

Deaccessioning Empire

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A few daring curators are confronting the imperial histories of their museums.

Reviewed:

The Metabolic Museum

by Clémentine Deliss
Berlin: Hatje Cantz, 127 pp., \$22.00 (paper)

The British Museums: The Benin Bronzes, Colonial Violence and Cultural Restitution

by Dan Hicks
Pluto, 345 pp., \$27.00



William Kentridge/Marian Goodman Gallery, New York, London, and Paris/Goodman Gallery, Johannesburg
'Head'; drawing by William Kentridge for *Faustus in Africa*, 1995

About ten years ago I read a news story reporting that one thousand human skulls from Germany's former African colonies had been "discovered" at the Charité hospital in Berlin. In the 1990s I had traveled the world as a caged Amerindian trying to be discovered by the West, in a performance art piece I'd cocreated as a response to the nineteenth- and twentieth-century ethnological expositions—the human zoos—mounted for research and popular entertainment in Europe and America. So I was familiar with the sordid ways that scientists of the period had colluded with colonial regimes to obtain human specimens, living and dead; I see colonial history—and the ethnological museums filled with colonial artifacts—as a one-sided affair that was fascinated by the idea of "the primitive" and refused to recognize the intellectual complexity and beauty of African, Asian, and

Latin American cultures and the humanity of non-European peoples. From research for my performance, I had a pretty clear idea of how the African skulls could have gotten to Berlin, but their staggering number and the fact that they had remained hidden in a hospital for more than a century struck me as remarkable.

A few years after I read the story about the Charité I was invited to create a new work for an art center in Berlin, which gave me a chance to find out more about those skulls. I assumed that at least some of them had come from Namibia, the former German colony that had been the site of a genocidal campaign against the Nama and Herero peoples between 1904 and 1908. To this day gruesome lore circulates about how prisoners of war were forced to scrape flesh from the skulls of comrades to prepare them for shipment to Germany. After Namibia achieved independence from South Africa in 1990, the new government demanded that Nama and Herero remains in Germany be returned, which eventually led to the repatriation of twenty skulls in 2011. I could see in the photographs of the official repatriation ceremony in Berlin that there was some kind of writing on the crania. I wanted a closer look to be able to read the notations.

Shortly thereafter, I learned that the rediscovery of the skulls at Charité had caused some embarrassment, leading to their transfer to Berlin's Museum of Prehistory and Early History. But when I asked a museum staff member about scheduling a visit, I was told there were no more Namibian remains in the collection and that the documents that might have identified the rest of the bones had been destroyed in World War II. I was also informed that the museum's effort to treat its human remains "with the greatest sensitivity, and the utmost respect" forced it to deny my artistically motivated request for access to the collection. It seemed strange to me that only the twenty Namibian skulls were identifiable. And I couldn't help but suspect that the museum's insistence on being sensitive and respectful was a way to avoid discussing the colonial violence that had made possible the transfer of the remains to Germany.

I did not know at the time that there was a politically daring curator in Frankfurt named Clémentine Deliss who had just spent five years inviting artists to the Weltkulturen Museum, the ethnographic museum in her charge, asking them to devise creative responses to the thousands of artifacts taken from Africa during Germany's colonial expeditions. I did not know that while I was inquiring about the skulls in Berlin, she was unceremoniously ejected from her post, in 2015, for orchestrating the very kind of research that I sought to undertake. Nor could I have predicted that two years later the French president, Emmanuel Macron, would reverse the longstanding position of his government on repatriation of African artifacts by advocating for their return, boosting the efforts of European and American museum professionals and African governments to bring about such homecomings.

The much-discussed scene in the 2018 film *Black Panther* in which two characters steal a Wakandan axe from a fictional British museum made the history of European looting of African treasures a popular subject, and the recent toppling of Confederate monuments in the South has catalyzed public debates about how our built environment tacitly condones racism. But the thorny process of figuring out what to do with the colonial war booty that is scattered throughout hundreds of public and private collections in Europe and America has not been resolved.

Two recent books offer extended reflections on the many dilemmas involved in rethinking the purpose of the “world culture” museum in our era of decolonial reckoning. In *The Metabolic Museum*, Deliss, since last year an associate curator at the KW Institute for Contemporary Art in Berlin, outlines her radical curatorial vision and chronicles her attempts to transform the Weltkulturen Museum from a moribund storehouse of artifacts into a laboratory and educational center for critical engagement with the material cultures of non-European societies. In *British Museums*, Dan Hicks, a professor of archaeology and curator at the Pitt Rivers Museum at the University of Oxford, makes a persuasive argument for the repatriation of the Benin Bronzes.

Widely considered to be magnificent examples of West African art, the more than one thousand plaques and sculptures that once decorated the royal palace of the king of Benin, in modern-day Nigeria, were pillaged during a raid by the British in 1897. Historians call such incursions “punitive expeditions” in order to underscore the retributive intent of strikes aimed at foreign targets. Most of the stolen bronzes are currently held in Britain and Germany, but many more reside in private collections and American museums like the Metropolitan and the Brooklyn Museum. Hicks provides a devastatingly thorough account of the destruction and plunder of Benin and a political analysis of the rhetorical strategies used by museums to evade ethical issues relating to their African acquisitions. It is a long account of loss.

Deliss and Hicks differ slightly in their proposals for transforming ethnological museums, but they both seek to reenvision anthropology’s fraught relationship with non-Western artifacts. Each writer emphasizes different reasons why European institutions have evaded that history until recently. According to Deliss, as heavyweight anthropologists of the postwar era shifted their focus from material to immaterial cultural expressions such as language, belief systems, and ritual, objects became less relevant to the discipline, and the question of the sordid origins of collections could be put aside. As a result, many ethnological collections (like the one housed in the museum she directed) fell into relative neglect and, when displayed at all, were shown in outdated ways. Imagine a museum that had not changed anything about its displays since the 1960s, with sealed windows, bad

lighting, and linoleum covering wooden floors. Deliss calls the old way “the museum as emporium...that department store museography with its creeping class differentiation.”

Nowadays most visitors to such collections tend to be primary school groups. Faced with this situation in Frankfurt, Deliss proposed a series of “experimental...remediation” measures, reorganizing the materials, displaying them in ways designed to prompt critical engagement, and inviting artists to interpret them in performances and other works presented in the museum.

Hicks also advocates for major changes in curatorial practices, but he sees Western institutions’ reluctance to address their claims of ownership of artifacts pillaged in colonial raids as a form of sustained aggression, as the unfinished business of imperialism. For Hicks, to exhibit the spoils of wars waged against colonized peoples and rationalize such displays as a great educational service to the world reeks of European arrogance and extends imperial violence into the present. He describes the recent rebranding of major ethnological museums—such as the British Museum—as purveyors of “world culture” as a ploy to extract further economic gains through tourism, to deny other countries the benefit of their own cultural patrimony, and to legitimate European claims to ownership of stolen goods. It bears noting that Hicks’s book was published just weeks before David Adjaye’s architectural plans for Nigeria’s new Edo Museum of West African Art were unveiled. That museum is to be built in the center of Benin City, exactly where the bronzes were once located. The Nigerian government continues to pressure the UK to return the sculptures to their original site, and the prospect of this major new museum undermines attempts to suggest that the African nation lacks proper resources for the preservation of these treasures.

Deliss’s curatorial vision is indebted to the work of anthropologist Paul Rabinow, echoing his emphasis on the need to invent new ways for institutions to understand things human, to compensate for the flawed practices of the past through new approaches to public engagement and display, and to enable interdisciplinary research. She also cites Bruno Latour’s distinction between displays of objects that are designed to provide information about a preestablished cultural identity and performative exhibition tactics that allow viewers to imagine new interpretations of artifacts—her preference is clearly for the latter. Deliss notes that the artistic experiments of the Laboratoire Agit’Art collective in Dakar—known for its satirical exhibitions and musical and theatrical performances in the 1970s and early 1980s—are an important influence because of their interdisciplinarity and their rejection of fixed forms.

Throughout her text, Deliss offers numerous examples of the ways artists have been influenced by anthropology and how anthropology has incorporated the work of artists. She cites the writings of the

American artist Joseph Kosuth, Georges Batailles's magazine *Documents*, and Lothar Baumgarten's studies of European ethnographic museums to fortify her own suggestions for how artists might revitalize an ethnological space.

Deliss, who was born in London to French-Austrian parents, conceives of the museum as a metabolism, a living organism in which the interaction of different parts generates the functions needed for survival. To bring the museum in Frankfurt back to life, she reorganized its organs and limbs and infused it with the energies of a variety of groups: artists, members of the public, including amateur ethnologists, and students.

She gave long-hidden elements of the collection a new place in the galleries and a fresh interpretation: for example, hundreds of photographs of migrant tobacco farmworkers in Sumatra, taken by a German doctor (the museum's founding director), and photographs of African women's genitalia were reclassified to highlight nineteenth- and twentieth-century medical interest in racial typologies. Exhibition spaces were furnished with tables and seating to encourage longer and deeper engagement and discussion. Displays were given a facelift. A gastro-anthropologist was contracted to provide meals for researchers and offer courses about food preparation in different cultures. Laboratories were set up for art students to produce experimental exhibitions using the collection, and clubs were established for amateur anthropologists. Public programs were created to debate questions of provenance.

Artists such as Thomas Bayrle (whose father had participated in a "collecting expedition" to Ethiopia led by the famed archaeologist Leo Frobenius) were invited to study the artifacts and propose interventions. Some added their own works to the collection. The New Zealand artist and filmmaker Luke Willis Thompson used the production budget allotted to him as an artist in residence to finance the return of the remains of a Muslim immigrant to his homeland. The goal for Deliss in all of this was to make engagement with material culture an intellectually stimulating and socially conscious experience. She writes:

These collections can be seen as reservoirs of memories waiting for emancipation, as banks of stored code, as strata of symbolism, desire, and ingenuity and therefore as concentrates of energy whose economic value is suspended and whose circulation is hampered beyond the [museum collection].

Given that she had been asked more than once to take over the Frankfurt museum, and that those who hired her were aware of her long history of collaborating with artists on unconventional projects, Deliss assumed that she had *carte blanche* to implement changes. She soon learned otherwise. Her plans to expand the museum into an

adjacent garden were scuttled when local residents complained that the annex would require the felling of trees. Museum staff mistrusted the artists that came for month-long residencies and refused to follow the usual collecting and cataloging procedures for works the artists donated. Her decision to hire a gastro-anthropologist caused an administrative uproar. Even though Deliss notes that attendance at the museum broadened under her tenure and public and educational programs were favorably received, in the fifth year of her tenure pressure inside and outside the museum led to her being fired.

Reading Deliss's account, I did wonder if her lofty intellectual goals were too idealistic for the moment, or perhaps not economically feasible. The language used to describe her venture is unrepentantly theoretical: Was this how she conveyed her plans to the more pragmatic professionals who surrounded her at the museum? Her account does not include expressions of concern about the cost of the renovations and residencies, which seems an unusual oversight for any museum administrator. But what comes across clearly is that while many artists and members of the general public were happy to participate in her venture, conservative political forces were not pleased by the attention that Deliss's work had attracted. Perhaps they preferred the museum to remain mostly neglected.

Hicks makes his argument for repatriation from a more advantageous and less isolated position than Deliss. He is not a foreigner brought into a museum to change it—he is British and very much an insider involved in a range of European-wide efforts to repatriate looted artifacts. The founding collection of the museum at Oxford came from a former British army officer, Augustus Pitt Rivers. In the mid-nineteenth century Pitt Rivers became interested in archaeology and ethnology, and in the course of his lifetime amassed a collection of 22,000 weapons and tools from around the world, which he arranged typologically to illustrate his view of cultural evolution. Hicks devotes a portion of his book to a critique of how this treatment suggests that African tools correspond to an earlier stage of human development, and thus Africans themselves were less evolved humans. The museum currently holds over 500,000 artifacts, and until 2020 it still had shrunken heads on display.

Hicks defines the task of a decolonial anthropology as “necrography,” or forensic death writing. He wants to change the stories that the British tell about themselves and their former empire. He disputes the notion that ethnological museums are neutral containers or custodians of universal heritage, arguing instead that they are propagandistic monuments to Western superiority. He points out that while much anthropological study is informed by the theory of gift-giving as a universal human act, this focus on intentional exchange obscures the reality that European institutions are filled with stolen goods.

The
case of
the
Benin



British Museum

Study of a Benin Bronze plaque showing two officials with raised swords, Edo, Benin Kingdom, Nigeria, circa 1530–1570

Bronzes serves as an example of a broader phenomenon; because the thousands of treasures were extracted during a single punitive expedition, it is easy for Hicks to trace how they were trafficked throughout Europe and to shape the details into a coherent narrative. His necrography is divided into three main parts: an analysis of the 1897 expedition, an exposé of the looting and subsequent trafficking of the bronzes, and reflections on the museum's ties to militarist-corporate colonialism in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and global capitalism in the present. According to Hicks, "*as the border is to the nation state so the museum is to empire.*"

Britain established the Oil River Protectorate in Nigeria in 1884, and the Royal Niger Company ruled there authorized by charter, extracting increasing amounts of palm oil and palm kernels, a crucial ingredient of soap and an industrial lubricant, as well as ivory, mahogany, and various resins. For Hicks, the historical justification for the 1897 expedition was based on a distorted and even false representation of the course of events. The official story was that nine British officials were massacred when they tried to meet with the Oba of Benin to

negotiate an increase in trade, prompting the “small war” carried out by British military in retaliation. This version, predicated on the idea that whites were the true victims, obscures both the scale of the violence against Benin and the ulterior motives for the British invasion.

Britain’s principal reason for invading Benin, according to Hicks, was to remove the Oba and the fetish priests who imposed limits on British trade. Plans to carry this out preceded the killing of the British officials. The scale of destruction of the Kingdom of Benin was enormous: tens of thousands were killed, the entire city of Benin was razed, the ruler was expelled, and the priests were publicly executed. Not only were existing conventions of warfare violated by the indiscriminate killing and destruction of sacred sites, but the British also kept no records of prisoners of war or casualties, outbreaks of disease and starvation, or refugee camps, which would have been standard for postwar accounting. It would seem that they did not believe African survivors worthy of the treatment accorded to most other groups in wartime.

That five thousand soldiers and vastly superior weaponry were deployed in response to the killing of nine British subjects is evidence to Hicks that the goal was to annihilate a society, not to punish a foreign leader. The British even claimed the moral high ground in the conflict, excusing their carnage by saying they were suppressing heathen barbarity, cannibalism, and illegal slave trading. Meanwhile, the deliberate desecration of sacred royal mortuary monuments and the looting of treasures transformed a living sacred site into an archaeological ruin.

To Hicks, the combination of destruction and theft makes the 1897 raid an act of “disaster capitalism,” in Naomi Klein’s phrase, a practice that he says continues as contemporary multinational corporations profit from natural and manmade upheavals. For example, he draws parallels between the pursuit of palm oil in Benin and the pursuit of crude oil in Iraq. The Royal Niger Company came under the control of Unilever in the 1930s and remained one of its subsidiaries until 1987. After that it was absorbed into Unilever, which continues to produce several palm-oil-based personal care and food products. The best-known product originally derived from palm oil, however, is Palmolive soap, owned by Colgate-Palmolive. While Palmolive soap no longer contains palm oil, other products produced by the company still do. According to a 2016 Amnesty International Report, although both Unilever and Colgate claim that their products contain only sustainable palm oil, the oil from an Indonesian-based supplier was produced by child labor and forced labor. In response to that report, Colgate-Palmolive issued a statement promising to terminate contracts with suppliers engaged in such abusive practices.

The story that lies behind the Benin Bronzes is chilling. Hicks explains that there are no definitive records of how many royal and sacred objects were extracted or where they all are now. In the aftermath of the raid, the British claimed that selling artifacts allowed them to pay the expenses they incurred. Treasures were sold by traders and colonial administrators and brought back by British soldiers, some of whom turned over their booty to specialized dealers and auctioneers. Within seven months of the punitive expedition, looted artifacts from Benin were exhibited in London. The fact of their display is for Hicks only part of the problem: it is the way such artifacts are exhibited, coupled with the reluctance of curators to divulge what they know about their provenance and the defensive strategies of museums that refuse to relinquish them, that turn the stolen objects into what he calls “unfinished events.”

Hicks believes that the ways African artifacts are exhibited generate an image of otherness, casting African cultures as distinctly primitive. Cultural and geographic differences have been rendered temporal, because the living culture of Benin was, from the objects’ first presentation in England, treated as a set of archaeological remains from the distant past. Exhibitions of such stolen artifacts have also supported pseudoscientific racial theories and normalized “the display of human cultures in material form.” Racist thinking embedded in Western ethnological knowledge propagated an “ideology...of cultural degeneracy” with regard to the civilization that was ransacked. This, Hicks argues, constitutes a “chronopolitics” that denies Africa “a place in the contemporary world.”

While few would claim to hold onto this kind of thinking in the present day, contemporary resistance to repatriation among institutions, curators, and some government officials bespeaks a view of Africa that is still informed by racist ideology and imperial hubris. Hicks lists three common arguments against returning artifacts. The first is that they were taken in accordance with values of another era and thus ownership is legitimate, and restitution would violate Britain’s entitlement to its property. The second argument claims that returning the objects would endanger them because Africans can’t be trusted to care for their treasures, and the third rejects the idea that the looting was an attack on African sovereignty, calling this view too “political.”

Hicks argues persuasively that this kind of neocolonialist reasoning undergirds the 2002 statement entitled “Declaration on the Importance and Value of Universal Museums,” which was signed by eighteen European and American museums, including the Getty Museum and the Whitney Museum of American Art. He calls the idea of the universal museum a “charter myth,” a form of institutional self-justification:

The Declaration emerged as part of a wider instrumentalization of “heritage” and culture as soft power in the rhetoric of multicultural and global exchanges, including international loans as a kind of cultural diplomacy, during the so-called “war on terror” launched by the Blair and Bush administrations, using the universalist storyline to operationalize museums as global spaces in the era of what George W. Bush described as “a new world order.”

The good news for Hicks is that conservatives are losing ground. African demands for repatriation began more than eighty years ago, and the Nigerian government continues to purchase stolen artifacts at auction. The pressure on European and American museums has increased in recent years as public opinion has shifted and now favors repatriation. Hicks notes that despite the rhetoric about preserving “world culture” collections for the public good, for decades many museums have been discreetly returning human remains to descendants and repatriating artifacts to “source communities.” For example, several museums (including the British Museum and the Victoria and Albert Museum) have returned thousands of cultural artifacts to Aboriginal communities in Australia. The Smithsonian has two repatriation offices and has returned human remains and artifacts to Native American communities and to indigenous communities in New Zealand.

But Hicks wants museums to do more. He heralds the current moment as the end “of innocence and complacency.” He calls for a revision of the euphemistic descriptions of colonial violence and looting in the wall texts that support museum displays, noting that the Metropolitan does not even mention the 1897 raid in its label for the Benin Bronze it owns. He seeks to usher in a national process of reflection on “colonial ultraviolence” and its links to contemporary global disaster capitalism. Finally, he would like to turn anthropological museums into “sites of remembrance” where the return of stolen treasures would be memorialized through new works by contemporary artists. Like Deliss, Hicks invokes the restorative power of art to attend to traumatic violence and loss. For those who still bear the weight of these colonial legacies today, Hicks’s urgent, lucid, and brilliantly enraged book feels like a long-awaited treatise on justice. ■

Coco Fusco

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