

# The Dangers of a Comfortable Debate

## A Review of *Across Anthropology. Troubling Colonial Legacies, Museums, and the Curatorial* by Margareta von Oswald and Jonas Tinius

I was excited when I first read the announcement for the publication of Margareta von Oswald's and Jonas Tinius' edited volume *Across Anthropology. Troubling Colonial Legacies, Museums, and the Curatorial*. The long list of contributors, ranging from influential voices in the debate on ethnographic museums to positions from art and activism, promised a thorough discussion and an illuminating read. Consequently, I had high expectations for the book and at times they were certainly met. However, in many regards, *Across Anthropology* could not live up to what it had promised, or to what it could have been. Not just despite, but also because of these shortcomings, the book offers an illuminating read and may be seen as emblematic for the debate it is depicting, as I will argue in this review.

In *Across Anthropology*, von Oswald and Tinius set out to answer the question what the current and on-going crisis of the ethnographic museum can tell us about the convergence of the field of anthropology and what they call "the curatorial" – "contemporary artistic research, theorising, education, and practice" (p.17). The choice of the ethnographic museum as case study additionally prompts a discussion of Empire and its legacies. The editors thus formulate their thematic triad as "museums, contemporary art, and colonialism" (p. 29), all in relation to anthropology. They emphasise that these relations are rapidly shifting and that questions traditionally discussed in anthropological academia are increasingly also taken up by artists and activists outside of it. To theorise this shift, they propose the concept of the "trans-anthropological" (p. 21) to better focus debate on the fringes of traditional anthropological practise.

The publication of the book is one of the results of the research project *Making Differences: Transforming Museums and Heritage in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* based at the *Centre for Anthropological Research on Museum and Heritage* in Berlin. This configuration allowed for the book to be published as open source material. As the book is addressing concerns relevant also to many actors outside of academia, this move towards the open accessibility of the publication appears especially thoughtful and represents, in itself, a structural contribution to opening up the debate. The book comprises 21 contributions, half of them paper-length position pieces, the other half shorter interviews the editors conducted with central interlocutors from the fields covered: Wayne Modest, Anne-Christine Taylor, Clémentine Deliss, Toma Muteba Luntumbue, le people qui manque, Natasha Ginwala, Bonaventure Soh Bejeng Ndikung, Nanette Snoep, and Nora Sternfeld. This inclusion of such a broad range of voices is one of the book's strongest points and the state of the art it provides is both useful and illuminating.

Among the contributions, some offer especially novel and thought-provoking perspectives. For example, Sarah Demart asks crucial questions about the relationship between activist movements and institutionalised museums. She points to the appropriation of activist expertise by museums, calling out the potentially insincere meaning of collaboration in which museums outsource their most critical work to decolonial activists but label their contributions mere “experience” and thus refuse to adequately remunerate them. Demart reminds us that now, with the inclusion of decolonial voices suddenly being en vogue, we must ask hard questions about structures and resources and not just about representation. Similarly, Natasha Ginwala cautiously approaches the topic of collaboration with institutions, calling for a middle position of simultaneous engagement and distance – a so-called “temporary occupancy” (p. 244). Despite her reservations, she rejects giving up the museum and its actors too quickly and instead stresses the so-far unfulfilled potential of the depot as a counter-archive of colonial expansion. Ginwala's impulse to pay close attention to the histories of the people who amassed these collections is

shared by Erica Lehrer. Lehrer comes to the debate on restitution from an often-overlooked space of collecting, the national ethnographic collections of Central and Eastern Europe. Discussing the legacy of objects connected to the Jewish population of Poland, before and after the Holocaust, she points out that while restitution might be an answer for some specific problem areas of ethnographic museology, in other contexts a too rigid focus on ‘creator communities’ might prove problematic in itself. To avoid the simplistic equation of an object with a community, she proposes the concept of “communities of implication” to highlight that objects often are meaningful to the history and culture of more than one group. Being implicated is not a matter of choice or desire, but the outcome of specific historical processes and thus “identification takes on the quality of obligation, implying responsibilities as well as rights” (p. 304). Lehrer’s conceptual work opens new possibilities without rejecting restitution as a possible solution – after all, just because several communities might be implicated, not all share a connection of the same character or intensity.

These examples show that some of the authors succeed in furthering the debate on the ethnographic museum. As would be expected for such a large volume, not all contributions manage to do so, but this is not the main problem of the book. Rather, the more fundamental issue lies in the editors’ main theoretical choice – they frame the multifaceted accounts of *Across Anthropology* as a debate about discipline. Even though many of the authors themselves have noticeably outgrown these terms, von Oswald and Tinius repeatedly return the debate to a rigid understandings of “anthropology” and “contemporary art”. They constantly bring up their central concept, the “trans-anthropological”, even though most interlocutors react with indifference or outright rejection to it. Nanette Snoep summarises this reaction when she responds in one of the interviews that “as the disciplines are blurring, [she is] not sure if “trans-anthropological” curating is the appropriate terminology. The term risks reducing ‘trans-curating’ only to anthropology. Why does anthropology have to be the starting point?” (p. 329). Indeed, it remains unclear to me why the

concept had to be in the book in the first place. Disciplines, if they work well, allow different researchers to come together and define common theoretical frameworks, methods, and challenges. But in this case, the contributors were already participating in the same discussion that has as its focal point the ethnographic museum and the debate on how to decolonise it. Why then introduce a new concept to define a debate that has already found its own transdisciplinary character? And why give this new concept the name of only one of the fields from which this debate is originating?

The editors seem to have felt equally uncomfortable with an overly narrow understanding of discipline at the centre of their work. For this reason, they add the prefix “trans-” to indicate movement at the fringes of the anthropological, a transcending of former boundaries. However, they run into several problems. First, the actual definition of these movements remains surprisingly vague. Sure, anthropological issues are not only debated in disciplinary academic spaces, but is this really a new development? And if there is movement at the fringes of anthropology as a discipline, how does it look like in detail? Definitions by association, such as that “[t]rans-gender and trans-cultural, for instance, do not deny the existence or association with particular identities but express a discomfort to processes of stabilisation and fixation” (p. 22), not only read a bit problematic in their vague reference to trans identities, but also foreground the opacity of the editors’ understanding of “trans-”. Secondly, I wonder why so much space in the book is dedicated to decentring a term like “anthropological” that will ultimately always recentre the debate by staking a disciplinary claim, as Snoep points out. With so many contributors already working beyond these disciplinary concerns, I am not sure what the benefit of sticking to these determinants would be, even if we add new prefixes to them.

“Trans-anthropological” thus remains in an awkward position throughout the book, often evoked but never quite fitting, a rather restrictive label that hampers

discussion instead of animating it. It makes the ongoing encounter between different fields at the ethnographic museum about discipline, a category that few of the participants in that encounter attach much weight to. At times, it feels that by using disciplinary terminology in their questions, the editors end up sustaining an old art vs. anthropology discourse. In one of the conversations, Wayne Modest brings this unease to the point: “When I started out, I was having a lot of discussions about the relation between art and anthropology museums. And I have basically banished that thought from my modes of thinking” (p. 73).

This is not to say that inquiring about the workings and problematics of disciplinary thought is an unimportant subject per se. Throughout the book, one consequence of discipline comes repeatedly to the surface: that of structure and resources. ‘Who is being taught what content at different institutions?’, ‘Which degree enables on to follow what kind of career?’, ‘How high and stable will salaries be and where does the money come from?’ – all these are questions heavily defined by discipline and well worthy of discussion, as Modest equally points out (p. 73). Regarding theoretical thought, however, the question of discipline seems outdated, stuck in time while the debate has already moved on.

Certainly, as someone writing from inside the ethnographic museum, but not as an anthropologist, it is easier for me to voice this critique. I am not invested in the future of (museum) anthropology as a discipline and do not feel the same anxiety regarding the transformation of the ethnographic museum, which might leave it detached from the discipline from which it originated. But it seems to me that *Across Anthropology* itself is the best proof for the continuing relevance of anthropological insight, both from within and outside academia. Despite the conceptual problems I have outlined, the book can be read as a convincing argument for the fact that we have only to gain from allowing approaches and competences to float freely among the different actors involved with the ethnographic museum.

However, free-floating concepts and a heterogenous debate still need theoretical

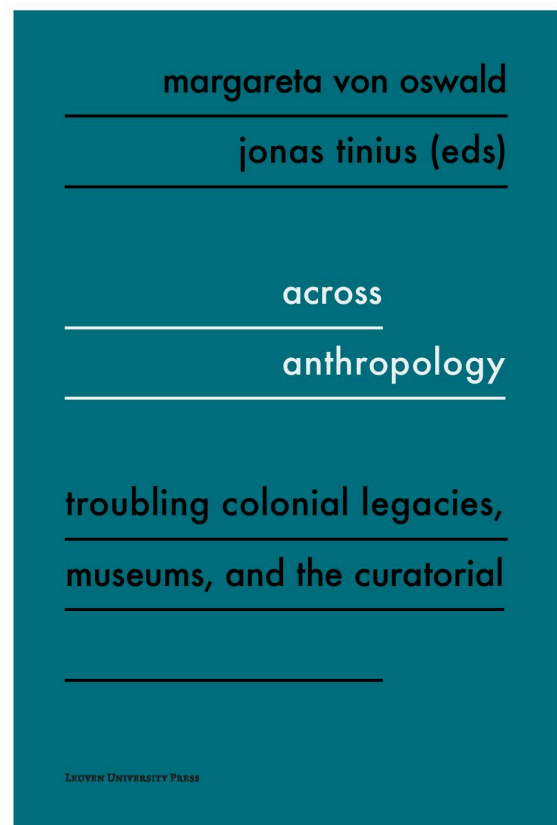
impetuses and thus I asked myself what kind of framing the editors could have chosen for their rich material to emphasis its relevance for the current debate and for the future of anthropological thought as a whole. To me, the ominous elephant in the room, stuck between the disciplinary concerns for ‘contemporary art’ and ‘anthropology’, is colonialism. After all, the first part of the subtitle reads “Troubling Colonial Legacies”. So, what does *Across Anthropology* have to say about the recursive presence of colonialism in the debate on contemporary ethnographic museums? Unfortunately, the topic is not addressed directly in the introduction and the interview questions remain rather vague when referring to it. Most common throughout the book is the editors’ triad “museum, contemporary art, and colonialism”. But what does this mean exactly? Can such things as museums and contemporary art be imagined independently from colonialism, but then again placed in relationship to it? That would result in a troubling understanding of all three concepts, but it remains unclear whether this meaning is intended or implied. Here, theoretical framing and conceptual innovativeness would have been most welcome.

It might be useful to engage with the thought of Ann Laura Stoler here. In her work on *Empire*, Stoler has criticised the concepts of “legacies” and “memories” for implying an understanding of the past as over and in mere need of critical reprocessing. Instead, she urges scholars of colonialism to look for uncomfortable durabilities and continuities.<sup>[1]</sup> Thus, not only would the question be whether ethnographic museums or contemporary art might have “colonial legacies”, but how precisely these institutions were implicated in the racialised colonial regimes of exploitation and violence *and how they continue to be so*. Instead of arguing over which discipline has the best tools or the right to confront the enormous challenges that are facing museums, I think it is necessary to turn to these pressing colonial continuities, making up our approach as we go along from the rich reservoir disciplinary thought has provided us with. Rather than focussing too much on the colonial “traces” we have already identified and endlessly citing Sarr and Savoy<sup>[2]</sup>,

we should be looking hard for those colonial features in the current debate that continue to slip past our attention.

In this sense, I see *Across Anthropology* as emblematic for a larger current debate. The book contains many insights of significance and it is obvious that both editors and authors participate in the debate on colonialism not because it's a trendy topic, but because they have a sincere desire to do so. In this way, the book might be seen as an example of what Stoler has termed "colonial aphasia."<sup>[3]</sup> The colonial in the ethnographic museum does not evade us because we do not want to see it, or because it is not even there, but because it is challengingly hard to find the words to address it, to speak of such violence and to endure such feelings of loss, shame and guilt. Many of us – I myself certainly included – are heavily invested in those museums, emotionally and often also financially, and sometimes it just feels safer to talk a bit more about art and anthropology, or to delve into the archive for four years to do provenance research, or to hire yet another decolonial artist than to face the questions that lie ahead. But we have to face them sooner or later, and luckily for us, some of the contributors already push us into the right direction. Nora Sternfeld, on the one hand, shows us that the admission that one personally is working in a problematic position, be it that of gentrification or racialisation, does not necessarily lead to a moral meltdown, but can be used productively. Wayne Modest, on the other, calls for museums to investigate the construction of European identity, especially by engaging with topics such as "structural inequality, racism, discrimination, Whiteness" (p. 68). Both their contributions are too complex to summarise them here sufficiently and are well worth reading in detail. Importantly, however, they concur in one point: that neither museums nor the debate surrounding them can allow themselves to get comfortable in the discussion of colonialism. Modest thus calls for "a kind of critical discomfort about the taken-for-granted-ness we have of ourselves" (p. 72). To invest in such critical discomfort, we could think about how restitution mobilises artefacts at a time when securitisation demobilises and kills people in the Sahara and the Mediterranean, as Achille Mbembe

and Ariella Aïsha Azoulay have done. We could think about the value the artefacts in our museums have reached on the art market, and contrast this with the price of agricultural foodstuffs produced by the descendants of these artefacts' creators, who are now working on the plantations around Europe. We could think about the sexualisation of women of colour in the travelogues of our collectors and the sex tourism industry around the world today. Finally, we could think about what part of White identity is represented in a museum of non-White artefacts and why we – White people – seem to depend on these tokens of “world culture” so much. These ideas are not new and certainly not mine, but to make them more than ideas, we have to engage with them on a larger scale – with exhibitions, conferences and edited volumes, in Anthropology and beyond, through art, activism and the forging of new relationships. Only then can we hope to find better words to describe the things around us and a meaningful voice in an aphasic colonial present.





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The book is available for download at: <https://lup.be/products/126524>

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### Footnotes

[1] Ann Laura Stoler, *Duress: Imperial Durabilities in Our Times* (Durham/London: Duke University Press, 2016), 33–35.

[2] This is not to minimise in any way the enormous contribution that their report has provided the debate with.

[3] Stoler, *Duress: Imperial Durabilities in Our Times* especially chapter 4.

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