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The Crisis of Anthropological Museums from the Perspective of an Anthropology of Museums, and some Remarks on the Agency of Restitution Conceived as a Restitution of Agency

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(1.) Apart from royal societies and their art, f.i. Benin Bronze sculptures, most African ritual objects were not preserved for eternity or for permanent preservation, but were made for their cyclical reproduction and renewal in new artefacts. Once objects fell out of ritual use or were damaged by use, they were destroyed or left to decay. After all, these objects were part of performative arts, of music, dance, ritual, and of invisible powers manifesting themselves first in movement, and more often than not deriving their existence from performances, or from "African Art in Motion".

(2.) In the ethnographic sources from ca. 1850 to 1950, we do not seem to find a narrative or a theorem or a message, that discarded African objects had a "soul" that is lost by their being collected and exported. This narrative or "myth" is made in the museum itself and about the museum, especially by the film "Les statues meurent aussi" by Chris Marker and Alain Resnais. The film-makers were instructed for their film by the "Présence Africaine" group to use Placide Tempels "La philosophie bantoue" as their blueprint. The English Présence Africaine edition of Tempels' book contains seven photos of African Art in European collections; and it has a chapter on the "Restitution" of Bantu agency in cases of damage (not, of course, of art works, but about the redressing of injustice and evil magic by "Restitution"). Even "property" is subjected to Tempels' philosophy and ontology of "forces":

"Another law says that the living being exercises a vital influence on everything that

is subordinated to him and on all that belongs to him. … The fact that a thing has belonged to anyone, that it has been in strict relationship with a person, leads the Bantu to conclude that this thing shares the vital influence of its owner. It is what ethnologists like to call 'contagious magic, sympathetic magic'; but it is neither contact nor 'sympathy' that are the active elements but solely the vital force of the owner, which acts, as one knows, because it persists in the being of the thing possessed or used by him." (p. 54)

It is from these and other sentences by Tempels that Resnais and Marker develop their motif of a "loss of vital force" or "soul loss" in African objects in European museums: The "vital force" persists in the object and its "alienated" status demands restitution: "Even when the restitution takes the form of a transfer of natural goods, it is considered as part of the re-establishment of life; or rather, as being a re-establishment of life." (p. 94).

(3.) Thus, French film-makers without anthropological training re-interpreted a Belgian missionary's essay on African "philosophy" or "ontology" in a critical film about museums. It's important to note that they referred to a European missionary's text re-interpreting Victorian anthropological theories of "Mana" and "magic". Tempels' text was and remains a catechetical text preparing for Christian conversion; he interprets the "psychic unity" in Bantu ontology that enables the pagans to become good Christians. We know how influential Tempels' text was to become: for the development of African and Afroreferential philosophy, for an autonomous religious African movement called "Jamaa"; and it seeems for the crisis of anthropological museums and the narratives of "restitution" too. The blueprint of "Les statues meurent aussi" provides a powerful narrative because it links loss and restitution, the European agency of alienating the object and the non-alienable agency within the object. The agency of restitution will lie in a restitution of agency. This narrative nucleus has a long Mediterranean and Near Eastern genealogy ultimately linked with laments of loss and exile: f.i. "city laments" demanding the re-

erection of the temples of city goddesses of cities destroyed in Mesopotamian wars. Concerning Africa, this genealogy remains apocryphal, at least as far as ritual objects are concerned, and unless, of course, we accept “Les statues meurent aussi” as an authentic source of a theory about what a museum does to Arican objects.

(4.) So what is a museum? Before the museum, there are the collections of tribute. Mary W. Helms has summarized their constitution in these succinct sentences:

„Foreign tribute-payers or traders or agents of the polity itself … may bring exquisitely crafted goods or highly valued and symbolic natural ‚riches‘ of the earth. Official symbols and regalia of rank or of office may include foreign ornaments, accoutrements, or robes, and great effort may be expended on exotic collections of holy relics, foreign wonders, strange plants, curious animals, or even human beings, such as foreign slaves and entertainers, which graced temple precincts and royal courts, or were housed in royal zoos and aristocratic gardens in (for example) ancient Egypt, pre-Columbian America …, the ancient Near East, and the capital of imperial China… Far from being curiosities (though some collections may have been, at least to some extent…) these animate and inanimate exotics from the ends of the earth or from its most sacred centers were repositories of power and symbols of the distant, potent regions known to, and ‚controlled‘ by, the lords of the realm.”

(5.) Mary W. Helms even went one step further, when she compared the constitution of “collections of tribute” with shamanistic bundles of knowledge and power:

„In a sense, far-fetched though at first it may seem, royal collections of the strange and the sacred … can be considered as vastly elaborated expressions of the power-filled medicine pouches of tribal shamans, filled with potent bits and pieces of unusual minerals, wood, flora and fauna replete with (and symbolic of) cosmic power, or of the small ‚pods‘ prepared by young men … to enhance their social and intellectual development and the acquisition of personal power pods in which they place various magical substances such as beetle wings…etc.“

(6.) Thus, “collections of tribute” are and were also places of knowledge by “assembling things” and making them symbols of cosmic order. Assembling and re-assembling collections are what collections do: they collect other collections, or from other collections, and they assemble things that are themselves “repositories of power and symbols of the distant”, f.i. altars, curiosity cabinets, shaman’s drums, amulets and other cosmogrammatic objects. The collection of exotic objects and their exhibiting are symbols of power: the power of representation and the representation of sovereign or especially of imperial power. The collections of royalty, of courts, of cloisters and of feudal elites demonstrate their cosmic kingdom, their imperial power and the superiority of elite consumption. So far, nothing specific European in these characteristics.

(7.) The only specifically European transformation: In modern times, it’s not the king who is sovereign, but the people. The royal, clerical and elitist collections become an inalienable “property of the people”, by opening the museum for the general public, by public responsibility for the collections, and by scientists and scholars taking control of the collections in the name of the administrative order, and vice versa.

It seems only logical that all sovereign nation states and peoples have a right to administer and to own their own museums and its collections. And this taken-for-grantedness is at least one crucial factor in the recent debates on restitution. But of course, there is more to the question of collecting and exhibiting than just public collections: there are commercial interests, and there is the question of science and scholarship. Ever since the 19th century, and against wishful thinking to the contrary, there was a strong divide between the museum as a place of exhibiting, and the collection as a place for scientific and scholarly work. This dualism is irreducible, and it was only by compromise that the interests of representing the world (or exhibiting) and the scholarly and scientific interests to preserve and investigate the collections were linked (or divorced).

(8.) And of course there is the sphere of individual consumption and consumerism in

general. As the historian Frank Trentmann writes, “the proliferation of individual and institutional collections” may be the “most prominent manifestation of such consumerism”. And referring to cosmological constitution of collections: “Cosmic kingship has been democratized: anyone can play the role of conservator and guardian of things facing extinction.” Which means, anybody can become an owner of any collection by being the buyer of objects of any sort.

(9.) At the moment, the result is more than paradoxical, and it is problematic. We accept the fact, that anthropological objects are traded commercially and owned privately, and if we see them in galleries, nobody seems to worry about their “loss of soul” or vital force. But in museums, we question their status as tribute and representation and demand their “return”. But in the strict sense, there is no “return” and there is no “restitution”. Restitution is a narrative that invents the subjects for “restitution” under the premise that our public institutions are the inheritors of injustice, “that they are not ours” and have to be given away to other peoples’ institutions. We don’t feel the pain of their status as commercial goods; but we feel the pain of representing the world “for us” and of representing “us” for the world. And the scholarly and scientific interests to preserve and investigate the collections, the trusteeship of what is neither ownership nor representation, neither exhibition nor consumption, seems of negligible importance, as far as political and/or commercial decisions are concerned. The “repositories of power and symbols of the distant” seem an embarrassing “survival” from a criminal past, because publicly accountable exoticism itself has become embarrassing, whereas private exoticism and its collections are accepted, but may soon become critically scrutinized as well.

(10.) The reason for this change is twofold: Nation-states in the 19th century started to claim that their identity demanded self-representation and the rightful ownership of objects manifesting that self-representation. But European nation-states were empires too, thus, their representation was split between nationalist and imperialist

(and universalist) forms of representation. After World War II, "identity rights" gave rise to more and more property rights. Nationalist and ethnic forms of representation win in the long run. After all, we have about 70 more nation-states than in 1989. Publicly accountable exoticism goes against the grain of translating identity rights into property rights, which is not only a juridical movement, but a seemingly endless source of legitimacy.

(11.) Who are the losers in this erosion of publicly accountable exoticism? The small populations that are not or cannot be represented by nation-states or post-colonial states; the dead, because we would have to represent their worlds and not ours or that of our ancestors; the scientists and scholars who will soon be or are already employed in principal-agent relationships with political leadership; etc.

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