Traces, Legacies, and Futures: A Conversation on Art and Temporality

with Nora Al-Badri, Khadija von Zinnenburg Carroll, Silvy Chakkalakal, Alya Sebti and Jonas Tinius

Introduction

Jonas Tinius

The departure for this publication and the conversation on which it is based is a series of public encounters that I conceived and curated at the gallery of the institute for foreign cultural relations (ifa) in Berlin in 2017 and 2018. Entitled ‘Gallery Reflections’, these encounters took place in between each of the four chapters, or exhibitions, that constituted curator and director Alya Sebti’s long-term programme ‘Untie to tie: On Colonial Legacies and Contemporary Societies’, which inaugurated the discursive and political reorientation of the institution under her guidance. The series was originally conceived as a form of critical collaboration between an anthropologist (Jonas Tinius) and a curator (Alya Sebti), which formed part of a bigger research project based at the Centre for Anthropological Research on Museums and Heritage (CARMARH) and funded by the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation at the Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin. Seating the white anthropologist as a marked sparring partner amidst artists, curators, activists and scholars, we sought to think about ethnographic research as a form of instigation of situations; an interlocutor rather than an observer or audience member, and thus unable to withdraw from critique and debate. The series soon served a broader interest, however, which, borrowing from the metaphor of a reflection, tried to refract, break and divert both our and a wider public’s perspective onto curatorial engagements with colonial legacies and contemporary art today.

Each reflection took place in loose relation to an exhibition in the Berlin gallery, speaking to its core themes without simply illustrating the show. To accompany the opening chapter and exhibition by Cameroonian artist Pascale Marthine-Tayou, we devised a panel on the question of urban diasporas and decolonial thought. Key for us here was to combine questions about

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1 The conversations were transcribed by Pia Chakraverti-Wuerthwein with funding from the Centre for Anthropological Research on Museums and Heritage (CARMARH) supported by the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation. Jonas Tinius’s research position at CARMARH in the Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, within whose remit he devised this series of collaborative research and conversation events, was funded as part of Sharon Macdonald’s Alexander von Humboldt Professorship, which he would like to acknowledge here.

2 See Jonas Tinius, ‘The anthropologist as sparring partner: German colonial legacies, fieldwork, and the expanded curatorial field’, Berliner Blätter: Ethnografische und ethnologische Beiträge, open-access special issue, forthcoming 2020
hidden ways of seeing urban space with a discussion of Asian—meaning here Korean, Vietnamese and Indonesian—diasporic formations.3

While themes of space are also crucial to debates about art and colonial and postcolonial experience, so are issues of time and temporality. This is an edited transcription of a conversation that took place on 7 September 2017 in the ifa Gallery in Berlin and which constituted the second iteration of the gallery reflections series—‘Traces, Legacies, and Futures: A Conversation on Art and Temporality’. For this encounter, I had invited the artist Nora Al-Badri, the anthropologist Silvy Chakkalakal and the artist and art historian Khadija von Zinnenburg Carroll to poke at and interrogate the temporal dimensions of concepts we use to talk about the colonial past, present and future.

The constructedness of notions of time and temporality, their use as rhetoric and artifice, is evidently also central to the sustained auto-critique of anthropological writing since the ‘Writing Culture’ debate. Johannes Fabian captured this in his seminal work Time and the Other,5 wherein he investigated the way in which ethnographic accounts use the denial of contemporaneity and co-evalness, i.e. the acknowledgement that we all live in the same here and now, as forms of othering of non-European societies. As a discipline involved in the making and representation of knowledge, he argued, anthropology requires its scholars to engage in the sharing of time with others and yet denies that same shared temporality in the construction of its narratives. It has, in other words, a long history of ‘keep[ing] the Other outside the time of anthropology’, as Fabian put it in his article ‘The other revisited’ (2006).6 Our conversation seeks to problematise this aspect and find other ways of thinking time and temporality in the context of decolonial artistic and scholarly practices.

The literal backdrop of our conversation was provided by the exhibition ‘Watch your step / Mind your head’ by artists Irene de Andrés and Sofía Gallís Muriente, curated by Marina Reyes Franco, and forming the third chapter of the ifa Gallery’s ‘Untie to Tie’ programme. It presented a selection of works developed between 2015 and 2017 that ponder the question of who constructs the concept of paradise and who consumes it, focusing on how this is experienced from the Caribbean nation of Puerto Rico. The artists worked in photography, print, installation and video formats, remixing original and sourced materials from various official and personal archives, as well as the internet, to construct alternate soundscapes to the usual tropical narratives. In doing so, they contested the visual economy of tourism, but also paid attention to the ways in which historical narratives are rewritten.

3 A video of this event with urban scholar and activist Dr Noa Ha, anthropologist Trang Tran Thu and performer Hyunsin Kim can also be watched online via this link: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yqGIsMdx-pg accessed 13 November 2019
4 A full recording of this event can be watched online at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MRa6SMQ13lk&feature=youtu.be accessed 13 November 2019
The notion of paradise already takes us straight into the three central concepts of the present conversation: traces, legacies and futures. Traces are defined as a mark, object or indication of the existence or passing of something. The word has the beautiful double etymological meaning of ‘a path that someone or something takes’, allowing it to be a term that conjoins the past with the present and the future. It is also a term often used to refer to the detective search for remains, be they traces in ethnological museums such as the Humboldt Forum, at the time of writing still under construction a stone’s throw away from the ifa Gallery in Berlin-Mitte. In reaction to vocal criticism from activist groups – articulated, for instance, in a conference entitled ‘Prussian Colonial Heritage’ organised by the umbrella organisation No Humboldt 21! in Berlin in October 2017 – provenance research has come to the fore of discussions at this stage of the planning of the Humboldt Forum. Yet, it still appears more like scattered and inquisitive detective work with the comical Columbus rather than systematic inquiry, for which ethnologist Lariss Förster argues. Research into object provenance and the question of restitution are but two examples of a current issue at the crossroads of traces, legacies and futures, situated within the complex temporal processes taking recourse, among other things, to the reconstruction of speculative histories in the face of a scant and absent record of the past. Larissa Förster and Holger Stoecker’s Haut, Haar und Knochen: Koloniale Spuren in naturkundlichen Sammlungen der Universität Jena (which translates as ‘Skin, Hair and Bones, Colonial Traces in the Natural History Collections of the University of Jena’) is an example of a publication that embraces the speculative as a means of tackling the violent history of German colonialism in Namibia. But the leaving of traces can also be rethought as an active intervention. Creating new traces and burying newly made traces to be found in a distant future, for instance, has been described by Nora Al-Badri, who participated in this second conversation, as ‘techno-heritage’ and explored in her joint collaboration with Nikolai Nelles in their project Fossil Futures.

The notion of legacies, too, is fraught and problematic, yet also ambivalent and productive to think with. A legacy denotes something left or handed down by a predecessor. This could be, as in the title of the ‘Untie to Tie’ programme, in the form of continued colonial legacies – such as architectural or urban traces of colonial conquest marked by statues of Christopher Columbus discussed in the show ‘Watch your step / Mind your head’ – a presence contested in the iconoclasm of post-Charlottesville US, which erases and actively destroys such legacies. Alya Sebti uses the term ‘legacies’ differently in her curatorial programation. More explicit in the German translation Vermächtnis or Hinterlassenschaft, this connotation describes the active projection
of something new into the future; the creation of future memories. In such a way, legacies and traces can provide insight into parallel or multiple temporalities, into juxtapositions of anachronies, archives of anachronicity.

With recourse to notions of the future – how it affects our present, how visions of the future can shape the contemporary status quo – we wish to problematise ideas of shared heritage and the construction of social fantasies. Is it the case, as philosophers Armen Avanessian and Suhail Malik have argued in proposing the terminology ‘post-contemporary’,\(^\text{11}\) that anticipations of the future actually shape the present and that we are better off moving from a futureless focus on experiences in the now (so prevalent in contemporary art) to ideas of anticipation and the post-contemporary? To what extent are notions of the future employed as political rhetoric; how do they function politically in a performative sense; and how does this affect our conceptions of alternative possible realities?\(^\text{2}\)

The three participants for the evening were Khadija von Zinnenburg Carroll, an artist, historian, and Professorial Chair of Global Art at the University of Birmingham in the UK; Silvy Chakkalakal, Junior Professor at the Institute for European Ethnology at the Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, with a focus on gender, education and the future; and the artist Nora Al-Badri. Nora Al Badri has worked with Jan Nikolai Nelles as a collective since 2009, and their practice incorporates interventions and engagement with the role of technology, including the contentious project \textit{Nefertiti Hack}.\(^\text{12}\)

\section*{Traces}

\textbf{Jonas Tinius:} Nora, let’s jump straight into our conversation by addressing the notion of ‘traces’. Through your artistic research, you are, among other things, investigating colonial traces in Western art, anthropology and natural history museums. You have described your work as gestures of civil disobedience. Could you elaborate how you think through your work on colonial traces as a form of civil disobedience?

\textbf{Nora Al-Badri:} I would like to start with the word ‘traces’ because it is also a term that sometimes minimises the whole range of phenomena we have in front of us. In one way, traces are not as important in my investigative practice, because we are not so much interested in detective work. What I liked always to point out with the work I do – with the \textit{Fossil Futures} project as well as with the \textit{Nefertiti} – is that it is a lot about questions of originality and authenticity, and of course, let’s say, the \textit{Deutungshoheit}, the interpretational sovereignty, of museums. This is a kind of power they have because they possess the actual objects we wish to


\(^{12}\) See http://nefertithack.alloversky.com/ accessed 20 December 2019
problematis. Through technology, this can be changed somehow; it can be an emancipatory tool, but it can also be the opposite. If you look at Google Arts and Culture, which collaborates with museums in a totally different way, this collaboration with public collections especially is leading to a copy fraud of public collections, since these collections go into the digital possession of a multi-national like Google. In our case, and this was the case with the Neferiti, and it was also similar with the dinosaur bone we are currently working on, our speculation was that the data of the objects can be a means of renegotiating the object, through the digital.

Nora Al-Badri and Nikolai Nelles, Neferiti Hack, 2015, 3D dataset of Neferiti rendered by the artists

JT: The visualisation of the leaked data set of the bust of Neferiti, here rendered in 3D, epitomises some of the interesting challenges and provocations of this project. Deliberately to insert traces into a historical record turns this idea around that traces are something that we gather retrospectively about the past. In a sense you weren’t actually acting as archaeologists, or criminal archaeologists, who are using civil disobedience to provoke these kinds of institutions – you are leaving possibly fake traces for other people to find in the future.

NAB: Yes, that’s true. There are different kinds of traces, I would say. One is on the level of the world wide web. When you look now at Wikipedia, you can find an entry for the bust of Neferiti. What’s interesting is that someone added another line to the biography of the object, which states that the data is now online, available for everyone, because of a hacking – an ethical hack, if you will. In this situation, you now find two new traces added digitally. One is something someone has written online, and another is more closely related to the actual physical object. Because what is very important in our practice, I should add here, is that in the case of the
Nefertiti, we also 3D-printed and exhibited the bust in Cairo, trying thus to recentre the whole idea of where to exhibit and show the actual object – London, Berlin or Cairo? We discussed this quite a lot, realising that we found ourselves in a situation where we asked ourselves which object to exhibit – the copy or the original – and which one is more real, more original? Is it the 3D plastic print, which is now exhibited in Cairo, or is it the original one that we find in Berlin, which has been in a museum here for over one hundred years and been painted over by custodians with new layers of present meaning, new layers of paint. So how much of the original is left on or in that object?

The New York-based author Ben Lerner wrote a beautiful essay about this idea of traces left by custodians, published as ‘The Custodians’ in The New Yorker. He explores this question: when you add layer and layer of paint over such a long time and restore the objects that much, how much is actually left of the original? The same is true also, of course, for paintings, on which we find very invasive ways of ‘updating’ the object.

JT: In your own practice with Nikolai Nelles, you went one step further. You didn’t just exhibit the object in Cairo, but you also buried the object again in the meaningful and yet also idealised and epitomic sand of the Egyptian desert. Tell us more about this phase of the project, because it seems almost, if I may be a bit provocative, like an exoticisation of this act of discovery, but inverted. I’m wondering in what sense that is the case, and how you conceptualise this act temporally?
NAB: This phase you describe constitutes the largest aspect of our intervention. It really deals with time and shows how we figure this out by recourse to archaeological objects. We always referred to this as a ‘counter-act’ to excavations, because in the act of excavating is encapsulated such a Western notion of objects, of discovery. It epitomises the idea of a Western world that is extracting, and a non-Western or ancient world that is leaving traces for us to find. We therefore also conceived of our act as one of giving back. We like the idea of our artefacts becoming, as we put it, ‘techno-heritage’ for someone to find in one hundred or three thousand years – or maybe never. I would actually be quite happy if they were never found!

Anachronism

JT: Khadija, we worked together on an article about the Humboldt Forum in which we speak about what we called ‘palatial recurrence’ – that is, the idea that certain palaces, in that particular case here in Berlin-Mitte, recur and reappear in strange kinds of ways. And, there is, of course, an aspect of repetition, and perhaps even a circularity that I think is very visible whenever one sees anything that is being reconstructed, but also a certain sense of a renaissance – the return, the rebirth, possibly of those who have never died or are reborn as zombies.

You begin your book, *Art in the Time of Colony*, with a quote by the African-American writer Ralph Ellison who wrote that the world doesn’t move like an arrow, it moves like a boomerang. For him, therefore, we should always keep a steel helmet available, because it’s going to hit you in the head at some point. But the book, as you write, is an attempt not to study art through methods of history, but to try and understand history through art, and as one of the concepts that you have been using in a different context, but relates to this project is that of anachronism, or that which is anachronistic. Could you maybe tell us a bit more about that concept, and how it relates to the work that you have done with it?

Khadija von Zinnenburg Carroll: The cover of *The Importance of Being Anachronistic: Contemporary Aboriginal Art and Museum Reparations* (2016) illustrates what Nora was saying, as a kind of strategy of reburying a digital, in this case the archaeological collection from the Cambridge Museum of Anthropology. The artists Julie Gough, Christoph Balzar and I photo-documented

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all the Tasmanian archaeology collections and then returned them back into the ground. The cover of the book is one group of the stones being returned. Although *returning* never really functions as such, of course, and can come back as a kind of boomerang that violently hits you à la Ellison’s *Invisible Man*. Anachronism can mean return, to be out of time, to be ana-, -chronistic is to not always read the past in its own terms, something that historians would traditionally try to do. German art history is very attached to the idea that work on nineteenth-century colonial history should refer to this material in the terms in which the collections were originally collected, otherwise we are going to do it some injustice by projecting our postcolonial revisionism on it.

Yet I think that actually is what, as artists, we do: we grapple with things in the terms that are useful to the living. I was thinking, as you were speaking, Nora, about a lot of these terms that, like fraud and legacy, and also even the idea of who finds what, is very much from our own perspective. I mean, for indigenous people, it’s not a fraud; what was always there is being found again. In my work I am trying to see things in their own terms, rather than always, already projecting our own kind of historical methods onto them.

**JT:** Anachronism isn’t just a way to think about the ways in which history repeats itself, but it also functions as a concept that allows you to *do* certain things, to be performative with it. You were devising interventions in your own artistic work, creating your own historical re-enactments of situations, as ways of opening and finding ways into institutions – not just to get them to think about temporality and exchange, but also performatively to create situations in which, for instance, the framework for restitutions are made possible. Could you open up and describe how and if these temporal interventions get institutions, like museums, to change?

**KVC:** Institutions are beginning to recognise the power of returning the so-called original. Even if these things have obviously been changed over time, it is through performance that I find reactivation works. It is a process of wresting the material from the past and turning that into a kind of script for a contemporary ritual or real use of material culture. Being an infrastructural activist of this kind is a process, however, that begins before any public display. The diversity of collection policies and advisory boards needs to be addressed first.

I’m working on a new piece called *The Restitution of Complexity* (Austrian Cultural Forum, London, and Unconscious Archives Festival, November 2017) that looks at the feather crown of
Montezuma that’s in Vienna, which the Mexicans want back. This is a performance in which, with Nicholas Gansterer, I tell the story, the 600-year-long story, of German colonialism in the Caribbean. As a sculptor, he did this through a live layering and then cutting through history, while I performed the voices.17

Futures

JT: Let’s come back to those and ‘shift to the future’. In the way that Nora mobilises the idea of ‘techno-heritage’, or in how Khadija speaks about ‘scripts for a contemporary ritual’, the future is already present. Philosophers Armen Avanessian and Suhail Malik have suggested the term ‘post-contemporary’18 to challenge what they perceive as the over-emphasis on the contemporary in our analyses of art. They have been arguing that contemporary art, through its emphasis on experience, on the now, has created a lack of vision for, or lack of a capacity to envision other possible futures, a ‘future-less-ness’ if you will. What the post-contemporary proposes, then, is that we should be looking at the ways in which anticipations of the future shape the present, and therefore allow us to anticipate certain things before they have actually happened, influencing what we’re doing at this moment.

Silvy, in your inaugural address at the Institute of European Ethnology at the Humboldt University of Berlin, you spoke about the possibilities of an ‘anticipatory anthropology’. How does this idea relate to our understanding of the future?

17 A short excerpt from Khadija von Zinnenburg Carroll and Nikolaus Gansterer’s The Restitution of Complexity performance in 2017 can be seen here https://vimeo.com/240687602 accessed 20 December 2019
18 Avanessian and Malik, op cit, accessed 20 December 2019
Silvy Chakkalakal: I am very much interested in this notion of future and the ideas proposed by Avanessian and Malik. Around the time of the 2017 German general election, Angela Merkel’s contestant for the chancellorship, Martin Schulz, was mobilising a campaign that was heavily based around ideas of the future. Whenever institutions are in crisis, we speak about their ‘futures’ or lack thereof. At present, anthropologists and critics debate the future of the anthropological museum in Germany, for instance, and the future of ethnographic collections, as they have come under pressure from all sides.

Nora, too, talked about the future, when she explained how she deploys technology in the context of museums. And in this series of conversations, you have highlighted how the ifa Gallery uses an understanding of ‘legacy’ that concerns the future traces we leave, and not the collecting of those left in the past by others. It fascinates me to think what it does to the present and the past if we think it from the imaginative vantage point of the future; or if we employ the future politically, which is essentially what we are doing when we speculate on, say, an institution’s possibility to change. Speculation is, of course, also wishful thinking, but I’d like to conceive of it as the creation of a thinking space in which we can imagine how things could be otherwise, in an alternative reality. In this sense, anthropology is always already a kind of anticipatory anthropology. I am not trying to suggest it as a new branch of anthropology; rather, I tried to look at the extent to which the anticipatory, imaginative and speculative is already a part of anthropology.

In my work on early US cultural anthropology, you can clearly see these borderlands between art and anthropology. At that time, you cannot separate art from anthropology. Scholars like Margaret Mead, Edward Sapir or Gregory Bateson collaborated with artists, dancers and filmmakers; they wrote poetry, made films, and were generally, in some sense, artists themselves. In that sense, I think anthropology was just that thinking space I described – albeit not without its own problematic colonial entanglements, obviously.

JT: Futurism, retro-futurism and Afro-futurism are just three examples of movements that employed utopian and dystopian ideas of the future as political tools for rethinking our predicaments in the present. Ideas of paradise, hell or utopia then become ways in which the future is turned into a political instrument for thinking about the present.

SC: What becomes really interesting when we think about these ideas of future-making, or thinking through the future, is that it tells us something about how history is made. History is not just something ‘out there’ which you uncover – as Nora already pointed out. Making history, as the verb already suggests, is, rather, an act, a practice. Once you realise that, the question becomes: how do we use/deploy thinking about time? What are historically-relevant temporal practices? What temporal orders are at work here, and how? And as a footnote, I think we can definitively speak of temporal orders when we wish to think about ethnographic collections, objects or museums.
JT: You anticipate a crucial debate pertinent to current discussions around anthropological museums, and especially the predicament of the future Humboldt Forum, namely the debate about so-called ‘shared heritage’. Such, and related, notions are, on the one hand, ways to deflect responsibility and distract from the politics of restitution; on the other, they are ways to try to get museums to open up, investigate multiple axes of ownership and possible pathways of restitution. Furthermore, concepts like ‘laboratory’, metaphors of speculation, uncertainty, try to work out possible ways to rethink institutional structures and their ingrained epistemologies. My question is, then, to what extent the idea of shared heritage allows us to think about possible other ways of using museum institutions and their collections as facilitators for future relations between communities of involvement, and object futures? Perhaps we could even consider such opening and activation of storages as a rethinking of provenance along a different temporal axis, not as a reconstruction of possible historic trajectories but as projected future itineraries of objects in an unknown future.

NAB: Let’s expand our view from ethnographic collections to archaeological collections too. Labelling societies, cultures and ways of knowing as ‘dead’, ‘ancient’, or ‘past’ is part of the way in which archaeologists – and, I guess, anthropologists – make history. This is an aspect of the debate we don’t have when we talk about shared heritage. We don’t talk about the ways in which we divide existing artefacts and objects into those that belong to ‘past civilisations’ and those whose ancestors still relate to them. There is nothing like shared heritage. These are the kinds of arguments mobilised in a lot of different institutionalised spaces, museums included. The Greek archaeologist Yannis Hamilakis tried to push us to think about the possibilities of an indigenous archaeology. He is asking questions about temporality in archaeology that we can transfer to anthropology. What he says is that as soon as we label, for instance, a ‘source community’, an ‘indigenous’ or ‘ancient’ civilisation as dead, we generate a very powerful situation for ourselves, which is dangerous. Hamilakis tries to get us to think about rethinking the making of history from a non-linear way, which I think would help us open this discussion further.

KvZC: Provenance is definitely instrumentalised in order to hamper restitution, or to delegitimise indigenous people’s claims to objects, or land, or human remains, because that precise bit of evidence cannot be found or is not available in the historical written record, but exactly as you’re saying, and I think Germany suffers from being detached from its former colonies and from the ‘traditional owners’ elsewhere, who remind us that they are still here and would like access to this material. Yet because this material is so far away when it’s here in these European museums, they don’t really have the means of access.

So although they are ‘universal’ museums, theoretically open to everyone, there is an unbalanced sense that most of these people can’t travel here, and many have never had the means or support to travel to Europe. A shared heritage would thus be one in which we completely have to rethink the form of ownership and the form of legal possession over this kind
of colonial loot, and begin to at least make partial adjustments to, for one, the legal structures, but also the kind of access and the kind of use that those objects are put to.

SC: Isn’t the concept of a ‘source-community’ already part of this problematic temporal order? It implies an idea, as you’ve said, of ‘we’ve been there before’. What you just told us can be used the other way around, making the problem with the term so much clearer. Once you don’t have a community which is claiming this history anymore, then you don’t have a reference point for political action anymore. Restitution works very much through creating this historical reference and making this community standpoint visible, which is an act of ‘placing yourself’ within this history that makes sense to the other person and in relation to a bigger historical narrative in which this invention has to be integrated.

And yet, I am left wondering if ‘source community’ is the right term to do these kinds of politics in the future, because, in a way, it is also counterproductive in situations when there is no one to claim this version of history.

JT: The concept of a source community also contains the problematic temporal association of a ‘source’, or Ursprung, as Foucault discussed in his essay ‘Nietzsche, Genealogy, and History’. It brings us back to the question of temporal experience as a social construction and the ways in which when we speak about time we have ourselves already been complicit in an effort of marking time. Archaeology, for instance, especially the kind of archaeology that Nora referred to, is complicit in constructing narratives of succession and narratives as fundamental as human and biological evolution. These kinds of narratives suggest, as Richard Rorty argued in Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity, that we are uncovering truths and evidence about the world, while they are instead creating forms of language to speak about it. Paul Wenzel Geissler makes a related point in the jointly edited book Traces of the Future: Archaeologies of Medical Science in Africa, when he argues that the ordering of temporal experience is in itself, a construct, a feat achieved by various kinds of scientific discourses.

NAB: Let me use the example of the dinosaur as a metaphor of this kind you mention. Why are we so fascinated by gigantic bones and gigantic skeletons and by the fantasma of the dinosaur? To put it provocatively, natural history museums have to have dinosaurs – they are their bestsellers, their centrepieces, the audience attractions. I know from a Scandinavian museum located in an area where no dinosaur bones were ever found that they bought one from the US. As soon as they had their dinosaur, their visitor numbers increased by around thirty percent, marking a significant economic advantage for the museum. For me, dinosaurs are interesting as

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speculative material, because they allow us to question the hierarchy of knowledge constructed in such museums when ‘Natural Science’ puts itself in a hierarchy over other narratives and other knowledges, ideas and data.

In *The Last Dinosaur Book*, W J T Mitchell described the dinosaur as a totem animal of our modern societies. He suggests that they are our totems, because they allow us to talk about extinction – and extinction is a term relevant for how we understand our future, or, rather, our limited futures. In our project *Fossil Futures*, we talk about the dinosaur collection here, in the Natural History Museum in Berlin, whose collection contains 250 tons of dinosaur bones from Tanzania. They ‘acquired’ them a hundred years ago, during the time of the German colonial occupation of East Africa. The extraction of these bones was a very violent act, and the entirety of these 250 tons was unearthed and brought here by 5,000 workers over the course of a few years.

Now these bones are here, and, with the exception of a few research projects, no one really realised the significance of its story for a critical inquiry into Berlin’s natural history museums. What is critical about it is that from a point of view from Tanzania, these bones have been looted. For us, and me, the relevance of these bones, their future, is their origin in this area of southern Tanzania from where they were taken. A few kilometres from the original source of the bones, you find a territory roughly the size of Italy, where various multi-nationals, including German ones, are co-operating on a large World Bank project for agricultural production. So once again, you have European capitalistic powers extracting ‘resources’ from the African soil. I don’t want to say that history is repeating itself, it’s more like a continuity – but you don’t even need traces, or artefacts, to point to this situation. It is obvious. In our project *Fossil Futures*, we wish to articulate some of the connections between these continuities of colonial and neo-colonial extraction.

**JT:** You used a particular term to refer to this project of extraction: ‘cultural fracking’. How do you use the concept, and what ‘work’ does it do for you in describing narratives about extinction and futures?

**NAB:** To respond, I’d love to refer to my collaborator, Nikolai Nelles, who is in the audience and with whom I collaborated on the *Nefertiti Hack* and the *Fossil Futures* projects.

**Nikolai Nelles:** We coined the term ‘cultural fracking’ in order to point out that this is the next level of cultural appropriation. Cultural appropriation is not enough. For example, Picasso would say a good artist steals, he doesn’t copy. To appropriate something is almost *en vogue*. Now to point out the extraction of these bones means also linking it with the violent histories of German colonialism, such as the Maji Maji massacre, one of the bloodiest wars for the German colonisers in Tanzania, which took place only a few years before the dinosaur bone

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extraction. We call such and other forms of extraction ‘cultural fracking’, because we extract and what we leave there is wasteland and there is no longer a culture that you can connect to.

**NAB:** The dinosaur bones are one example. But when there were calls towards getting all the antiquities out of Iraq and Syria in order to protect them, this, I would also say, is cultural fracking, because you take everything away. Of course, it didn’t happen, because the people in Iraq and Syria knew exactly what would happen if they gave it away for ‘safeguarding’. Even the Director of the Louvre said ‘we want asylum for objects’, which is ridiculous. It’s horrible if you think about it. This is also some kind of cultural fracking we are talking about.

**KvZC:** I thought I might interject and offer a counter-narrative, because we wanted to talk about the future as well and I think there is something very polemical about saying everything’s gone. Usually everything is not gone even when you’ve had a country mined.

Some time ago I was in Berlin to find a scientist, Anna Gorbushina, who was an expert on cyanobacteria. She had studied these bacteria that thrive amongst the mining that has destroyed most of Australian Rock Art, which is about 60,000 years old (and was always very difficult to carbon date). It turned out, and only through these scientists – whom we cannot set up as straw men, my point would be here – that the rock painting itself is actually made up of living bacteria. It’s a mixture of living biologies that keep symbiotically eating each other rather than being static pigment. It must have been intentional on the part of the painters, 40,000 or 60,000 years ago. These are deep Jurassic timescales but not dead and gone things. What you hear, in the resulting video project, are the scientists showing me how these organisms work (see *Ore Black Ore*, 2015).23

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How do we actually make these places useful, like the Humboldt Forum, and closer to understanding or supporting non-Western knowledge systems rather than always mining our own ways of thinking, which leads to very dismal connections between the past and the future?

**JT:** One aspect of these particular paintings was that, because they are constantly repainting themselves, there is another question implied, namely that of authorship. Who is actually painting these particular murals? Is it the person who initially applied the paint? Or is it the bacteria that are constantly ageing themselves further into the stone? So, in a sense, you are multiplying and giving away the authorship of that particular writing of art history, in that moment.

**KvZC:** Absolutely. Whose civil disobedience? Why is it not a social contract that the object has? Why does the object not have human rights, or object rights? Do we need actor-network theory to answer these questions to our ends?

**NAB:** Our approach with the *Fossil Futures* project is not that the territory is now wasteland and all possibilities are gone. It is being used still, and it is a ritual or spiritual place, and so it is still a living place.

**SC:** I find this idea of ‘authorship’ and ‘whose history’ and ‘the agency of the object’ really interesting, because what I was asking before, when I was saying ‘doesn’t it bite us in the ass’, is not to focus, or maybe it is a possibility not so much to focus on certain positionalities or subjectivities but instead to focus on the practices. Because I very much believe that practices of collecting, practices of classifying, practices of putting an object into a very specific location, exhibiting it, copying it, discussing it, changes this object and also changes its aesthetic throughout time. Because you cannot assign objects easily to one history, because they are part of many histories or part of something that is more complicated than ‘history’, then you might think that restitution is not enough. What else do we have to do with these objects?

When the discussion ends with restitution, for me then it is just reiterating this temporal order, which we try to criticise. Sometimes it is even absurd. That’s why I think it’s interesting what you are doing, Nora, because you are playing with these narratives, you are speculating with them. You are offering a different narrative, you are making yourself part of this history, you’re changing it, doing something else, something more.

Public Discussion

**Friedrich von Bose:** ‘Maybe restitution is not enough, what else do we have to do’ also connects to what all three of you have been saying. Taking the institution’s point of view, everyone is very afraid of restituting; if we give away one object, we are going to lose all of them. Talking about the Berlin context, we have about half a million objects in the ethnological storage.
and exhibition spaces. So it’s actually not even imaginable who would take back 500,000 objects, and I think everyone knows that this would be an endeavour that might just be never ending, which is interesting, because this, to start this endeavour, would be a really interesting project—like, where would this go to? The fear of losing objects is very telling, but, of course, the real politics is that many people, many communities, whoever they are, may not even want the objects back. Some of them say we are happy you have them because then we don’t have to deal with them. There are all kinds of different positions, so it is very interesting to ask, or it is very important to ask this question of what else do we have to do, because restitution focuses, on the one hand, too much on the question of the source, and therefore on the question of belonging—which is a tricky one. But it also focuses very much on the act of something that for many, many, many objects just will not be possible.

So, if it’s not possible, what else is there to do, instead of just keeping the status quo? Therefore, I think this question is a very interesting theoretical one, but also a methodological one, and a pressing one, because talking about shared heritage is, in a way, also a means to keep the status quo, because you can keep the objects here and invite people, most of whom may not even be able to come because they won’t get a visa. I think that is interesting in terms of connecting past, present and future ways of dealing with these things.

**NAB:** What I like about this idea of the ‘museum as a process’ is that it has to be a constant space of negotiation. So the moment we are negotiating here, in public discourse, about objects, so it starts, and I think ‘constant’ is the important word here—there is no solution, there will never be an end to it. What’s important is that we have a discussion, and that we have an open-ended and an open-minded discussion—which is definitely not happening now because it is driven by fear, by institutional angst, which I think is completely illegitimate because there are so many other examples all around the world where museums have done progressive things.

**SC:** This fear of the institution and the assigning of positions—‘these are postcolonial positions’, or ‘these are the museum ethnologists’—is very intriguing. When I think as a historian about the postcolonial, it is colonial history, it is not ‘this is history’ and ‘this is colonial history’, or ‘we have to work on this colonial history’. This division in different histories is not how it works. Colonial history is part of the museum, it is not something you can cover in a minute, or delegate to the postcolonial critics who can deal with it. This history is embedded in our thinking, in the object itself, in the classification, in the architecture, in how we think about ourselves. In my opinion, from my historical research, it is an entangled history. There is agency of ‘the Other’, there is not just the act of classification and collecting. We really need a more complex understanding of history and of thinking about history. ‘The temporal’ is a very important thing, and ‘the postcolonial’, the idea, is not something which comes ‘after’. It is something that is ongoing, something never ending, an open-ended process. It will never be over, there is no end to this debate, and it is not just a debate, it goes on.
KvZC: That’s one of my problems with entanglement, actually, because it implies that you could disentangle something and then be done with the complexity of it.

Christoph Balzar: Silvy, you were mentioning source communities and criticised it for referring to cultures as a resource for our museums. That delegitimises them, in a certain way. So do you have a proposition, do you have an idea for an alternative term? How do we refer, actually, to all kinds of interest groups that have a particular, plausible interest in museum collections, especially colonially-acquired collections?

SC: The museum as an institution needs to get rid of this notion of belonging. But not in a way that it can keep everything. I am totally in favour of giving stuff and things up, and to free things. I just really like that notion that you (Nora and Nikolai) are freeing Nerfertiti. The notion of belonging is a problematic one and we need to work with other concepts. It is the task of the museum to deal with this. I think it is the responsibility of the institutions that hold these collections to come up with a critical way of thinking about history and also their own investment in this history. They are using this notion of source communities as well, and that is my problem. We need to have a different discussion.

KvZC: It is easier said than done, because in law these national museums, since the French Revolution (and France is the ultimate example), embed in the constitution the idea that national patrimony are things you cannot take from the (French) citizens who managed to repatriate wealth from the king to the people. I started working with lawyers, because it is the only way to actually make repatriation possible, to undo that law—which is not easy. It happens occasionally; there was a case of Maori heads from France that created an important precedent exception to the national patrimony law. It acts as a sort of firewall. For example, the British Museum has, in British law, a particular case that you cannot move anything outside the walls of the Museum. Until you change that law about the physical walls of the British Museum, nothing will leave. The Elgin Marbles can still be temporarily lent to the Hermitage, of course, just to spite the Greeks!

JT: There are particular terms that you already raised, Friedrich von Bose, in your question before that trouble that idea of the source community, in the sense that it already implies the idea of something going back. It’s a backward-looking sort of concept that tries to reduce, and exhausts the potential of objects and the potential of this act, of this potential relation in its bringing back, in the conclusion of the case, as it were—again, this sort of detective metaphor comes in here. The reason I say this has to do with the way that we conceptualise the practice of curators and museums is because in those notions of the curator, the person who takes care, in the notion of the keeper or even the guardian of world cultures, as certain of these positions are referred to, is contained an idea that one is for a while, as it were, taking care of things. One is also—and this is a term that we haven’t touched on yet, but which is highly relevant—conserving; one is putting things into a place where they can stay, as if the rest of the world, or the original context
from which they came, was sort of dangerous to them. And this idea that the museum is, in that sense, a sort of saviour, who might allow the things to go back to their status quo – which, of course, overtime has changed as well… I think there is a temporal logic in that which is just flawed from the beginning, and ideas of thinking as museums, as these kinds of actors, as open-ended future-oriented practices that are not just finishing or concluding relationships but actually building relationships that will last beyond the restitution. I think that is really the temporal logic in which we should be thinking about those practices.

**NAB:** Silvy gave us a glimpse of your answer earlier. What we talk about is very anthropocentric, because we talk about ‘source-communities’. If we take into consideration what has been written about the post-human and the agency of objects, of the natural environment and the territories where everything came from, this would also change the debate completely. It is very revealing that, for example in political science, there is not much conceptualising about this dimension yet, but it’s starting and it’s actually changing how our structures think. Taking these ideas seriously into account would also have legal consequences.

**SC:** The discussion on restitution polarises so much that it closes this kind of discussion. You cannot think about other relationships than this kind of temporal relationship – which, again, shows how powerful this temporal order is. And this order was incorporated into these objects when they were collected. When we talk about the Humboldt Forum, it is so interesting, for example, how personalities like Humboldt are mobilised in these debates. When they were talking and writing, they constructed the German historical position within a global colonial setting via these art objects, and via their thinking of a ‘correct’ and ‘proper’ understanding of the cultures of the world. Also embedded in this discussion is the notion of scientific curiosity. It is mind-blowing how easy, apparently, it is to reiterate eighteenth century ideas of being the ‘right’ curator or being the ‘proper’ guardian of world culture.

**Carol Que:** I guess a lot of the conversation that’s been had has been circling around the idea of heritage as a material thing, but I would like to pose a question about moving toward the idea of heritage as intangible, and obviously this is not only just the ‘thing’. Heritage is a term used by the Western nations to propagate this history and agenda, but now I think it is also very relevant that international organisations, like UNESCO, are propagating the idea of intangible heritage – for instance, methods of storytelling with indigenous populations – but with that said, heritage, to take it a step further, is also a brand, because UNESCO, and, I guess, Western nations, have used it as a term. Khadija, you’ve been working with lawyers, to work with restitution in general. In what scenario can you foresee the redefinition of ideas of heritage, not just in the public space (so curators have perhaps a position in that) but in terms of anthropologists? What are their roles in terms of reconceptualising the idea of heritage as perhaps something more of a brand rather than a material object?
KvZC: The market in late capitalism is perfectly able to define heritage objects as brands, they don’t necessarily need anthropologists to help with that. The scenario in which anthropologists are consultants in branding processes is also already a reality. Anthropologists like Charlotte Joy, and heritage theorist Lynn Meskall, are reconceptualising the larger stakes of heritage. Yet the actual scenario is always a political one. There needs to be political will for these objects to be revalued, and so the scenarios for restitution run case by case. At present I see the future being formulated by people that actually use materials outside of sites like the museum, which is mostly moribund. The problem with intangible heritage and UNESCO law is that once you define and brand it, you also shut down the very vitality that has kept it alive. It can no longer breathe, appropriate, change or live; a paradigm in which heritage is shared in the future in terms of property ownership being distributed – not only between the citizens of the nation-state currently in possession of the object but to use heritage to understand the longer durée of an object’s effects on its various stakeholders or owners. Hence, heritage that grapples with the legal, economic and cultural significances of ownership for the legitimacy, agency and vitality of those that identify with that. Where this is not possible, other forms of strategic intervention into the existing paradigm of preservation can be taken. Techno-heritage is one based on older notions of digital repatriation. I’m interested in what Paul Goodwin has called criminality stemming from a necessary subversion of institutional support for cultural projects that, in turn, use what I call museopiracy, which robs the preciousness of copyright that museums maintain.

I think your provocation of making replicas is really powerful. It calls on the strategy of mimetic magic. Once we lose this attachment to an authentic original, we can see that copies may also be efficacious in ritual practices – something anthropologists like Michael Taussig have studied for a long time. The relationship between the precious, fragile, museum object, and the many replicas that are made of it, do not undermine the different kinds of value of either of those types of objects.

There is a movement in the arts at present to articulate the growing interest and sensitivity to non-human agency and yet I think humans still have an unrefined relationship to objects. On the one hand, humans are obsessed with and live through objects; on the other, they always need to feel superior and undermine their efficacy and autonomy.

NAB: Before we conclude, I would like to go one step back, and come back to Monsanto, and this specific territory in Tanzania to make a broader point. When we talk about being creative in science, or about scientists as artists, we have to take seriously the images we produce, the knowledges, the narratives we create – but also those that scientists create and the consequences of these narratives. Palaeontology in the US, for example, dug up bones before settlers and colonialists did so. In more than one sense, they spearheaded the appropriation of territories. This is the bigger context in which I situate the gigantic dinosaur bones we talked about. They have become a symbol of what is happening in land grabbing elsewhere in the world. The specific World Bank project we discussed constitutes a form of land grabbing, but it is also a form...
of dispossession, of small-scale subsistence farmers, and everyone else who lived in this region and had some relation to the territory – one as large as Italy. Ironically, the project was initially promoted as helping small-scale farmers. We want to talk about this in our Fossil Futures project. But it also links to one of our future projects in which we want to construct, if you will, a digitally mediated, counter land grabbing. In the area of Tanaguru Hill, roughly eighty square kilometres in size and located in the forest, we want to build a non-invasive museum (without bricks), avoiding to copy a conventional museum. The community commissioned us, as artists, to find a way of bringing back, somehow, the bones. Since we cannot just go into the museum and get them out, we are in the process of constructing an AR and VR museum, which will be a multi-sensory experience. We think this is important, because when you talk about heritage and heritage sites and reduce the debate to materiality, you exclude many other senses. I am not only detaching objects from their source, I am also detaching their sensorial landscape and environment from them. We are already implementing the first steps with the regional government and have an idea of creating the museum within an area of a self-sustained, self-managed Forest Reserve, ensuring that the area cannot be grabbed anymore.

*Edited by Jonas Tinius*