Mark Münzel

Basket, Earthenware Jug, Cross

The baskets rebelled: "'Humans deal with us very poorly. When they no longer need us, they throw us away. Animals step all over us, the pigs and dogs. Then they throw us in the fire and burn us. I propose that we hide from the humans.' [...] They emptied themselves and left the house. After a time, the woman of the house came from the plantation with manioc and bananas. The baskets had not moved far away. They heard how the woman said, 'Who took away my baskets? Where should I store everything?' The baskets laughed, but then they returned, because the disorder in the house was too great without them. 'And who threw away everything that was in you?' asked the woman. 'We did it, and it was right,' said the baskets."

This is how the Tacana in eastern Bolivia call for respect for objects. "The earthenware jugs were especially evil. They ate the people. Even today, the bones of the eaten people can be found in the large vessels deep in the earth." And the consequence? "The people, too, rose up against each other and wanted to kill and eat each other." (Source references in the endnotes, here endnote[1].) Is this what is currently happening in Berlin?

But sometimes objects expose a remnant of attentiveness in us. In a play by Colette (1925, Music by Ravel), a child torments animals, pushes over a grandfather clock, tears the wallpaper from the wall, and smashes porcelain. Objects and animals retaliate. In the scuffle, a squirrel is injured. And then the naughty child feels remorse and bandages the paw of the injured creature. When the objects and animals see that, they bring the child back to its mama.[2]

Ravel implements this story by having each animal appear with its own respective

musical style. If he had set the discussion about the Humboldt Forum to music, he might have used proud fanfares for the hymns praising some museum or other as a model. In the mythical Africa of Frazer and Frobenius, songs of praise are sung for the young successor after the murder of the old king. In German museums, fanfares praise the new Director (or "Artistic Director") with his new concept as the beginning of a new era – preferably with the good old rhetorical figure: fresh wind against old dust in the showcases. But since the concept of the savior Humboldt Forum is still vague, the paeans refer in part only quite generally to the savior, but in part also to new concepts in other museums or to discussions of new concepts. And Berlin can live with cloudy projects: "Everyone walks around and is full of big projects and plans really big things," Tucholsky already observed in 1920 and quoted Kipling on the monkeys: "They boast and chatter and pretend that they are a great people about to do great affairs."[3]

The debate is predominantly *postcolonial*, which is no longer so new. And if the rule is true that an approach that is applied to everything and anything has entered its last phase, then what A.E. Jensen wrote is valid again here: "When the light of an idea is extinguished, then the formations that originally belong to it are dissolved from the context and are extinguished or remain as individual and separate phenomena."[4] Erhard In the discussion about the Humboldt Forum, Erhard Schüttpelz takes a similar view of the "sunken cultural good of '*writing culture*'" (this blog 17 Oct. '17) – "sunken cultural good" is a term from German ethnology (Volkskunde) for relics of forgotten contexts that have fossilized as folklore, quotations of quotations.

The victory of the new concept museum over the old ethnological museum is morally underpinned by the criticism of the latter's art theft. The robbery occurred in the colonial era, and the ethnologist Michel Leiris already criticized it at that time (on this, see Hans-Jürgen Heinrichs, F.A.Z. 22 Dec. '17); but for decades now today's

ethnological museums have worked cooperatively together with the descendants of the robbed or simply with the researched people, like (to mention only Martin Porr's example, blog 28 Nov. '17) between museums in Berlin and Frankfurt, the Frobenius Institute, and the institutions of Australian Aborigines. But that is dull, if only because museums speak with indigenous people about old objects – instead of repeating old concepts.

Objects are dull. So it is not even asked what a museum begins its planning with: what objects do I find there, and what potential is in them? In Berlin, that would have been easy to find out, because the Ethnological Museum has published numerous catalogs with descriptions of objects and their backgrounds and has posted an initially small, but growing number of its objects in the Internet with their photos and brief descriptions.[5] This would enable planning – but that would mean looking at objects, rather than concepts about society, about history, about everything and anything. Most of the discussants are proper Neo-Platonists for whom the thing is impure and earthly and only the idea points the way to heavenly glory. And so they keep on conceiving without even a fleeting look at the objects. After all, the artifacts don't even come from Prussia. To understand them, one would have to delve into a background other than the Christian-Western one.

In this discussion, Bernhard Streck turns the matter upside down: he doesn't ask which concepts the things should be assigned to, but what the things might think about this. Emptied of their religious content by missionaries, they would probably have something to say about the Cross above the Forum, which they contradict with "their speechless accusation" (this blog, 3 Oct. '17). Here, of course, the things also stand for their producers and their culture. Thus, Claus Deimel criticizes that the Cross honors "the science that arose in the womb of the Church, which encountered indigenous knowledge with its social structures and which contributed to their displacement and destruction" (ibid. 14 Nov. '17). How innocent of the world: as if the

point were to understand what is foreign! The point is oneself, saving the honor of the Christian West in a Prussian variant, which may not have understood these cultures, but pitied them out of Christian universality. Standing for this is the Cross, not the basket or the spirit in the earthenware jug from Bolivia.

Ethnologists complain that the Humboldt Forum lacks “ethnological expertise” (Viola König, this blog 3 Oct. ’17) – expertise for what? In Mexico, Viola König conducted research on topics like the collision between conquerors and conquered, or about places of power: what does that have to do with the Prussian royal palace? And even on exotic script, which I, as a normal Prussian, don’t understand at all: where is Kaiser Wilhelm in all this? Does she do research on the Prussian state, “led by its king and the heroic Luise at his side, who…” would become “an inspiring and honored ‘Queen of Hearts’”? Does she feel equally empathically: “In our view, quite intuitively, iron is the symbol for German steadfastness”? These are sentences from the founding directors of the Humboldt Forum; ***that*** is critical science! And Prussian tolerance: “Science begins now! And whoever opposes it, sorry, will have a problem,” (threatens a founding director).[6] And ethnology by contrast? Mona Suhrbier (Museum Frankfurt) understands as its essence “the effort to acknowledge and like, nonetheless, what doesn’t want to be like us”[7] – what does that have to do with Queen Luise?

As a student, I once sat in the office of my professor, a gifted university researcher, but who didn’t know what to do with the museum that he also headed. Behind him on the wall, an old Peruvian textile from his museum fit precisely behind the back of his head and underscored his dignity. As I later learned when I worked in the museum, he had had the (originally larger) textile cut so that it fit as the background to his head. Will this be the fate of the objects in the Humboldt Forum as well? Will they be cut to fit as halos behind the heads of European professors or directors?

Or will people ask once again what stories of foreign labor and foreign spirits they tell? And also about the theft, yes, but not only about Europe's thievery achievements, but also about the resistance against them and about the continued life of other cultures?

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[1] Hissink, Karin/Hahn, Albert (1961). *Die Tacana*, I, *Erzählungsgut*. Stuttgart: Kohlhammer: 367, 85.

[2] Colette/Ravel, Maurice (1925). *L'Enfant et les sortilèges, fantaisie lyrique en 2 parties*. Paris: Durand.

[3] Tucholsky, Kurt (1952). *Zwischen Gestern und Morgen*. Hamburg: Rowohlt: 15 f.

[4] Jensen, A. E. (1966). *Die getötete Gottheit, Weltbild einer frühen Kultur*. Stuttgart/Berlin/Cologne/Mainz: Kohlhammer: 156.

[5] Currently 67,746 of ca. 500,000: http://www.smb-digital.de/eMuseumPlus?service=direct/1/ResultLightboxView/preselectFilterSection.$FilterGroupControl.$MpDirectLink&sp=10&sp=Scollection&sp=SfilterDefinition&sp=0&sp=3&sp=1&sp=Slightbox_3x4&sp=0&sp=Sdetail&sp=0&sp=F&sp=S10026&sp=S2 (seen 26 Dec. 2017).

[6] MacGregor, Neil (2015 [2005]): *Deutschland, Erinnerungen einer Nation*. Munich: C.H. Beck: 294 and (Horst Bredekamp) 297. MacGregor zit. in *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 9

April 2017,
http://www.sueddeutsche.de/kultur/unter-termindruck-jede-geburt-tut-weh-1.3458197.

[7] E-mail 21 Dec. 17.