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The Preserves of Colonialism: The World in the Museum

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Since the 1990s critical reflection of ethnographic/anthropological representations in text, image and collection has been an important constituent of art that is oriented on postcolonial and institutional critique. Artists such as Trinh T. Minh-ha, Renée Green and others exemplify the meaning of themes and practices of this nature in the art of the late 20th century. The works of Viennese artist Lisl Ponger follow the project of a critical dismantling of those determination that form the Western subject in relation to his perceptions, imaginings or fantasies of the Other. The work of the Nigerian artist Olu Oguibe entitled "Ethnographia"—made between 1997–1999—places typical forms of historical Western writing about African people and societies in contrast with present-day images of real people against a background of an ethnographer's 'office', hallmarked by utensils such as spectacles and a pipe, in which images/texts about the other are being produced.

Two interventions that I believe to be amongst the best that contemporary art has to contribute on the subject of the

representation of history in museums come from the Afro-American artist Fred Wilson. As with most of the above-mentioned artists Wilson is also interested in the critical connection of handed-down, institutional forms of presentation with the political realities they usually allow to be forgotten. In the 1990 New York Bronx exhibition Wilson realised "Rooms with a View: The Struggle Between Cultural Content and the Context of Art". One of the rooms in this project has been described by Fred Wilson thus:

> . . .in one part, *The Colonial Collection,* I wrapped French and British flags around African masks. These were all trade pieces, but when you put something under that beautiful lighting it looks, whatever the word means, "authentic". I had this vitrine made which looks something like a turn-of-the-century vitrine in which I placed *Harper's* lithographs from the turn-of-the-century punitive expeditions between the Zulus and the British and the Ashanti and the British. I wrapped the masks because they are sort of hostages to the museum. If they had been in the museum since the turn of the century—and many of the collections do date from this time—they were taken out during these wars. (...) There are a lot of questions surrounding this—should they go back, shouldn't they go back—but I like to bring history to the museum, because I feel that the aesthetic anesthetizes the historic and keeps this imperial view within the museum and continues the dislocation of what these objects are about.[1]

Referring to a part of his intervention from 1992, "Mining the Museum", in the Maryland Historical Society in Baltimore, probably his most famous work, Wilson writes:

> There is a lot of silver in this museum. I created one vitrine of repoussé silver with the label, "Metalwork 1793–1880". But also made of metal, hidden deep in the storage rooms at the historical society, were slave shackles. So I placed them together because normally you have one museum for beautiful things and one museum for horrific things. Actually, they had a lot to do with one another; the production of one was made possible by the subjection enforced by the other. [2]

A remarkable comment by native American artist Jimmie Durham comes from the same period, the year 1991:

> Recently I was on a panel with three other American Indians discussing the return of the collection to the respective communities. A man asked what we would do, for example, with the thousands of pairs of beaded moccasins. We had no real answer. What *could* one do with thousands of beaded moccasins? The Smithsonian is, perversely, a perfect place for them.[3]

In the meantime a number of institutions are attempting to bring a degree of transparency into the historically imperialistic collecting mania on which the ethnological museum rests. For example, in the entry hall of the Musée du quai Branly in Paris a huge, glass-fronted cylinder has been erected that is intended to give visitors insight into the repositories of an institution of this kind. Thousands of flutes, thousands of bows, thousands of spears can be perused en masse. However the Musée du quai Branly is also an example of the pro forma character of a kind of self-reflection that also invites contemporary artists to give the museum a critical coat of paint by means of their interventions. Perhaps they are really taken seriously by the curatorial personnel but, generally speaking

—as in the case of the Parisian example—they are overwhelmed by the spectacular staging in the museum.

When Fred Wilson talks of the necessity of allowing history to move into the museum the agenda stands in the same relationship to a critique of the chronopolitics of anthropology and the ethnological museum as that which has also been formulated by critical anthropology: "The ethnographic present is the practice of giving accounts of other cultures and societies in the present tense", writes Johannes Fabian in his book "Time and The Other: How Anthropology makes its Objects" [4] published in 1983. For Fabian the relationship of anthropology to its subject matter has always been organized in significant correlations of oppositions such as Here–There and Now–Then. He understands these as techniques of creating distance between the subject and the object of ethnographic praxis which, in turn, he considers to be founded in the superordinate distance produced by colonialism between the West and the rest. Alongside the once dominant "evolutionist time" that situates other cultures at earlier stages on a universal time axis whose summit was embodied in the culture of the anthropologist, Fabian designates an "encapsulated time" that he connects up with functionalist and structuralist approaches in ethnography. Both of them, though in differing ways, can be characterised by a "denial of coevalness": "By that I mean a persistent and systematic tendency to place the referent(s) of anthropology in a Time other than the present of the producer of anthropological discourse."[5] This "present tense", declares Fabian, "freezes a society at the time of observation; at worst, it contains assumptions about the repetitiveness, predictability and conservativism of primitives." [6]

In the 1980s, when Fabian's book appeared, the so-called "writing culture" debate was developing. In the foreword to a book of the

same name which documents a 1984 conference, James Clifford talks of a “crisis in anthropology”.[7] The subtitle of the anthology “The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography” indicates the two main sides from which ethnographic praxis can be placed in a critical light: the representation of other cultures becomes, on the one hand, a question of the style or genre. How large a share does invention, fiction, have in ethnographic writing? How clearly can scientific and literary styles of writing be differentiated? How objective or, as the case may be, constructed are the depictions of cultures? Clifford Geertz published the relevant book about this in 1988, “Works and Lives. The Anthropologist as Author”. In it he enunciates clearly the typical narrative patterns in ethnographic reports and the authors’ structures of desire manifested therein.[8] The second side, the “politics of ethnography”, links the scientific authority of the ethnographer with the structures of colonial dominance within whose framework (and on the basis of which) it could develop in the first place.

In “Time and the Other” Johannes Fabian throws up the question of a postcolonial reconfiguration of the relationships of power or discourse and time: “It takes imagination and courage to picture what would happen to the West (and to anthropology) if its temporal fortress were suddenly invaded by the Time of the Other.” [9]

In a book with the title “Anthropology and the Colonial Encounter” that was published by Talal Asad in 1973, this fortress seemed to have suffered severe damage. “The plausibility of the anthropological enterprise which seemed so self-evident to all its practitioners a mere decade ago, is now no longer quite so self-evident”,[10] wrote Asad. He is talking about the “fundamental changes since the Second World War”, that made clear, to at least a part of the discipline, that they not only recorded the world but

that, within the respective worlds in which they were active, they determined the way in which it was seen. Asad emphasizes the processes of decolonization in the 1950s and 1960s and the emergence of indigenous, nationalistic historiographies which are bound up with it and often turned accusingly against colonial involvement in anthropology. “Anthropology and the Colonial Encounter” also names a number of concrete events such as the exposure of CIA-financed ethnographic research in the context of the Vietnam War, from where it became imperative to cast a critical backward gaze onto the instrumentalisation of “applied anthropology” with its aim of “indirect rule” in the colonies. In addition, in 1967 the field notes of Bronislaw Malinowski, the founder of modern ethnography with its field work techniques and participant observations, were published posthumously. They spoke of the researcher’s fears, aggression and deep-seated racism, the objectivity of the father of British functionalism was placed in a new light.[11]

Asad’s book is of particular interest because it does not regard colonial involvement in anthropology as a moral and political problem alone but equally an issue of epistemological theory. Generally speaking anthropology had refused to take into account the preconditions of power politics which underlay its knowledge production and thus it described societies in a form as if they were outside the colonial order.

Johannes Fabian showed how the various ethnographers described the cultures they investigated as being from the past or in the process of disappearing. This also applied to the objects that were collected. Ethnographic objects represent a past, a dying culture. It serves to construct “a past in which people in Africa have to be situated in order that scientific schemata and imperialism continue to make sense”.[12]

Lothar Baumgarten's works from the late Sixties are amongst the first systematic artistic reflections on ethnographic and museum praxis. In 1968—alongside a whole series of simultaneous works such as "Feather People (The Americans)", "Ethnography, Self and Other" or "Amazonas Kosmos (Grünkohl)" that are concerned with the self in the productions of Otherness—Baumgarten began a two-year photographic analysis of display systems in ethnographic museums. Baumgarten was still studying under Joseph Beuys in Düsseldorf when he began with these works. As is well-known Beuys had adapted the shamans' prophetic and therapeutic role for his social and rationality-critical art. It is, so to speak, out of this blind spot of Beuysian late primitivism that Baumgarten begins his ideology-critical cartography of travel in the historical and political context of discourses and practices of the description, collection and conquest of foreign cultures. Here a distinct shift from the modernist desire for difference towards a critical archaeology of forms of representing the Other is discernible.

The slide projection, "Unsettled Objects" (1968/69), which resulted from this gives insight into the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford, an anthropological museum from the late 19th century which has remained largely unchanged. The 80 slides of display cases, vitrines and individual objects from the collection have words superimposed on them that denote the activities and effects of museum praxis: displayed, imagined, classified, protected, consumed, mythologized, analyzed, claimed, transformed, photographed, framed, fetishised etc. The museum was donated to the University of Oxford in 1884 by Lt.-General Pitt-Rivers to preserve his private collection and make it accessible to the public. In its categorisation and presentational criteria the museum followed its founder's evolutionist ideas: "Ordinary and typical specimens, rather than rare objects, have been selected and

arranged in sequence, so as to trace, as far as practicable, the succession of ideas by which the minds of men in a primitive condition of culture have progressed from the simple to the complex, and from the homogeneous to the heterogeneous."[13]

Even if, in the midst of its tightly-packed and crammed-full display cabinets, it is difficult to grasp the fact, it is a typological and evolutionist programme in the museum that dominates the historical and cultural profile of this institution and differentiates it from an ethnic and geographic model of organisation: "We have carried on his [Pitt Rivers'] comparative method by showing, in sequence with cases illustrating the tools of early prehistoric peoples in Europe, Asia, and Africa, a series showing the tools of peoples who were in their Stone Age at the time of their discovery by Europeans."[14] Here is a manifestation of the above-mentioned "denial of coevalness". A brochure from the Pitt-Rivers Museum underlines the unbroken relevance of the 'saviour' paradigm: "So-called 'primitive' societies are everywhere under threat and the museum is acting as a curator for the world in striving to preserve and record that which may vanish totally."[15]

As Lothar Baumgarten later ascertained, the museum, modernised only marginally, can be understood as "Preserve of Colonialism"[16] in a double sense. "Unsettled Objects" reveals the imperialist addictions of appropriation and accumulation of the unknown, the demand for control over the Other by means of organisation and classification. The view of over-filled vitrines containing "similar" objects where the similarity is sometimes of function and sometimes of motif and then again defined through form, testifies to an interest in collecting that is not concerned with social structures but with demonstrating of a global overview. The objects exhibited do not have their place and function in a corresponding relationship to other objects within a specific society

but in relation to other items that are, at times, culturally and geographically far apart and with which they are supposed to cooperate in solving questions relating to "humanity" as a whole. These questions are formulated from the standpoint of an industrialised, Western modernity while it is exactly that that drops below the horizon of museum interest: "The Museum takes the world for its province, and for its period, from the earliest times to the present day, excluding the results of mass production."[17] If the museum tells—more by atmosphere than by reasoned argument—of the "diversity of species" of the Other, Baumgarten's slide installation views the anthropological museum as a manifestation of a regional formation of thought and knowledge that is situated in the historical context of colonialism. This is the case, above all, with those pictures concerned with the packaging, numeration, labelling and decorative ordering of the collected objects which point to scientific, conservational and aesthetic aspirations. One of the most beautiful and instructive shots is that in which there is a piece of technical equipment intended to avoid disturbing reflections of the viewer in the display case glass. It indicates the systematic fading out of the ordering authority, the subject of the representation, from the institutional practices of representation.

While viewing the serial presentation of slides in Baumgarten's projection the possibility of concentrating, lingering in front of individual objects, fades. The work communicates a feeling of disorientation because of the accumulation of objects being presented and provokes in the viewer a tendency towards wanting to assume control, the wish to order the fleetingly viewed exotic material within a referential framework. One of this work's specific qualities lies in the viewer's at least partial identification with the museum's endeavour of imposing order because the critical distance

to the institution is once again undermined by an exoticism that is in sympathy with it.

Before I make another leap in art history I would like to mention a significant parallel between Baumgarten's enumeration of practices that the items collected are subjected to in the museum context and a literary description of a society under colonial subjection. In the novel "Ambiguous Adventure", published in 1962, Cheikh Hamidou Kane discussed the fate of West African peoples who either resisted the colonist in armed conflict or reacted more passively "Those who had shown fight and those who had surrendered, those who had come to terms and those who had been obstinate – they all found themselves, when the day came, checked by census, divided up, classified, labelled, conscripted, administrated."[18]

In the 1920s Hannah Höch created a series of photo-montages that can rightly be regarded as institutional critique avant la lettre. The 18 to 20 works in the series by the Berlin Dadaist were made between 1924 and 1934. The majority of these small format works are individually titled, the whole work group carries the title "From an ethnographic museum". Even the name of the series is remarkable and points to a fundamental deviation from the contemporary norms of artistic positions in regard to other cultures and their artefacts. Höch's title makes it unmistakably clear that the motifs which surface in the photo-montages are to be attributed to a Western institutional context and do not claim to tell of a cultural elsewhere as in the works of other artists. Before one has even been able to take a closer look at the individual works, the title of the work group has already provided the framework for their perusal. Everything in these images that gives the appearance of being exotic, primitive or foreign, belongs to the

discursive order of the museum or to ethnography as a scientific practice.

It seems likely that in the early 20th century, in the immediate surroundings of Dadaism—especially its political variant to be found in Berlin Dada—conditions came into being that were conducive to the development of "institutional critique" from an artistic perspective. Along with the critical confrontation with the capitalist, nationalist and patriarchal structures of the Weimar Republic, it is, above all, the media awareness of Dadaist art that must be taken into account. If the fundamental problem of primitivist and exoticist art of early modernity may be described as an inability to differentiate between representation and reality, the Dadaists chose as the material for their art the reality of language and images especially those of the mass media. Dadaist methods deconstruct the idiom and rhetoric of the worlds of public language and image and montage these fragments into the idiom of their critique. In the Dadaists' photo montages and collages photography is regarded less a depiction of reality and more a constituent of modern, mass-media reality. Seen from this position pictures were always framed, contextualised fragments of a discursive practice. The Dadaist sensitivity to representation in the media is, furthermore, linked to a critical and ironic reflection of the social status of art and the role of the artist. This combination of media awareness and self-reflection prevented a similarly idealistic, not infrequently unworldly, imagining of the cultural Other as evinced by the primitivist mainstream of early modernity. Two other factors would appear to be worthy of note with regard to the perspective—exceptional for the time—that Hannah Höch used in making her ethnographic pictures and objects. On the one hand Höch, as the only woman in a male-dominated Dada group, found herself in a marginal position and her entire artistic oeuvre is

criss-crossed by reflections on the role of women in a highly technologised and mediatised society. On the other hand between 1916 and 1926 Höch worked for the Ullstein publishing company which published the most popular magazines in Germany at the time. Most of the images used in Höch's pictures come from these illustrated magazines ("Illustriert Zeitung", "Uhu", "Querschnitt") to which she had direct access and in which not only the new image of women was being negotiated—between social emancipation and a new form of commodification—but in which there was also abundant ethnographic and exoticist material. Apart from a few exceptions, for the works-on-paper series "Aus einem ethnographischen Museum" Hannah Höch fitted together cut out motifs and fragments thereof from both of these pictorial worlds, women and ethno images, into hybrid figures. Even if the artist had indicated that museum visits served as a stimulus for this work, the series does not refer to a single museum but reflects generally on the sites and techniques of the construction of Otherness. The compressed readings of institution and media as instances of meaning production in relation to gender differences and cultural distinctions belong to the significant characteristics of this series. The combination of pictorial fragments of white women's bodies with pictorial fragments of non-European sculptures invites mutual examination and is fundamentally different to the usual absence of signifiers of white Europeans in the art of primitivism. For the status of the sculptures this results in their perception qua objects within a Western institutional reference system by being exposed to visual curiosity, as are their companions, the white women's bodies.

Apart from the title of the series, where can clear indications of a reflection on museums be seen? Firstly, there is the simple formal means that point to a museum presentation. Höch often

positioned her figurations on pedestals cut out of coloured paper. They stand before a neutral background, in empty spaces which is, in turn, in many cases, contained in window-like frames. In a more limited sense these frames can be read as a reference to vitrines or display cabinets but also, in a figurative sense, as a reference to the practices of meaning production. That the frame for Höch also serves as a symbol of desire can be seen in a comparison with a picture from 1925, "Der Traum seines Lebens". It shows a provocatively staged bride in various poses that are enclosed and fragmented by a whole series of frames. Here the frame is to be unmistakeably understood as a metaphor for the forced integration of the person represented into the fantasy of a subject, in this case male. In the series "Aus einem ethnographischen Museum" pedestals and frames can thus be read as markers of a process of translation which the ethnographic object is subjected to when it is transferred from its context of origin into a Western museum. Besides these means it is, above all, the technique of montage itself which estranges fragments of the sculptures and forces those fragments into new constellations, a parallel to the practice of ethnographic collecting which tears the objects out of the contest of their use and meaning and inserts them into an order that is foreign to them. Furthermore it is remarkable how frequently Hannah Höch balances non-European sculptural torsos on fragile-seeming female legs that are, in turn, taken from dance or sports pictures and thus also publicly staged events. Finally, the institutionalised desire for otherness which ethnographic objects are subject to are emphasised by the sexualised (parts of) women's bodies with which the sculptures coalesce into grotesque constructions of foreignness. Even if it is difficult today to reconstruct Höch's critical intentions her perspective on the media-determined and institutional conditions of the construction of Otherness stands out clearly from contemporaneous artistic

attitudes which imagine the “primitive” as a projective space for escaping civilisation. If Höch’s works from the 1920s represent the first beginnings of a critical artistic perspective on the ethnographic museum and Lothar Baumgarten’s works from the late 1960s can be counted amongst the first explicit institutional criticisms, one should nevertheless not forget a whole series of other positions that developed, not coincidentally, during the phase of decolonization: the ethnographic surrealism of “Document”, some of Jean Rouch’s films or the reflections on the connection between deadly colonialism and the symbolic death of African art in Western Museums that Chris Marker and Alain Resnais undertake in their brilliant 1953 film “Les Statues meurent aussi”.

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[1] Fred Wilson, Constructing the Spectacle of Culture in Museums, in: Christian Kravagna (ed.), The Museum as Arena. Artists on Institutional Critique, Cologne 2001, p. 98

[2] Ibid, p. 101.

[3] Jimmie Durham, Über das Sammeln, in: Das Museum als Arena, op.cit., p. 94.

[4] Johannes Fabian, Time and the Other: How Anthropology makes its Objects, New York 1983, p. 80.

[5] Fabian, Time and The Other, op. cit., p. 31.

[6] Ibid, p. 81.

[7] James Clifford, George E. Marcus (eds.), Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography, Berkeley. 1986, p. 3.

[8] Clifford Geertz, Works and Lives. The Anthropologist as Author, Stanford 1988

[9] Fabian, Time and the Other, op. cit., p. 35.

[10] Talal Asad (ed.), Anthropology and the Colonial Encounter, Amherst, New York 1973, p. 10.

[11] Here one should not overlook remarkable contradictions. The same Malinowski who in this context became a factor in the crisis of the science was also a supporter of indigenous ethnographies in that, for example. he was Jomo Kenyatta's—later the first president of Kenya—dissertation supervisor ("Facing Mount Kenya. The Tribal Life of the Gikuyu", 1938). When it was published Malinowski also wrote the foreword.

[12] Johannes Fabian, Curios and Curiosity: Notes on reading Torday and Frobenius, in: Enid Schildkrout, Curtis A. Keim (eds.), The Scramble for Art in Central Africa, Cambridge 1998, p. 101.

[13] General Pitt Rivers 1874 in speech at the Anthropological Institute in the South Kensington Museum, quoted in: Beatrice Blackwood, The Origin and Development of the Pitt Rivers Museum, Oxford 1991, p. 2.

[14] Ibid., p. 3.

[15] Ibid, p. 19.

[16] Lothar Baumgarten, untitled statement, in: Kunst-Welten im Dialog: Von Gauguin zur globalen Gegenwart, Ausstellungskatalog Museum Ludwig Köln 1999, p. 372.

[17] Blackwood, The Origin and Development of the Pitt Rivers Museum, op. cit., p. 19.

[18] Cheikh Hamidou Kane, Ambiguous Adventure, London 1972, p. 49.