

# Redesigning the Universal Museum: Epistemic Challenges and Aesthetic Remedies

Sophia Prinz\*

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## Abstract

The museum is facing a crisis. Contrary to their image as guardians of cultural heritage, museums seem to be losing cultural and social relevance precisely because of their historical legacy: their collection histories, epistemological foundations, personnel policies, architectural settings, and displays, are all deeply rooted in nineteenth-century forms of 'power/knowledge' (Foucault 1981b). However, any clear-cut division of exhibits into art and non-art, modern and pre-modern, or the 'West and the Rest' (Hall 2018) is becoming untenable in a post-migrant, globally entangled world. This crisis of the museum cannot be approached in solely discursive or conceptual terms, it demands to be addressed on an aesthetic level as well. The task of contemporary exhibition design is to invent new perceptual 'affordances' that subvert cognitivist bias, linear historiography, and classification systems of Western museology. In this regard, both Theodor W. Adorno's concept of 'constellation', and Edouard Glissant's 'poetics of relation', can serve as guiding principles.

**Keywords:** universal museum, global entanglement, exhibition design, aesthetics, curating

## Introduction

Experts in the field of critical museology have been debating for decades how the museum institution can address both its old aporias and new socio-cultural challenges (Hooper-Greenhill 1992; Bennett 1995; Witcomb 2003; Anderson 2004; Edwards et al. 2006; Chambers 2014; Macdonald 2015, 2022; Oswald and Tinius 2020). However, only recently have significant sections of the wider public realized that the collections of Western museums, and the way they are displayed, may well be considered problematic. It is not without reason that the colonial legacy of ethnographic museums and the restitution of looted art are at the centre of the current public and academic debate (Hicks 2021; Phillips 2022; Savoy 2022; Vergès 2023). However, it is also worth taking a step back to look at the wider landscape in which this crisis is situated: besides the ethnographic museums, the so-called encyclopaedic and universal museums (such as the British Museum in London, the Metropolitan Museum in New York, or examples of Arts and Crafts Museums) face more or less the same fundamental problem: despite critical self-reflection, they still lack adequate epistemological and curatorial tools to deal with the complex and often contradictory historical origins and present-day dynamics of our globally entangled world. Nonetheless, this apparent museological crisis has not had a huge impact upon the number of visitors attending museums. Rather the opposite seems the case: as key features of the 'creative city', museums play an important role in urban policy and cultural tourism (MacLeod 2002; Mathur 2005; Michels et al. 2014). However, as Ien Ang has pointed out, the neoliberal popularization of the museum has not been accompanied by a further diversification of the audience: "survey after survey have consistently shown that ethnic minorities and immigrant populations are underrepresented among museum audiences in Western, liberal democratic societies. [...] In short there is ample statistic evidence that (lack of) audience diversity is a problem for museums" (Ang 2018: 316-7). The failure to address diverse audiences is rarely due to ignorance or lack of ambition. On the contrary, several

ethnographic and universal museums have tried hard to become more inclusive or attempt to decolonize their programmes in order to make non-Western perspectives and narratives seen and heard. These initiatives have already brought about some changes in exhibition practice and discourse. However, they have not been able to address the core issue, namely the persistence of the museum's underlying power/knowledge structure (Hooper-Greenhill 1992; Bennett 1995). This structure, or museum apparatus,<sup>1</sup> is deeply rooted in the Eurocentric and colonialist worldview of the nineteenth-century. As I will argue, a transformation of this long-established structure can only succeed if museums rethink their notion of (scientific) knowledge and embrace the exhibition as an aesthetic-epistemological form in its own right. Museum display should not be conceived as a tool destined to convey the 'true' meaning of the exhibits, but rather as an aesthetic constellation that creates space for plural perspectives. As will be discussed below, it is precisely the in-betweenness of objects within larger constellations that invites different kinds of perception and interpretation. This is not an entirely new idea. In the field of contemporary art, the method of 'aesthetic' or 'artistic' curating has been discussed for some time (Smith 2012; Voorhies 2017; Bismarck 2022). However, this discussion has not yet entered wider museological debates that are still reluctant to address questions of aesthetics. For a better understanding of this tension between critical museology and aesthetics, I will first recapitulate some of the central aspects of the discussion about artistic forms and methods in non-art museums. This will also include recent trends towards elaborate exhibition designs and immersive spaces (MacLeod 2005; MacLeod et al. 2018; Austin 2020). Secondly, I will introduce the concept of 'aesthetic constellation' as an alternative to established forms of exhibition design. In doing so, I will problematize the usual division of labour between curator and designer in universal, ethnographic, and historical museums. Drawing on post-conceptual installation art that interacts with historical collections, I will argue for an integrated approach that understands display design as a research practice in itself. Finally, I will show how 'aesthetic' or 'artistic' curating could be made productive for the (re-) conception of the 'pluriversal museum' (Basu 2023). As an example, I will use the exhibition and research project *Mobile Worlds* (2018), in which I was involved as a researcher. Since 'aesthetic constellations' are by definition site- and context-specific, and are produced with a high degree of improvisation, *Mobile Worlds* should not be seen as a kind of blueprint that could be applied anywhere. This exhibition was more of a curatorial experiment that went against the grain of the dominant display conventions, with the aim of exploring the collection's 'invisible' history of global entanglement and its subsequent relevance to the transcultural present.

### Curatorial and design strategies within critical museology

Current museological discourse on historical, universal, and ethnographic museums addresses (at least) three main topics: (a) the colonial legacy of the ethnographic museum; (b) community building and the diversification of museum audiences; and, finally, (c) new narratives of global entanglement. All of these discussions are accompanied by a critical analysis of museum spaces and exhibitions, which are reconsidered in terms of both curatorial concept and design, often using methods and strategies that were originally developed in art contexts. My proposal to include concepts such as 'aesthetic constellation' or 'artistic curation' in critical museology should be understood as an extension of these approaches.

The most prominent debate in critical museology addresses the fate of the ethnographic museum. This is due to the fact that the this type of museum clearly reveals the connection between museological taxonomies and imperialist forms of knowledge and understanding.<sup>2</sup> The ethnographic museum therefore faces a triple challenge: to address the nature of its history of collection-building through looted objects; to deconstruct the structural racism of the ethnological gaze (Hicks, 2021; Phillips 2022; Savoy 2022; Vergès 2023);<sup>3</sup> and to invent new means of telling more diverse stories – for example postcolonial narratives – through the same historical material (Karp and Lavine 1991; Chambers 2014; Oswald and Tinius 2020; Macdonald 2022). Since the 1980s, attempts have been made to tackle problems of the ethnographic museum by modifying the epistemological status of the objects of the collection: instead of their presentation as mere 'ethnographica' in need of anthropological expertise, they have been exhibited according to formalist criteria. The 'aesthetic gaze' that

has emerged as a legitimate reception practice in the context of the Western art field, has simply been transferred to non-western artefacts, transforming them into 'works of art'. One of the first exhibitions of this type took place in the field of contemporary art. In his 1989 exhibition *Magiciens de la Terre* at the Centre Pompidou, Jean-Hubert Martin sought to subvert ethnological and colonialist orders of knowledge by juxtaposing Western and non-Western artworks and artefacts. While the curatorial focus on 'magic' or 'spirituality' as an umbrella term had been criticized as primitivist, exoticizing, or a form of neo-colonialist *othering* (Araeen 1989; Buchloh 1989), *Magiciens de la terre* has had a lasting impact on curatorial methods, as well as on ethnographic museum and exhibition practice (Steeds and Lafuente 2013). While the inclusion of artistic and anthropological research methods has become a prominent feature within the global field of contemporary art, especially as part of post-conceptual installation practices (Enwezor 2003), the 'rules of art' (Bourdieu 1996) remain somewhat at odds with the ethnographic museum and its historic collections.<sup>4</sup> The re-labelling of ethnographic objects as artworks has consequently been criticized as Eurocentric paternalism and mere aestheticization (Vogel 1991; Lidchi 1997; Phillips 2007). Since the Enlightenment ideal of autonomous art and aesthetic contemplation hardly corresponds to the historical and cultural meanings and functions of ethnographic objects, the 'valorisation' of such objects as works of art seems to present just another act of 'epistemic violence' (Spivak 1988a: 280) that ultimately reinforces the power and knowledge structures of the Western museum. A recent example of this curatorial strategy can be seen in the exhibition *Unvergleichlich [Beyond Compare]* shown at the Bode Museum in Berlin between 2017 and 2019. As Nnenna Onuoha (2022) argues convincingly in her detailed analysis, the juxtaposition of European and African sculpture did not contribute to a diversification of perspectives within the museum, but on the contrary reinforced museological stereotypes. This was due both to the superficial parameters of comparison, which were based on far-fetched similarities in form, function, or content, and to the mode of presentation and narration that did not address the colonial legacy of the collection. A striking example of this poorly conceived de-contextualisation and re-contextualisation was the pairing of a Benin bronze of an Oba with a wooden sculpture of the severed head of John the Baptist. While this juxtaposition was not even convincing in purely formal terms, there was no mention of the punitive expedition by British forces in 1897 that brought the objects into the orbit of Western collections, nor any mention of the ongoing debate about their restitution. While the categorization of ethnographic objects as artworks offers no escape from the epistemological impasse of the ethnographic museum, curators had experimented with other uses of artistic or aesthetic methods. One popular strategy that dates back to the 1990s is the 'artistic intervention' (Deliss 2012; Geismar 2015). In this context, individual artists, often from so-called 'source communities', are invited to deconstruct established narratives about historical collections, while offering fresh perspectives on certain objects or constellations. An example that has now become canonical is Fred Wilson's *Mining the Museum* (1992), which will be discussed in more detail in the following section of the article. Unlike broader curatorial approaches that explicitly attempt to employ aesthetic methods, artistic interventions are inherently limited in scope and impact by institutional constraints of time and budget. As a result, they only scratch on the surface of the museum apparatus and thus run the risk of merely 'performing' diversity. Moreover, as Heidy Geismar has pointed out, temporary commentary provided by outsider artists also tends to reproduce the traditional distinction between autonomous (contemporary) art and 'mere' ethnographic or ritual objects (Geismar 2015). To avoid this trap, some scholars also argue that the power and knowledge structures of the ethnographic museum should be countered more intrinsically within exhibition design strategies (Classen and Howes 2006; Witcomb 2015; Watson 2016; Ang 2018; Austin 2020). This idea assumes that the aesthetic, practical, and spiritual significance of non-Western objects cannot be captured by the two perceptual habits that inform the reception of artefacts in Western museums, i.e., an ocularcentrism that privileges vision over other forms of sensory perception or the ideal of pure contemplation according to which aesthetic experience arises only in 'disinterested pleasure' (Kant). Drawing on key insights of from the phenomenology of the body that challenge the established mind-body dichotomy in Western philosophy, some scholars suggest that a proper understanding of the exhibits can only be achieved if the exhibition design takes visitors' implicit bodily or perceptual knowledge into

account (Austin 2012; Hale 2012). The phenomenological reassessment of exhibition design has led to a trend towards immersive, atmospherically-dense spaces that employ visually and sensually stimulating displays and interiors, as well as theatrical forms of lighting and media device. However, even this approach does not necessarily lead to a fundamental reordering of the museum apparatus.

There are of course examples of immersive museum design that work towards a “redistribution of the sensible” (Rancière 2004), or a postcolonial ‘aesthesis’ (Vázquez 2020), especially if indigenous curators and designers are involved.<sup>5</sup> Examples of this include The National Museum of the American Indian in Washington D.C. and New York (Geismar 2015), the permanent *First Peoples* exhibition at Bunjilaka Aboriginal Cultural Centre at Melbourne Museum (Witcomb 2015), or the Museu Afrobrasil in São Paulo. But more often than not, new scenographic trends play into the hands of marketing, which thrives upon easily recognizable markers of cultural difference or ‘authentic’ experience (Reckwitz 2020). This mere ‘designification’ of diversity, as you may call it, results from the fact that non-art museums usually maintain the established division of labour between curators with an academic background on the one hand, and professional designers on the other hand (Lanz and Leveratto 2023).<sup>6</sup> Consequently, designers are rarely involved in the conception of the exhibition as a whole. Usually they come late to the production process and are asked to create a ‘container’ for the academic content. Of course, such a division not only perpetuates the dichotomy between form and content, but also serves the modernist cliché of design as a practice that, in contrast to art, is aimed solely at solving problems and making information easily accessible. Discussions taking place within the domain of critical museology should ask, however, whether transparency and clarity is the only educational goal in the contemporary global age (Prinz 2021). Perhaps a pluriversal museum should also invite visitors to deal with non-translatibility, opacity, and ambiguity.

In addition to the art and anthropology debate, another museological trend has impacted contemporary exhibition design – the so-called ‘educational turn’, which also partly originated in the field of contemporary art (O’Neill and Wilson 2010; Andermann and Simine 2012; Jaschke et al. 2012).<sup>7</sup> Inspired by the ‘relational aesthetics’ (Bourriaud 2002) of artists such as Rirkrit Tiravanija and Liam Gillick, who created socio-material environments for informal gatherings and exchanges within the gallery space, curators, artists, and educators have become increasingly involved in collaborations with visitor groups, community building and the democratization of knowledge. Even in non-art museums, critical art educators have challenged the institution’s prevalent self-image as the guardian of validated scientific knowledge. One way of doing this has been by inviting visitors to become co-producers of alternative forms of knowledge, or to engage in practices that have been discredited by institutional metanarratives (Mörsch et al. 2017; Sternfeld 2018). Such outreach-programs are not altruistic in character but functional: as long as the museum staff are still mostly white and middle-class, the inclusion of people with expertise in a post-migration society is essential for the diversification of both the museum programmes as well as the audiences they are intended to attract (Ang 2018). However, it is not only by defining its core concerns that critical art and museum education draw on the methods and strategies of relational aesthetics; additionally, the design of the spaces in which educational workshops take place – sometimes called ‘labs’, ‘in-between space’, ‘thinking space’, or ‘open space’ – are reminiscent of the artistic settings mentioned above. Similar to Tiravanija’s participatory performances, these new educational spaces are usually located in a prominent place within the museum, right in the middle of the exhibition rooms. In contrast to the immobile, prestigious furniture characteristic of old gallery halls, such spaces are often equipped with flexible tables and stools that can be easily moved and adapted to different situations. Also to be found in these spaces are small libraries with selected books on critical topics, comfortable seating areas for relaxing, and all sorts of instruments and working materials commonly used in collaborative design thinking processes, such as post-its, flipcharts, and pens. This conceptual emphasis on improvisation, openness and spontaneity is also reflected in the use of aesthetic elements reminiscent of (former) sub- and counter-cultures, such as plywood and other inexpensive materials, raw and minimal shapes, minimal use of (light) colours, and playful typefaces.<sup>8</sup> It is doubtful,

however, whether these 'open spaces' really contribute to a lasting diversification of museums and their audiences. This is not only because their well-conceived design caters primarily to the tastes of young, cosmopolitan elites, but also because the democratic participation they supposedly create is confined to this rather limited space, leaving the character of the rest of the museum unchanged. In other words, 'open spaces' tend to become mere *performances* of diversity that allow museums to "look like their offerings of experiences fit in with visitors' desires" (Kundu and Kalin 2015: 42).

A third, perhaps less prominent strand of the current museological debate and exhibition practice, is concerned with global entanglements that contradict the established division of departments within universal museums (Prinz 2020; Driver et al. 2021; Leeb and Samuel 2022; Basu 2023). This debate was sparked by the post-1989 wave of globalization, which not only gave rise to new research in global history, global art history, and postcolonial studies, but also opened up the field of contemporary art to the 'global south' and non-western forms of modernism (Belting et al. 2013; Smith and Mathur 2014; Hlavajova and Sheikh 2017).<sup>9</sup> While the debate about art in ethnological museums described above still follows the (strategic) essentialist logic of cultural identity and difference (art versus non-art, Western versus non-Western, etc.),<sup>10</sup> the transcultural perspective, strongly influenced by poststructuralist and postcolonial concepts, emphasizes relationalities, ambiguities, and polysemy. This means that the historiographical metanarratives that also shape the institutional structure of Western museums are subject to fundamental scrutiny: for example, the formation of modernity, including its cultural forms, cannot be told purely as a Western success story, but must also include its dialectical counterpart – exploitation and colonialism. In this sense, the history of the global present can no longer be told from the Western 'centre', but also needs to include its multifaceted colonial origins. Any exhibition that seeks to overcome outdated Eurocentric reductionism has therefore no alternative but to reach down to the very core of the museological power and knowledge, and to dissolve its supposedly universal categories. This includes distinctions between art, craft, design, technology, and nature, the geographical division of cultural spheres and nations, a linear form of historiography that distinguishes between modern and pre-modern, and the differentiation of museum types. Instead, exhibitions need to focus on the numerous transcultural entanglements and exchanges between different regions of the world, and on the interrelation of social, cultural, and natural processes.

Beyond the field of contemporary art, where 'global' and 'transcultural curating' has become a key issue (Prinz 2017, Dornhof et al. 2018; O'Neill et al. 2019; Amanshauser and Bradley 2020; Ndikung 2023; Buerger and Prinz 2024), the historical discourse on global entanglements has so far been taken up primarily by museums with encyclopaedic collections or by specialist exhibitions about Europe and Asia, for example, the textile trade, or the cultural legacies of the Silk Road.<sup>11</sup> There are far less examples in which features of permanent exhibition displays become rearranged. Independent of the subject matter, historical exhibitions that thematise global entanglements typically adhere to the scenographic language that dominates the rest of the museum, thereby either adopting immersive and theatrical exhibition designs or emphasising the temporary nature of the display. While the actual designs may vary in their style, they typically make up a well-conceived and cohesive whole, which nonetheless serves as a mere container or stage for the objects on display. This separation of curatorial content and exhibition form leads to a problem of ethnographic museums that has already been discussed. Unless design is made a central element of the curatorial process, exhibitions will not be able to fulfil their ambition to diversify. To support my argument, the following section of the article will introduce the aesthetic concept of 'constellation' as a counter-model to the designification of the museum.

### **Critical aesthetics**

The museum apparatus is not only linked to specific regimes of knowledge, but also to established schemes of perception. What we perceive and how we perceive in a museum is not 'innocent' but instead linked to certain power structures and social orders. This is not a new insight. Early museum and exhibition studies were already indebted to Michel Foucault (Hooper-Greenhill 1992; Bennett 1995; Rose 2016: 220-53). It would be too narrow though to conceive of museum regimes exclusively as panoptic mechanisms or spectacles, as Tony

Bennett had suggested. The act of perception is rather to be understood as a complex and multi-layered cultural practice that is shaped by repeated bodily interactions with the formal patterns of the socio-material world. According to such a post-phenomenological re-reading of Foucault,<sup>12</sup> the museum apparatus of the nineteenth-century correlates with design conventions that not only suggest a particular reading and understanding of the exhibits, but also imply certain modes of sensory perception. Or to use the terminology of Jacques Rancière – a certain ‘distribution of the sensible’ (Rancière 2004). To undermine prevalent forms of museological knowledge, these conventionalized perceptual ‘affordances’ of museum display also need to be challenged.<sup>13</sup> In other words, a critical form of exhibition design must to some extent disrupt the visitor’s sensory expectations in order to reveal the shortcomings and limitations of their habits of perception and meaning-making. This line of thought is inspired by Theodor W. Adorno, who argues in *Aesthetic Theory* (1997) that a real critique of the existing social and political order can never be achieved with the epistemological and communicative tools that result from these conditions. Established discourses, concepts, and sensory orders make it difficult to think or see beyond the given, Adorno observes (1997: 145). To overcome this impasse, an aesthetic method is needed that searches for the ‘nonidentical’ in the cracks and gaps of the existing socio-cultural order (Adorno 1997: 176). Of course, such a critique or form of negation can only be conceived from within the apparatus, since according to Foucault there is no absolute outside of power (Foucault 1981a: 141). One has to make do with the available means. Thus, for Adorno, the method of constellation is the only viable way of establishing aesthetic difference (Adorno 1984: 165, 1997: 7, 82, 133). As part of a ‘constellation’, certain key elements of the apparatus are taken out of their conventional context and reappear in a different ‘aesthetic’ figuration. Within this new figuration, their original meaning still resonates, but the sense of unity or totality on which the knowledge order is based gets lost. The constellation thus generates a particular type of experience – an aesthetic experience – in which meaning resists its fixation and therefore any attempt to identify phenomena once and for all. This concept of aesthetic ‘constellation’ that transcends the existing orders of knowledge, bears similarities to Edouard Glissant’s understanding of an ‘aesthetics of relation’. Citing the experience of creolization in the Caribbean, Glissant emphasized that cultural identities cannot be considered stable but are rather in flux, given the relational intertwining between the subject and the phenomena of the socio-material world. In this sense, he calls for a replacement of the Western epistemology of identification with a consideration of the ‘trace’:

I think that we must in future move towards trace thought, towards a non-system of thought that will not be dominating, nor systematic, nor imposing, but will perhaps be a non-system of thought – intuitive, fragile, ambiguous – which will be best suited to the extraordinary complexity, the extraordinary dimension of multiplicity of the world in which we live. (Glissant 2020: 12)

Both Adorno’s concept of ‘constellation’ and Glissant’s understanding of an ‘aesthetics of relation’ therefore refer to the ambiguous in-betweenness and the relationality of the heterogeneous elements of the apparatus to unfold the critical potential of the ‘aesthetic’. However, while Adorno’s aesthetic theory is situated within a philosophical debate on (relative) autonomous art, Glissant’s concern is with the creolized practices of knowing and writing under the conditions of postcolonial thought. In Glissant’s view, these practices can serve as a model to make Western thinking compatible with the sheer complexity and ambiguity of global dynamics. By combining both approaches, the ‘constellation’ could be redefined as an aesthetic form particularly suited to capturing transcultural processes, as it favours multiperspectivity over a linear, coherent narrative. Transferred to the exhibition context, it can be argued that a pluriversal mode of perception and understanding – one that embraces transculturality and diversity – needs to deconstruct the reductive, classificatory logic of the existing conceptual tools and orders of knowledge in the museum. Instead of assigning objects in collections to pre-defined categories, they could become the starting point of an inductive curatorial process that attempts to reveal their inherent relationality, polysemy, and multi-temporality (Rincon 2019).<sup>14</sup> A sensory and intellectual re-ordering of museum taxonomy in this way cannot succeed if the exhibition designer’s task is limited to a mere translation of

predefined academic content. Rather, the whole design process needs to be incorporated into the curatorial concept from the very beginning. Such an approach is necessarily linked to a critical reflection on the museological concept of 'valid knowledge'. Since the selection, archiving, and transmission of what counts as historical sources follows exclusively Western academic criteria, historical archives show considerable gaps in knowledge. Consequently, a pluriversal representation of global entanglements cannot be based solely on available historical sources, but also requires forms of 'critical speculation' that make use of aesthetic or literary techniques (Hartman 2008). Moreover, so-called 'scientific objectivity' (in the classical sense) is still based on rigid identifications: objects are either this or that, but never both at the same time. By contrast, an experimental design that focuses on the multiple relationships between objects is able to demonstrate that meanings and even forms are always conditioned by their respective contexts. Therefore, from the perspective of critical aesthetics, museum exhibitions do not have to be easily comprehensible in every aspect – on the contrary. Pluriversal museum exhibitions that seek to overcome universalist ways of seeing should rather create a space for multiple perspectives, perceptions, and readings, as well as for ambivalences, conflicts, and processes of negotiation. Of course, such an aesthetic constellation cannot be conceived in the abstract but instead emerges from a co-creative process that involves not only curators and designers, but also members of the public, representative of a post-migrant society. Despite the aforementioned innovations in curating, education and exhibition design, the concept of aesthetic constellation is not one that has yet been pursued outside of art museums. Within the field of art history, however, there exist numerous frameworks for such an approach: post-conceptual installation art,<sup>15</sup> for example, has adapted the methods of Western conceptual art to reconstruct hitherto omitted historical aspects of (post-)colonial modernity. A paradigmatic example that is often cited is Fred Wilson's *Mining the Museum* (1992). In this installation, conventions of display at the Maryland Historical Society were fundamentally challenged by simply re-arranging items from the museum's collection into unexpected constellations. Wilson has described his artistic method as follows:

There is a lot of silver in this museum. I created one vitrine of repoussé silver with the label 'Metalwork 1793–1880'. But also made of metal, hidden deep in the storage rooms at the historical society, were slave shackles. So I placed them together, because normally you have one museum for beautiful things and one museum for horrific things. Actually, they had a lot to do with one another; the production of the one was made possible by the subjugation enforced by the other. Quite possibly, both of these could have been made by the same hand. To my mind, how things are displayed in galleries and museums makes a huge difference in how one sees the world. (Karp and Wilson 1996: 183)

Contrary to Walter Mignolo's interpretation (2011), Wilson's installation is not simply a political statement on decoloniality that could also have been articulated in textual form. By making the hidden relationship between the silverware and shackles visible, the visitors' incorporated 'schemes of thought and perception' (Bourdieu 2000) are disrupted through the artist's aesthetic strategy (Petersen 2014).

In the proceeding section of this article I will outline how the artistic method of aesthetic constellation can be systematically applied to universal collections in order to uncover 'traces' of global entanglements. The example I provide is *Mobile Worlds* (2018),<sup>16</sup> an exhibition curated by Roger M. Buergel, the director of *documenta 12* (2007), in which I was involved as a researcher and co-curator. As will soon be explored in more detail, *Mobile Worlds* can be understood as a refinement of the 'migration of form', a curatorial method Buergel had originally conceived in the field of contemporary art and which was also later applied to 'hybrid' exhibitions that combined historical, anthropological, and artistic research. The central assumption of this method is that global socio-material entanglements can be traced by examining their aesthetic sediments, as well as the global circulation of materials, artefacts, forms, and patterns (Buergel and Prinz 2024).<sup>17</sup> *Mobile Worlds* certainly does not claim to solve the aporia of the Western museum; nevertheless, some lessons for the use of aesthetic

frameworks within critical museum practice might be drawn from its experimental character.

### ***Mobile Worlds***

A long-term research and exhibition project, *Mobile Worlds* applied curatorial methods that were mainly inspired by post-conceptual installation art to the collection of the Museum für Kunst and Gewerbe (MKG) [*Museum of Arts & Crafts*] in Hamburg. Much like the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, the MKG is an offspring of the nineteenth-century tradition of the world exhibition. MKG houses a wildly eclectic collection that is categorized according to subjects such as 'Islamic Art', 'Musical Instruments', 'Photography', 'Modernity', 'Fashion', and 'Design'. To begin with, the *Mobile Worlds* exhibition team looked through the collection for 'unruly' objects that didn't fit into conventional museological categories and were therefore relegated to the museum's vast depot. With this selection of artefacts, to which works by contemporary artists were later added, including newly commissioned pieces and various loans, the *Mobile Worlds* exhibition attempted to propose a transcultural counter-model to the existing museum order. A seventeenth-century Persian ceramic bowl that imitates Chinese porcelain, including fake Chinese characters (figure 1), gives an idea as to what is meant by 'unruly' objects. Indeed, there were many artefacts that upon closer inspection show traces of their relationship to global trade and empire-building. In any case, they sit squarely within the understanding that individual cultures can be clearly distinguished from one another, which is still prevalent within museological thought and practice. Other examples include: a deconstructed coat designed by Alexander McQueen, which evokes a nineteenth-century British military outfit, using a fabric with an Indian boteh pattern, known in Europe as a 'paisley' (the name of a Scottish weaving town); a comb from the Herkules Sägemann factory in Hamburg that is made from rubber harvested in the Amazon region; an early Meissen figurine depicting an African elephant hunter; and a Japanese okimono that is carved out of ivory in the shape of a 'fellach' (an Egyptian peasant woman). The idea was to emphasize the kaleidoscopic character of the objects – that is to say, their multi-layered and multi-temporal nature – rather than to identify them through conventional categories. This disregard for established organisational rules naturally led to conflicts within the museum, but it also made it possible to involve people from outside the institution. International scholars and artists, as well as students and members of Hamburg's migrant community, were invited to join the exhibition-making process, with the aim of reconstructing and speculating upon a vast network of global entanglements and their lasting impact. This included subjects relating to the Opium Wars, Japan's self-imposed Meiji-era top-down modernization, the infrastructure projects of the Baghdad Railway and the Suez Canal, German-Swiss coffee plantations in Brazil, the Haitian Revolution, and the iconography of Afro-futurism. The sheer heterogeneity of the material did not allow a traditional Eurocentric worldview to simply be replaced by an equally coherent global meta-narrative. Adorno's concept of constellation, and Glissant's aesthetics of relation, both of which emphasize the instability of meaning and multiperspectivity, direct us towards an open arrangement that visibly negated any sense of museological order. Key elements of the apparatus of the museum exhibition – objects, vitrines, captions, light – were rearranged in such a way as to undermine any sense of coherence and cause multiple disruptions and disturbances. Long-forgotten display cases from the museum's early days were scattered in the exhibition space and filled with wild arrangements of objects that were only accompanied by essayistic fragments of text (figures 2 and 3). Display cases were combined with pink plywood pedestals, dark purple carpeting, and light blue curtains that had the effect of dimming the light. At the centre of the exhibition space was an open container for objects discarded from Hamburg households that were intended to be shipped to West Africa from the former 'Africa Terminal' at the city's port (Peters 2021). In front of the container was situated a historic plaster cast of the so-called 'Enthroned Goddess', a Neolithic sculpture from Mesopotamia, which took pride of place alongside a Vodoun flag depicting Erzulie Dantor, the female loa who called for the Haitian revolution, as well as a small postcard of the Black Madonna of Częstochowa (figure 4). The exhibition did not prescribe a particular route through the space, but rather encouraged visitors to find their own way through the labyrinthine constellation of displayed artefacts.





*Figure 1: installation shot of Mobile Worlds, 2018: Plate with sheet and pseudo-Chinese script in Chinese Kraak style with pseudo branding on the ground in Chinese style, Iran, Safavid dynasty, 17th century, Museum für Kunst und Gewerbe, Hamburg (© photo: Daniel Ladner)*

By tracing the complicated path that brought the 'Enthroned Goddess' into *Mobile Worlds*, I would like to explain the experimental approach to researching, curating and designing that was employed. A key aspect of the process was the attempt to involve members of Hamburg's post-migrant community. This is how we encountered a group of Kurdish activists who were engaged in a feminist social project in 'Rojava', the multi-national and multi-religious autonomous region in north-eastern Syria. Because of the massive destruction of the region's archaeological sites during the reign of ISIS, the activists wanted to contextualize pre-Islamic Mesopotamian artefacts from the MKG with a documentary about the situation in northern Syria. This idea fell through when it became evident that their explanatory image-text panels, which work well in an activist context, would turn into mere ready-mades in the museum space. Or worse, they would look like works of conceptual art. Following Adorno and Glissant, one could also argue that the conflation of historical perspectives on archaeological artefacts and the social dream of 'Rojava' as a political project would demand distinct forms of presentation. Moreover, we did not want to reduce the complexity and ambiguity that characterizes the relationship between Hamburg and 'Rojava' to the rhetoric of activist discourse. However, after countless discussions, it was possible to find a common ground: as it turned out, some Mesopotamian Neolithic sculptures in German museums, which seemingly betray no hierarchy between men and women,<sup>18</sup> resonated with the feminist activists' cause. From their perspective, these sculptures represented a time when women were not oppressed by religious or other patriarchal systems. The archaeological artefacts thus proved to be more than just 'cultural heritage' – the activists saw them as agents of a progressive future coming from the past.



Figure 2: installation shot of *Mobile Worlds*, 2018 (© photo: Tim Kaiser)



Figure 3: installation shot of *Mobile Worlds*, 2018 (© photo: Tim Kaiser)



Figure 4: installation shot of *Mobile Worlds*, 2018 (© photo: Daniel Ladner)



Figure 5: installation shot of *Mobile Worlds*, 2018 (© photo: Geneviève Frisson)

The so-called 'Enthroned Goddess', now at the Pergamon museum in Berlin, is another such agent. Not much is known about this monumental object, a tomb figure with braids made of basalt that is approximately 3000 years old. Would it be possible to appropriate this archaeological monument for a retelling of the 'Rojava' story within the *Mobile Worlds* exhibition, and if so how? The wish of the Kurdish feminists to get hold of their 'Goddess' revealed a remarkable chapter in the history of German museums. The artefact was excavated during the early twentieth-century in northern Syria, on Tell Halaf, a hill close to the present-day Turkish-Syrian border. Her 'discoverer' was a German diplomat and amateur archaeologist called Max von Oppenheim, who at the time was providing information about the 'Orient' to Berlin from his office in Cairo (Gossman 2014). In 1899 Oppenheim was exploring a possible route for the 'Baghdad Railway', a massive Ottoman-German infrastructure project to link Berlin by rail with what was then called Constantinople, in addition to Aleppo, Baghdad, and eventually Basra (McMeekin 2011). During his fact-finding mission, Oppenheim's attention was drawn to Tell Halaf, where in 1911 he began excavating on a grand scale. As the Berlin state museums refused to include the finds in their collections, Oppenheim decided to set up his own institution, the Tell Halaf Museum, located in an empty factory building in the Charlottenburg district of Berlin. During a bombing raid in 1943, the Tell Halaf Museum was completely destroyed. Although the phosphorus heat did not damage the volcanic basalt, water from fire-fighters caused the sculptures to burst. Oppenheim's helpers at least managed to save the thousands of pieces from the ruins of the building and store them in the Pergamon Museum's depot. Here they survived the German Democratic Republic of former East Germany. They later surfaced again in 2001, and were painstakingly restored and reconstructed. Finally, in 2011, the Staatliche Museen zu Berlin [*Berlin State Museums*] presented the Mesopotamian artefacts under the title 'Die geretteten Götter aus dem Palast vom Tell Halaf' ['The Rescued Gods from the Palace of Tell Hala'f] (Cholidis et al. 2011). Since the reconstructed Basalt figure weighs several tons, transporting it to Hamburg was out of the question. Fortunately, however, Oppenheim had plaster casts made of the finds at the original archaeological site. The cast of the 'Goddess', now in the Berlin Museums' Gipsformerei (replica workshop), presents the sculpture in its original state. This includes the original sensory quality of the basalt, which was imitated by the addition of a layer of sand. The feminist activists agreed that the cast of the 'Goddess' aligns more closely to the vision of their cause than the patched-up figures from the Pergamon Museum. Upon the suggestion of a member of the group, the cast was shown in *Mobile Worlds* alongside images of female fighters and activists from 'Rojava', while the history of the Tell Halaf Museum was reconstructed in a nearby display case (figure 5). This constellation was not designed to be read in any particular way. Rather, there were many entry points that could be linked to one other and to other objects in the exhibition in various ways, depending on the historical paths and formal associations the viewer followed. To put it another way, through the aesthetic and narrative openness of the constellation of artefacts, audience members became crucial to the co-production of meaning.

## Conclusion

There is no magic formula for creating a pluriversal museum. The complexity of global interconnections and their seemingly contingent unfolding cannot be captured with the help of a quick-fix curatorial method. Rather, as the example of the 'Enthroned Goddess' has shown, improvisation is required, for the process enriches itself in its indeterminacy. Exhibition design plays an important role in this: in order to create the constellatory framing that allows for aesthetic forms of knowledge production, precise, formal decisions have to be made. Understood in this way, exhibition design does not necessarily aim to convey content in the simplest and most accessible way. Rather, the design itself becomes an aesthetic medium that gives space to ambiguity, complexity and multiple perspectives. Such a perceptual 'relearning', which foregrounds the in-betweenness and dynamics of formal relations, as opposed to fixed identities and unified forms, might contribute to a better understanding of the historical origins, as well as the current social conditions, of the global, post-migrant present.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> The term ‘apparatus’, sometimes also translated as ‘dispositive’ or ‘dispositif’, has been adopted by scholars within the museum studies from Michel Foucault. In an Interview, Foucault outlines the term as describing a “thoroughly heterogeneous ensemble”, consisting of “discourses, institutions, architectural forms, regulatory decisions, laws, administrative measures, scientific statements, philosophical, moral and philanthropic propositions” – “the said as much as the unsaid”, as he puts it (Foucault 1981b: 194).
- <sup>2</sup> To underline the intertwining of modern western knowledge and colonization, post- and decolonial theory speaks of modernity/coloniality (Quijano 2007).
- <sup>3</sup> For the sake of balance, it should be added that historical discourse around so-called ‘ethnological artifacts’ has not been as homogeneous as it appears in the current debate. The Benin Bronzes looted by the British, for example, were also collected by arts and crafts museums, not so much as examples of ‘primitivist’ aesthetic objects, but of outstanding craftsmanship, and as models that inspired modern forms of design during the period.
- <sup>4</sup> Until recently, ethnographic museums rarely collected contemporary African art. One exception is the Weltkulturen Museum in Frankfurt am Main (see Mutumba 2016).
- <sup>5</sup> Inspired by an understanding of the museum as a ‘contact zone’ (Clifford 1997), Western ethnographic museums have increasingly involved so-called ‘source communities’ in the conception of exhibitions and programmes (Peers and Brown 2003; Witcomb 2003, 2015; Binter 2019). However, as Tony Bennett and others have remarked, such programmes often tend to conform to a neoliberal idea of multiculturalism (Bennett 1998; Boast 2011).
- <sup>6</sup> This is not necessarily the case in the field of contemporary art. Here, curators and artists often work closely together in designing the exhibition.
- <sup>7</sup> *documenta 15* (2022) provides a paradigmatic example of the educational turn in the field of contemporary art, also with regards to some of its problematic effects. It became clear, for example, that educational discourse overemphasizes the positive and power-critical effects of cooperation and participation, while ignoring the often deeper political conflicts that also occur within the ‘Global South’.
- <sup>8</sup> In German Museums, these spaces are for example designed by Raumlabor (lab.bode); Studio Ra (Zwischenraum, MARKK), Constructlab (Freiraum, MKG).
- <sup>9</sup> This development can be traced through the example of the *documenta* exhibition series. Since *documenta 10* (1997) Western concepts of art have been increasingly questioned and supplemented by non-Western perspectives. *documenta 11* and *documenta 12* in particular – each in a different way – have addressed global forms of modernism and their genealogies (Prinz 2022).
- <sup>10</sup> In addition to the traditional Western discourse that imposes an essentializing identity on the non-Western ‘other’, an identity politics ‘from below’, which opposes the hegemonic ‘othering’ with the formulation of ‘counter-identities’, has also emerged in various colonial and postcolonial contexts. However, as Homi K. Bhabha, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, and Stuart Hall have emphasized, this is a different form of identity construction that makes use of a ‘strategic essentialism’ (Spivak 1988b: 205) without negating the fundamental openness and fluidity of identifications as well as the various global origins of identity.
- <sup>11</sup> See for instance: *Taswir – Pictorial Mappings of Islam and Modernity* (2009–2010) at Gropius Bau, Berlin; *Interwoven Globe: The Worldwide Textile Trade 1500–1800* (2013–2014) at The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; *Asia in Amsterdam: The Culture of Luxury in the Golden Age* (2015–2016) at both the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, and the Peabody Essex Museum in Salem, Massachusetts; and *Exchanging Gazes Between China and Europe 1669–1907* (2017–2018) at Kunstbibliothek, Berlin.

- <sup>12</sup> For further elaborations on post-phenomenological re-readings of Foucault's theory of the visible, as well as a practice theory of perception, see Sophia Prinz (2014).
- <sup>13</sup> The term 'affordance' was coined by the perceptual psychologist James J. Gibson (1977), and was taken up by design theory in the 1980s. In this context, 'affordance' refers to the fact that certain things imply a bodily interaction simply by virtue of their design (Norman 1988).
- <sup>14</sup> Beatrice von Bismarck also uses the concept of the 'constellation' to describe the curatorial condition (Bismarck 2022).
- <sup>15</sup> I refer here to Peter Osborne's concept of 'post-conceptual art' (2013: 37-70), as well as Juliane Rebentisch's philosophy of installation art (Rebentisch 2012; Rebentisch et al. 2019).
- <sup>16</sup> The exhibition *Mobile Worlds* was part of a larger research project funded by the Federal Ministry of Education and Research, Germany (BMBF). See also [www.mobileworlds.org](http://www.mobileworlds.org), accessed 10 October 2023. Some of the constellations in this exhibition had previously been developed at the Johann Jacobs Museum in Zurich.
- <sup>17</sup> See also Roger M. Buerger, 'Die Migration der Form', *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* 2007. <https://www.faz.net/aktuell/feuilleton/kunst-und-architektur/documenta-12-die-migration-der-form-1435445.html>, accessed 10 October 2023.
- <sup>18</sup> In fact, recent research suggests that the sculptures do not even follow a binary gender distinction (Belcher 2016).

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**\*Prof. Dr. Sophia Prinz** is Cultural Theorist and Professor of Design Theory and History at the Zurich University of the Arts (ZHdK). Previously, she taught Cultural Studies, Sociology and Design Theory at the University of Konstanz, the European University Viadrina Frankfurt (Oder) and the Berlin University of the Arts. She was coordinator of the research and exhibition project *Mobile Worlds* (2015–2018), funded by the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF) and the Johann Jacobs Museum (Zurich). Parallel to her university activities, she was involved in several exhibition projects.

Her academic interests are practice theory and perception, design and society, exhibition theory and aesthetics, as well as global modernity and transculturality.

She is currently working on a book project about exhibition histories under the title "Migration of Form" (together with Roger M. Buergel) and a research project exploring the relationship between social practices and design in global modernity.