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Blind Spots and Asterisks in the Subtitle

Reactions to the Exhibition “Bremen and Art in the Colonial Era”

In individual psychology, blind spots are the phenomenon in which certain emotionally unpleasant matters are blocked out of subjective consciousness, rendering them inaccessible to conscious processing. They have seldom been diagnosed in museums; after all, these institutions exhibit what is beautiful and important in a society and shed a special light on what was previously hidden. It is all the more surprising that, at the beginning of August, Bremen’s Kunsthalle opened its print room to present the special exhibition “Bremen and Art in the Colonial Era” and took “The Blind Spot” as its leitmotif. During the colonial era, didn’t people speak more about the “white spots” on the map?

The concept that ethnologist Julia Binter of Vienna and Oxford submitted for the call for tenders from Germany’s Federal Cultural Foundation was successful, and she was commissioned to search for postcolonial traces in the depot of the Kunsthalle Bremen. The history of the institution’s founding and its early collection of artworks and documents from the 19th and 20th centuries, the “heyday of patronage”, suggested themselves for this project, as Director Christof Grunenberg explained in the newspaper WeserKurier (7 Aug. 2017), thereby recognizing the urgent tasks of tackling the colonial past, which until now has been addressed only cautiously by other museums in this city state.

The reviews in the culture sections of renowned German papers give one the impression that Binter and her team marched through the archives with a racism and Eurocentrism detector and, pointing a moralizing finger, hung on the walls everything that made the needle swing. But it was more a seismographic procedure

that demanded prior and contextual knowledge to plunge into the complexity of collections and to confront them with contemporary perspectives, inspired by postcolonial theoreticians, but also with the instruments of qualitative methodologies from history, art history, and cultural studies. The reviewers hardly acknowledge this, but it led to tactically wise decisions, for example choosing the "Still Life with Apples and Bananas" (1905 by Paula Modersohn Becker) as an eye-catcher for the exhibition's website: this picture by a representative of Northern German Modernism presents itself quietly, almost banally, and a superficial web surfer asks himself what this depiction has to do with colonialism. Oh, bananas from distant lands, so beloved by Germans, lie here quite intimately with homegrown apples – only in the exhibition itself is the visitor informed that, in 1905, Bremen had already become a central transshipment hub for what are called "southern fruits", i.e., tropical fruits. Modersohn presumably took special pleasure in integrating this at the time still exotic and probably also expensive fruit in her still life of the apple harvest from gardens in the artist colony Worpswede, while for us this view of a colorful potpourri of fruits from all over the world is part of the everyday advertising aesthetic of supermarket chains (in recent weeks, for example, in an ad series from ALDI markets). This tension of tracing the past spirit of the times in the colonial epoch but consciously from the perspective of present-day, late-capitalist habits of seeing and stocks of knowledge characterizes the exhibition through and through.

And yet, between the lines and pictures, the critics scent sermonizing: this is about a "show trial" (Rauterberg in Die Zeit of 30 Aug. 2017), about assigning clear roles as "perpetrators" and "victims" to potential culprits (the colonizers of that time and, in their wake, the merchants, patrons, and collectors) and potential innocents (those who were exploited, subjugated, and even murdered), and now to uncover additional "accomplices": people in the European art scene of the time who took part in the intellectual exploitation of the wholly Others by seeking counter-images to the dawning era of Modernism in the exotic, wild, or primal, implementing them in their

paintings, objects, and graphic art – artists who found a thoroughly receptive audience for such works in their societies. Till Briegleb (SZ of 24 Aug. 2017) reproached the exhibition for pursuing a moral mission, instead of "fulfilling the core task of an art exhibition to present a pictorial theme in differentiation, scientifically, and independently".

If one thing has been conveyed by postcolonial debates, however, it's the insight that such postulated "independence" is a skillful construction of Western sciences aimed at veiling the positioned character of historical and current actors. But there cannot and will not be an independent meta-perspective on history or histories. Rather, the point is well-considered explications of subjective positions, in order to narrate history and stories differently, to shift Eurocentric perspectives onto the phenomenon of colonialism with curiosity rather than guilt feelings, in order to hear the "history of the hunter" from the viewpoint of the "hunted" for once, as is postulated by the slogan on the wall of the exhibition. This is precisely the exhibition's starting point for fueling a new contextualization of artists and works that, in the epoch of incipient Modernism, i.e., of *simultaneously* erupting nationalism and imperialism, were children of their times and thereby transported latent colonial, hegemonic, and racist stances, because they were the expression of a spirit of the times that was widespread, if only reserved for certain milieus. The elites of the time not only embodied this imperial thinking through a specific lifestyle; they were also dependent on it: the established trade relationships and hegemonic positions had to be constantly buttressed, further developed against other colonial-national competitors, and legitimized for the populace at home: for example through the mania for collecting exotic-seeming objects for aesthetic satisfaction or scientific curiosity, but also through the new stream of luxury consumer goods that, in the course of the development of industrial technologies, increasingly became accessible also for the lower classes.

The development of all “colonial wares”, like sugar, coffee, tea, cocoa, tobacco, and cotton, as products for mass consumption takes a key position in Europe’s modernization dynamics, as is well known. And with today’s knowledge, this can no longer be separated from the mechanisms of exploitation that, at that time, were implemented in the regions of the global “South” and that in many cases perfidiously continue to this day. This is precisely why the exhibited painting “The Blue Coffee Pot” (1888, by Émile Bernard) or the sophisticated “Coffee Garden at the Weser” (n.d., by Elisabeth Perlia) from the beginning of the 20th century are central testimonies to a social history of global interweavings, and no longer to an individual oeuvre or an art-historical stylistic epoch.

But the curator is reproached for this strategy of recontextualizing, accused of sacrificing not only scholarly independence, but also of making the museum into a moral “reformatory” (Rauterberg in Die Zeit 30 Aug. 2017). The tenor: the free space of art and its creators, and with them also the culturally legitimized space for unbridled fantasies and visions, turns into an arena for political correctness if exhibition organizers allow themselves to alter subtitles out of concern for the potential retraumatization of affected groups of visitors.

In order to avoid a debate like that over renaming “Negro kisses” as “chocolate kisses”, the team decided to frame controversial terms like “Neger” (negro), “Eingeborene” (native), and “Primitive” (primitive people) with *****, thereby protecting readers from the repetition compulsion of racist concepts. But also thereby to confront them with the difficulty of finding new forms of description. What an audacity this is in the eyes of the critics: that the exhibition organizers appropriate the originality of the works in order to communicate to a contemporary public their message of distance-taking from a painter like Emil Nolde. The museum, i.e., art, is being politicized! – Wow, how revolutionary. To the best of my knowledge, in the postmodern art scene, inspired by Deconstructivism and Pop Art, among other

things, we have experienced a lot more cosmetic surgery and disturbing interventions than a row of added asterisks.[1]

But probably this critical reception of the exhibition in the Kunsthalle Bremen renders another controversy audible, namely the question of what purposes state- or community-financed museums should serve today: Should they continue to be display cabinets of selected high culture to celebrate (or conserve) aesthetic, artisan, or intellectual holy relics? Or is the point to have open, i.e., accessible, spaces of experiencing and negotiating, in order to take up urgent issues of our society and to invite people to a polyphonic debate?

Instead of facing these contingent processes of a socially, politically, religiously, and subculturally diverse society, which can become uncomfortable and don't always result in common sense, as the stagnation over the concept for the Humboldt Forum in Berlin demonstrates, one regresses into dichotomous perpetrator-victim schemata, into a reduction to a debate over guilt and responsibility, which after all cannot be the sole goal of retrospective and comprehensive understanding. Nor is it the sole aim of the political postcolonial/anticolonial alliance (as is sometimes imputed), because the point here is far-reaching demands for socio-political recognition, i.e., political and public admissions about unfair constellations, and not just historical ones, in order to finally enable the participation of the groups and actors who were ignored or silenced for centuries. Because collective fear of these processes of dealing with these matters have accrued over the years, one prefers to persist in institutionalized defensiveness and accuses those who dare to grasp the nettle of treading on postcolonial "minefields" (Briegleb, SZ 24 Aug. 2017) or of basking in an "aura of moral infallibility" (Wiedemann in taz 6 Sept. 2017).

Why don't these critical journalists conduct research on and write about the precarious framework and working conditions of curators, about the marginal

budgets that the various institutions provide to work through colonial history, or about the expansion of pedagogical work that would be necessary to adequately inform coming generations about the postcolonial involvements of today's European nation-states? What political party calls on the culture ministries to finally catch up to the "state of the art" of international critical research on colonialism?

If we look more closely in this direction at the landscape of our state educational institutions, one blind spot adjoins the next, and we actually ought to fear retinal detachment. Because in some ways, more new omissions are still repeatedly produced than existing suppressions are worked through. And that is true of the reviewers: hardly anyone mentions the wooden statue of Queen Victoria, a Yoruba carving from 1904, that the Hamburg Museum for Ethnology contributed to the exhibition. According to Brus (exhibition catalog, 2017:131), it is probably a cult figure of the Saro, a Nigerian ethnic group that appropriated this power symbol of the British colonizers in their local art practice. It remains interpretatively open whether, in the local interplay of forces, the Saro thereby demonstrated loyalty to the colonial administrators; perhaps they used the symbol of Europe's then most powerful woman to point to their own structures of authority? These are the grand moments of the new contextualization of objects that inspire the curious visitor, because things previously unknown are brought to the surface. This important part of the exhibition – how the colonized spoke about Europeans through their art and which images of and ambivalences about the "strangers from afar"[2] thereby become visible – reveals the actual tactic of postcolonial analysis: namely, to apply an interactive mirroring technique, without which one could never ruffle the feathers at the back of one's own head.

The external station of the exhibition, the staging of the boat "Cui Bono" by Hew Locke in the upper City Hall is doubly on target in this respect. Bremen has no site more symbolically charged than its City Hall, a historical and present-day center of

worldly power that in the meantime has been declared a UN World Cultural Heritage. Precisely here, the Guyanese artist hung his hybrid and fragile boat construction between the historical models of the Hanseatic cogs with which Bremen mariners once sailed out into the world. The irony of the object: it can be viewed only on sightseeing tours of the City Hall. Even today, inclusion and exclusion are subject to specific rules, here that of a market that targets outsiders who (it is hoped will) come to the city out of curiosity and for pleasure. We can look forward in suspense to seeing what kind of patronage can currently be mobilized to ensure that this eye-catcher remains for this city-state struggling to maintain its "maritime image" and whether the Kunsthalle Bremen can acquire it for its permanent exhibition. Access to the "Blind Spot" is still possible through November 19.

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translated by Mitch Cohen

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[1] At the documenta14 (Kassel, 2017), Sonja Haiduk replaced the blind spot of imperial historiography with a “dark room” in which one listened for 22 minutes to an alternative narrative of history that does without being subsumed by imperial visuality (Haiduk: “Seductive Exacting Realism, (2015-): Veränderbarer Raum um Geschichte zu schreiben”; website der documenta 14).

[2] This is the designation that villagers in Mali chose in 2012, when they told us – three researchers from Bremen – about colonial stories in their region; see Bass, H./von Freyhold, K./Weißköppel, C. (2013): Schrebergärtnern am Rande der Wüste? Wege zur Ernährungssicherung im Sahel: Ein Beispiel aus dem ländlichen Mali. In: Überseemuseum Bremen (ed.): TenDenZen, volume accompanying an Africa exhibition.