

# The Laboratory-Exhibition: A Metalinguistic Curatorial Approach to Discuss the Future of Berlin's Ethnological Collections

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From October 2017 to November 2019 Berlin's Bode Museum received a temporary show called "Beyond Compare: Art From Africa in the Bode Museum". Highlights of the city's Ethnological Museum were paired with works from the collection of European sculptures of the Bode Museum in an attempt to create dialogues regarding different origins, provenances and histories. The show was part of a series of events preceding the opening of the Humboldt Forum, a major cultural center dedicated to house and exhibit part of the collections of Berlin's Ethnological Museum and Museum of Asian Art, which was supposed to open on September 2020 after a one-year delay.

The Forum is considered Germany's most relevant cultural project at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Parzinger, 2011), and has as its mission to be a place for exchanges among cultures through art, science and research. It is the result of decades of intensive work aiming to guarantee Berlin's position as a cosmopolitan center in Europe after Germany's reunification in 1990. However, it is still not clear how the non-European collections will be displayed, in contrast to the shows that took place until 2017, when the ethnological museum was closed as it moved to the Forum. Hence the exhibition in the Bode Museum serves as a laboratory for the handling of cultural heritage with a colonial background, and the show is an effort to keep African masterpieces in public view.

We analyze strategies adopted by the curators as they tried to put at the same level of fruition objects with such different histories. Julien Chapuis, the Bode Museum's director of the Collection of Sculptures and Byzantine Art, with Paola Ivanov and Jonathan Fine, curators for Africa at the Ethnological Museum, take as the main issue the way Berliner collections were organized and why some objects were sent to a museum of ethnology while others were integrated into an art museum (Chapuis, Fine & Ivanov, 2017, p. 6). They organized the show in two major sections, where African and European objects co-existed and thematic intersections were created to organize groups of artworks. Besides occupying the room for temporary exhibitions of the Bode Museum, the curators established 22 groups of objects in which a European piece was put in front of an African

one, a strategy they called *juxtapositions*. These groups were distributed among the rooms of the museum where the permanent exhibition is shown.

Based on two core instances, the curators developed a methodological basis that made it possible to exhibit and compare the objects in an aimed common frame. This was done by questioning the museological *savoir-faire* that historically characterized both museums. Their reflections point out the production of differences among Western and non-Western cultures and how these hierarchical differences influence the way comparisons between European and non-European material culture are made. In addition to the historical and political background within the collections, they set the terms on the way information about each object was displayed on the labels. Finally, they introduced among objects of previous centuries two self-portraits of an African female contemporary artist. In the following sections we examine the choices adopted by the curators and reach preliminary conclusions on how this 25-month show contributed to museal practices and lessons for the Humboldt Forum.

## Comparisons as power enunciations

The curators invited visitors to reflect on the way comparisons are projected among objects in a museum. A wall text in the show presented this idea, which is also detailed in the exhibition's catalogue, where they create the arrangement to sustain their view of how comparisons should be taken within the show. In the catalogue's essay, the ideas of two consulted authors deserve greater attention in order to understand the background of comparisons in an atmosphere of unequal power. Fabian (2013) discusses the "denial of coevalness", a situation in which the *self* denies to the *other* the possibility of belonging to the same historical era. Therefore, by denying coevalness to the *other*, the *self* provokes an artificial positioning backwards on time and history, based on its own cultural and social standards. Chapuis, Fine and Ivanov, (2017, p. 11) stress that to define what is different or alike is more a matter of epistemology and power than perspective. Examining the act of comparing itself, the curators refer to a writing of Radhakrishnan (2009) in which he establishes conditions upon which epistemological comparisons can be done despite the colonial act of surpassing the *other's* system of knowledge and expecting to impose that of the *self*. In his vision, "emerging realities in different parts of the world are both historically disparate and coeval with one another" (Radhakrishnan, 2009, pp. 455-456).

By transferring the contributions of both authors to the Berliner set of public museums, the Ethnological Museum can be seen as a place dedicated to exhibiting and preserving artefacts of cultures whose fate was either to disappear by extinction or to be no longer produced by colonized groups. The Bode Museum was the institution devoted to preserving highlights of European art from late-Antiquity until the 18th century, with an especial bias to the Italian Renaissance, as the museum's founder, Wilhelm von Bode, was Jacob Burckhardt's pupil. In "Beyond Compare", the curators aim to establish new conditions for Western and non-Western material culture to share not only the same space but also

epistemological legitimacy. Nevertheless, facts concerning the way African objects turned out to be part of the Ethnological Museum make it a hard task to conceive.

## The label issue

The condition of African artworks gains visibility when we examine how the curators handled the display of available information on the labels. They developed a common model of display for European and African works since the provenance of many European objects is not as noticeable as it appears to be. In the catalogue, the curatorial team describes the decisions behind the developed model of labels. Chapuis, Fine and Ivanov (2017, pp. 17-18) warn the visitors and readers that the displayed information should be taken as a kick-off for further research on each piece and not as a conclusive investigative process. Museological systems of classification are essentially constructions, therefore, provisional and open for new evaluations, say the curators.

A key aspect of this approach consists of not showing what they do not know when it comes to the authorship of each piece. Based on this incompleteness, they have decided to leave a “metaphorical empty space” on the label instead of writing ‘unknown artist’. They stand for the view the works were done by individuals and not cultures (Chapuis, Fine & Ivanov, 2017, p. 17), while Baxandall (1991) would have recommended incorporating a concept attached to the culture that originated a piece for addressing cultural difference. A look at the works enabled us to expand the discussion initialized by the curators to the power relations behind the formation of museums.

From a total of 78 African artworks, 62 are dated in the 19th and beginning of the 20th century, a time when almost the entire Africa was split into colonial constituencies ruled by European powers. On the other hand, the alleged dating of European artworks varies in range from the 4<sup>th</sup> century A.D. to 1704. Only one African piece is from a pre-colonial time, even though the time gap extends from the 12th to the 15th centuries. Clearly, the colonial period is a main reference to establish a timeline for the African objects. This also indicates a central difference between African and European objects: the colonial violence inherent to the acquisition of many African pieces. Additional evidence of this condition is found in that many of the objects were obtained from former colonial chiefs, like Robert Visser, or as spoils of war sold by merchants, like the Benin Bronzes acquired in England at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Consequently, information concerning the origins and meaning of African works shows more accurately the net of power that brought them to the museum and the kind of objects that were attractive to the eyes of European collectors, rather than serving as a trustworthy source of referencing. Furthermore, individualizing authorship can obliterate multiple relations of production, especially those attached to a collective act of creation and transmission of knowledge.

## The artist as index

One last remark concerning the curatorial approach on exposing Berlin's museological architecture is related to the presence of the two self-portraits of the South-African contemporary artist Nomusa Makhubu, in which she manipulates the visuality of ethnological photography by projecting it on her body of a black woman. Her presence in a show not focused on contemporary production serves as a feature to indicate that the colonial past was somehow taken into consideration. It is, therefore, an index of how this theme has occupied the curators. This strategy, already implemented in similar shows outside Germany, is an attempt to mediate the background African objects in museums of the Global North and contemporize this problem to the present day.

## Final considerations

'Beyond Compare' took place in a time when the *status* of non-Western collections is being questioned among specialists and organizations from both the North and the Global South. It gained a special impulse after France's President Emmanuel Macron announced in a speech at Ouagadougou University on November 2017 his intension to restitute African cultural heritage; and Bénédicté Savoy and Felwine Sarr (2018), the scholars who provided him with a broad analysis of the case, recommended full restitution based on the inversion of the burden of proof.

In exposing and questioning the methodological basis of both museums, the Bode and Ethnological museum curators found a manner of positioning objects together, aiming to break with historical preconceptions of white supremacy in relation to other cultures. Yet, the unresolved issues regarding the provenance of African objects and ways to process this past in a show expose the problematic lack of research and data related to this topic, which is a key point within the origin of these collections. This delicate question was particularly visible when examining the strategy behind the objects' labels, which was insufficient to cover both traces of colonial violence contained in the objects from Africa and cultural entanglement related to the use and meaning of masks and statues. The option of the "metaphorical empty space" for unknown authorships indicates a curatorial view that values the person of the maker instead of cultural relations around the object, which in some cases then excludes social interaction and traditions that go beyond the creativity of an individual. In the end, the curators indicated many topics to be handled in future shows, a task the Humboldt Forum must take on when it opens.

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