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Trafficking Vague Cosmological Boundaries: Towards Knowing Experiential Relationality in Museum Epistemics

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This article seeks inspiration in engaging with African art works displayed amongst sculptures and paintings from European pasts in Berlin's Bode Museum 2017–2019. Concepts at play in designing that exhibition, deriving from both history and philosophy of art and anthropology, expressed a modern spacetime cosmology. As is the modern way, it focussed on what it took to be various cultural and social qualities of the art works assumed to be objects, ›real lumps of matter set in spacetime‹ – universal common sense. I offer a reading of the exhibition that arose in knowing otherwise than in this modern common-sense way. Reading the displays as enacting a multiversal relationality, I aim to inspire museum curators to develop an alternative epistemic demeanour as they face challenges of decolonising. I propose this will involve curatorial analyses and interpretations that begin in incommensuration, and work through knowing experiential relationality.

Opened in 1904, Berlin's Bode Museum keeps largely to its original design. Apart from the temporary exhibitions display space in its basement, the building houses a series of period rooms with the decor of each designed to show artworks from Europe's classical, byzantine, gothic, renaissance, and baroque periods, each in the unique context of its emergence as named art form. The concept of this museum, originally called the Kaiser-Friedrich-Museum, was developed by Wilhelm von Bode (1845–1929) who is recognised as carrying on the work of previous imperial European museums, for example »the papally sponsored Museo Pio-Clementina and [particularly the work] of Vivant-Denon, the Director of Napoleon's imperial museum« (Eisler 1996: 23).

Taking up the position of director of royal museums in Berlin in 1883, the display techniques Bode pioneered have been systematically developed for over a century now (Backer 1996). The collection of the Bode Museum is renowned. Neil MacGregor, former director of the British Museum, has celebrated the sculpture collection of the Bode Museum as offering »the most comprehensive display of European sculpture anywhere« (MacGregor 2006), adding that through the sculptures a visitor to the Bode Museum can witness Europe's history – aesthetic and religious, intellectual and political. The displays in the Bode exhibit the multiplicity of what historian of European art, Henri Focillon, has termed »the life of forms« in the histories of European cosmologies (Focillon 1992).

The African art with which art works inhabiting some of the Bode's rooms sang in glorious concert between October 2017 and November 2019, had been brought in from another, and much larger collection of items owned by a different branch of Berlin's powerful Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, the Ethnologisches Museum, which temporarily had no access to display space. It seems that the brief ›louding‹ of African voices that the Bode exhibition afforded, had mundane institutional origins and motivations. Notwithstanding, in this essay I recognise the exhibition as a unique and significant happening in museum history.

Such a concert of art works as that which could be experienced in a few rooms of the Bode Museum across 2018 and 2019 is a unique opportunity. Of course, it is a very different affair than the concert that happened for a few months in 1884–1885 in a building that was situated just a twenty-minute walk from the Bode Museum. That unique ›happening‹ planned

> »the European partition and conquest of Africa [...] perhaps the greatest historical movement of modern times [...] [a] phenomenon, usually associated with the rise of a ›new imperialism‹, [which] was given concrete expression [...] when the Concert of Europe assembled at Berlin,

> the capital of the newly-formed nation-state of Germany« (Uzoigwe 1984: 9).

I use the occasion of the so-called Beyond Compare. Art from Africa in the Bode-Museum[1] exhibition to attend to a much needed, and long overdue, redesign of museum epistemics. What happened when displays in galleries designed for, and dedicated to European art were interrupted by introducing African art objects? One might attend to this question in many registers and genres of judgement and critique. Here I ask the question in the light shed by the idea that museums, like all modern institutions, collectively enact themselves in expressing a modern spacetime cosmology,

> »the official physical cosmology of modernity [...] culturally marginalised at the heart of the social system by the contrary pressure exerted [...] by a progressive sensibility that sought certainty in cosmological closure. Cosmological openness was redacted [in modern institutionalisation] « (Abramson/Holbraad 2014: 11).

In the past decade or so philosophers, practitioners of science studies, social theorists, and anthropologists have been gradually ›outing‹ this formerly sealed off modern spacetime cosmology, its formerly solid socio-cultural framings are beginning to dissolve. With Karen Barad's skilful bringing of physics' relational metaphysics to the fore (Barad 2007), and the emergence of the new materialisms, a move is underway to devise and tell stories of new modern relational cosmologies. The problem of course is that on the ground – in the complicated workings of modern institutions, places like, say schools in Nigeria, or museums in Europe – it always takes more than having a new story; developing new on- the-ground epistemic practices and methods takes work. Many years ago, I found myself

struggling with the issue of the pervasive modern spacetime cosmology in Nigerian classrooms, although at first, I could not name my struggle in that way. My book Science and an African Logic tells how I came to ›see‹ and ›see through‹ the translating figure of matter set in spacetime, in conceiving numbers as uniquely different conceptual expressions of disparate cosmologies (Verran 2001: 150). Different epistemic demeanours than modern epistemics are possible, and they involve conceiving of our concepts differently and recognising how we might use concepts in negotiating vague and flimsy boundaries of cosmologies (Verran 2018: 112).

In contemporary institutions the unmarked and sealed off modern cosmology at the core of institutional functioning, is mobilised by what we might name a ›modern epistemics package‹ which gives particular answers to epistemic questions: axiological issues, ›Why is our knowledge valuable?‹; and teleological, ›What are the purposes of our knowledge making and doing?‹, for example. It involves the doing of particularly configured knowns, by particularly configured knowers, who collectively make and do modern knowledge, in answering to taken for granted ontological and epistemological standards. In operationalising museums' missions as dealers both in ›the cultural heritage of world civilisation‹ with its undergirding universalism, and in ›the national patrimony‹ with its enabling relativism this, by now past its use-by date ›modern epistemic package‹, has proved its worth for museums in the colonial and postcolonial eras.

In developing an epistemics that has utility in the period of decolonising that has now hit museums like a tidal wave (Maples 2020), here I elaborate the claim that museums must undertake substantial epistemic renovation. In this makeover, different sorts of answers will need to be found in negotiation with ›others‹. Of course, this will require some tricky work in recognising who or what ›the others‹ are, and how they might be negotiated with. In particular, I argue that, ontologically speaking, the entities museums know through and with, need to be explicitly

recognised and attended to. Ontologically, the entities museums need now are not objects that have the property of being universal in expressing a state of cosmological universalism in their being, as is necessitated by claims of world civilizational heritage. Nor, alternatively, are objects with the property of being culturally relative in expressing a state of a different, hermetically sealed cosmological specificity, or historical uniqueness, as required by arguments of national patrimony, suitable for museum operations nowadays. Rather, museums need to devise ways and means of ›happening‹ knowns as expressions of relationality in embedding a multiversal relationism in their being (Verran in preparation). Such an epistemics would befit museums as liminal multiversal institutions in beginning to live up to their task of negotiating boundaries of cosmologies in doing a canny cosmopolitics, opening up possibilities for inventing new worlds.

Unvergleichlich. Kunst aus Afrika im Bode-Museum/ Beyond Compare. Art from Africa in the Bode-Museum

Bode Museum displays have expressed a contradictory approach towards cosmologies from its inception. Inheriting the imperial mantle, the universalistic side of the modern constitution has been the natural domain of its operations since the beginning. Indeed, in 1995, while celebrating the 150-year anniversary of Bode's birth, such ambitions, along with an unwillingness to take on a relativist epistemic ethos more suited to a postcolonial world were made obvious. »The cosmic goals [of the institution for which] only an ensemble of universally accepted ›master- pieces‹ from all over the [...] world was uniquely adequate, [were] the ambitions of Bode's employer« (Eisler 1996: 32), the implication being, that such cosmic goals were still valid in 1990s. This institutional ethos in its period displays proposes its art objects as expressions of the many diverse cosmologies that historically have animated the past polities of Europe. Yet, these cosmologies can only ever be mere steps on the way to a triumphant European modernity, with its powerful but backroom, instrumentalist spacetime cosmology, which the Bode Museum as a whole

represents.

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Fig. 1 and 2: The Bode Museum enacts modernity's cosmic goals. Staatliche Museen zu Berlin–Preußischer Kulturbesitz. Skulpturensammlung und Museum für Byzantinische Kunst. Photo: Antje Voigt, Berlin.

Across the two years of the Beyond Compare exhibition, the very first display case that most visitors to the museum would come across, located in the Museum's Grand Basiiica entrance hall, explicitly performed the museum and its modern ethos. Two bronze/ brass figures sat side-by-side in a single display case: »Putto with a Tambourine«, by fifteenth-century Italian artist Donatello, sat beside »Statue of the Goddess Irhevbu or Princess Edeleyo«, made in the Kingdom of Benin sometime in the seventeenth or eighteenth century. In this display, visitors were instructed through engagement in an institutionally reflexive exercise.

The explanation provided for this display contrasted the institutional accessionings of the objects by two separate museum collections, evidenced in the African art object carrying its accession number and other markings on its shoulder and back, in a spidery white-ink tattoo. At the beginning of the twentieth century one object was categorized as art object, the other as ethnographic object. The explanatory text accompanying the display uses the juxtaposition to comparatively describe how each item was treated by the institution of the state museum: the one as art, and the other as cultural artifact exemplifying ›otherness‹, infused with the ›less-than-ness‹ implicit in European imperialism and colonizing – as ethnographic object.

Despite being delighted by the juxtaposition of these objects I had three critical reactions to this display. First with this exhibition threshold display, the museum as modern

Fig. 3: Putto with a Tambourine, by fifteenth-century Italian artist Donatello, sits beside Statue of the Goddess Irhevbu or Princess Edeleyo, made in the Kingdom of Benin sometime in the seventeenth or eighteenth century. Staatliche Museen zu Berlin–Preußischer Kulturbesitz. Skulpturensammlung und Museum für Byzantinische Kunst. Photo: Wolfgang Gülcker, Berlin

institution proposed itself the main focus of the exhibition; second, it is yet another rehearsal of the old modern science progress story: we used to think we knew the truth, but then the true truth emerged, and we realized we were mistaken back then; and third the display papers over the assumption that both objects remain the cultural property of the German State, despite implicit recognition of the dubious morality of the exchanges that enabled passage of the Benin goddess/princess from Benin City to Berlin. I come back to this display – the art objects deserve better than this.

In the substantive elements of the exhibition, the curators of *Beyond Compare*,

Jonathan Fine and Paola Ivanov developed two different display frameworks (cf. Chapuis/ Fine/Ivanov 2017) mobilising what in the modern cosmology are proposed as universal cultural categories, arising in what modern analytic philosophy names as »universal canons of thought and action« (Wiredu 1996: 1). The museum's special exhibitions gallery on the ground floor assembled a large number of both African and European sculptures, dating from the sixteenth to the twentieth century, in rather a small space. The accompanying interpretive material listed and explained the groupings: »The Others«, »Aesthetics«, »Gender – or the multiplicity of the person«, »Protection and Guidance«, »Performance«, and »Taking Leave«. In this way they elaborated a conceptual framing which connected. These conceptual categories then became the means to compare and contrast. This is a top-down application of categories assumed as universal. The second element of the exhibition consisted of twenty-two displays scattered in sixteen separate galleries across the first and second floors of the building. Here the terms of comparison were said to arise from universal properties embedded in works themselves. Some pairs were compared and contrasted on aesthetic criteria, others on social grounds. Here the universal categories work, so to say, bottom-up.

In this essay I read against the grain of the of curators' intentions. While they take an empirical approach in a deliberative attending to the artworks as objects that might be indexed, I experience the artworks in alternative mode. Mobilizing the typology of experiential possibilities developed by American philosopher C. S. Peirce, I take the artworks as expressions of iconicity. To experience the iconic, one must develop capacities to experience prior to conceptualising, learning to trust ontic experience of experience (Christie/Verran 2013: 304). In proposing this approach, I do not seek to replace, but to expand the epistemic repertoire of curators.

In beginning I acknowledge the brilliant artfulness of Bode's display techniques as in large part affording my (mis)reading. In recognising their artful display techniques, I discern that the curators seem to know more than they know they know. In

suggesting that museum curators need to renovate museums' epistemic practices I am proposing that curators learn to make explicit in epistemic talk, what it is they already seem to know about the lives and ways of forms in art objects. In the past I have made explicit some different ways and means in working with numbers; museum curators can make explicit different ways and means of working epistemically with museum objects.

Later in this essay, I offer an ethnographic narrative of experiencing the exhibition within an explicitly translating cosmology that expresses a multiversal relationality (Verran 2018). This reading does not pretend to review the exhibition, the voice here is not that of the ›every-visitor‹; on the contrary. Taking multiversality seriously, the reading enacts the claim that ours is, and always has been a world of many worlds. In both subsuming it and revealing it as just one possibility, in this framing the modern epistemics mobilising universals enacted in expressing modern spacetime cosmology, through which the ex- hibit has been deliberatively designed, is parochialized. Rather than the usual approach of adopting a demeanour of epistemic good will afforded by unremarked epistemic bad faith, the multiversal relationality mobilised in narrating my experience of the exhibition, amounts to an expression of epistemic good faith enabled by initially and explicitly indulging a transient, knowing epistemic bad will (Blaser/de la Cadena 2018: 11; Verran 2018: 113). Featuring explicit and minimalist metaphysical commitments, this translating cosmology is nothing more and nothing less.

Bringing to the fore art works' existential relationality refuses to begin in a postulated conceptualised sameness. Ontic distinction is acknowledged as framing experience, while recognising possibilities for experience of partial and oscillating connection. Epistemics expressing this posited general multiversal relationality, involves relations enacted knowingly outside of/without universalism and relativism which are epistemics packages precipitated within the modern spacetime cosmology (Verran 2001: 32). Recognising that there are many ways to experience any

exhibition, and that eisegesis is both legitimate, and an expression of profound respect both for the art works displayed and the art of the display work, in my idiosyncratic reading of the effects of the constellation of artworks assembled in several rooms of the Bode Museum given over to the *Beyond Compare* exhibition, I offer an auto-ethnographic narrative; a story of experiencing which I propose as ethnographic data. The experiencing has been purposefully contrived as experiencing outside a modern spacetime cosmology which ontologically prescribes particular forms for knower, known and knowledge (Verran 2001: 34). Instead, it is experiential knowing contrived within a cosmology of multiversal relationality.

I made four visits to the exhibition across a year, each visit taking up the better part of a day. Downloading the exhibition app, I devised a means to attend to the items, and experience the displays in ways that, while cognizant of the curator's categories, simultaneously actively sought to evade them. In this way I contrived to develop a sort of multiversal double vision (Verran 2021a). Such contriving is always particular to a situation, and when it comes to application of this experiential methodology, the beauty of museum exhibition spaces is that replications are possible. The story of epistemically experiencing the exhibition, which I present here, can be understood as making particular passage out of apory (aporia) felt as infernal chaotic confusion that only deepened across the year of my visits. I tell my story here insisting that such a contriving of one's own experience of a museum exhibition, is analogue to museum staff setting about explicitly designing ›visitor experience‹. Mobilising a modern spacetime cosmology they contrived comparison between the objects understood as modern objects, lumps of matter with particular attributes and 'qualities, I choose to know otherwise (Verran 2014).

Beginning in Knowing Experiential Aporetics

Institutionally it is difficult to insist that epistemics begins in recognizing difference because it amounts to insisting on beginning in a ›not knowing‹, in the experience of apory. Experientially apory is singular, particular and situated; one always begins off

balance, on the back foot.

To experience apory is to recognise that passage, going on, is blocked; we are epistemically disconcerted, suffering negative affect when it comes to epistemics. Knowing experiential aporetics is the name I have coined for the first step towards the knowing otherwise of multiversal relationality. The aporiá of the Meno in Plato's Socratic dialogue is an epistemic emptiness; at that moment, a knower knows nothing, does not know what to think or say or do next; a paralysis, numbness results. There is no path in sight. But, a different kind of aporia, or apory to simplify the English term, is to recognise that one has lost one's way, and is confused; there are too many paths from which to choose. Different still is apory experienced when one cannot see a path, but acknowledge that others do. Of course, there is also apory in which the path is apparent, but most knowers are not willing to follow it, perhaps because the destination is unknown, perhaps because it is known and unpleasant. Any or all these experiential apories might come into play in knowing experiential aporetics.

The first step in knowing otherwise than through the epistemics package of the modern spacetime cosmology, and in beginning to enact a multiversal relationality, is becoming comfortable with epistemic apory, learning to relax and not panic. In chapter one of Science and an African Logic, I tell of such panic, and how narrating the experience of epistemic disconcertment turned out to be a form of therapy (Verran 2001: 23). I contrived this shift in ›doing difference‹ in social sciences many years ago now, and since then I have been developing my skills in this regard, a knowing experiential aporetics lies at the core of a multiversally competent epistemics. This story of participants struggling to do difference together and experiencing apory in the field might help here, in that it offers some terms needed to develop a path together and to muddle a way out of apory (Verran 2008).

The arcane concept of the ontic, what ontology studies, is part and parcel of knowingly working with experiential apory. But note ontic here is quite other than

the concept as used by other philosophers. The ontic of multiversal relationality is certainly not the ontic of phenomenologists with their commitments to the universalism of a modern cosmology. One way to introduce the ontic of multiversal relationality is to connect it with the puzzling comments Wittgenstein made about knowing-doing in his very last writings.

> »[...] I meet with someone whom I have not seen for years; I see him clearly but fail to know him. Suddenly I know him, I see the old face in the altered one [...] Is this a special sort of seeing? Is it a case of both seeing and thinking? Or an amalgam of the two, as I should like to say? The question is: why does one want to say this?« (Wittgenstein 1958 IIxi: 197e).

My answer to Wittgenstein here would be this. »I say this because this ›thinking-seeing‹, or ›knowing-looking‹ points to the actuality of an experiential ontic relationality: I know I know the face before I conceptualise the manifestation as the face of my friend«. Here Wittgenstein is presenting us with a case of a conceptual ontic knowing (Verran 2021b).

In institutional work, attending to epistemics experientially by beginning in apory makes it possible to go on to interfere in ontological happenings, and effect ontological shifts in our concepts as the knowns we work with and through. It is possible to do this knowingly if we suspend our habitual ways of beginning empirical inquiry, and commence instead by cultivating an ethos of respectful, careful epistemic incommensuration in learning to relax in apory. Different ontological entities can be knowingly happened in situations as knowns in collective knowledge making and doing, and in this way futures different than pasts can be generated.

Encounters that generate epistemic apory involve many participants – knowers and non-knowers. To engage the epistemic experiencing of multiversal relationality requires two moves of knowing participants in the encounter. First, a decomposing

step of not knowing as they ordinarily would, as a modern thinker or otherwise. Second, it requires participants to compose what emerges in the encounter (Verran 2018: 25). The first requirement is expression of epistemic bad will, it involves cultivating a feeling of canny attentiveness to one's own habits of knowing. The itch, always present, to propose one's own common-sense must be systematically rejected, so as to think difference. Knowingly exercising epistemic bad will, a knower becomes able to both recognise the demands of their knowledge habits, and to refuse to implement them. In doing this they can acquire a capacity to attend to what emerges in the here and now of the epistemic space opened in the encounter. This is the stage for the practice of the second requirement, enactment of epistemic good faith. This second step expresses epistemic commitment to articulate interpretation within the conditions that constitute the here and now of the encounter itself. Acknowledging that, ontologically speaking, participants emerge self-different than what they were as knowers, while remaining aware of what their back-then-there knowing selves were. When difference is done together, none of the heterogeneous knowing participants becomes the other, yet they do not remain only what they were either. Another such telling of this approach has been composed by colleagues Blaser and de la Cadena (2018: 11) in their helpful explicating of my telling of practices involved in doing this with respect to the encounter of developing an innovative school mathematics curriculum with my Yolngu Aboriginal colleagues in the 1980s and 1990s (Verran 2018). In beginning expression of epistemic good faith, the re-composing stage, six epistemic questions can provide guidance (Raasch/Lippert 2020). These are questions traditionally asked of epistemics, but of course asking these questions is merely an organising device, the fantasy of answering any one in anything more than a partial and vague way, in actually enacting answers, should not be entertained – wordy discourse is not a valued outcome of this sort of knowledge doing and making.

In any recomposing, axiological and teleological questions are important: asking ›Why and for whom might knowledge, generated in any re-composing, be significant

and valuable?‹, and ›What purposes might be served by knowledge generated in recomposing?‹, and perhaps more important ›Whose purposes are these?‹ Answers to methodological and epistemological questions might also need attention. ›How to tell how this knowledge is generated?‹ and ›How to be certain enough it is knowledge?‹ But most significant of all in generating knowledge for futures different than pasts are ontological questions. ›What is known here?‹ and ›How are knowers configured?‹. These are the questions that for the most part have guided my use of this approach, but a younger generation of researchers following this approach is focussing on others. They focus more on questions of whose epistemic purposes and values, and how particular epistemic interests might be pursued (Spencer 2019; Smolka 2020; Smolka/Fisher/Hausstein 2021).

The experience of apory featured in each of my four visits to the *Unvergleichlich. Kunst aus Afrika im Bode-Museum/Beyond Compare. Art from Africa in the Bode-Museum exhibition*. Having surveyed the whole early on, I spent my time in different rooms. I chose specific rooms to train myself in what, following Wittgenstein I name as a particular ›thinking-seeing‹ or ›knowing-looking‹, selecting displays I felt connected to. These became my co-participants in beginning the process of working my way out of the experience of epistemic apory the exhibition wrought with me. What I offer in the next section is a decomposing, a story of finding words to negotiate passage out of uncomfortable experiences that I had in the museum. In this paper I do not offer recomposition on the basis of this carefully assembled experiential story data; interpretation of the unusual experience of this Bode exhibition I strove to contrive, is not part of this paper. That is not my purpose in this article, and in any case, it is not work for me, or any other person to do alone. That, I hope, is the work that collectives will do in making museum futures different than pasts.

A Story of Encounters with Bode's *Beyond Compare* Displays

Like all visitors to the Beyond Compare exhibition on each of my four visits, my

experience begins with the display situated on its threshold. Along with my critical response to the explicit, wordy curatorial framing, I also recognize the curators know more than they are saying, or perhaps more than they know they know. Having worked with epistemic, in particular ontological, disconcertment for many years, in coming upon this display I feel a vivid delight in the juxtaposition: visual similarities connect – color, size, human body shape and even posture. But these similarities, material-semiotic superficialities in the meaning-making context of art, lie within an overall profound incommensurability. As art, each figure actively repels the other, yet it is difficult to discern where those tense mutually repellent forces arise, let alone discern their form. For me the display generates a moment of wonder: I feel that here indeed I am experiencing something that truly goes beyond compare. This sense of a form of cosmological concertation, a moment of commensuration, arrives reliably with each visit; it disconcerts me. I feel sure that I am not the only looker who experiences delight, and assume the location of this display signals that. This in part leads me to suspect the curators do know how to know differently.

In this moment of wonder, initially I feel keenly a lack of training in reading works of either European or African art. Yet I am emboldened by the systematic training in engaging with cosmology that I received over many years from my Yolngu Aboriginal Australian senior colleagues. From the very first, they generously offered tuition which invariably proceeded through art forms. My reading of and about the work of French philosopher Henri Bergson also heartens me. In Bergson, art is the answer in philosophy not the question; he argues that analytic possibilities arise in extension and expansion of disciplined training by an intuition grounded in that disciplined thinking (Guerlac 2017: 42; Jancsry 2019: 76). But what fortifies me most in this new venture, is that I know I know how to cultivate ontic experience of the exhibition, wordless experiencing, albeit within a particular language world. Long ago I learned from some helpful Nigerian children, bilingual in Yorba and English, that the ontic is not only knowingly habitable, but also that one's navigation within it happens in particular language worlds, albeit wordlessly, and further, that such navigation might be spoken of (Verran 2007). For me the ontic has become but one aspect of the

fractalizing interface of multiversal relationality.

All four of my visits to the exhibition leave me uncomfortably disconcerted. My first visit is given over to surveying the exhibition, subsequent visits focus on particular rooms. In visits two and three I focus on the paired displays in rooms 108 and 208 respectively. I choose these in large part because I have travelled to Benin and Ashanti, the areas the African works in those two rooms hail from. Visiting the lively workshops of artists that could still be found there in the late twentieth century, I purchased small tourist art pieces as mementos of my visits. I have never visited Italy or Belgium, the places of origin of the European companion pieces of these African sculptures, here I can only trust I absorbed enough in my school history of art lessons, and in experiencing the gothic in Christian church architecture. On visit four the room of interest is 209, and in this visit I explicitly experiment with the form of my attention, in part in response to feeling I have made no headway in negotiating my way out of the apory the exhibition provokes.

In room 108, the Beyond Compare display features two wooden figures, ›dolls‹ is the word that comes to mind; both smallish yet still human baby-sized. One is pinkish, round and invitingly cuddly from fourteenth century Perugia, the other all head and arms with a face that demands attention, from nineteenth century Asante. I am drawn to each through feeling a sense of connection to the women for whom these figures mattered, whom I learn about from the notes provided (Sears 2017). But no moment of commensuration arises between the two as works of art. I come away from the display with a sense of failure and disconcertment. I have no idea how to begin to think these two partially together as art, while respecting their profound difference as expressions of disparate cosmologies. A similar sense of failure is complicated by feelings of disgust and horror as I take my leave of the display in room 208. The display »Portrait Heads« has a sixteenth century bronze memorial head of an Oba of Benin stolen by an unknown British soldier during a brutal collective act of British imperial perfidy; and a wooden, fifteenth century sculpture, a

relic or, perhaps, a reliquary, a life-like portrait of the head of the Biblical figure John the Baptist, seemingly still in the act of dying. In the case of the first object, I find it almost impossible to separate the art work from the story of its journey from Benin to Berlin. In the second, the gory sculptural detail of a European type head on a plate seems to exactly capture the horror of the story of the perfidy of Herod and imperial Rome. Again, while recognising that each figure perhaps brilliantly expresses a particular cosmology, no matter that I struggle for a thinking-seeing, or a knowing-looking, I admit failure; the stories get in my way. I know not how to look partially in this situation, no partially commensurable lively forms are see-able by me.

Fig. 4: The stories of John the Baptist and the Oba of Benin dominate. Staatliche Museen zu Berlin–Preußischer Kulturbesitz. Skulp- turensammlung und Museum für Byzantinische Kunst. Photo: Wolfgang Gülcker, Berlin.

On my fourth and final visit to the exhibition in August 2019, I find the *Beyond*

Compare exhibition displays are being dismantled. Fortunately, the displays on the second floor remain untouched, so the experiment in experiencing I have been planning is still feasible. I am headed for gallery 209, a display space that I know well, having lingered in it on previous visits. There, in the center of the room is a pair of objects that feature in the exhibition's advertising. The Bwiti figure made in the nineteenth century within the Bwiti community of the Kota or Kele´people in the Republic of Congo or in Gabon, one of that pair, seems to be the darling of the exhibition. The companion piece in the display, a reliquary bust of a bishop made in Brussels in 1520, seems to be merely a foil. On previous visits I had observed that visitors often lingered in the room of this display.

My experiment in thinking-seeing is designed so that I might experience the room both in its parts and in its wholeness, and also engage the art objects both in their individuality and in their being items displayed together. As I enter the gallery, I begin by confining my attention to objects in the room's periphery. In addition to the Beyond Compare object pair, this gallery is designed to display gothic-era art objects depicting Christian religious iconography. It contains a total of twenty-three art pieces, mostly delicate wood sculptures. As I make my way around the walls, it seems to me that the objects compete, each subject matter proclaiming itself as the most pious, each piece aiming for a realistic expression of Christian religious piety. For the most part, female piety is on display here: St. Ursula arraigned Christ-like on a cross, or protecting supplicants in the folds of her cloak; clusters of women tending the lolling dead body of the Christ; beautiful young European women playing with the baby Christ-figure; clusters of women reading out of books. Male piety is featured in just three displays. In two of these we see men reading off scrolls, and in the third a large figure of archangel Michael is slaying a writhing devil.

After photographing each of these accompanying objects with my phone, I retreat to a far corner, drawing a reprimand from the security guard as I make to lean back against the wall. My aim with this uncharacteristic gallery behavior is to try to

experience ›the room‹. In contrast to my previous viewing of the ›resident‹ objects, from this position I want to bring the display of the whole of the room into focus, vague though this must be. Now the Beyond Compare pair are in the picture; I am facing the diminutive Bwiti figure. Watching other people enter the room, I see that the Bwiti figure draws a visitor's eye. Placed at the room's center, it changes the room; it conducts and concerts its companion art objects. Forms wrought in many different times and places by unknown knowing-doing human hands, in the ways human hands have in making art, sing in concert.

The dissonance I have previously experienced in the implicit competition for attention (God's?) in the gothic-era Christian objects turns to a calm around the Bwiti figure. It seems quiet and still in comparison to those around it. A tenderness emanates from its smooth bronze colored metallic surface. Shifting my gallery-gaze to include the reliquary bishop, the pair present a simultaneously both ›yon‹, beyond each other, and yet ›par‹, each other's equal. I muse that perhaps this seeing is specifically what the exhibition title refers to; what it indexes. Then, focusing solely on the bishop, the bust suddenly seems tawdry; the banality of its mimetic, realistic representation of some actual bishop, has me almost laughing out loud, but I am aware of the rather aged, hovering guard keeping me squarely in his sights.

My experiment in knowing-looking over, I retreat to the bookshop and a cup of tea. As I browse through the exhibition catalogue, I feel the inevitable sadness of goodbyes. These objects, many no doubt stolen from the African places in which they first came to life, or at very least exchanged in conditions where power was distributed very unevenly, will not be in this museum space next time I visit – coming to life, calling out or not, to the objects that surround them. I cheer myself with the thought that at least some of the art works might in the next few years, make their way back to their places of origin.

Museums Cultivating a New Epistemic Demeanour

My reading of the displays of the Beyond Compare exhibition refused to begin by assuming all objects in the displays necessarily are objects in the common sense of the modern

Fig. 5: The diminutive Bwiti Figure lights up the room. Staatliche Museen zu Berlin– Preußischer Kulturbesitz. Skulpturensammlung und Museum für Byzantinische Kunst. Photo: Wolfgang Gülcker, Berlin.

spacetime cosmology. I refused to focus on the entities I met as ›real lumps of matter set in spacetime‹ expressing various cultural and social qualities by which the objects might be compared and contrasted. I chose instead to cultivate experiential apory, to experience epistemic emptiness when confronted with the manifestations that were museum displays. I mobilised an alternative epistemic demeanour as I faced the challenge of engaging these manifestations in unknowing, attempting to offer opportunity for the manifestations themselves to announce their own terms. And indeed, that is what happened. I found I could learn how to look knowingly so

that terms of manifestation of the entities in that singular situation, could be read, and the displays known in a non-modern way. As I learned to do this in passing my days amongst the displays, I discerned signs that the curators who had designed this exhibition had indeed already learned to engage with the artworks in the ways I was laboriously contriving. This of course, is not a surprising finding to arise from my experiment.

I propose the cosmology of my reading as a translating cosmology. I do NOT propose my reading, afforded as it is within a radically minimalist, partial modern cosmology, as a substantive cosmology. It is salient to epistemics, only albeit a politically inflected epis- temics. Importantly, ontologically speaking it is utterly promiscuous; it can connect to any and all other readings which, in their manifold differences are necessarily cosmological. This translating cosmology, better proposed as an experiential methodology, proposes only a partial, limited and ephemeral commensurability which can nevertheless be reliably experienced. Such ontic experience reading artworks as icons fraught with difference, is enough to become a solid basis for politico-epistemic negotiation. Its explicit acknowledgement is crucial in allowing curatorial analyses and interpretations that begin in an incommensuration that opens up, rather than a posited commensuration that seals off.

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Footnotes

[1]Despite the title the epistemic design of the exhibition was comparative through and through.

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