As colonialists are toppled and beheaded in the Black Lives Matter movement, the history they protest looms long and large. I am reminded of artists who have tackled the telling of colonial history, such as, for example, Lisl Ponger in her intervention, *The Master Narrative und Don Durito* (2017), commissioned by Vienna’s Weltmuseum for when it reopened in 2017. The exhibition consisted of a group of works that Ponger has been working on since 2000, in which staged photographs are created using actors and the props of exoticised locals. Flanking these was a two-channel audio/video installation in which the artist narrates ten chapters of ethnographic history. It remains a mystery as to how she managed to both curtain her work as architecturally separate from the anthropology display and to face the central courtyard frontally with an installation that questions the very premise of the anthropology
smuseum and its un-self-reflexive mode of othering. Her chapters are in themselves roomy as a museum, a museum that does not supplement the architecture but supplants it with an alternative mode. It is a deadly critique, posed with her humorous light touch, and brilliant for the way it delivers more stories even than the whole ethnographic material accumulation in Vienna. *The Master Narrative und Don Durito’s* great feat is to distil the seemingly endless chaos of the world as it was collected during colonial exploitation, now gathered together in yet another new display that still does not manage a coherent self-reflection of European collecting mania.

To subvert the master narrative of the universal museum, the script takes a format comparable to Walter Benjamin’s Arcades Project, a vast assemblage of cited fragments. Ponger draws upon a variety of perspectives from different times and disciplines. There are primary sources of fellow artists and ethnographic and historical accounts, both retrospective and from the scant archive of those few critical witnesses. The images that accompany these are first day covers of postage stamps, which trace the peripatetic exploration and colonisation around the globe. The stamp is about as mobile and ephemeral as a historical object can be and exemplifies Ponger’s parody of authentic artefacts of anthropology. The artist has also assembled a metamuseum of ethnography, entitled the *Mukul* (Museum for Foreign and Familiar Cultures). This collection includes a speculatively fabulated salvage ethnography of *The Vanishing Middle Class*, and was shown at the Secession in Vienna in 2014.¹

The Durito video is a next stage, in which an ethnographic museum without walls replaces silent spectator objects with the vitality of a storyteller in her own remix of citations. Ponger’s two-channel video – on one screen of which is the English translation of the spoken German text – could be seen as a commentary, a subtext or subtitle to the drama of the ethnographic museum as it is staged on Heldenplatz without ever being activated in the ways *The Master Narrative und Don Durito* does. Don Durito himself was a conversational sparring partner for Subcomandante Marcos of the Zapatistas. This dialectical relationship is carried over to the artist and the ethnographic museum, who in the video are in a dialogue that calls the latter’s very existence into question. This parallels the way neoliberalism is deconstructed by Don Durito in Subcommandante Marcos’s book *Conversations with Durito: Stories of the Zapatistas and Neoliberalism*. Ponger quotes from this book in her video – in the Lacandon jungle, Don Durito, a well-dressed, pipe-smoking beetle and tiny knight errant, holds a conversation with Subcommandante Marcos, his shield bearer; Marcos recalls Durito saying:

‘… you start from the idea that “neoliberalism” is a doctrine. And by “you”, I am referring to those who insist on frameworks that are rigid and square like your head. You

¹ Lisl Ponger’s *The Vanishing Middle Class and Wild Places* were at the Secession, Vienna in 2014; on speculative fabulation, see Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*, Duke University Press, Durham, North Carolina, 2016
think that “neoliberalism” is the capitalist doctrine to confront the economic crisis that capitalism itself attributes to “populism”. Right?”

Durito doesn’t let me answer.

‘Of course right! Well, it turns out that “neoliberalism” is not a theory to confront or explain the crisis. It is the crisis itself made theory and economic doctrine! That is, “neoliberalism” hasn’t the least coherence; it has no plans or historic perspective. In the end, pure theoretical shit.’

‘How strange … I’ve never heard or read that interpretation,’ I said with surprise.²

The work of neoliberalism and its false promises of economic prosperity have a mirror in the asymmetrical and chimeric privilege of ethnography and the economy of colonialism. The results of this project, which has decimated the land rights and thus the livelihoods of Indigenous people throughout the colonised world, are picked apart throughout Ponger’s Don Durito. This dialectic of neoliberal economies, colonial and ethnographic ideology is the metastructure of the video. In its detail and duration, it is a Borgesian one-to-one map onto the museum, taking the scale of global domination for its own counter-scale. What Borges’s fiction can only evoke as an absurd magnitude, historians and ethnographers typically flatten in myopic studies. Ponger sutures together the transnational themes at the heart of the decolonial struggles for communal land ownership, from the ejido system in Mexico to John Steinbeck writing about revolts against foreign domination and for food ‘through land’.³

Chapter one of Don Durito homes in on Tahiti and the fascination with French Polynesia, accounting for the plethora of Modernist painting, film and literature about the exoticised island. Ponger counts the preponderance of painters in comparison to writers and muses on the influence of the story of the Bounty on films set in Polynesia. The chapter opens with Tony Horwitz’s flabbergasting but plausible assimilation into American pop culture of even the most potent index of colonialism:

Like most Americans I grew up knowing almost nothing of Captain Cook except what I learned in fifth-grade geography class. Though I didn’t realize it at the time, I also absorbed his adventures through episodes of Star Trek. … It wasn’t until years later that I realized how much [it] echoed a true story. Captain James Cook: Captain James Kirk. The Endeavour; the Enterprise. Cook, the Yorkshire farm boy, writing in his journal that he’d sailed ‘farther than any man has been before’. Kirk, the Iowa farm boy, keeping his own log about boldly going ‘where no man has gone before!’. Cook rowed jolly boats ashore, accompanied by his naturalist, his surgeon, and musket-toting, red-jacketed

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³ See Jorge Luis Borges, Del rigor en la ciencia, 1946
marines. Kirk beamed down to planets with the science officer Mr Spock, Dr McCoy, and phaser-wielding, red-jerseyed ‘expendables’. Both captains also set out – at least in theory – to discover and describe new lands, rather than to conquer or convert.⁴

In Ponger’s video, a first day cover of the 200th anniversary of Captain Cook in 1968, stamped in Bournemouth (an English port town near Plymouth, from where the Endeavour departed) is followed by one from the fateful Hawaii in 1978. The kitsch of Cook’s heroic poses is then heightened by Star Trek stamps emblazoning ‘The Final Frontier… These Are the Voyages’. These historical anachronisms show the unexpected and absurd moves that cultural appropriation makes. All the while Ponger’s cool voice reports, and a droning soundtrack evokes a sense of deep space travel. This electronic music was composed especially by Peter Ponger using field recordings of actual beetle sounds, providing a further dialogue with Don Durito, who was, according to Marcos, a shielded totem with many legs (a metaphor of the Zapatista army). The minimal visual means of the video amplifies the sense that history is made up of famous figures, the kinds of subjects that make it onto postage stamps. The incommensurable distance we hear and see in the accumulation of stamps in black video space has the effect of a suspended black pixel matter that might represent all the other sources that are not published or visible in official history.

Every morning Captain Cook and his wry researcher shadow Mr Spock set sail together in the Weltmuseum. First thing, when the museum opened, the video came on, although for these first minutes there was never a viewer; its daily repetition was a counter-monumental act. *The Master Narrative und Don Durito* is an eight-hour epic that it is impossible to see in its entirety. It is a video that enacts a critique of the very site for which it was specifically made, and in its own monumentality obscures the larger theoretical blows that it deals to that institution.  

There is something particularly striking about the duration of this piece, as it runs precisely for as long as the museum was open, thereby tracing the slow stillbirth of objects into future pasts in a form of daily repetitive labour over hours and hours. The stories, histories and lives they carry have the quality of waiting for the next episode. By making such an incredibly long video, Lisl Ponger highlights this waiting in real time, mirroring the monotony of everyday incarceration. The video is everything but the quick and slick highlights of treasures in a speedy promotional video clip that whizzes an audience through a sales pitch for the new Weltmuseum. Instead, the duration of Ponger’s piece grounds it in a profound gesture to the multiple and complex histories told from many perspectives that can only unfold over a prolonged period. It is what Theo Reeves-Evison would call a ‘reparatory gesture’: a gesture of giving time, of giving attention to detail, of giving enough context not to justify the imprisonment of the objects but at least to begin, in almost an hour each per chapter, to delve into them, like a book or a documentary, and more than a wall text ever could.

Pacific islanders, writes the anthropologist Katerina Tieawa, have their bodies as archives and their performances as the repositories of knowledge. For those of us that work with video and voice in our storytelling, the solidity and authority of the traditional paper and object archive, with all its precious preservation problems, could similarly be alienated by thinking of video and its storytellers as also intentionally subverting the museum’s ways of remembering. For it is by drawing attention and thereby creating a relationship to lived stories that certain values about place, environment, people and culture are kept. These relationships are hard to build up in a museum display. Absorbing the spectator in moving images, voices and performances on screen, it is the recounting of stories rather than just the documentation in video that is important to making a different kind of presentation. What is at stake in Lisl Ponger’s work is, on the one hand, the difficult but all important creation of a relationship with people and stories that are otherwise ignored in places like Vienna (faraway from the

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5 All ten chapters of *The Master Narrative und Don Durito* are accessible at [vimeo.com/user24353939](https://vimeo.com/24353939)


‘Anderswo’, the lived realities of exotic paradises) and, on the other, the telling of those stories in a way that reconfigures critically the actual format and method of their display. The Master Narrative und Don Durito becomes in its very medium a rejection of the object-centric, authoritative archive in favour of an experiment with a different time and therefore also the space of storytelling and history-keeping. Ponger’s voice activates a relationship in things that may no longer be there. It is not the presence of the material object that is important, as Ticawa also says, but the performances in which knowledge is transmitted. The dematerialised moving image narrative is a way of conveying the complexities of colonial history, as The Master Narrative und Don Durito does.

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Lisl Ponger’s work is concerned with stereotypes, racism and the construction of the gaze at the interface of art, art history and ethnology. Her work involves photography, film, installation and text material. She is the curator of /MuKul/, the (fictitious) Museum of Foreign and Familiar Cultures which organises exhibitions in cooperation with various institutions.