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Unbearable simultaneity

On the correlation between mobile objects and people*

**Translated from the German by Jane Yager*

On Sunday afternoon, 27 May 2018, I am watching the podium and listening to Tom Holert introduce the second day of the conference "Deep Time and Crisis, ca.1930", which is taking place at the Haus der Kulturen der Welt in Berlin as part of the exhibition "Neolithic Childhood. Art in a False Present, ca. 1930". The exhibition, jointly curated by Holert and Anselm Franke, engages with the feeling of the unbearability of the present, following the work of Carl Einstein, which is contextualised in a dense composition of texts and artworks.

> The stock market crash and mass unemployment, political polarization, the industrialization of perception, the violence of colonialism: "c. 1930" was a time of crisis in modernity. For the artistic avant-gardes in Europe, the contemporary condition also became problematic; the impositions of the present led artists to break out into an imaginary realm of the archaic and the exotic – seeking out alternative origins and points of departure for humanity. New sciences and the fields already undergoing profound changes – such as ethnology, archaeology, psychology and mathematics – served as resources. "World art" became a key concept for revising history and modernity. (Neolithic Childhood, Manual 2018)

In his introductory remarks, Holert notes that at the same time as he is speaking, a demonstration by the alliance "Berliner Bündnis gegen Rechts" — initiated to oppose a march by the far-right, anti-immigrant Alternative for Germany (AfD) – has started nearby and that some of the conference participants will be arriving late because

they are taking part in it. His chest displays a brightly coloured sticker reading "NO TO RIGHT-WING AGITATION. RACISM IS NOT AN ALTERNATIVE." He gave me a sticker like this too when I arrived at the museum. The first conference talks begin, and the sound of drumming from the demonstration echoes in the background. I – probably like many other participants – am dogged by the uneasy feeling that we are sitting here dutifully listening to lectures about racism, colonial representation, primitivism and modernism when we would much rather be "out there".

The phenomenon of unbearable simultaneity lingers throughout the day; it never dissipates. There is a striking concurrence of events (the conference and demonstrations), of different senses of time (the 1930s and today), of reflective engagement with colonial archives and, at the same time, growing right-wing populism, which dominates our parliamentary debates and has not only aggravated migration politics in Germany in an unprecedented way, but also coarsened the discourse as a whole.

The exhibition displays by Holert and Franke also generate simultaneity by mapping the 1930s' sense of time. The exhibition *work* – the detective work of bringing together a great variety of relationships that condense into a present that is experienced as a crisis – makes it possible for exhibition-goers to relate this feeling implicitly to their own (crisis-imbued?) sense of time. In Raymond Williams' terms, the HKW exhibition is working out "structures of feeling"[i]. The exhibition and the conference make it clear to me once again that thinking in cultural anthropology and ethnology at that time focused on 'time' itself in its engagement with its own society. The unbearability of the present was expressed in the search for a different era; it drove artists, anthropologists, curators and creative artists to find the cultural Other in objects and artefacts, in motifs and images. Of course, their cultural critique was itself intertwined with periods of time: the unbearable present and colonial appropriation, artistic approaches to ethnological objects and systematisation of them within a development paradigm. Art was figuratively entangled and

intermeshed with cultural anthropology, as I demonstrate in my research on early cultural anthropology in the United States in close reference to German *Ethnologie*[ii], just as cultural anthropology has always been (and remains) entangled in imperialism, in global trade and power relations. The approaches of *entangled history* and postcolonial history of figurations suggest not so much that these relations can be disentangled or unravelled, but rather on the contrary that we are stuck with a knot that cannot be undone. These entanglements are also temporal, and they interlink history, the present and the future.

On Tuesday morning, 10 July 2018, I read an article by Richard Schröder in the newspaper *Die Welt*. Schröder has been the Chairman of the Association Berliner Schloss since 2004, and is also a member of the Board of Trustees of the Stiftung Humboldt Forum, which is responsible for the Humboldt Forum's programming and its configuration. Schröder writes that criticism of the latest compromise between the CDU and CSU on asylum-seekers and the proposal to establish "transit centres" in Germany to deport migrants more quickly and effectively is an excess of political correctness. He calls upon his own party, the SPD, to support the proposal.

> Comparing these planned transit centres to "camps" in the sense of concentration camps or gulags is utterly misleading: once a person is in such a camp, for the most part they never get back out again. At best, they will be released in a gravely damaged state. A better comparison would be a waiting room. Waiting rooms have two doors. You use one to enter the room. That door is always open, and you can use it at any time to leave the waiting room.[iii]

Schröder, a philosopher and Protestant theologian, has often spoken about migration policy, making clear that "the state must not be merciful. The state must be just. It is to act according to rules, and it is to consider the consequences of its actions."[iv] Here, Schröder has displayed a cynicism that goes hand in hand with Thilo Sarrazin's familiar adage "*Das wird man dochnochsagen dürfen*"("Assuming

we're even still allowed to say that"). He has expressed his criticism of leftist and liberal naïve cosmopolitanism in the press. On 22 August 2017, he wrote in a *Huffington Post* article entitled "Why the Sea Rescuers Are no Heroes":

> The absurdity that black Africans are risking and in some cases losing their lives in massive numbers to cross the Mediterranean to Europe, then applying for asylum here, being rejected and deported after some trickery and concealment of papers, — that most of them never attain refugee status, because they neither are persecuted nor are victims of war – could then finally be stopped.[v]

This notorious paranoia about the "purportedly looming invasion of entire hordes from overpopulated parts of the world" (Achille Mbembe, "The Great Walling Off", TAZ, 14 July 2018) unfolds in the same context and at the same time as Germany's cosmopolitanism, which Schröder and his fellow *Schloss* aficionados believe to be symbolised by the rebuilt Prussian palace and the Humboldt Forum housed in it.

At the time, the ethnological collections from the Dahlem district of Berlin have begun to arrive at the new palace. The first major object, a Luf boat from Oceania, moved into an almost 18-metre-long custom-designed case on the first floor of the palace on 29 May. I have followed the speeches that are part of an impressive press event and are posted on the Humboldt Forum's YouTube channel. The speakers tell of a "new home" for major anthropological objects, which will foster better understanding of the world.

> The collections of the Berlin State Museums form the backbone of the Humboldt Forum. For all of our partners, moving the objects from Dahlem to Mitte poses a logistical challenge. The arrival of the Luf boat, an icon of the Ethnological Museum, marks the beginning of the process of setting up the contents of the Humboldt Forum. What this new cultural area in the heart of Berlin is supposed to be – a place where the world can be understood better

– can now be seen in real life and not just on paper.[vi]



Illustration 1: Image at:
https://berliner-schloss.de/blog/suedseeboot-schwebt-ins-humboldt-forum/



Illustration 2: Image at:
https://berliner-schloss.de/blog/suedseeboot-schwebt-ins-humboldt-forum/

It is entirely intentional that the presentation of the collections' move to the Mitte district involves images of mobility and migration; this draws on a long history of collection objects as a valuable treasure.[vii] This is migration that is wanted, migration that represents cosmopolitan enrichment and incorporation into our own cultural body. The big case thus vanishes into the belly of the palace; it is walled in and henceforth preserved in the exhibition hall on the first floor.

Simultaneity is not only manifested in the parallel nature of migrating objects and migrating people, both of which are taken as significant for the Other culture. It also becomes painfully evident in the inextricably intertwined notion of migrating in a good and legal manner versus fleeing fraudulently and illegally. The homepage of the Association Berliner Schloss website reads:

The palace will restore the familiar picture of Berlin, complete its historic centre and heal the previously wounded cityscape. Its reconstruction is making Berlin once more the much-loved 'Athens on the Spree'. In this way, a counterpoint is being created to the mass-produced modern areas of the city's centre.[viii]

> The palace and the history that is desired through it correlate with the narrative of the overcrowded working-class district and the image of the bleak GDR prefabricated high-rise, both of which are critical of modernity. Of course, Schröder imagines transit centres as clean and orderly waiting rooms and the European border regime as a well-oiled machine that is able to prevent chaos, overcrowding, unemployment and poverty within Germany. All of this can be read in Schröder's article "10 Theses for a Cosmopolitan Germany" and his book "Cosmopolitan Germany? Ten theses to change our country," which he wrote together with Eva Quistorp and Gunter Weißgerber.[ix]

Unbearable simultaneity is not a matter of rhetorical coincidence. Rather, it is a part of social figurations, of networks of relationships and power that connect things and

people inextricably with one another. It is thus an element both of ethnological collections and of the conjunction of global history and the history of things that is manifested in them, which Rebekka Habermas and Susanna Burghartz correctly note in a special issue of *Historische Anthropologie* that is devoted to "Globale Dinge", global things:

> Connecting the history of things with global history can contribute to the debate about how global history combines the macro and micro levels and how static concepts of space, problematic epistemic classification schemes and implicit perpetuation of the postcolonial legacy can be explicitly addressed rather than implicitly perpetuated.[x]

The definition of what a legitimate refugee is, who has the right to be saved, and whose deportation is legal and justifiable, is closely connected with anthropological museums' systems of knowledge, collection practices and logic of representation. The way we define Europe or Germany spatially, culturally, historically, ethically and legally is articulated in processes of negotiation that become apparent in all their severity in today's migration and asylum discourse, as well as in the restitution debate, in the discussions about colonial history, and in the way that history is presented in exhibitions. This knotting together and entangling is inextricable, and it leads Arjun Appadurai in the aforementioned journal issue "Globale Dinge" to understand the museum objects of ethnological collections as "accidental refugees". Appadurai shows how "displacement, relocation and rehabilitation", like the agency, biography and humanisation of museum objects, are closely linked with the dehumanisation, de-historicisation and de-subjectification of illegalised migrants.[xi]

Thursday evening, 8 December 2016. The Berlin regional chairperson of the AfD at the time, Beatrix von Storch, opens her evening of lectures at the packed Humboldt Box, "Islam in Germany, Where Is It Headed?" with the following words:

> Christmas is coming. All of us celebrate Christmas, whether or not we are

> believing Christians. It has become a part of our culture and that is what this evening is about, if I am allowed to say so: it is about our culture and our traditions. Islam is not a part of our tradition or our identity in Germany, and thus it is not a part of Germany, as…
> [she is interrupted by applause and a shout of "Bravo!"]
> …as Volker Kauder, the chairman of the CDU/CSU parliamentary group at the time, said on 19 April 2012.[xii]

The Foundation Council of the Stiftung Humboldt Forum wanted to turn off the lights of the neighbouring palace construction site in protest for the duration of the event. But here too, the phenomenon of unbearable simultaneity, which is likely essential to the Humboldt Forum project as well as to the other establishments with ethnological collections in this country, is manifested. Of course, it is a calculated decision by the Berlin AfD to welcome an audience to this particular place. Von Storch even welcomes her audience to the heart of Berlin.

The interrelation between interaction with this sensitive site, with things, collections and images, and the historico-political, racist and Islamophobic proceedings can once again be seen. Ethnological objects and their embeddedness in what are known as "circuits of culture" (driven by representation, identity, production, consumption and regulation) – to make use of a concept from cultural studies – make it necessary to deal with the phenomenon of simultaneity. Is there not an inextricable correlation between migrating museum objects and drowning people, are they and we not likewise a part of the same regime of migration – historically evolved, and repeatedly recreated and reproduced in the present? A regime through which cultural orders of belonging are negotiated and within which humanity is defined. Can we have a debate about anthropological exhibiting without permanently grappling with these irresolvable relations? And, in doing so, not merely enduring the feeling of unbearable simultaneity, but rather accepting it as an inescapable element? If we take Johannes Fabian's call for coevalness seriously, we must grapple with

simultaneity, which does not simply exist, but rather is repeatedly brought forth. Rather than shutting out the lights, what I would urge us to do is turn on all the spotlights and flood the things that seem unbearable with light.

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[i] Williams, Raymond. The Long Revolution. Ontario: Broadview Press, 2001 [1961 Pelican], print, 57-88.

[ii] Chakkalakal, Silvy. expected 2019, in the peer review process. "Ethnographic Art Worlds. The Creative Figuration of Art and Anthropology", in: American Studies.

[iii] Schröder, Richard. "Ich mache mir Sorgen", in: Die Welt, 10 July 2018, quote trans. Jane Yager.

[iv] Schröder, Richard. "Ohne Strenge bei Migranten machen wir uns zum Affen", Interview, in: Die Welt, 26 April 2016, quote trans. Jane Yager.

[v]

https://www.huffingtonpost.de/richard-schroeder/seenotrettung-migranten-mittelmeer_b_17796596.html, quote trans. Jane Yager.

[vi] Hermann Parzinger, https://berliner-schloss.de/blog/suedseeboot-schwebt-ins-humboldt-forum/, quote trans. Jane Yager

[vii] Cf. Chakkalakal, Silvy. 2018; in print. "Migration in der frühen Kulturanthropologie. Grenzüberschreitende Wissenspraktiken zwischen lokaler Geschichte und globaler Zukunft", in: Historische Anthropologie 26/2: 149-175.

[viii] https://berliner-schloss.de/en

[ix] Schröder, Richard/ Quistorp, Eva/ Weißgerber, Gunter. "10 Thesen für ein weltoffenes Deutschland", in: Die Welt, 14 October 2017, and ibid. "Weltoffenes Deutschland? Zehn Thesen, die unser Land verändern." Herder Verlag, München 2018.

[x] Habermas, Rebekka / Burghartz, Susanna, "Editorial. Globale Dinge – und was wir von ihnen lernen können", in: Historische Anthropologie 25 (2017) H. 3, 301–307, 306. Quote trans. Jane Yager

[xi] Arjun Appadurai, Museum Objects as Accidental Refugees, in: Historische Anthropologie 25 (2017) H. 3, 401–408.

[xii] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MMoOS2awp5Y, quote trans. Jane Yager.