces a fixed pitch, rich in overtones.
v Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar was an Indian economist, social reformer and political leader who headed the committee drafting the Constitution of India. Ambedkar advocated for the abolition of caste system and is a venerated hero of Dalit minority.
vi The ecological concerns are the main subjects of artistic production in India. They often serve as a proxy for such issues as caste, freedom of speech and discrimination of minorities. With democracy threatened, artists are reluctant to openly target political issues, and risk their own freedom. Even among the students, I felt the intention of using indirect criticism and avoiding overt political remarks.

vii
viii Available at: https://lekha.cc/institution/unrestroom
ix There are a few of gender-neutral bathrooms built recently in tourists places.

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DEMOCRACY IN PROGRESS

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Abstract Our contemporary world faces multifaceted crises spanning political, socio-cultural, and economic aspects, underlined by events like the COVID pandemic, climate emergencies and geopolitical conflicts. These challenges fuel scepticism towards democracy's efficacy in surmounting obstacles, evident in the rise of far-right movements globally. Amidst this situation, museums can serve as crucial spaces for fostering dialogue and understanding as they not only act as repositories of collective memory but also have the potential to become platforms for re-evaluation and innovation. Furthermore, they provide needed physical spaces in a digital age, which can offer opportunities for communal engagement and knowledge sharing. Futurium in Berlin and Theodor-Heuss-House in Stuttgart exemplify this by providing forums for discussing the principles of democracy and its future. Through interactive exhibits and public events, they facilitate informed discourse and societal reflection. By studying their approaches, we gather insights into fostering democratic engagement, highlighting the pivotal role of museums in nurturing informed citizenship, and shaping the trajectory of democratic societies. **Keywords: discussing the future of democracy, Futurium, Theodor-Heuss- House.**

The crisis of democracy Observing the current state of political, sociocultural, and economic development around the world we can note a palpable and persistent sense of crisis. From the COVID pandemic, the worsening climate crisis and various ongoing war conflicts around the globe to the growing divide between rich and poor, the rise of nationalist political movements and the discrimination against minorities, the constant instability we are presently experiencing often challenges not only our everyday experiences but also our stance on every aspect of life. On the one hand, this constant sense of instability and fear presents a fruitful soil for far-right groups defying the democratic system as clearly visible in the tensions in the eve of the upcoming 2024 US presidential election or the popularity of right-wing political parties such as the Alternative for Germany (AfD) in Europe. Such heightened tendencies and sociocultural transformations lead to a logical scepticism regarding the ability of democracy to overcome such obstacles. In our digitalised and interconnected world this phenomenon is starting to occupy every aspect of our existence

and consumption – from talk shows and articles to the booming market for nonfiction books on the core, threats, and future of democracy with titles such as How democracies die (2019) and Tyranny of the minority (2023) by Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt or Rebooting democracy: A citizen's guide to reinventing politics (2014) by Manuel Arriaga. Herein lies the ray of light in the current situation – while constant instability foments a sense of fear, which can potentially have detrimental results for the development of democratic societies, it also forces us to question the status quo and gives us the opportunity to build stronger democratic communities, motivating individuals to work towards such a future.

The role of museums As history has proven, the best antidote to fear and uncertainty is knowledge. Museums as custodians of societal collective memory have the potential not only to safeguard knowledge and experiences made but to also create a space to re-evaluate current concepts and generate new ideas. In this regard Audunson et al. (2020) fittingly describe the present situation as 'a seeming paradox':

> 'in spite of massive digitalization of our everyday lives, libraries, archives, and museums are heavily used as physical spaces and meeting places. The role of LAM-institutions as physical spaces seems to be increasing.' (Audunson et al., 2020, p. 1).

Thus Audunson et al. (2020) study the role of libraries, archives and museums as physical meeting places and knowledge repositories for society in a digital age acknowledging the importance and continuing popularity of such institutions in present society. Further studies on the transformation of museums in the digital age and the implementation of new technologies in exhibiting and communicating with visitor audiences support the observation that this is the path towards creating social institutions, 'developing social spaces for innovation, (…) building a shared authority on cultural heritage, involving the user as an active participant in co-production of cultural heritage knowledge' (Romanelli, 2021, p. 79). The presently transforming profile of museums from mere knowledge repositories to social meeting places (Gau, Sachs and Sieber, 2024) offering accessible discussion platforms not only secures their relevance within a digital world but also allows them to become a realm for education and social action (Hein, 2005) or 'an incubator for sustainable social development and environmental protection' (Gustafsson and Ijla, 2016, p. 446).

Evidently, it is in our power as scholars, curators, planners, and members of the public to implement the tools of the digital era in order to transform museum structures into

collaborative and open spaces for social action offering insights and creating strategies for our future as democratic societies. While this is an aspect addressed by professional bodies such as the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and the International Council for Museums (ICOM) in their proposed Guide for Local Governments, Communities and Museums (2019), the paths towards such development can be very different. Therefore, the current paper offers two examples from the German museum practice as case studies, giving us insights into the implemented strategies, their success in aiding social dialogue and ideas for aspects, which can be used in other museum projects around the world.

Futurium and Theodor-Heuss-House – two approaches to the same topic

Germany can be viewed as an important indicator for the ongoing transformation in Europe and the clear rise of far-right movements and nationalist rhetoric. Observers fittingly describe the current situation as a 'rude political awakening' for 'there's no greater sign of Germany's shrinking political center than the rise – and growing extremism – of the AfD' (Angelos, 2024). Most recently, fuelled by a report on a secret meeting of right-wing extremists including politicians from the AfD to discuss a plan to deport foreigners and '" non-assimilated" German citizens' (Bensmann et al., 2024), large groups of concerned citizens viewing the party as a grave danger to democratic society have participated in massive demonstrations.

Within this political climate of division and uncertainty the need for public platforms addressing the principles of democracy is becoming profoundly clear. Moreover, the act of protest against right-wing movements such as the AfD we have experienced in the past months indicates the importance and demand for physical spaces, in which people can gather, experience community and open and rational conversation while gathering inspiration for collective action.

Futurium in Berlin and Theodor-Heuss-House in Stuttgart are two museums, which strive to offer society exactly this – a physical public space combining knowledge on the principles of democracy serving as an open platform for conversation and exchange on the future of democratic societies. Both museums aim to educate on and discuss our role in a democratic society but take a different approach to the topic. While Futurium aims to offer an outlook into our future by presenting our current situation and possible development in the aspects of urbanity, nutrition, health, mobility, energy, work, and democratic policy, the permanent exhibition of Theodor-Heuss-House under the motto 'Democracy as a way of life' choses a historical approach, focussing on the life and work of Theodor Heuss, the

first Federal President of the Federal Republic of Germany after WW2 and Elly Heuss-Knapp, a politician, social reformer and author.

Futurium (2019), Berlin

Futurium, which was unveiled in 2019, is designed as a participative experience with the aim to tackle the question of how we want to live in the future and offers not only insights on ongoing technological and scientific development but furthermore a public forum for discussion and inspiration (Leinfelder, 2014). Funded by the Federal Ministry of Education and Research, a number of research organisations and industrial partners, the museum incorporates different spaces of exchange. The latter range from the continually updated permanent exhibition, changing exhibitions on various future issues, the integrated future lab, inviting visitors to join in through an interactive workshop and experiment space, to the future forum, which offers a platform for debates and conversations on the development of our society (BMBF, no date).

The participative concept of Futurium is greatly supported by the spatial design of the museum and its visitor policy. The building is located in the heart of the city, close to the main train station and the government district and offers free access to all visitors. It is exactly this heightened visibility and open access policy that allow Futurium to become a meeting place for Berliners and guests of the city alike, relating to all age and social groups, giving them the opportunity to learn, explore, discuss, and co-create the development of our democratic society. The low-energy building in itself serves as a home to innovative technology and invites the public to explore it in all its details. The visitors are led through the interactive future lab and exhibition levels to the Skywalk on the roof top, where they can experience the development of the surrounding Berlin skyline, the solar panel system supporting the electricity generation for the museum as well as its solar thermal system (2).

The topic of democracy has a central place in the programme and exhibition at Futurium as it is not only an underlying aspect within the different thinking spaces of the permanent exhibition but is also directly addressed by installations within the future lab (Figure 1). The installation 'Smile to Vote', for example, is a voting booth simulating AI reading the face of the visitor in order to garner their political convictions while 'Citizen Quest' presents an interactive game, in which players improve democratic decision-making in a virtual city while exploring different future scenarios (Figure 2). Simultaneously, the event programme within the future forum complements the conversation on the topic by introducing participatory experiences and event series such as 'Dating Democracy', allowing us to get

to know this form of government better and discuss how we can collaborate on creating

Figure 1. David von Becker (no date). Exhibition focus on democracy and the current obstacles it faces. Photo courtesy of Futurium / David von Becker.

Figure 2. David von Becker (no date). Futurium Lab on digital democracy. Photo courtesy of Futurium / David von Becker.

concepts for a better future (Futurium gGmbH, no date).

Theodor-Heuss-House (2002/2023), Stuttgart

'Theodor-Heuss-House' has become the designation for the last home occupied by the first Federal President Theodor Heuss (1884-1963) in Feuerbacher Weg 46 in Stuttgart. After it was attained by the Foundation Federal President Theodor-Heuss-House in 1995 the building was transformed into a museum and a venue for cultural events based on the design of architecture firm Behnish & Partner in 2002 and later renovated, extended, and reinvented with a new permanent exhibition in 2023. While the museum grants its visitors access to the living quarters of the first Federal President and educates on his role as part of the government of the republic, the motto of the new permanent exhibition 'Democracy as a way of life' reveals its central aim to educate on the foundations of democracy as a political form and a lifestyle. In order to do so the exhibition presents the historical development since the late 19th century through the lens of the personal accounts of Theodor Heuss and his wife Elly Heuss-Knapp, who both played active roles in translating their democratic beliefs into actions, experiencing the painfully undemocratic political system of Nazi Germany and later helping rebuild a democratic German society in the post-war period (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Franziska Kraufmann (no date). Lenticular installation depicting a portrait of Theodor Heuss and Elly Heuss-Knapp. Photo courtesy of Theodor-Heuss-Haus / Franziska Kraufmann.

Furthermore, the museum offers a wide range of workshops, public events, guided tours, and knowledge transfer events for school children as well as the general public. Consequently, the permanent exhibition presents the visitor with an interactive experience targeting all age groups through audio-visual materials, historical objects, as well as

physical games (Figure 4). The tour through Theodor-Heuss-House is completed with the openly accessible garden and seating steps connecting the interior of the exhibition space with the green exterior of the courtyard, inviting the visitors to linger, reflect and discuss the content of the exposition with others. The latter is one of the central aims of the museum as the foundation states the following:

> 'Theodor-Heuss-Haus does not provide ready-made answers to the questions of our time. Rather, it sees itself as a place of historical and political discourse, education, and reflection, in short: as a house of open society.' (Stiftung Bundespräsident Theodor-Heuss-Haus, no date) (3)

Figure 4. Franziska Kraufmann (no date). A view inside the exhibition. Photo courtesy of Theodor-Heuss-Haus / Franziska Kraufmann.

Possible experience transfer

Despite their different orientation on a historical level, both Futurium and Theodor-Heuss-House have the potential to serve as discussion platforms on our future as a democratic society. Studying their concepts especially in addressing and involving their visitors and communicating the topics at hand not only through the medial and interior design but also through the architecture of both museums allows us to gain insights we can transfer to other projects of the same calibre. The varied scale of the two projects allows us to experience the similarities and differences in their consequent strategies. While Theodor- Heuss-House does not have the spatial resources or funding of Futurium needed to offer free access or create large-scale changing exhibitions, its success as a public discussion platform on the past and future of democracy underlines the central role of event series,

accessible guided tours, and knowledge transfer opportunities in establishing a needed physical space for learning and social discourse.

Notes

1 Dr.-Ing. Radoslava Guirguinova is an architect, researcher and lecturer based in Stuttgart, Germany. Currently working as an architect and project manager at the State Building Department Baden- Württemberg, Dr.-Ing. Guirguinova can look back on fruitful working experience in different aspects of the architecture and urban planning practice as well as in the academic field as a researcher and lecturer at the University of Stuttgart and the Stuttgart University of Applied Sciences. Following her dissertation at the Institute for Architecture History at the University of Stuttgart her research focusses on the architecture and urban planning history of European cities, the role of cultural exchange in urban development, as well as the state of the current planning practice and the accompanying transformation of professional education in the field of architecture and urban planning. 2 For further insights on the building of Futurium and its exhibition concept the author suggests referring to experience Berlin (2023a, 2023b). 3 Original text: 'Das Theodor-Heuss-Haus liefert keine fertigen Antworten auf die Fragen unserer Zeit. Es versteht sich vielmehr als Ort des historisch-politischen Diskurses, der Bildung und der Reflexion, kurz: als ein Haus der offenen Gesellschaft.' in (Stiftung Bundespräsident Theodor-Heuss-Haus, no date), translated by the author.

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DIGITAL UPRISING FOR LOCAL COMMUNITIES: THE CASE OF THE CATPC WHITE CUBE IN LUSANGA

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Abstract
In 2017 the CATPC (Cercle d'Art des Travailleurs de Plantation Congolaise) founded the White Cube: an art museum built on reclaimed land, intended to "restore agency, capital, and visibility to plantation communities. From there, CATPC presents a program that not merely offers the public a beautiful spectacle, but it ensures that the utmost positive impact is made – both material (economic) and immaterial (historical memory)" (CATPC website). Since then, the league has been engaged in numerous activist curatorial projects, using analogue and digital means to create a personal artistic and territorial narrative. One project stands out: a series of NFTs, created in collaboration with Dutch artist Renzo Martens, disrupting museum ownership and restitution practices. These artworks, created from images of an original wooden statue symbolizing a local uprising against belgian tax collectors, carved in the early thirties, represent a concrete way of reconnecting with the league's heritage, history and future.
Starting from this project, the paper researches the impact of digital technologies in strengthening territorial museological projects, discussing how the communitarian grounds of physical museum spaces can be empowered through digital infrastructures. Operating at the intersection between material evidence and virtual accessibility, digital cultural projects can often respond to identitarian meaning making needs, which cannot be met by analogue solutions. Opening the landscape of collective cultural production to a new version of rootedness, through the designs of marginalized and peripheral communities. Across the paper, questions of museum epistemological dominance and decolonial educational paradigms will be addressed, attempting to highlight the crucial characters of these new museological forms, emerging in the cultural field.
Keywords: CATPC, Collective Memory, Digital Heritage, NFTs, White Cube.

This article analyzes digital activist projects that operate as community builders with reference to heritage restitution and accessibility. Beginning from the case of the Cercle d'Art des Travailleurs de Plantation Congolaise (CATPC) White Cube in Lusanga, a museum space created to address the local need to restore both heritage and land after decades of colonial occupation, the research investigates the relationship between the technological specificities of virtual digital artworks and their functioning as means to repatriate heritage

and engage local communities in the construction of new knowledge, meaning and belonging. Moving across conceptual positions and empirical research, the analysis establishes that digital artistic intervention can powerfully intervene within historically static contexts and dynamics, setting in motion restitution progress by creating new original artworks which empower participation, debate and creativity. In order to do so, the first section deals with the connection between access to heritage and identity building, addressing the important role that institutions can play in restoring the relationship between art, community and healing and presenting the case of the CATPC. In the second section, the cases and story of the Balot statue and Balot NFTs are discussed, explaining the importance that the use of NFT technology can play with reference to activist agency and empowerment. In the final section, other case studies which manifest how technologies can ignite community engagement in heritage projects are discussed. Ultimately, the article concludes that, in a world where community building is more and more a priority within the museum sector, examples from marginal and activist spaces, with reference to the use of digital technologies, can provide useful insight on how participation and belonging can be ignited.

The CATPC in Lusanga and the community binding role of heritage

Community building represents, today, a central theme for museum practices. As spaces which have historically been answering a desire for continuity between what was and what will be, museums face the ongoing need to engage their publics, ensuring that their programming builds a forceful relationship between people, heritage, spaces and values. As museologist Krzysztof Pomian has widely argued (1984), museums have historically exercised the function of preserving, collecting and exhibiting those objects which are deemed to represent the invisible values that a community cherishes as identifiers. The availability of these material connections, and the possibility to experience them, is a fundamental prerogative of communities' relationship with their past, through which they can build their presents and futures.

Whilst this might seem almost a given in many parts of the world, there are numerous cultural spaces where the premises for nurturing and sharing one's own cultural identity are not given, nor simple. This is the case of the White Cube, a cultural space designed pro bono by star architect Rem Koolhaas's firm OMA, built in Lusanga, formerly Leverville, a colonial town created by William Lever in the early twentieth century. This area housed a palm oil plantation, from which the capitalist multinational Unilever extracted resources for a century, until the land was fully exhausted, then sold. Lusanga is a village located a day trip away from Kinshasa, the capital of the Democratic Republic of Congo, and it is here that the CATPC, founder of the White Cube, operates.

The logic of the group is framed within what they call the Post-Plantation philosophy:

With the income from their art, CATPC re-appropriates this once confiscated land, and develops a new form, the Post Plantation: community-owned, inclusive, multi-species food gardens and forests. Bringing back biodiversity, restoring food security and mitigating climate change, through the regeneration of forests: these are the keys to decolonizing the plantations'(CATPC website).

The ultimate aim of the collective is to buy back 2.000 hectares of land – they have now reached 5% of their goal – and to restore it using agroforestry techniques and building ecological test gardens, in order to mitigate climate change and provide local food security (KOW Berlin website).

The connection between the exploitation of natural resources and the financing and construction of white cube museums (O'Doherty, 1976) across Europe is a direct one, the organization says: these institutions have been benefiting for centuries from forced labor and extractive practices, creating collections and wealth by looting occupied territories. In a controversial logic where military punitive missions became the occasion for the acquisition of cultural heritage, often seeing museums collecting policies and objectives influencing military strategies, and transforming heritage into capital and distribution (Sarr, Savoy, 2018: 7)(3): a system of appropriation and alienation of which museums have become inevitable archives (Eyssette, 2023).

While critiques of colonial heritage spoilage find their ideological foundations in the early nineteenth century, when the German jurist and philosopher Karl Heinrich Heydenreich first denounced heritage looting as a 'crime against humanity', deconstructing the rhetoric of the conqueror being entitled to deprive its victims of their spiritual nourishment (1798: 293), the route towards a widespread acknowledgment of the colonial atrocities concerning the plundering of heritage has been a long and difficult one. The confiscation of art objects and artifacts, which has been accompanying imperialistic endeavors since antiquity, has long remained disguised within the framework of intellectual, aesthetic and economic appropriation that for centuries has legitimized its stance (Stoler, 2008). A position which has not been fully eradicated in the 21st century, with exhibition practices and politics of display which still aim to 'memorialize the "positive" and the "civilizing" role of […] colonial enterprises'(Straus, 2008: 598-99); as Sally Price effectively denounced in her critique of the Museé du quai Branly (2007).

Nevertheless, there are a number of artistic organizations which are actively working towards the construction of cultural programmes in areas which have been deprived of

their heritage, addressing a colonial past while nurturing local identities. The work of the CATPC, within and outside of the White Cube, operates in this direction, at the intersection between artistic, activist, political and sacred dimensions, understanding:

> artworks as cathartic vessels that absorb the pain and evil of colonialism's ongoing disaster while also acting as objects of hope and repair. CATPC defines art as a living force borne of a sacred Earth and art making as a sacred endeavor. This endeavor is central to the community's attempts to recuperate the knowledge of its ancestral lands and its desire to forge more regenerative relationships between art, culture, economy, and ecology (CATPC website).

As this extract clearly states, the activity of the center engages operatively with the construction of a shared connection with one's land, history, identity: a necessary process given the absence of historical cultural identifiers, looted during the colonial invasion (Sthan, 2023). Heritage, as mentioned, proves essential to the construction of a shared memory within communities, offering the opportunity to 'socially externalize memory, entrusting it to a material support which can then be accessed and shared'(Pinotti, 2023: 54). The consequences of colonial plundering are not only of creating an unjust distribution of access to knowledge and heritage, which become reserved 'to the inheritors of an asymmetrical history, to the benefactors of an excess of privilege and mobility'(Sarr, Savoy, 2018: 4). More importantly, they consist in depriving communities of the possibility to freely entertain a personal and identitarian relationship to one's origins (2).

The binding relationship between past, present and future, materialized through cultural heritage and actualized by the possibility to explore it, understand it, and build new artistic products within the awareness of one's historical past, is a tangible and concrete one. And it directly links to the community building possibilities that surround cultural institutions and museums, which heavily rely on their collections to create identitarian narratives which can strengthen social bonds (Pomian, 2020). Or, as in the case here addressed, need to create new artworks to relate to, in order to restore their artistic past and future. From this perspective, collections can be seen as more than historical resources, understood as technologies that allow one to operate in perspective, creating something new (Thomas, 1991). The CATPC, and the White Cube, work within this complex dynamic, addressing their colonial past, the continuous exploitation that Northern countries exercise on the global south and the need to produce and make it accessible to the local community.

Balot and Balot NFT, a digital undertaking

While being involved in the production of contemporary artworks, the CATPC has also been committed to finding and retrieving missing heritage, attempting to recuperate original artworks which could contribute to heal and nurture the relationship with their local artistic and political past. This is the case of the wooden sculpture Balot, a carved wood ancestral power-figure made after the Pende revolt of 1931 by a Kwilu Pende artist (3) and initially intended as a power object to harness Belgian Colonial Officer Maximilian Balot's angry spirit, who had been killed during the revolt.

The rebellion occurred during the time Congo was a Belgian colony (between 1885 and 1960), and the statue itself was used as a force for protection against the plantation regime (Mondriaan Fund website), operating within a semantic field of independence, rebellion, violence and spirituality. The original purpose of the statue, as described, marks a strong difference with the Western signifiers customly attributed to artworks: it is an object with a cultural agency (Gell, 1998) heavily rooted in its country of origin and in a historical and spiritual instance. Evidently, the story of the sculpture and its purpose serve to highlight how ill equipped and ill purposed Western museums can be in the exhibition policies of non Western artifacts, decontextualized within a white cube aesthetic when their destiny was meant to be completely different (Wood, 2012)(4).

Today, the sculpture is located in Richmond, Virginia, at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts (VMFA), who have owned it since 2015, where the CATPC representatives Cedart Tamasala and Matthieu Kasiama found it after a long and complicated journey, documented in the six-part documentary Plantations and Museums (2022) created in partnership with Dutch artist Renzo Martens. In the documentary Tamasala and Kasiama interview key experts on the Balot sculpture and postcolonial discourse, such as Ariella Aïsha Azoulay (Brown University) and Simon Gikandi (Princeton University), through conversations which unravel the hidden relations between plantations in the south (from where profits were extracted to build museums) and the museums in the north (where art from the plantations is held and academic scholarship is funded). They discover that Herbert Weiss, archaeologist and professor at the City University of New York, was the one who sold the statue to the museum, who himself bought it originally in 1972 from an impoverished local. When at the VMFA, Tamasala and Kasima asked museum management to repatriate the artwork to the White Cube, having the means to transport, exhibit and preserve it. As their request was denied, they then asked if they could host it temporarily, to which the museum agreed. For two years, however, the museum kept postponing the shipment, without engaging in any formal agreement, despite having loaned the artwork to other Western institutions.

Moved by the need to address this situation, and to take control of the narrative and the experience surrounding the artwork, CATPC members, together with Dutch artist Renzo

Martens, decided to mint, distribute and exhibit an edition of 300 individual Non Fungible Tokens (NFT) of the statue, treated as tangible individual artworks in terms of copyrights. As Martens stated:

> With the Balot NFT, the Congolese Plantation Workers Art League uses blockchain technology to claim back what is theirs: not just art, but land. The sculpture will later be atomized in a limited number of original NFTs for sale. Buyers get a digital rendering of the sculpture, based on photographic reproduction from the VMFA's website. Every purchase helps to ultimately unleash the powers of the sculpture and make it work for the community: sales directly buy back land, replant the forest and reintroduce biodiversity, resulting in offsetting carbon emissions and providing autonomy and food security for plantation workers in one of the most impoverished areas of the world (Renzo Martens website).

Within this experience, the characterizing elements of the CATPC cultural project clearly emerge: an organization which collectively designs artworks that directly relate to heritage, and its absence, with a clear connection to environmental and territorial needs. Interestingly enough, this becomes possible thanks to the use of a digital medium which allows the creation of new original artworks, directly related to the expropriated one. Opening a new scenario, where NFTs establish the technological domain which enables digital restitution.

While NFTs are being used by museums for other scopes, such as creating digital replicas of their collections for research and educational purposes (Bolton, 2021; Jung, 2022), or as a revenue stream (Valeonti et al, 2021; Zhao, 2023), this case distinguishes itself from customary applications. Here the technology is used by an artistic movement which directly counters museological authority, questioning the Western curatorial canon by constructing new narratives around physical objects. NFTs, instead of being tools instrumentally used by museums to foster their strategic policies, become agents of change and disruption.

The case of the CATPC seems therefore to highlight a new operational field, where digital technologies can function as counter forcers in the institutional scenario, empowering communities at the margins to regain voice and agency. Tamasala said their blockchain appropriation of the object has allowed them to 'bypass the problem and finally have the sculpture and create our world' (Brown, 2022). This empowering employment of digital technologies, which can prove functional in solving complex cultural and ownership issues (Whitaker et al., 2020), is extremely relevant when contextualized within a wider scenario where digital technologies can also be used without the same positive process and

outcomes. It is important, when discussing these issues, to be wary that the universal understanding of 'technology as a democratization tool is problematic given that internet access is not universal, and that the digitisation of museum collections often neglects important cultural applications and meanings' (Feld, 2023: 2). As it can be the case, digital projects that advocate greater accessibility lack the procedural care and efficacy which could have wide and long lasting impacts. Moreover, as in the case of looted heritage, claims of 'digital restitution' from cultural institutions can also be disguising the lack of intention to restitute the 'physical heritage', operating more as a temporary palliative solution than an active qualitative attempt. The CATPC project, however, seems to suggest a new perspective from which to analyze digitization programmes: one that finds its answer in the agency and initiative of the artistic community involved, and also in the technological specificity of this particular experience. NFTs, by offering the possibility of creating new original artworks which are however strongly dependent and linked to the original physical work – thanks to the photographic images of which the file is made – create a unique ontological object (Chalmers, 2017). A digital entity whose virtual nature directly addresses the statute of plundered heritage: artifacts that were but are no longer, whose meaning has been obliterated and whose absence is more pressing then their presence. The Balot NFT, by claiming its agency into the cultural market and artistic scene, remarking the absence of the wooden original statue, and engaging a new community of people around its creation and fruition, suggests a new way of using digital technology within heritage community building and restitution debates. As Feld argues, 'minting an NFT (a unique, one-of-a-kind digital item), or other types of digital representations of important cultural artifacts, afford impacted communities' options to explore alternative forms of ownership when a museum denies requests for access' (2023: 1).

Virtual ontologies and community building in digital practices

The unique attributes identified in the previous example seem to be referable, in principle, to a variety of digital technologies. Which, thanks to their generative power of presencing images and entities, directly tackle the painful scenario they are employed in. By producing images that are too real (Baudrillard, 2004) and which risk to prevail on the reality they refer to (Virilio, 1988), these technologies seem to offer an innovative opportunity to bring back a degree of agency within the heritage debate. Especially for new generations of artists and cultural practitioners who want to address the longing towards their heritage, they offer a creative opportunity to fill a historical void. This moreover, marks a drastic shift compared to the usual terms in which the debate on virtuality has been customarily framed, focused on how these technologies appear to artificially endanger our experience of reality (Baudrillard, 2004) displacing our perception in environments which are defined by new spatial and temporal coordinates (Virilio, 1995).

Both in terms of community engagement, artistic agency and digital repatriation, digital technologies seem to, possibly, offer unique opportunities.

Another example, related to the British Museum in London, might inform this position further. In March 2023 three people – the two founders of Looty, London based digital art collective, and Egyptologist Monica Hanna – entered the museum. Without breaking any law, yet wearing plastic face masks to disguise their appearance, they scanned with two iPads and an action camera the famous Rosetta Stone, basalt icon and key to decipher ancient Egyptian. When questioned by the museum security guards, drawn to the scene by the masks and the suspicious filming, the three activists defended the legality of their actions, then left (5). As documented in the film Loot by Jasmin Sarwoko (2023), this museological heist had a clear goal: obtain sufficient scanned images to create, using cutting-edge LiDAR technology, a perfect digital replica of the artwork. The 3D image was then placed, using a geolocation based augmented reality platform, inside Fort Qaitbay, the site along Egypt's northern coast where the stone was originally found, before French forces traded it to the English and Ottoman troops by signing the 1801 Capitulation of Alexandria. The aim of this operation, the collective states, was to digitally repatriate a cultural artifact that had been unjustly plundered. Most importantly, to take control of the narrative surrounding expropriated heritage, actively producing knowledge about one's own past.

Also in this case, the use of digital technology serves a double scope. Firstly, it allows activists to operate with the heritage that is missing, producing a virtual replica of the stolen artifact, a new digital object that confronts the situation they are experiencing; an artwork which is clearly identifiable, while recording its physical counterpart. Secondly, thanks to the Return Rashid project, the Egyptian community has the chance to create a personal connection with their heritage, visiting the place where the Rosetta Stone was originally found and having the possibility to materialize it through the use of personal smartphones. It is a form of restitution which intervenes in an international dispute between governments by centering citizens' experiences, valuing their right to engage with their own story. In this case, as in the Balot case, the original communities of these artworks struggle to find funding and visas to travel to the countries where their heritage is being held and exhibited, making the digital copy a concrete solution. As addressed at the beginning of this work, accessibility to one's own historical heritage becomes a fundamental need to communities' cultural lives, one cherished and nurtured by museological institutions worldwide yet often taken away from many.

A third case study, also related to the accessibility of heritage, can offer further elements of analysis. It is the case of the Pedestal Project by the United States of America's largest

online racial justice organization, Color of Change (6), who decided to repurpose empty pedestals around the country where confederate statues once stood with images of activists, visualized with Augmented Reality. As the project claims:

> Contentious statues have been torn down all across America, leaving behind empty pedestals in their wake. It's time to place new symbols in their stead. The Pedestal Project is born of the vision to repurpose these ill-conceived pedestals by using technology to help people choose the statues that should go upon them. Statues of people who have dedicated their lives to fighting for justice and equality (Campaign website).

The images made available for the experience portray three activists who have fought for racial justice: Alicia Garza, Chelsea Miller and the late Rep. John Lewis. Their images have been sculptured and textured to resemble bronze statues, in continuity with the formal tradition of characters placed on pedestals, yet also rupturing with the history they are protesting. Every visitor crossing one of these sites, by scanning a QR code, gets the possibility to see, up on the pedestal, a hero which represents very different values from the ones celebrated by the original confederate statues, such as democracy, justice, equality.

Again, as in the cases addressed before, there is a direct connection between the use of technology and the possibility to collectively engage communities into building their own version of history and culture. Giving people the active possibility to choose new idols to cherish as a community, which can be a powerful step towards creating identification and belonging. Whilst in this case there isn't a direct link with a specific museum, as the action occurs in the public space, the same virtuous link between collective agency, heritage and technology upholds.

As these three case studies show, digital activist projects that employ modern technologies to problematize historicised Western narratives can prove very effective in building community consensus and engagement around heritage. As Fiona Cameron advocated already in 2007, these projects prove the possibility to go beyond the cult of the replicant, which is often found in digitization projects, finding in the structural characteristics of digital media – both in terms of wider diffusion and accessibility and in terms of the virtual ontology of these technologies – a powerful mean to redirect the discussion and the experience of art.

As the three cases highlight, there can be very important differences in the ways in which projects can be designed and conducted. Which can depend on the context where they

are being presented into – more or less institutional – or on the technologies used – that can function in different ways – but, most of all, on the creative integrity moving the artistic intervention (Bishop, 2020). What seems however common is the shared potential of digital technologies to highlight the absence of heritage while also creating a counter-narrative, which fights institutional domains and creates community and engagement.

Ultimately, these case studies seem to offer interesting insight for community building prospects, carrying lessons that from outside the museum sector can be of great value for museum professionals. They show how digital technologies can be employed to not only build true community engagement and participation, but most importantly do so through critical stances, which become visible and accessible as they are coded within the material fabric of the media employed. As such, these technologies open a whole new scenario for community building, where creativity and activism can be channeled through powerful devices and strategies, with a unique accessibility potential and the strength to create new narratives and belonging.

Addendum: the Dutch Pavilion at the Venice Biennale 2024

While at the time of the NFT production and release the VMFA was not strongly cooperative with the Balot loan, and even protested the illicit use of the statue's images which were taken from the museum website to create the NFT, this position drastically changed between 2023 and 2024. In April 2024, in fact, the CATPC exhibits at the Dutch Pavilion of the 60th Venice Biennale, while the original statue is loaned to the White Cube where it is showcased for the whole time of the Italian exhibition. Meanwhile, a live stream connects the two locations, showing to the European visitors in Venice the inside of the White Cube in Lusanga, and actively 'pairing a white cube in a plantation with one at the summit of the art world' (7). It appears that the American museum management has changed their minds, and no longer believes that 'unfortunately, the NFT has broken all trust between VMFA and the exhibition organizers' indulging in an unprofessional and unacceptable behavior by taking the images from the website without permission (9). While their statue is being temporarily repatriated, the Congolese collective is using the Venice space, which they identify as an 'unhealthy privilege' as a stage to protest the injustice their ancestors have suffered and which they themselves continue to endure (13).

While the Balot NFT appears to be a great accomplishment in itself, a successful project which had concrete consequences impacting social, cultural and economic aspects of the CATPC community, this last passage of the story is also important. It testifies to the more

global and political dynamics that can be activated by digital repatriation projects, proving that activist actions can actually generate change.

Numbered Footnotes

(1) Sarr and Savoy, in their volume The Restitution of African Heritage. Toward a New Relational Ethics, also elaborate on how certain disciplines, such as Anthropology and Ethnology, started positioning their scientific value in colonial undertakings, contributing to legitimize spoilages within the framework of academic knowledge. (2) As Historian Enibokun Uzebu-Imarhiagbe from the University of Benin states in the film Loot by Jasmin Sarwoko, with reference to the case of the Benin Bronzes, artworks that have been looted from the Benin Kingdom starting from the British invasion of 1897, the inacessibility of heritage has also practical consequences in the artisanal and artistic scene. Still today, in Benin there is a strong and wide tradition of casting, creating artifacts not only with bronze but ivory, wood, and many other materials. For casters, not being available to see and appreciate the history of their practice in their ancestors' work is a great deprivation. The film is accessible in the Youtube video A digital Heist Recaptures the Rosetta Stone, retrievable at the link https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9tkAb9rzH7E&t=3s accessed april 3rd.
(3) The Pende peoples are ethnic groups indigenous to the Democratic Republic of Congo.
(4) As Sarr and Savoy write in their 2018 reportage: 'In a number of African societies, statues also perish. They have a certain lifespan and are caught within a regenerative economic cycle founded on a fluid materiality and ontological identity. Certain masks are buried for several years and then reproduced so as to then renew the energetic influxes that grant them an operative power. Within a rather particular modality of the articulation of the relations between the spirit, matter, and the living, they are the depositories of flows and energetic fields that turn them into animated objects and into active forces, thus mediating between the different orders of reality. These objects are also the bearers of a reserve of the imagination as well as the material manifestation of forms of knowledge [saviors]' (p. 34).
(5) A detailed account of the event can be found on the collective's website at the following link https:// www.looty.art/works/rashid accessed april 16th 2024.
(6) Information regarding Color of Change can be found on the project's website, accessible at the link https://colorofchange.org/ accessed april 17th 2024.
(7) This extract is taken from the Pavilion explanatory panels inside the Biennale.

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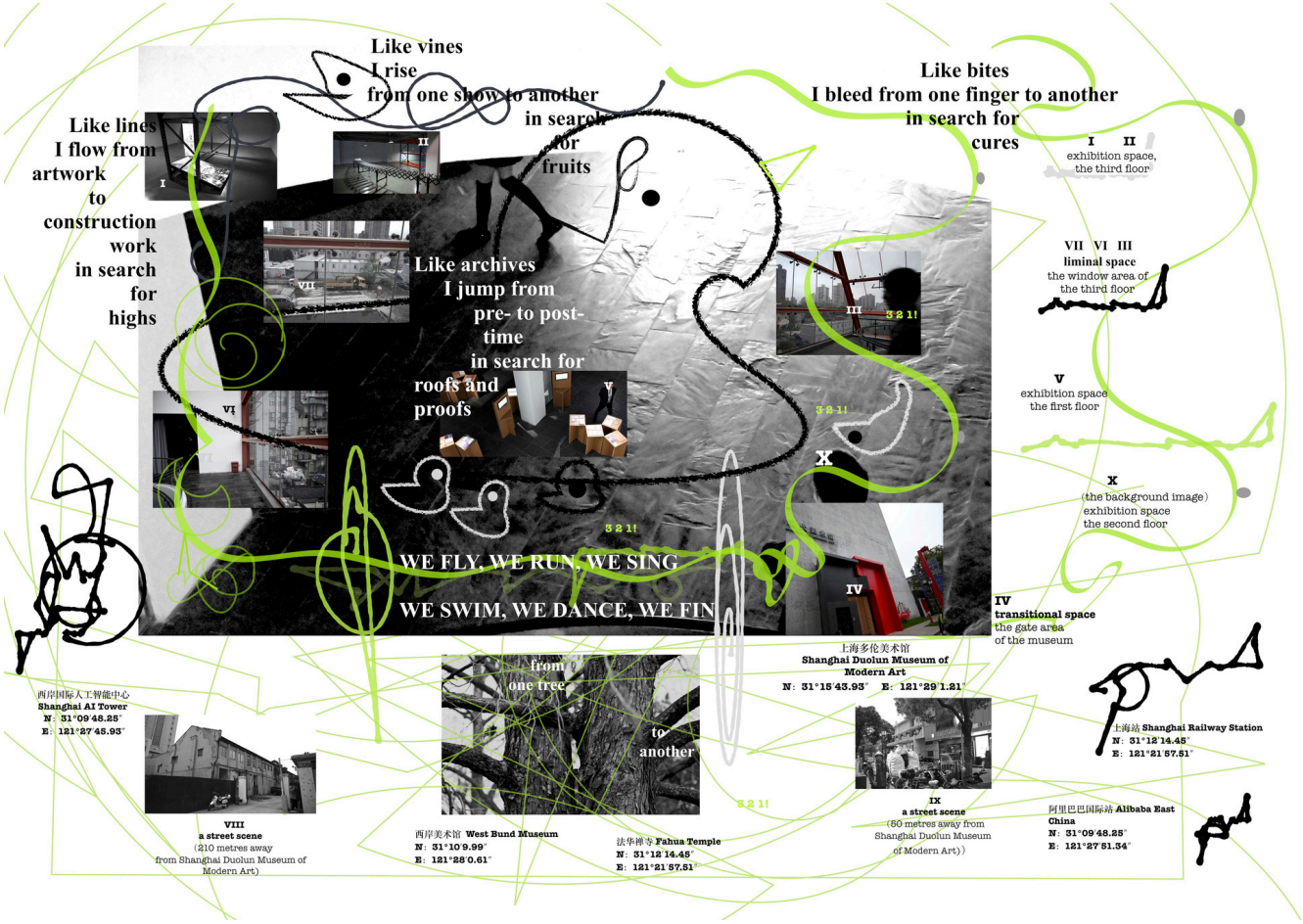
UNCOMPLETED SYMPHONY: IN SEARCH FOR 3 2 1!

Helle Lee Xuanzhuan
Writer, Artist, Researcher



With the juxtaposition of images, texts, poetry and line drawing, in this work, the senses of floating unease and stranded unsettlement that many artists and art institutions experience in cities of the developing world are expressed through the use of calligraphy-like line drawing. Circled by the directionless, squiggly lines, the photos that were taken aim to document the indoor spaces of the art museum, the in-between spaces of museum and urban area, and its surroundings.

Since the 1980s, the reform was in full swing in China and constructing infrastructures and commercial facilities have played a central role in China's urban transition. Art museums, although with the distinctive missions in exhibiting and safekeeping the collective memory and the human experience, they exist with diverse misconceptions. As non-commercial venues, in many Chinese cities, their roles are like secret stowaways without assured identity, or like wanderers who are always in search for meanings and positions.

In the ongoing and everlasting place-making process, art museums in Shanghai coexist with the most complex urban structures, marked by unequal socioeconomic distribution and living conditions. In **Uncompleted Symphony: In Search For 3 2 1 !**, I have assembled six photos that were taken in the Shanghai Duolun Museum of Modern Art, four photos of its surroundings, and a symbolic photo of tree. Shanghai Duolun Museum of Modern Art is Shanghai's first state-owned museum dedicated solely to contemporary art. The museum is almost enclosed by construction sites and commercial shopping streets. In this work, **"3 2 1 !"** symbolise two types of in-between spaces: liminal space between museums and the outside world; transitional space when entering museums; and "1!" is the code number of "my existence", of individual who exists and interacts with the museum space when visiting. These in-between spaces have the privilege to watch spectacles of two worlds, and listen to two types of stunning and uncompleted symphony, from the great symphony generated by exhibitions, artworks, artists and visitors; and the great symphony performed by construction sites, street entertainments and rule makers.

"3 2 1 !" is also the call and motto of the duck-like bird β and her companions. The smaller βs like to write poems on trees. Whether they are in front piles of archives, or alien artworks, whether they are enclosed by construction sites, or stopped by security guards, β and her companions are constantly in search for roofs, proofs, cures, fruits and highs. The motto reflects my subjective, unsettled, in-between state of mind after I returned to my native land with an art degree from the University of Leeds. As an interdisciplinary writer and a nomadic creator, like β and βs, I sometimes write at riverside, sometimes in parks, or at randomly picked cafes, from a temporary canoe to another, and from a search to another. **Uncompleted Symphony: In Search For 3 2 1 !** depicts the entanglements of my inner space and the pervasive spectacles of various types of urban spaces. The work tries to raise the question on the stowaways-like, complicated roles of artists and art museums in the contemporary world.