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Iconoclash in the GRASSI Museum

Seeking publicity for an international museum crisis by way of a damaged pedestal



Large-format photograph by artist Anja Nitz in the exhibition “Aneignungen” at the GRASSI Museum. The photograph shows the bust of Karl Weule in the depot, 2022. © Michi Knecht

The current debate surrounding colonial collections has unleashed a veritable feud in and around ethnological museums, which pits reformers and preservationists against one another, seemingly irreconcilably. In feuilletons, newsletters, and mailing lists, voices are growing ever shriller, and the means employed ever harsher, as peers and colleagues attack each another and seek to mobilize audiences in support of their respective positions. Most recently, the Grassi Museum for Ethnology in Leipzig was on the receiving end of a concerted effort to create a media scandal directly aimed at the museum's director Léontine Meijer-van Mensch.

In March 2022, Meijer-van Mensch and her team reopened part of the museum under the motto "Reinventing GRASSI", which focuses on efforts to put the knowledge practices of the museum itself under the microscope, in an attempt to implement new forms of transparency in curation. The director is thus carrying on the work of her predecessor Nanette Snoep in deconstructing the ethnological museum and the long shadow it casts. The extent to which these two museum specialists have caused offence by opening up the museums they lead to both new perspectives and new groups is demonstrated by the unprecedented interventions of their predecessors. Certain individuals have come forward publicly or half-publicly to criticize their successors (Antweiler and Schneider 2022, Deimel e-mail 11. March 2022, Deimel 2016). Whether alone or in conjunction with former companions, they have taken to criticising the exhibitions implemented under the direction of their successors, calling them "activist" or "unscientific"—*honi soit qui mal y pense*. And yet in their critique of the exhibition "I miss you. On Missing, Giving Back and Remembering" in Cologne's Rautenstrauch-Joest-Museum, for example, the authors neglect to mention African artist and professor Peju Layiwola's curatorial appraisal of ongoing academic debates. They equally overlook the fact that the GRASSI puts the epistemic practices of the museum itself at the centre of its curatorial work, such that a contribution is thereby developed in terms of the practices and politics of representation in ethnological museums. Indeed, in 2022 both Nanette Snoep and Meijer-van Mensch received the Kenneth-Hudson-Award

for institutional courage and professional integrity. Since her inauguration, Nanette Snoep and Meijer-van Mensch have implemented broad yet disquieting provenance research. The scandal in Leipzig, however, goes beyond an obvious insistence on outdated forms of ethnological representation and the preservation of one's own legacy. In the latest debate surrounding the reopening of the GRASSI museum, certain individuals are no longer content to merely criticize the director's work, they are attempting to fully criminalize it (Hicks 2022).



The processing of the stone pedestal on the opening evening, March 3, 2022. © GRASSI

The Guerrilla Action

The stumbling block in question was an artistic performance in which an empty (sic!) pedestal on the top of a staircase at the GRASSI museum was quite audaciously demolished. At the reopening of the museum, the art collective PARA orchestrated a rather media-effective action in which they used a jackhammer to pulverise rock from the pedestal, thus obtaining “raw material for decolonisation”.

The bust that once sat atop this pedestal depicts the former director of the house, Karl Weule (1907-26). Weule is known for his role in establishing ethnology as a subject of academic study at the university of Leipzig and had already made a name for himself in his own lifetime as an excessive collector. During the final phase of the Maji Maji Rebellion, he travelled through southern Tanzania on the heels of a police unit that was tasked with finding the remaining rebels, and subsequently sighted certain spoils of war for German museums in Dar es Salaam. Weule’s problematic role in violently collecting both people and objects is examined in detail in the exhibition catalogue “Humboldt Lab Tanzania: Objects from Colonial Wars in the Ethnological Museum, Berlin. German-Tanzanian Perspectives” (Lili Reyels, Paola Ivanov and Kristin Weber-Sinn 2018).

The action in Leipzig was instigated by Tanzanian artists Rehema Chachage[1] and Valerii Asiimwe Amani[2], who collaborate with the German artist group Para. It served to highlight the colonial history of the museum and in particular to expose the violent history of two actors, who amassed huge collections during the German colonial period. Alongside Karl Weule, the focus is on colonial geographer Hans Meyer, who in the throes of colonial conquest not only changed the name of Kilimanjaro’s peak to the Kaiser-Wilhelm Spitze, but also claimed to have been personally responsible for breaking off the mountain’s highest stone – the *summit stone* – during his expedition in 1889. According to the collective, the stone was split in two. One half supposedly made its way to the Kaiser himself and was incorporated into the Grotto Hall of the New Palace in Potsdam (Richter 2022). The other is said to have remained in the hands of the Meyer family but is now currently available for

purchase with an Austrian art dealer. With the help of museum visitors, the artists' work aims to disrupt and reverse these forms of colonial megalomania. In an installation resembling a factory, a machine sits at the ready to use the broken pieces from the pedestal – which for years has sat "without a head" – and mix them together with dust and clay to produce rocks in the form of summit stones. Visitors to the installation can either go online or use a dispenser to purchase such rocks—called "scruples"— thereby contributing to the repurchase of the original summit stone and its subsequent restitution to Tanzania. The installation – "Moving Mountains" – combines destruction with construction, and eradication with reparation, confronting the colonial pathos of male self-importance with subversion and irony (LeGall und Urbanski).



Scruple production site in the exhibition “Moving Mountains”, 2022. © GRASSI Museum für Völkerkunde zu Leipzig, Photo: Tom Dachs

Museum Ethics

In an article for the magazine *Museum Aktuell*, the chairperson of the German Association of Freelance Ethnologists, Annette Rein, felt compelled to intervene and edify the museum team: “In terms of museum ethics, the right thing to do would have been to label the pedestal – Ill-understood and thus ill-appreciated – with an appropriate explanation”[3]
. And yet the author seems less concerned with giving lessons in museum ethics than intervening in order to further increase the existing pressure on Meijer-van Mensch

and her team. To this end, Rein's article was quickly translated and reprinted in the English-language eZine *ExpoTime*, equally published by Müller-Straten. Rein's admonishment that it would have been quite easy to establish sufficient distance from Weule by simply labelling the pedestal serves as a prelude to an article by Müller-Straten himself, in which he demands legal consequences (Müller-Straten 2022). The effects produced by placing a monument in a prominent position on the museum staircase, however, cannot be sufficiently offset with mere comments on a label. In light of the violent history of ethnological collecting, which thanks to Karl Weule became part of the history of the GRASSI museum itself, an ethical appraisal of the situation is a great deal more complex than Anette Rein's article would have one believe. There are adequate examples of other forms of anthropological encounter – even under colonial conditions. And it is for precisely this reason that one must critically examine both Weule's research in the company of a police unit that acted as judge and executioner, as well as the arrogance and racism of the adventurist ductus with which he trivialises colonial violence in his writings. Weule may well have done a great deal for the institutionalization and popularization of anthropology but this should not conceal the violence of his research practices, which are precisely the subject of present critiques and international debates. From 1906 to 1907, Weule travelled with a police force that judged, executed (see, for example, Weule 1908: 43-44) and whipped people (the latter is confirmed in photographs taken by Weule) time and again. When the police unit would arrive, Weule would avail of the opportunity to photograph those who were obliged to assemble, placing them in front of a white screen. The scarification, nose plugs, and lip plates of Makonde women were one of his main interests and he repeatedly photographed them from every angle as well as devoting a great deal of attention to them in his texts. The expressions of those forcibly photographed in this way are shocking. In particular, the images of a "Makua woman" (inventory no. NegOAf 1228-1233), photographed naked and with her legs spread in Weule's tent, blur the lines between the supposedly anthropological-medical and the purely pornographic. The *Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden* or *SKD* (Dresden State Art Collections) has

not digitally published the images, and rightly so.

The authors who have stepped up to defend Weule's honour are quick to point out that Weule paid for the objects collected during his expeditions (Kohl 2022, Rein 2022: 10). Moreover, it is pointed out by Müller-Straten that his attitude toward other cultures over the course of his travels was ostensibly respectful (Müller-Straten 2022: 15). Weule's travel report repeatedly alludes to the circumstances under which he made his acquisitions as well as how much he paid for them. Yet the tone of his reports is benevolently patronising at best, inhumane at worst. Such is the case, for example, when he speaks of using of the infamous hippo whip, with the help of which he could lend force to his words and dismiss the demands of his interlocutors: "What wonders it does to have a vigorous grip on the kibok – the hippo whip! But that is the way of the N….." (Weule 1908:145, omission added). The following cynical passage is self-explanatory:

"At a distance of 20 to 30 metres, a young woman tries to avoid us; a group of strangers. This in itself is nothing exciting, but suddenly all of my men, long aware of what interests me the most, call out: "Kipini, bwana, look at the nose peg, sir!" In the next instant, some of them have already led the girl toward us. It is an exceptionally beautiful example of the ebony peg that this beauty wears in her left nostril, perhaps even more delicately and tastefully adorned with tin than one is accustomed to seeing. At first the woman flatly refuses our offers to buy, but in the end the fear of so many wild-looking foreign men seems to be more effective than even the glamour of a quarter rupee. Hesitantly, she touches her nose with her left hand, followed almost immediately by her right. With a deft push, the left hand must have freed the kipini from its habitual position, for she is already handing it over. The whole process was invisible, as she covered the whole nose area with her outstretched right hand in a gesture of almost inexplicable timidity and persistence. Even after she has long since received her piece of silver, she stands in the same position; my troops joke anew, but the woman presses her right hand ever more firmly to the exposed spot.

With this reference to local nudity, our psychological interpretation of the process is undoubtedly correct; once the kipini is removed, a sense of shame is invoked, hence the convulsive covering of the spot." (ibid.:165-166)

Yes, Weule paid for the piece and made an ethnologically valuable observation on shame into the bargain. And yes, this is all taken out of context, there are different examples of trade situations in Weule's report, but this repulsive scene speaks volumes about the asymmetrical conditions under which such trade would occur.[4] These forms of violence in the history of museum collecting are well known to the older generation of anthropologists, although only a few have dealt with them systematically (e.g. Fischer 1981, Ganslmayr and von Paczensky 1984). Since the 1970s, ethnology has been shaped like no other discipline in the humanities by a critical examination of its own subject history. Yet the interest in museums and collections has remained, in retrospect, somewhat secondary. The majority of university ethnologists were barely interested in the objects themselves. Toward the 2000s, it was more lucrative and fashionable for most ethnological museums to celebrate *multiculturalism*, transporting museum-goers to colourful *exotic worlds* and presenting *adventurers* and *explorers* as figures with which to identify. Critical aspects of the subject history as well as institutional critique were expressed in small niches on the fringes or in temporary exhibitions.

Karl Weule's pedestal is not "ill-understood and thus ill-appreciated", as Annette Rein would have us believe. The work of a new museum in a post-migrant society can hardly be based on Karl Weule as a figure of fundamental glorification for the citizens of Leipzig. It was therefore prudent and "in terms of museum ethics, the right thing to do" for former director Snoep to remove the bust with Weule's likeness as part of the FREMD exhibition in 2016. Even then, there was fierce criticism of this intervention, which reached the mainstream news and provoked a chain of public and semi-public reactions. The decision to do so was made permanent by the newly appointed director Meijer-van Mensch in 2019, such that only the pedestal – which is

fixed to the floor – could still be found on the staircase. The pedestal has since been repeatedly used to other ends. Not for the glorification of certain figures, but for the commemoration of anti-Semitic and racist attacks on minorities. In 2019, for example, two rimonim – crowning attachments to the wooden bars of a Torah scroll – were displayed on the support in response to the terrorist attack on the synagogue in Halle. After the violent murder of George Floyd, the pedestal wore a black hoodie with a symbol of the Black Lives Matter movement.

That the pedestal was publically destroyed during the performance goes beyond a simple removal of the bust, which was equally suggested by Adelheit Straten in *Museum Aktuell* as an appropriate course of action regarding "the Remmidemmi… in Leipzig" (Straten 2022:3). The iconoclastic provocation was obviously deliberate and it was to be staged to have media impact. As with so many iconoclasms that are the subject of research in anthropology and art history, it sought to create an audience (Brus/Knecht/Zillinger2020). Whether by approval or dissent, by disturbance, anger or euphoria, iconoclasts create scenarios that affect people. The resulting controversies break down walls of silence, signalling the end of a particular social consensus. PARA's performance was designed to disrupt the celebration of the museum's reopening. With the motto *Reinventing GRASSI*, the reopening sought to usher in a radical new process of restructuring. By physically modifying the premises, it sought to create a physical foundation for the transformation of the museum into a space for controversy. In other words, the artists took the new director at its word.

There is an interesting discrepancy in the public discussion of this intervention: while there have generally been positive appraisals in the feature pages of the smaller and larger national newspapers as well as internationally[5], statements have been circulating in the aforementioned publications, on *internal portals* and via email distribution lists that attempt to use the artistic action as an opportunity to delegitimize the representatives of a new museum practice.

Iconoclash

On 3 March 2022, visitors to the reopening of the GRASSI Museum witnessed an event that qualifies – to use Bruno Latour's term – as an "iconoclash". That is, an ambiguous and open-ended event, whereby it is not clear if the act in question is destructive or constructive. For Latour, it is this ambiguity that is constitutive of the event as an iconoclash and which prepares the ground for criticism and debate (Latour 2002).

For the older generation in particular, the destruction of the pedestal clearly signifies a painful break with a certain narrative of history. One in which collecting was inspired by science, in which countless objects facing destruction at the hands of cultural change in their regions of origin were saved, and in which ethnology was celebrated as a practice that within Euro-America stood for the diversity of human culture and its forms of expression. For others, this destruction is part of a creative act that at the same time heralds the end of the ethnological museum in its traditional form. For those spearheading this position, what is at stake is the end of the museum as a place of instruction from a male, white, and colonial perspective –which Karl Weule represents all too well.

It is of course useful to examine the supposedly iconoclastic act itself and its perpetrators if one wishes to measure the indexicality of this antagonistic event. But it is also very telling to take a look at those who have directly or indirectly levelled the accusations of iconoclasm.

Which values and normative orders are invoked in the protection of Weule as the forefather of science, and in defence of everything which he and the institutions we have inherited – namely ethnological museums – stand for? What techniques are used to make a mountain (a listed monument) out of a molehill (an empty pedestal)?

What associations and sensitivities are blended together to turn an object into the legacy of a(n East) German, European, or humanist tradition that must be protected from the attacks of international iconoclasts. Or to put it in the words of the French anthropologist, and authority on European blasphemy and witchcraft, Jeanne Favret-Saada: how does one manage to conjure up a national or even an international crisis of ethnological museums with a trivial pedestal – the existence of which wasn't confirmed until 1943 – and to put certain people in the proverbial stocks for it (Favret Saada 2015)? If one follows the debate, one is confronted by an apparent *upscaling* of meaning that is patently absurd. Universal, normative values are invoked, potential allies rally together, and appalling attacks are issued against GRASSI director Meijer-van Mensch.

Upscaling

Shortly after the artistic intervention, a statement was circulated in various email distribution lists and on social media, in which the President and Vice-President of the German section of the International Council of Museums (ICOM-Deutschland) for the first time described the performance as the destruction of a listed monument that is "presumably part of the GRASSI Museum's listed inventory"

Shortly thereafter, the board of ICOM-Deutschland distanced itself from the text, confirming that it was an unauthorised statement made by individuals and that the text had "not been discussed by the board of ICOM-Deutschland" nor "does [it] reflect the position of the board or an official position of ICOM-Deutschland".

Although the attempt to bring ICOM as a powerful international institution into play had failed, critics were not dissuaded by this rebuttal and distributed further statements online and via internal distribution lists, as well as in publications such as *Museum Aktuell* and ExpoTime. These were intended to make the director liable for

an alleged criminal act as well as to place her under suspicion of attempting to transform the ethnological museum. The apparent aim of this publication strategy is to mobilise a demographic beyond the much more sceptical professional circles such as are represented by ICOM.

A further strategy in the upscaling of meaning consists in comparing the performance with the current destruction of cultural property in Ukraine, something one sees again and again (Müller-Straten v. 26.4.2022 email list "museums-themen", Rein 2022:11, Reifenscheid and Walz 2022). Beyond this inappropriate conflation, Annette Rein elsewhere makes an indirect reference to the destruction of cultural property under the National Socialists, invoking thereby the public service remit of the SKD to justify her own polemic: "Former iconoclasts destroyed works because they seemed to them dangerous or obscene. The task of the SKD is to preserve and protect works" (Rein 2022, 1:11). The defamation of concerns – cast as postcolonial activism – as either anti-democratic (freedom of speech! destruction of art!) or anti-Semitic (Vollgraff 2021) signals an increasing polarisation of public debates, undoubtedly a symptom of the contested loss of privileged interpretive sovereignty.

Setting out to prove the monumental character of the pedestal, publisher Müller-Straten's text – ambitious as it is tedious – reaches quite (unintentionally) comic proportions. Over the course of several pages, he compiles archival photos and findings intended to support his argument that the pedestal ought to be preserved and protected as part of the museum's inventory of commemorative monuments. Its destruction, he writes, should be a matter for legal prosecution. Müller-Straten first seeks to prove the pedestal's character as a work of art insofar as it was an integral part of the bust of Karl Weule, which had been modelled by the little-known artist Max Lange and which came into the museum's possession in 1929. The bust, unlike its stand, has now been in the GRASSI Museum's storerooms for several years. However, Müller-Straten fails in his attempt to prove that the objects together constitute one discrete artwork. Rather, the photos he compiles show that the bust

was not mounted on the pedestal in question until 1943, in this instance not yet with the plinth. Moreover, Müller-Straten's research shows that over the years, the pedestal could be changed out and that pedestals were produced from different materials. It also shows that the bust has been moved around the house several times. In this respect, the evidence of the text speaks against the author's very intentions, namely that the pedestal should be categorized as movable exhibition material. Moreover, Müller-Stratens's unfortunate intervention actually points to the museum as a site of constant transformation insofar as it is subject to ever-changing historical narratives.

In another line of argumentation, Müller-Straten asserts that the pedestal should be valued as a commemorative monument in its own right. In short, having established neither a historical connection between the sculpture and the pedestal nor found any clear trace of the latter in the museum's inventory, Müller-Straten deduces that a non-listed non-monument (such as the pedestal) can, in fact, also be a monument, and is thus absolutely worth protecting. He concludes that due to her "unlawful act of radical feminism" (sic!) the director can (or should) face two years imprisonment or a corresponding fine, in accordance with paragraph 35 of the Saxon Monuments Act (Müller-Straten 2022: 20) (ibid. 17).

What is interesting in this line of thinking is the attempt to canonise and monumentalise a contextually specific culture of commemoration, thereby turning it into an unassailable cultural good. Yet the history of Leipzig first after 1945 and then after 1989 – as well as the most recent iconoclasm of the Black Lives Matter movement – all demonstrate that this is something which monuments most definitely are not, and they never have been: public remembrance is subject to constant change.

By suggesting a legal infringement and by deliberately appealing to an influential audience, the director's accusers seek to use the pedestal to define a certain type of *delict*, and to thus call into question the very legitimacy of the director herself.

Questionable alliances

It is alarming how certain statements can provide a political party like the AFD with opportunities to embed their right-wing politics within public discourse. Such statements are not only voiced by Annette Reins and Müller-Stratens or in the official comments they inspired at the German Association of Restorers (Körber and Nimoth 2022), but in the public or semi-public affirmations of many other important representatives of the profession in Germany. In determining what position to take on restitution, the AFD can count – not just in Saxony – on the support of the same emeritus German anthropologists who once set out to bring anthropology's potential for cultural critique to bear in West German society. It is frankly appalling that such diverse groups are apparently willing to expose their peers to the crossfire of right-wing agitation.

The curatorial work of Meijer-van Mensch in Leipzig or Snoep in Cologne is a matter of debate. But to defame their work, against one's own better judgement, as "unscientific" (Antweiler and Schneider 2022) should surely spark opposition, particularly among the professional public. It should equally spark opposition when the successful opening of German museums to new audiences is vilified as a danger for democratic society (Rein 2022). It should spark opposition when the arduous work of translating an international museum practice into the German context is cast as the very end of (not solely) the ethnological museum itself (Kohl 2022, Deimel 2016). When museum controversies, exhibition practices and certain forms of cooperation degenerate into the battlefield of a proxy war over interpretive sovereignty in the ethnological museum, there can only be losers. It is part of the basic knowledge of anthropology that relative distance to the object is constitutive for one's own epistemic practice. Especially for a generation that was shaped by the reflexive turn in anthropology, interpretive sovereignty should not rest solely with German anthropologists who presume to know the exact history of their discipline.

Instead, the outside gaze that is so valued in anthropology should be given a much better reception if new forms of knowledge are to be gained.

It is hardly a coincidence that the two most polemic museums in Germany are run by non-German directors. Two Dutch women with international experience and equipped with a good nose for historical injustice, who have set themselves the task of establishing new perspectives both for and within ethnological museums in Germany ought to be supported, particularly by anthropologists. Instead, the professional public must watch on while these directors are tarnished as traitors and subjected to smear campaigns which render them a target for hostility both in and outside the museum. It is high time that their peers and the professional public alike made a stand.

TRANSLATED BY MICHAEL DORRITY

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Fußnoten

[1] https://rehemachachage.co.tz

[2] https://www.valerieamani.com

[3] All translations of quotations were made by Michael Dorrity.

[4]Many thanks to Kristin Weber-Sinn and Paola Ivanov for their information and assessment of Karl Weule's research practices.

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