A Donkey for the *White* Visitor: Practices of Collecting (with) Forced Migrants

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Abstract: At a time when public and political opinion towards forced migration is negatively inclined, many museums in Europe are applying a collaborative approach to address the stories of forced migrants (Boersma 2023; Sergi 2021). Through participatory projects, museum practitioners are attempting to put forward an alternative to the 'authorized heritage discourse' (Smith 2006), yet their practices rarely accommodate a shift towards a more inclusive discourse. Aiming to shed light on the experienced limitations of collaborative curation, this paper scrutinizes what lies in the wake of a participatory project. Assuming a focus on collection practices as a result of participatory work, this paper looks at one project in particular: 'daHEIM: Glances into Fugitive Lives', which was organized at the Museum Europäischer Kulturen in Berlin. Through interviews with former participants and museum practitioners, combined with one of the author's lived experience of the project and its aftermaths, this paper unpacks the persistence of hierarchies within collaborative practices and the ways in which these feed into the discourse that is developed as a result. The paper starts from the process of collecting the potential outcomes of a participatory project within an inherently *white* institution, and it draws parallels between practices of care for people, as well as for their objects and artworks.

[museum collections, forced migrants, stereotypes, participation, colonial collecting practices]

Introduction

In response to the refugee protection crisis of 2015, many museums in Europe attempted to counter the ensuing polarizing public discourse (Bock and Macdonald 2019) through participatory projects with forced migrants.[1] These projects took many forms and produced a broad range of outputs, often augmenting exhibition spaces and museum collections with objects, works and stories from the migrants themselves. Many studies have reflected on the unequal power relations in these participatory process-

1 This paper addresses museum work that specifically engages forced migrants, differentiating between this 'category' of migrants and those who migrated for alternative reasons. The term 'forced migrants' is used here to include asylum-seekers, refugees and illegal immigrants who have been forced to leave their home countries. It does not imply their functioning as a group or so-called 'community'.

es (Whitehead et al. 2015; Lynch 2017; Vlachou 2019), and yet the effects of these hierarchies on the projects' discursive outputs remain largely unexplored. Although the aim is to develop an alternative to the 'authorized heritage discourse' as described by Laurajane Smith (2006), museum practices often continue to support this prominent discourse. Despite the good intentions behind their work, many museums, especially those established from ethnographic collections, tend to reproduce stereotypes, label artworks as ethnographic objects, and omit information about authorship in their publicly available databases. Confronting just one aspect of these participatory projects, namely what is preserved to remain part of the museum-constructed discourse, we ask how do the collecting practices construct a discourse, and to what extent does this reflect the museum's *white* gaze?

Based on these questions, the study sets out to emphasize the importance of integrating participatory practices into collecting practices, as well as assessing how these practices contribute to the discourses put forward by the museum. We focus solely on one museum project to allow for a detailed description and include personal reflections. The artworks created and collected as part of 'daHEIM: Glances into Fugitive Lives' at the Museum Europäischer Kulturen (MEK) in Berlin serve as examples of the wider problem of how museums approach the objects and art of those who are constructed as 'others' in public discourses. Despite our focus on one museum based in Western Europe, the case thus presents widely applicable concerns about museums' work with and representation of forced migrants. First, we build on the existing literature to define the 'authorized heritage discourse' and show how it is embedded in the (post)colonial structures and practices of the museum. Second, we refer to previous studies, empirical data and our own experiences to reflect on the ways migrant experiences are materialized and categorized for preservation as part of the museum's collection. Our assessment is a product of collaborative thinking and writing, in that it brings together the first-hand perspective of Dachil Sado, artist and former participant in the project, with the insights of Susanne Boersma, researcher and curator based within the institution under scrutiny (though not directly involved in the project at the time). Finally, we address the shifts required to decolonize (participatory) collection practices, especially with the aim of including perspectives and representations that are currently not part of the authorized heritage discourse.

Reconstructing the Authorized Heritage Discourse

In 2015, many people arrived in Germany seeking asylum, leading to a socio-political situation that came to be described as the 'refugee crisis'[2] (Bock and Macdonald 2019:2). Regardless of the attempts to reverse this phrasing to reflect the fact that the crisis was not caused by the incoming migrants but by the destination countries' inability to facilitate their arrival (Bock and Macdonald 2019), a polarizing narrative continues to impact how forced migrants, and predominantly Black and Brown people, are perceived within Europe today (Whitehead and Lanz 2019:2–3). Incidents such as the attacks in Cologne on New Year's Eve 2015–2016 were highly mediatized, while political decisions to keep migrants out in the future (e.g., the EU-Turkey Deal and the Law of Orderly Return) were given minimal attention by the press. This 'economic and political crisis of Europe is also a crisis of values and identities: it is a cultural crisis in which constructs of otherness take centre-stage' (Whitehead and Lanz 2019:22). The divisive rhetoric and selective representation of related events have strengthened austerity politics, leading museums to question their role within this debate (Vlachou 2019:48). Museum directors and practitioners suggested that their exhibitions and projects might positively contribute to the discussion, providing alternative narratives and historicizing the phenomenon of forced migration (interviews 2018–2021[3]; Baur and Bluche 2017:17).

The authorized heritage discourse, as defined by Smith,

> promotes a certain set of Western elite cultural values as being universally applicable. Consequently, this discourse validates a set of practices and performances, which populates both popular and expert constructions of 'heritage' and undermines alternative and subaltern ideas about 'heritage' (ibid. 2006:11).

Edward Said examines Orientalism as a discourse, as this is the only way to

> understand the enormously systematic discipline by which European culture was able to manage – and even produce – the Orient politically, socially, militarily, ideologically, scientifically, and imaginatively (ibid. 2003:3).

It is through this discourse that 'the West' dominated, restructured and exerted authority over the 'other' (ibid.). Museums, in their role as repositories of heritage and as

2 The term 'refugee crisis' was most frequently used to describe the situation at the time, but in this paper, we will refer to it as the 'refugee protection crisis', thus shifting the responsibility for it from the migrants to the countries involved and their lack of organization.

3 As part of her PhD project, 'The Aftermaths of Participation', Susanne Boersma conducted a series of interviews with museum practitioners and former participants of museum projects. The museum practitioners were at the time of the interviews based in institutions in Germany, the United Kingdom and the Netherlands. The thesis in which these interviews and the conclusions drawn from them appear has since been published as a book (Boersma 2023).

'manifestations of national identity and cultural achievement' (Smith 2006:18), are in a position to challenge the discourse by changing what they collect and include in exhibitions. However, within their context and through their practice, they often end up reproducing exclusive narratives that favour a 'Western' (in this paper, described rather as *white*) way of knowing (Lynch and Alberti 2010:14). The historically constructed power differential is deeply embedded in museums' infrastructures and practices (see Bennett 1995; Clifford 1997), and it is therefore likely to remain prominent in any discourse put forward through practice.

With the goal of contradicting or challenging the authorized heritage discourse (Smith 2006), museums increasingly employ participatory methods as a means to an alternative discourse. To address stories of migration, museums initiated participatory projects with migrants themselves in an attempt not to speak *for* them. Participation, ranging from consultation to co-curation (see Simon 2010) but excluding interactives in exhibitions, is seen as a way for museums to 'give voice' to marginalized groups and individuals. Such approaches continue to be essential as long as those who are being marginalized are not represented within the museum's curatorial team. However, this discourse was reproduced rather than challenged in different participatory museum projects, as migrants were approached, 'collected' (Lynch 2017:232) and portrayed as the 'other' (Meza Torres 2014; Boersma 2023). Despite participatory practices informing some of the content presented in exhibitions and in further outputs, it is rare for participants to control the project outcomes, resulting in the discourse remaining in the hands of the museum (Lynch 2017:230). This can be problematic, as

> those who staff museums and galleries have been trained and socialized to think and know in those ways, and museums are not set apart from global economic injustice and the reality of racial conflict and prejudice (Lynch and Alberti 2010:14).

With this in mind, it is important to take a closer look at the outputs and outcomes of participatory projects, including what is collected in the process (Macdonald and Morgan 2019; Boersma 2023).

Museums' collections and the objects of perceived 'others', as well as the practices through which objects were obtained, form the subject of this study, providing insight into the discourse that was constructed by and around them. Collected works or objects and their interpretations become part of cultural heritage, yet collecting practices often take place behind the scenes, and little information is publicly accessible afterwards (Brusius and Singh 2018:12). A study of these practices of collecting the heritages of forced migrants will demonstrate how they are aligned with some of the colonial aspects of museum work that have been extensively critiqued (Schorch 2017; Weber-Sinn and Ivanov 2020).

Methodology

Participatory museum projects are rarely able to eliminate racial and situational marginalization in practice, yet the museum's work is rarely assessed in collaboration with the participants. To achieve a fair evaluation of such practices, those who participate in a project should especially be asked about their experiences and their understanding of the appropriate terminologies and representative stories (Boersma 2023). Rather than repeating exclusive practices when it comes to the evaluation of participatory work, this paper is based on a collaborative approach combining the research of one author (Boersma) with the reflections of a former participant (Sado) on a participatory project. Boersma was not involved in the project at the time, but has researched the project and worked as a curator at the MEK since 2018. Sado was invited to be part of the project as a co-curator, which positioned him between the artist leading the project 'daHEIM: Glances into Fugitive Lives' and other forced migrants who were also engaged as participants in it.[4] Alma-Elisa Kittner suggests that questions of ownership (addressed in more detail below) also apply to research on migration and with (forced) migrants (2021:9). In putting together this paper, we have worked collaboratively to challenge the normalized and exclusive academic practices that Kittner describes. The preliminary conversations were written up by Boersma, edited and checked by Sado, and thoroughly discussed by both.

The materials gathered and used for analysis in this paper were part of ethnographic fieldwork by Boersma as part of her PhD research, bringing together interviews, informal dialogue about the project and personal experiences from after the project, as well as available information on the collected objects in the museum's database. For our reflections on this case study, we draw predominantly on our interviews with former participants and practitioners[5], as well as on our own personal experience. The discussion of the materials and the process of revisiting previous experiences was paramount in our evaluations, yet it often turned out to be emotionally taxing: the conversations brought up traumatic experiences of the collaboration and aftermaths of the participatory project. This makes for an inevitably subjective analysis, pointing to aspects and experiences that should be central to participatory museum work. The study focuses on the perspectives of participants and the impact of these types of projects on the people involved that should no longer be overlooked. Where possible, names have been omitted and gender-neutral pronouns are used to impede direct connections being made to the interview partners affiliated with this particular case. Following Hall et al.'s (2003) iterative process of collaborative analysis, we established a timeline and analytical framework for the selected examples. We considered the various possible foci

4 Although over a hundred people were involved in the project, a much smaller group worked on the exhibition consistently from beginning to end.

5 All interviews that were conducted in German have been translated into English by the authors of this paper.

of the paper: the experiences of participatory processes, the exhibition as an output, the (informal) working conditions, or the discourse developed through the collected objects. Despite these all being options that could have supported a similar argument, we found the examples from the collecting processes most illustrative, with evident parallels between contemporary and historical approaches.

Through a critical discourse analysis of the collected objects and their descriptions, we will outline some of the ways in which museums perpetuate unequal power relations. According to Gillian Rose, discourse analysis allows a 'detailed consideration of how the effects of dominant power relations work through the details of an institution's practice' (2012:258). Rather than focusing on the power relations that were part of the process as a whole, we prioritize how they played into the outcomes of the museum's collecting practices. Discourse, according to Teun van Dijk, is the 'main interface between the social and the cognitive dimensions of racism' (2012:16). The discourse, whether created by the museum or introduced by the press, actively connects social experiences with knowledge systems. A study of the discourse produced by the museum in response to the refugee protection crisis thus helps us understand the difficulties of challenging the 'authorized heritage discourse' (Smith 2006) and reveals some of the implications for those represented through this discourse. However, this study goes beyond the narratives constructed within the museum's publicly accessible spaces, reflecting on the processes behind a proposed 'alternative' discourse. It is not merely about the discourse itself, but just as much about the inclusion of participants in the development of said discourse.

To understand how the collection contributes to the discourse, this article points to both the process and the narrative presented through the collected items and their descriptions. Building on several of the works that were added to the museum's collection as a result of the project 'daHEIM: Glances into Fugitive Lives', we describe three aspects of collecting practices that contribute to the constructed discourse: stereotypical categorizations; defining artworks and objects; and acknowledging authorship and ownership. These aspects reveal some of the processes that perpetuate colonial structures rather than challenge them, making them central to our analysis. Before more focused sections on each of the aspects, we describe the project and the collection process that followed in more detail.

From the Project to the Collection Process

Like many museums after 2015, the MEK invited an artist to bring a project into the museum which engaged forced migrants in the development of an exhibition. The project 'daHEIM: Glances into Fugitive Lives' was hosted by the MEK in 2016 but had been initiated several months earlier by a Berlin-based German-speaking artist, who had become interested in forced migration as a focus of their work and had begun

working collaboratively in a refugee shelter in Berlin-Spandau. Together with those based in this temporary home, the artist initiated 'KUNSTASYL' (Art Asylum), which was later used as the name of the foundation established during their 'take-over' of the museum. The recently arrived migrants were either artists and performers before taking part or became artists and performers in the process of doing so.

The collaboration with the MEK started with several meetings between the museum staff and the KUNSTASYL artists, after which the project took over part of the museum for a so-called 'friendly occupation'. Described by the museum as a participatory workshop, and by the leading artist as a long-term performance (interview with the artist initiator 2020), the collaborative artistic process set out to address questions about people's realities of forced migration. The project gained a public-facing aspect when the members of KUNSTASYL started working in the exhibition spaces of the museum's west wing, where they developed an exhibition over a period of four months, after which it was on display for another eight months. Unlike many other participatory museum projects, where participants are asked for a specific contribution through a workshop or short-term collaboration, the museum took on a 'hosting' role, meaning it made its resources available to participants, who could use the museum's spaces to present something to the wider public (see Simon 2010). Through this practice, a museum can distance itself from politically complex topics and refrain from taking responsibility for the potential use of the 'incorrect' terminologies or harmful representations. However, the MEK was sufficiently involved in the project to formulate its desired outcomes (rather than the participants being able to focus on their own goals; cf. Simon ibid.). The museum facilitated the process, provided the materials, promoted the project and exhibition, curated an additional narrative contextualizing migration as a historical phenomenon (to be included in the temporary exhibition), and collected some of the outputs after the exhibition had been taken down. Though the collaboration did not have a predetermined outcome, early documentation of the project shows that the museum intended to collect some works that were created as part of it.[6] The participatory project should make available materials – objects, works, and information – to be collected by the museum as keepsakes representing this sociopolitically turbulent time. The importance of this aspect of the long-term impact of the project became clear in an interview with the director of the MEK, who pointed out that objects that have become part of the museum's collection are more likely to be available for posterity than photographs or exhibition texts that are kept as documentation. The director highlighted that the objects ensure that we will know about the 'refugee protection crisis' a hundred years from now (interview with museum director 2021).

The collection of the works is aligned with the museum's role as a cultural heritage institution. The role for the museum practitioners in this scenario was clear, yet the

6 Documents that were compiled in preparation for the project were made available for this research.

participants were no longer involved in the collection process, which was only initiated after the exhibition ended. Selecting the works after the exhibition closed was a quick process: the curator and project facilitator decided what could be kept and what not, available storage space being an important factor in the selection process. In addressing the works, the curator mentioned that their role as objects – reflecting on the process, as well as the political context – was more important than their artistic value (interview with a museum curator 2020). The selection process took place in 2016, after which they were catalogued and photographed by museum staff to make the works publicly accessible in the online database.

The works in the collection were meant as reminders of the refugee protection crisis of 2015 and the impact this had on those who had to leave their home countries. Led by the question about what forced migration actually means for those who experience it (interview with the artist initiator 2020), the works in the exhibition, some of which were collected afterwards, were constructed using objects that are a part of this experience. Bed frames that came from the refugee shelters and routes drawn on the museum walls became symbols of the participants' personal stories. The framing of the project as a 'friendly occupation' stressed the passive role of the museum. Yet the museum – now containing the beds and bodies of Black People and People of Colour – became a reconstruction of the refugee shelter, open to the predominantly *white* visitors to come in and have a look. Both the forced migrants and the objects that symbolized their journey turned into 'objects of ethnography' (Kirschenblatt-Gimblett 1991:387). 'Artworks create and reflect discourses. Discourses determine actions, which ultimately have very real consequences for people of colour and *white* people' (Micossé-Aikins 2011:420). Likewise, the works collected by the MEK, their context and interpretations construct a discourse on forced migrants.

Many recent publications about provenance research refer to community engagement as a way of enhancing the information available in museums (Förster et al. 2018; Weber-Sinn and Ivanov 2020; Morse 2021) and of building connections for the future restitution of some of the objects. However, when museums were already working with these so-called 'communities' to create objects or artworks for the collection, it has been easy to dismiss the potential of involving them when entering the information about these objects or artworks into the database. Curatorial staff members often hang on to a fixed format, and their decisions are steered by their professional accountability (Morse 2021:108), making the active involvement of the participants in certain aspects of museum work more difficult. Yet, the practices they hold on to, discarding the relevance of participatory practice across the board, are framed by and build on the colonial structures that define the institution.

Contemporary (Post)colonial Collecting Practices

Von Oswald describes the 'impossibility of *not* reproducing colonial epistemologies from within the institution' (ibid. 2020:107, emphasis added). The museum and its practices continue to be shaped by colonial relations, despite this very same institution claiming to have been decolonized, to be working towards decolonizing itself or being painstakingly decolonized by external partners (Schorch et al. 2019; Brücke-Museum et al. 2022). This has also been highlighted by Wendy Miriam Kural Shaw, who states: 'The persistent coloniality intrinsic to the post-colonial museum, whether located in imperial centres or post-colonial nation-states, emerges not simply in the ownership of the objects or the location of the exhibitions, but in the procedures that give objects order' (2021:35). The procedures described by Kural Shaw (2021) include the organization, care and categorization of collected items, processes that continue to be intrinsically colonial, as the museum's database perpetuates a '*past* conceptualisation of difference via its *present* structure' (von Oswald 2020:115). Within the context of the MEK, the collecting practices of ordering, valuing and acknowledging authorship are defined by present structures as well as present conceptualizations of the migrant as the 'other'. We assess how these practices perpetuate colonial relations, as well as the ways in which this can contribute to an affirmation of the *white* 'authorized heritage discourse'.

Categories and Stereotypes

Von Oswald points towards the existing knowledge categories in museum databases that maintain discriminatory stereotypes and colonial differences (2020:109). Her chapter describes the perpetuation of Western epistemologies through the information recorded about collected objects. Within museums, the works and objects of the 'other' serve as means to study and relate to this 'other' (Whitehead et al. 2015; Boersma 2023). This section addresses how the categorization of newly collected items is aligned with stereotypical imaginations of this 'other', proposing a narrative that coincides with the 'authorized heritage discourse'.

The work in the museum ended several years before Sado (co-author of this paper) looked at the works in the museum's online accessible database. At this point, Sado was no longer involved in the work of the KUNSTASYL foundation, nor was he involved with any work at the museum; the accession of the works into the database had taken place in the meantime, without further involvement by the former participants. Upon finding these items online, it was clear to him that some of the information about them was wrong, and that the interpretations provided online were limited, often only pointing out the project that had led to the work. Once he informed the museum of these mistakes, they made changes to the descriptions.

The museum director referred to the process as a mistake on the museum's part. 'That shouldn't have happened like that', they said, pointing to the incorrect documen-

Objektbezeichnung
Sportjacke mit Kapuze

Identifikations-Nr.
N (25 K) 4/2018

Titel
Idomeni-Jacke

Datierung
2015

Geographischer Bezug
Gebrauchsort: Irak, Syrien, u.a.

Personen/Körperschaften
[redacted]/ Kunstasyl, Sammler

Maßangaben
Größe: 52 (Etikett zeigt XL, Asian Size)

Material/Technik
Ausgabe: Kunststoff mit Elasthan

Zustand
3. teilweise instabil/ schlecht

Kurze Beschreibung
Schwarz-graue Adidas Herren- Sportjacke mit Kapuze, Vorderseiten durch grau-dunkelblaue Stoffflächen sowie weißen Aufdruck: F 50 gestaltet; mit Reißverschluß zu schließen, zwei seitliche Eingrifftaschen, auch mit Reißverschluß zu schließen; Gummibündchen am Saum der Jacke und an den Ärmeln; Kapuze mit Meshfutter innen; Jacke hat die deutlichen Symbole von Adidas: Aufnäher-Symbol und Schulter-Armstreifen weiß;

[redacted] sammelte bei ihrem Aufenthalt im Idomeni-Lager etliche Kleidungsstücke ein. Die Jacke war teil der Ausstellung DaHEIM. Einsichten in flüchtige Leben, da darin symbolisch ein Grenzzaun aufgestellt war.

Fig. 1 Section from a PDF exported from the museum's collection management system on the object 'Sportjacke mit Kapuze' in 2018

tation of the items, as well as to the fact that they needed to be made aware of this by a former participant in the project (interview with the museum director 2021). Sado had made the museum aware that some of the information was incorrect and that the stories behind the works (from the exhibition or conversations with the artist) had not been included either (ibid.). The latest version of the descriptions in the database[7] includes more accurate information: the artists of several works have been updated, and the new description of a work formerly entitled 'Lampedusa: Sportjacke mit Kapuze' (sports jacket with hood) no longer refers to presumptive geographical locations. The jacket was part of an art installation that was featured in the exhibition. The original description, entered into the database immediately after acquisition, referred to the object's former place of use (Gebrauchsort) as 'Iraq, Syria, amongst others' (see Fig. 1). As the jacket had been found in a refugee camp, its initial description suggested it had formerly been used in Iraq and Syria, the two countries from which most forced migrants were coming to Germany at the time. The former place of use, however, is unknown, meaning that this information was merely based on an assumption by the

7 SMB Collection Management System. Last accessed by the authors on 3 July 2023.

museum's *white* staff. A later description of the work no longer included this reference. Instead, the work was now defined as a piece formerly used on the boat to cross the Mediterranean Sea ('Mittelmeerüberfahrt/ Fundstück aus Boot an der Küste Lampedusas'). Despite this being a possibility, once again it is based on an assumption rather than a testimony from the previous owner of this item of clothing. The problem here lies in the museum's very decision to include a place of use at all. The work could refer to the problematic situation faced by forced migrants today equally well without the uninformed and possibly false documentation about its former place of use.

This is not the only example of a stereotypical description that correspond with the ideas of a *white* staff and a predominantly *white* audience. According to Sandrine Micossé-Aikins, BPoC (Black, People of Colour) artists in Germany work in a restrictive space that only allows artists' statements or activities that correspond with the ideas of a largely *white* audience (2011:426–7). Likewise, one of the works in the MEK's collection clearly assumes a *white* gaze (see Kassim 2017). This notion puts *whiteness* and the ideas and privileges of a *white* person who lacks an understanding of the prevalence of structural racism at the centre (Kassim 2017; Wekker 2016; Yancy 2017). This is especially clear in the case of the work entitled 'Eselkarren' ('donkey cart', quotation marks are part of the title in the database). This small work (Fig. 2) did not feature in the exhibition but was selected for inclusion in the museum's collection. It does not reflect or document the project's output, yet it was deemed relevant for the collection as means to represent the 'crisis', or the museum's response to it. Despite the title of the work and description reading 'small donkey, or horse cart', the work features a plastic unicorn figurine. The reference to a donkey is based on a stereotypical idea of daily life in Middle Eastern countries. It features another assumption made by the museum's staff, and caters to the expectations of the *white* museum audience.

In his research on participatory work with forced migrants (2021), Sergi reflects on the effect of using and reproducing presumptions about people through museum work. He states, '[i]n the context of contemporary forced displacement, this methodological approach [of formulating hypotheses about the owners or users of objects] might reinforce, rather than contest stereotypes around refugees' (Sergi 2021:74). It is not exceptional for works and objects in museum databases to contain information that reproduce stereotypes, sometimes by alluding to ideas about the lives or experiences of 'others', or sometimes by using and therefore promoting specific words or phrases. 'Recording the many traditions of naming and categorizing museum objects, collection databases often contain words and phrases that express stereotypes about, are disrespectful to, or are outright offensive toward the people and cultures they try to document' (Kunst 2021:29). The same goes for the museum's interpretation of this work (see Fig. 2).

The use of stereotypical cultural references provides the work with a context that presents a limited set of experiences matching the (online) visitors' expectations. Rather than these descriptions being provided by the artists themselves, the curator wrote the texts for the database, and it was only after the publication of Boersma's thesis that this likely false information was taken offline. This information is what is available on the

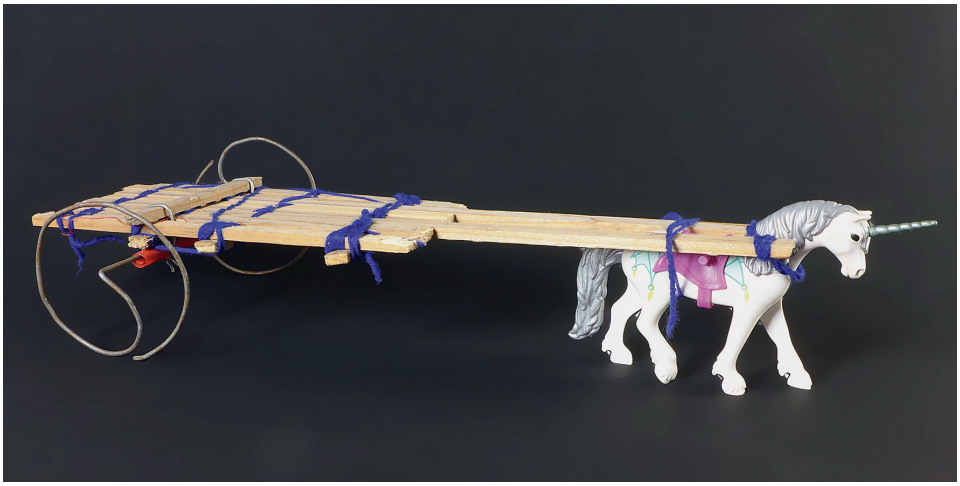

Fig. 2 The work 'Eselkarren' taken for the museum's database. © Picture: Museum Europäischer Kulturen / Michael Mohr

work at present.[8] Besides the definitions used to describe the works, more importantly they have come to stand for the 'refugee crisis' at large. This problem becomes evident upon studying these and further outputs of the participatory project at the Museum Europäischer Kulturen. The artworks have become synecdoches, not of their cultural backgrounds, as suggested by Mieke Bal (1996:78), but of the socio-political implications of forced migration. The works served as 'objects of ethnography' in the exhibition, and they continue to do so in the museum's collection. According to Azoulay, '[p]eople and artifacts have become objects of observation and study, conversion and care, charge and control by two seemingly unrelated set of disciplines, institutions, and their scholars and experts' (2019:20). This goes for the works collected as part of 'daHEIM: Glances into Fugitive Lives' as well.

An Artwork or an Object?

During the interview with the museum director, they seemed unsure whether to refer to the items collected after the project as artworks or objects. This reflects a common process in ethnographic museums, which, both historically and today, either understand works of art made by 'others' as objects for ethnographic study, or alternatively label things as 'art' when these actually fulfil a different function for their original

8 The museum has asked Boersma to initiate a project with the participants to review the documentation on and interpretation of the works in the MEK collection. This project has not yet started, but the false descriptions have been taken offline and are now only accessible through the Collection Management System for staff.

owners or creators. According to researcher Guno Jones, 'The so-called migrant artist … is presumed to create art based on a select set of experiences, often informed by their origins, and knowing their background is somehow seen as a prerequisite for appreciating their work' (2021:59). Though this does not have to imply a derogatory view of what is produced by BPoC, it does reveal that the museum was not interested in the artistic value of the work but rather chose to collect it to represent the current socio-political situation of migrants and the post-migrant society.

As pointed out in the previous section, the works collected after the daHEIM project came to stand for the so-called 'crisis', as well as for the museum's response to it. This is further evidenced by what is added as a 'note' to each of the works:

The object is part of the art and exhibition project 'daHEIM: Glances into Fugitive Lives', shown at the MEK from July 2016 to July 2017 on 550 m^2 . . . The idea behind the exhibition was not to make an exhibition about refugees, both topically and historically, but to let the people themselves have their say, to let them tell their stories, and to let their design ideas shape the project. (SMB Collection Management System, last accessed by the authors on July 3, 2023)

Despite this text describing the project as an artistic one, stressing the importance of putting 'their design ideas' at the forefront of the exhibition, the text starts by referring to the work as 'the object'. For works such as 'Lampedusa: Sportjacke mit Kapuze' or the 'Plastikflasche aus Lampedusa' (a plastic bottle retrieved from Lampedusa) this description seems appropriate; the works are re-appropriated objects that can be recognized from our own day-to-day lives. The jacket, however, was not a stand-alone object but, as mentioned earlier, part of an installation in the exhibition. The work was neither perceived nor collected as an artwork; the museum deconstructed it to allow for the preservation of an object rather than the work as a representation of the situation at the time. Even works that are clearly the product of artistic practice – such as a set of drawings or a mosaic in the collection – have been collected, interpreted and understood by the museum as ethnographic objects instead of works of art.

Sandrine Micossé-Aikins addresses this differentiation as an example, using a project in which objects from the ethnographic museum in Berlin were newly contextualized as part of an exhibition in the Gropius Bau modern art museum. Despite the works' presentation alongside contemporary artworks, they continued to be shown as anonymous objects from a marginalized group, whose individual authorship was deemed unimportant (2011: 428). This practice is underlined by Rassool, who claims that '[e]thnographic museums and museums with anthropology collections, for example, have their own history of object labelling, characterized by the practice of attributing the work to a group or tradition or 'tribe' rather than to an individual' (2021:21). As part of the exhibition described by Micossé-Aikins, the works were displayed as artworks rather than ethnographic objects, yet the interpretation was limited and did not acknowledge the creators of the works. Even in projects like the 'daHEIM' project at the MEK, where works were described and authorship was recognized as part of the exhibition, the documentation of the items in the database did not reflect this. This

Fig. 3 The work 'Mosaik' was documented as a work by KUNSTASYL instead of listing the individual artists. © Picture: Museum Europäischer Kulturen / Christian Krug

collecting practice of labelling highlights the discrepancy between the perceived value of an artwork and that of an ethnographic object. Berlin-based curator and researcher Soh Bejeng Ndikung calls for a more rapid change in practices and perceptions: 'Understanding these so-called objects as subjects necessitates a radical shift from Western understandings of subjecthood, personhood and community, as well as a drastic shift from a Western understanding of art, authorship and society, and subsequently a profound reconfiguration of what it means to be human' (2021). Museums, and the people working in and shaping these institutions, need to acknowledge their *white* gaze and their prejudice actively (Lynch 2017) and to challenge this in their practices.

Authorship and Ownership

Whether an artwork or an ethnographic object, the museum should be required to document authorship and address questions of ownership of what is collected. As mentioned in the description of the project, the museum collected the artworks that were developed and created as part of the project after it ended. At this point, the participants were no longer involved in the process, meaning not only selecting the works, but also their entries in the museum database. The disposal of works that were ultimately not collected was carried out by the museum's curator in conversation with the initiating artist. Though individuals in the group had created different works, the museum did not necessarily document or recognize their authorship.

According to Kittner, collecting objects or works by forced migrants can be problematic, as the 'Western-dominated art field, despite the prevalence of deconstructionist approaches, still relies heavily on the idea of a pronounced authorship' (2021:392). Artworks and their value rely on authorship, yet the ownership is often assigned to the person(s) that collected an object or work (Kittner 2021:390–391). In her examples of displayed objects of forced migration, the original or rightful owners are often unknown; it is when their object becomes part of an installation or archive that ownership is assigned to the person who collected or assembled it. In the case of 'daHEIM', however, the artists were known to the museum. Initially, right after the works were entered into the database, the descriptions did not contain any information about the authors; they were listed in the database with reference to the artist who initiated the project and the KUNSTASYL foundation, rather than the individual artists.

In an interview with one of the artists involved, they referred to a work they had created for the project: a mosaic that represented the warfare they had experienced in their home country (see Fig. 3). Currently, the work is listed in the database as 'Mosaik' collected by the artist and KUNSTASYL. One of the artists described how they did most of the work but were excluded from the project and the related processes after the work was completed; they had bought the ceramics and decided on the colours and the image, yet their input was not acknowledged at the time, nor is the artist listed in the online description. They pointed to the language barrier and described the hierarchical structure in place, both of which made it impossible for them to intervene and claim ownership of their work. On the website of the KUNSTASYL foundation, the artist is recognized as one of the creators of this work. Conversely, the museum has excluded the artists, even though they are acknowledged for their work by the foundation. It is difficult to pinpoint exactly how this discrepancy between the available information came about, but it is evident that the museum did not reach out to the artist to ask them about the work and find out whether they wanted their name to be recorded in the database.

For another collected work, the jacket mentioned above, the museum subtly left out one of the artists when the description was changed. By changing the title of the work from 'Idomeni-Jacke' (Idomeni jacket) to 'Lampedusa: Sportjacke mit Kapuze', a new location was connected to the object. The suggestion that this used jacket was found on

Lampedusa supports the idea that the artist initiator collected and repurposed this item themselves; as such, this artist takes ownership of this work, which, according to Sado, had been a collaboration. In the case of this jacket, Sado had joined the artist on the trip to Idomeni at the time and worked on the installation that later became part of the exhibition. By changing the title of the work and the 'location of use', sole authorship of the work was ascribed to the artist who led the project. The description of the work is made inaccessible as a result of Boersma's research, as it still includes the place that was originally listed as part of the title:

> [The artist] collected several items of clothing during her stay in the Idomeni camp. The jacket was part of the exhibition 'DaHEIM. Glances into Fugitive Lives', where it was symbolically displayed on a border fence. (SMB digital, last accessed on 27 October 2021)

Though not visible to the visitors of the online database, the changed information erases one of the artists of the work. Also excluded from the database's description is a reference to the previous owner of the jacket. The jacket was left behind in a camp and, as suggested by Kittner, the collector is accredited for taking, showing and preserving this emblem of forced migration.

These practices are similar to common practices documenting the objects of colonized peoples. Von Oswald states that, 'in lacking other kinds of indications, the object is above all defined by the person who had *collected* it, not the person who had *produced*, *owned*, or *used* it' (von Oswald 2020:117). Building on this argument, it is important to note that the names of the artists who made this work are known to the foundation and to the museum, yet their details are left out *despite* the availability of precisely this information.

Collecting is Caring

At the beginning of this paper, we addressed the institution's role and discussed how practitioners understand the collection as prominent for their work in the museum. Nuala Morse states that '[c]are for objects is the very foundation of museum work' (2021:1). Drawing on some examples from the MEK, it has become evident that little care went into what happened after the items had been collected. The behind the scenes work of collecting and preservation is relatively unknown; museums write collection strategies and annual reports on what was collected, and technical and operational guidelines are written, updated and applied, yet what actually happens on the ground remains a mystery for those based outside the institution. The act of preservation requires systematic work as well as careful handling. This means 'intimate knowledge of individual objects, their materials and their vulnerabilities. Prevention of harm or damage, keeping objects safe, is the basis of care. Objects are treasured and gently handled, displayed and carefully stored away' (Morse 2021:1). In describing objects as treasured, Morse points to the value ascribed to what is preserved as part of museum collections. The understanding of care in museums often refers to caring for museum

objects rather than caring for people (De Roemer 2016; Morse 2021). The care for objects could, however, be dependent on caring for their (previous) owners or creators. In the studied project, we found that the museum was not quite careful enough.

Whereas evaluation was not part of the project while it was ongoing, the interpretations of the works, the collaboration and the outcomes were repeatedly reflected upon even years after the project had ended. Revisiting the database once more, Sado found that some of the works that were said to have been collected by the museum did not appear to be there. No record was kept of the drawings of one of the artists, nor was the cabinet that contained two personal stories of participants of the project catalogued. When this observation reached the museum, it became clear that no one knew where these works were kept, or if they were still there at all. A former staff member had to return to the museum to look through the storage rooms, and even Boersma, as a researcher on this project who had started working in the museum in 2018, was asked whether she knew anything about the whereabouts of the works. Eventually, several weeks later, the museum reported to Sado and the artist of the drawings that the works had been found: after being collected they had been wrapped up and kept in storage, but no information had been entered into the museum's database.

In light of this situation, the museum has offered to pay for the works that had been kept in its storage rooms all that time. No other works in the collection were paid for. They were all considered a product of the project that they supported financially, yet in this case the museum proposed compensation for their rather careless practices. The suggestion is familiar, as it reminds us of the handling of colonial heritage and looted art, for which museums are being recommended to offer financial compensation in addition to or instead of repatriation by the German Museums Association (Deutscher Museumsbund e.V.).[9] Recently, the newly found cabinet was entered into the database, but the presence of the drawings remains undocumented to this day. The museum, in its handling of the works and with its offer of compensation, clumsily continues to enact the power relations at play.

A Discourse Through Collecting

In this paper, we have proposed several ways in which museums reproduce narratives of the migrant as the 'other' through their collection practices. The studied examples draw parallels between historical and contemporary approaches to reveal that formerly colonial aspects of museum practices remain part of today's museum work. The examples range from problematic interpretations and a lack of acknowledgement of the

9 Museumsbund Leitfaden: https://www.museumsbund.de/publikationen/leitfaden-zum-umgang-mit-sammlungsgut-aus-kolonialen-kontexten/ https://www.museumsbund.de/publikationen/leitfaden-zum-umgang-mit-sammlungsgut-aus-kolonialen-kontexten/

work of Black people and People of Colour, revealing that the produced discourse on forced migration perpetuates the colonial practices and structures within museums that are continuously criticized. The objects and forced migrants that are part of this project often come to stand for the socio-political context, especially due to the ways in which museums collect and preserve objects, artworks and stories.

A lack of involvement in the different collecting processes, such as interpretation, categorization, valuing and acknowledging authorship, inevitably continues and promotes colonial attitudes. The 'daHEIM' project serves as evidence that a participatory approach does not necessarily eliminate the problematic power relations that define these processes. Museums should be aware of these relations and think carefully about how to approach and represent a discourse on forced migration or of forced migrants. The institution cannot do this without structural changes in staff, collection management systems and active engagement with anti-discriminatory work. Without these necessary shifts, museums will continue to produce stereotypical representations based on a limited set of perspectives that serve the *white* gaze. When working in participatory ways, participation should encompass the entire set of processes that are involved in the project, including its outcomes. Museums are likely to continue to build hierarchies rather than breaking them down. In their attempts to challenge the authorized heritage discourse, museums often perpetuate a Eurocentric narrative.

Drawing on a case study that the authors are both very familiar with, this paper provides a new angle on participatory work with forced migrants, putting the perspectives of and consequences for the participants at the forefront of the research on collecting practices. By addressing these difficult issues, it might seem that we are being particularly critical of the MEK for their approach to this work. However, the museum has provided us with the resources to do this research: it continues to reflect on its practices and has been open to feedback and critique by ourselves and others. As some of the issues between the artist, the participants and the museum remain unresolved, the museum director and staff remain keen to find solutions. With the help of the authors of this article, the MEK is seeking to put false interpretations and misinformed documentation right, and in addition, the museum has invested more time and resources into assessing categories and discriminatory language in the database. The institution acknowledges its responsibility, even if it did not take on quite enough responsibility at the time of the project. This attitude is necessary to move forward and change the institution, making a postcolonial museum a true possibility in the future.

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