A Room for Reaching in at the Heart of the Museum: Rethinking Dialogical Curating

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Abstract: Museums often prioritize connecting with their audiences, but they may neglect the importance of providing internal spaces for staff to communicate openly. This article thinks through the first Prep Room project at the GRASSI Museum für Völkerkunde in Leipzig, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden, whose invited residents were brought together in a process of dialogical curating museums staff. The goal was to transcend classic notions of curating by focusing on the processual aspects of co-creating multilayered transdisciplinary methodologies to foster an informal space for reflection and exchange. During these in-depth discussions, the participants explored the practical implications of having diverse ontologies in their collections and had an opportunity to reflect on their everyday practices.
[museology, curating collaboration, decolonizing, museum collections]

'*A museum is a not-for-profit, permanent institution in the service of society that researches, collects, conserves, interprets and exhibits tangible and intangible heritage. Open to the public, accessible and inclusive, museums foster diversity and sustainability. They operate and communicate ethically, professionally and with the participation of communities, offering varied experiences for education, enjoyment, reflection and knowledge sharing.*' [1]

After a series of controversial debates among its members, the General Assembly of ICOM approved the proposal for a new museum definition on 24th August 2022.

This decision was long overdue, since Peter Virgo's 'The new museology' (1989) had been published, and the public and artistic criticism of museums had been steadily growing since the 1990s, back when Fred Willson opened his influential exhibition project 'Mining the Museum' at the Maryland Historical Society in Baltimore in 1992. While there has been a strong push towards participation, inclusion, decoloniality and dialogue, it had been more than thirty years since these historic events, and scholars, and museums professionals are still facing similar challenges today.

Today, ethnological museums are exposed to a different kind of public scrutiny than other institutions due to their particular kind of enmeshment with colonial his-

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1 https://icom.museum/en/resources/standards-guidelines/museum-definition/ accessed November 28, 2022.

tory and imperialism, as well as a certain historical opaqueness in dealing with outside researchers and with the public, whose positions and expertise they did not always take into account.

As part of these broader social and political developments, some ethnological museums in Germany embarked on a clear path of shaking up their institutions to align them more with the ideals presented by the International Council of Musems (ICOM), and in the hope of making them more inclusive and critical spaces. At this point, I want to acknowledge the work of colleagues inside museums, museum staff and community members, who had comparable agendas for decades and had fought for such a change before this. Museums are still hierarchical institutions, and as such the public and media focus is directed towards their directors. Those who work under them, advocating changing museum practices and implementing them, often disappear from view.

Under its Director, Léontine Meijer-van Mensch, and aspiring to change the inner structure of the museum and understand it as part of a larger community, rather than maintaining dichotomous structures of 'us and them' or 'center/periphery', the GRASSI Museum für Völkerkunde zu Leipzig, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden, embarked on the project *REINVENTING GRASSI*, funded by the German Federal Cultural Foundation's 'Initiative for Ethnological Collections'.[2] The goal of the project was to transform the Museum 'into a Network Museum in which different voices have the opportunity to speak and different regions have the ability to connect with each other.'[3]

Part of this process was the creation of the section Backstage, with its three spaces on conservation, repatriation and experimental curating, whose aim is to include the audience and connect it with the ongoing debates and challenges, both material or theoretical, that the museum's staff encounters, rather than presenting a static exhibition. There the museum takes up its duties as defined by ICOM and displays 'its primary fields of work on a long-time basis,[4] which it shares with its visitors.

This article presents the first project of the Prep Room, the room for experimental curating in Backstage, which I co-curated with Franka Schneider, Curator at the Museum Europäischer Kulturen, Berlin. It then focuses on object ontologies, which were a main topic of discussion between us as project curators and the museum staff. It then reveals what ontologies actually mean for classifying objects inside the museum and their broader taxonomies, concluding with the importance of holding a space for emotions and discomfort when doing this kind of work. This text aims to provide museum practitioners with the tools to engage with and present the institution's inner

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2 The German Federal Cultural Foundation's 'Initiative for Ethnological Collections' funded the Linden Museum, Stuttgart *LindenLab* as the MARKK's *Zwischenraum.*
3 https://grassi-voelkerkunde.skd.museum/en/exhibitions/reinventing-grassiskd/ accessed November 29, 2022.
4 https://grassi-voelkerkunde.skd.museum/en/exhibitions/reinventing-grassiskd/backstage/ accessed November 29,2022.

workings to the public and to position this practice as a method so as to continuously reconfigure the interface between the museum and its visitors.

From Backstage to Prep Room

The Care Room, located at the entrance to Backstage, is a space dedicated to conservation. It has a showcase area containing two vitrines and an information video addressing current questions regarding the treatment of the collections for long-term safeguarding and the effects of past conservation on specific objects. There is also a closed work room with transparent walls and a door to the right of the showcase area. Within this space, storage custodians and conservationists collaborate with visiting guests on objects and themes. In particular, the glass door carries information and extends a warm invitation to the public to engage with staff members and ask questions while they work. As such, the door remains open during these times. This initiative emphasizes that the displayed objects are merely a small fraction of the collection, most of which is stored away. It also reshapes the visibility of the museum spaces, shedding light on the storage rooms, which often remain unseen and hidden, and on the conservation labs that are often regarded as spaces where objects are made ready for display and not where the objects operate in the world.

The room is followed by the Room of Remembrance, which addresses the important topics of repatriation and restitution. A unique arrangement in the German museum world gives these issues a permanent presence in the exhibition spaces. It is also a multi-layered communication room, offering a room for dialogue and encounter, but also for withdrawing from the visitors' eyes, offering the communities involved a quiet space to meet with their ancestors and spirits. Therefore, this room highlights the fact that the museum and its objects belong to various communities beyond the one it serves locally, which also necessitates a room of their own that should be part of the institution's total architecture on a long-term basis, instead of being made possible every now and then.

Inspired by the ICOM award-winning Prep Room[5] at the museum of the National University of Singapore, which is conceived as a space where audiences go to observe and engage with exhibition-making processes. Friedrich von Bose, head of research and exhibitions at the GRASSI Museum, introduced the third space for experimental curating and collaboration, the Prep Room. Here, artists, curators and scholars are invited to take up a residency. The Prep Room is simultaneously their working and exhibition space, where 'things may or may not happen'. Situated at the heart of the museum, the Prep Room offers a permanent space for residents and visitors to engage actively with the museum's themes.

5 https://museum.nus.edu.sg/explore/about/prep-room/ accessed November 11, 2022.

Taken together, these three rooms offer various ways of approaching museum objects, first as vehicles of our care, attention and conservation, second as embedded in a larger community, and third as motivators for inner reflections in how the Prep Room is approached.

Rethinking the Dialogical: Expanding the Contact Zone

Parallel to the debates on transforming museums into reflexive, more democratic spaces, ethnographic museums are especially under pressure to face their colonial pasts and become more inclusive. Often seen as carrying a more substantial historical responsibility towards the communities of implication (Lehrer 2021) than any other public institution, in recent years public discussions in Germany about the colonial past have been perpetuated thanks to the work of NGOs such as Berlin Postcolonial, Initiative Schwarzer Mensch in Deutschland, Decolonize Berlin, no Humboldt 21, activists like Mnyaka Sururu Mboro and Israel Kaunatjike, and the increasingly interested civil society. New funding bodies, like the German Lost Art Foundation's program on 'Cultural Goods and Collections from Colonial Contexts' were established to support projects investigating the provenance of objects in museum and university collections with a thematic focus on colonialism. An increased number of collaborations, research and exhibitions on the topic were conceived: 'Koloniale Spuren im Übersee-Museum Bremen: Afrika-Sammlungen als Gegenstand der Provenienzforschung', Übersee-Museum, Bremen and 'Confronting Colonial Pasts, Envisioning Creative Futures', Ethnologisches Museum Berlin, to name just a few examples.

After years of strong advocacy by Black, Indigenous People and People of Colour, as well as marginalized actors, a critical, expanded idea of the contact zone (Clifford 1997, Boast 2011) seems to be materializing within ethnological museum spaces, defined as a 'contact zone'. Boast has pointed out the inherent asymmetry of any contact zone as a space for collaboration between museums and Indigenous or First Nations peoples. Yet, the newly established spaces make possible collaborations between local publics and seem to expand the contact zone in its very meaning towards participation and democratizing the museum, away from its ivory tower and towards an attempt to create a symmetrical dialogue despite the asymmetrical shared history. This follows the first wave of renaming ethnological and anthropological museums, such as Weltmuseum (Museum of the world), Vienna, Museum of Five Continents, München, Museum of World Cultures, Frankfurt. This involves moving away from geographical and disciplinary references to align the institution more with notions of 'world heritage' and 'global history', notions deemed to have more contemporary relevance. Some museums have established new spaces for dialogue with the public. The Museum am Rothenbaum – Kulturen und Künste der Welt set up a 'Zwischenraum', the Linden Museum offers the LindenLAB, and the Museum for European Cultures is planning its Objekt

Labor (Working Title), to name just some examples. They are all attempting to position themselves as museums with a space in which not only is discourse produced, but also a form of empirical knowledge which can hopefully find its way back into its ecosystem and change it.

Within this context of a wave of renewal in the practice and self-presentation of ethnological museums, at the GRASSI, the Prep Room opened its door for continual dialogue and encounters in 2022.

Following a critical workshop on 'The reflexive handling of problematic categories and expressions in the Daphne and Online Collection', Franka and I were invited to be the first residents of the Prep Room. We contribute different positionalities, shaped by our respective life experiences in the former GDR and Hungary. For the initial workshop session, the museum staff selected several examples from the GRASSI museum's online database. The purpose of this activity was to actively involve the museum's colleagues by discussing and analysing cultural artefacts from their own collections and to work on concrete examples. It also allowed us to work out the challenges these databases still imply: how to deal with racist terminology and categorizations? What is practicable, and what examples of best practice exist?[6]

Understanding the Prep Room as an opportunity to foster dialogue between the museum personnel and ourselves, two connected matters were central to our project. One was the need to make creative, new contributions to 'curatorial dreaming' (Butler and Lehrer 2016) and practices, arguing that exhibitions are simultaneously ongoing processes and finished products (Karp and Kratz 2014), two positions that are not mutually exclusive. This is in line with the theme of REINVENTING GRASSI and the director's understanding of museums as places for 'processualism', – as in a place where the process of thinking about and through objects can be revealed to the public, instead of remaining behind the scenes. The second matter follows the decolonial turn and ongoing debates on coloniality (Maldonado-Torres 2017).

Observing many participatory, critical exhibitions at the GRASSI museum, we proposed to centre our conversations inward, instead of focusing on an outreach project. It was our curatorial position that contributing to change in museums – understood as systems of asymmetric power structures and as persistent creators of racist knowledge – has to come from within. What this means is that outreach projects, which aim to include Black, indigenous and people of color (BIPOCs) in the public and members of the diaspora in the process of making an exhibition are not enough to achieve authentic change. Therefore, as our Prep Room, we proposed a curatorial project to invite the staff of the GRASSI museum to a curatorial experiment. What Franka and I initially thought of was to determine dialogically the main topic for the room through a continuous process of discussion. In doing so, we continuously developed new questions and

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themes *for* the room. As I will argue later, the curation process was more than dialogical and included multilayered transdisciplinary methodologies as well.

For the concept of dialogical curating, I reference two main scholarly works. First, Grant Kester, in his book *Conversation Pieces*, gives examples of various artists who are using dialogue as an artistic method. Integral to this practice is an 'extended process of listening and documentation' (Kester 2004:7). The artistic outcome is not necessarily the traditional notion of an 'object' or exhibition, but rather the conversation and/or an engagement that affects people. Kester therefore also coined the term 'dialogical art'. Moreover, contemporary artists like Martin Krenn argue that dialogue adds its own aesthetic quality to art, so that dialogical art moves fluidly between social engagement, aesthetic autonomy and social change (Krenn 2019). Following these ideas, Franka and I wanted to focus entirely on the process – creating and perpetuating discussions and ideas – instead of focusing on an end product, an exhibition. This proved more challenging, as generally museum spaces are thought of as places of transfer, where themes are contextualized and explained, rather than left open and questioned.

As a second reference point, I used Bakhtinian dialogism, referring to the philosophy of language and a social theory that was developed by Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin (1895-1975). Significant were his thoughts on the 'open-ended dialogue', in the sense of creating structures of open-ended connections, rather than in isolating boundaries. Bakhtin argues that in dialogue 'no singular word relates to its object in a singular way and an elastic environment of other words about the same object…it is precisely in the process of living interaction with this specific environment that the word may be individualized and given stylistic shape' (Bakhtin 1981:276). He also mentions 'the utterance-in-dialogue' (Bakhtin 1981:276–277), a piece of the ongoing exchange between speakers and listeners, who jointly shape everything that is said in all social situations. A corollary for Bakhtin is what he calls 'heteroglossia'. Here he underlines the importance of realizing that there is no such thing as a generic language. Instead, each language is composed of many different variations and nuances. Different social classes, generations and occupations speak differently, adding various values and degrees of social prestige (Bakhtin 1981).

Informed by these approaches, during the project at GRASSI I defined dialogical curating as developing a participatory and collaborative process, in the sense of open-ended dialogue, that seeks to include a multitude of voices. It highlights what themes and challenges are essential to those involved. It fosters informal spaces of reflection and exchange, which it then presents to the public through formats that go beyond a classically finished exhibition.

Ontologies: Subject, Object and In-between

Museum practitioners have acquired experience in categorizing and naming objects over the last two centuries. Material culture worldwide became data in museum storage

in Germany and elsewhere. Indigenous Peoples from around the globe were mined for 'scientific' knowledge. These classifications and categorizations and their organization hardened into accepted practices of naming and categories throughout collecting institutions (Turner 2022). These names were often considered wrong by the Indigenous Peoples to whom they had belonged, but viewed as acceptable by museum personnel and as a genuine part of Western knowledge.

In the archive and museum storage, different ontologies confront each other. When cultural belongings (*Kulturzeugnisse*) are named as (museum) objects, they are assigned to this category. Following colonial knowledge production, colonial categories were grouped so as to reflect the subjects' or objects' essential and general characteristics and contexts. Categories are mostly based on one-dimensional use. Sometimes an assignment is difficult or not possible at all. This century is characterized by unlearning and relearning the use of words and the consequences of classification for understanding how cultural belonging operates in museum contexts. The participating staff felt it necessary to be self-critical about the types of words, categorizations and narratives they came up with.

The call for a broadening of one's perspective was seen as necessary. But for this, terms are needed that can adequately describe material culture. How to deal with the terms and names that are increasingly missing due to the contexts of colonial acquisition, which already capture the multi-layered contexts in their original living conditions?

How do we address the ontological difference between understanding material cultures? Some cultural belongings are not matter but also subjects, spiritual manifestations. What is called a sculpture in a museum might be, in its being and original use, an ancestor and thus part of the family. Our discussions with the staff pointed out that the vital reflexivity and resulting change in practice caused discomfort for museum visitors and tension inside the museum – discomfort in a different mode, which I will address further below.

As a first step, to determine relevant discussion questions for the Prep Room, we wanted to give the museum's staff the time and space to examine their experiences and challenges in their current working day. Was there a significant difference between handling contemporary issues and exhibiting them? We invited the museum's employees (educators, conservators, storage managers and curators) for initial conversations. Franka and I decided to meet each person separately, or if they wished, together with their team members. All were very open to meeting. Some participants stayed proactive throughout the entire project, while others only attended a few meetings. After the first fruitful set of personal meetings, we analysed the responses and our conversations. We chose not to record our sessions but to rely on note-taking. By taking this decision, we also wanted to build up trust and underline the fact that we are looking for an exchange at eye-level. Interestingly, all colleagues struggled with similar issues and a significant ontological question about objects. Therefore, the topic for a common basis was fixed, being ready to be reflected back on the participants. For our next meeting,

we sent out the following email, including a section for thinking about some concrete examples from their work:

A common denominator has emerged from the discussions. This is the question of the object itself. What is understood by 'object'? How does the museum deal with 'objects' that are understood in their original context as subjects or spiritual beings? How do we deal with this in everyday museum work?

How does the critical examination of historical designations change today's museum systems of order? Where do other world views find their place?

Over the course of the following weeks and months, enthusiastic museum staff suggested diverse examples and subtopics that would be worth discussing. It should be stressed that the staff's participation was completely voluntary. They invested their time between reopening the GRASSI museum's new exhibition spaces as part of the 'REIN-VENTING' project and their daily business. Through the course of an intensive seven months (November 2021 to May 2022), I received more than 70 emails from one of the participants. Naturally, not everybody was as enthusiastic, but it shows how we met the need for conversation. Various answers to our email regarding the 'museum object' question reached us, which we can boil down into two general questions.

First, how should museum staff deal with categorizations and names that are a) racist and inherit colonial naming and grammar; b) translations that have no equivalent meaning in German; c) subject and objects in the same temporality for different people; and d) names for cultural belonging which are spirited and whose communities of origin have not yet been contacted?

Second, how should we deal with everyday challenges in the storage facility that make museum staff uncomfortable? Examples here were racist and problematic cabinet titles, keywords, titles, subject groups and regions. Specifically, the category of region as a geographical location posed an ethical dilemma. This historical, colonial terminology may be crucial information for provenance research.

Also, there was uncertainty about how to decide whether some of the cultural belongings can be placed next to one another before we contact the community of origin.

Out of these umbrella questions, we agreed on six questions that were made visible in the Prep Room on large glass screens, with answers gradually being added during Prep Room meetings. These would take place in the space itself, with open doors, for museum visitors to either listen or join in the conversations.

The following questions were chosen as necessary to the work of our museum colleagues:

- What do we (museum staff) mean by object? What is 'Western' about it?
- Here the term 'Western' posed a challenge, but no adequate alternative words were found.
- Why is the discussion about dealing with words, categories and objects important?
- What do we (museum staff) make visible in exhibitions, and what not?
- How do we avoid reproducing stereotypes?

- Where does our knowledge come from, and what is missing? How do we exhibit missing knowledge?
- How can we find ways of working together with the communities involved? How can we ensure knowledge transfer?

Slowly, the Prep Room was filled with more questions than answers. Showcasing the process meant occupying a room which was an ongoing construction site and gradually layering its content. We added a timeline that tracked linearly the discussed themes, questions and cultural belongings. We left the working material, literature and images in the room for visitors to look at.

Throughout the entire process, Franka and I tried to tie our debates to specific examples to allow museum visitors to connect seemingly abstract questions to the actual cultural belongings kept in the museum. The goal was to select two or three objects of material culture for a presentation in the room, highlighting some of our considerations.

Keris Tangguh Mataram dapur Singa Barong, a manufacturer unknown to the museum from Java, Mataram, probably active at the end of the seventeenth and the beginning of the eighteenth century, was displayed in a glass case in the room. The curator, Petra Martin proposed the *keris*, as it made possible multilayered discussions.

The elaborately crafted *keris* had a high value in their culture of origin in Java. They were simultaneously a weapon, clothing accessory, status symbol and talisman. Because of their spiritual power and meaning, they were always treated with great respect, which included careful storage, attentive handling, regular cleaning ceremonies and offerings. Possessing a precious *keris* that had been inherited could legitimize a claim to power. The divine power of a *keris* rests in the blade. Many have elaborate surface decoration, which harmonizes with the owner's character.

This example shows how entangled cultural belonging and subject categories are. At what point is cultural belonging considered a subject? When it is attributed spiritual powers? Because of their spirituality, *keris* should be presented with the blade pointing upward. This contradicts the common depiction of daggers and swords in German museums, where the blade points downwards. Therefore, it is necessary to break with habits to assume certain perspectives to seemingly similar material cultures.

With their transfer to European culture, the *keris* underwent new contextualization. The inventories, places of presentation and the changes made to some objects reflect the process of European appropriation. To underline the practice of extraction and transfer of context, the *keris's* biography on the wall showed them in different colours.

Ohiniko Mawussé Toffa chose the second cultural belonging to highlight the questions on naming categories. At this point he was working on a provenance research project on colonial collections from Togo.[7] He chose from a currently unknown manufacturer

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7 https://forschung.skd.museum/en/projects/detail/provenienz-von-kolonialzeitlichen-sammlungen-aus-togo/ accessed August 30, 2023.

a piece of headgear or warrior's cap classified as cultural belonging from present-day Ghana. Toffa stressed that the museum system named it as 'headgear' (*Kopfbedeckung*), which is a difficult term because *Kopfbedeckung* in German means something to cover the head with. However, the presented piece is not simply headgear, but rather a status symbol, which empowers its owner. As comparison, he brought in the hats of Catholic bishops or 'mitres', which carry meanings and associations within them: they are not simply called headgear. Furthermore, Toffa underlined the importance of finding a word for each cultural belonging. Naming is something we must care about because, depending on the context, the given name represents a different reality, a different special reality, that also connects back to discussions on heteroglossia.

The questions and examples we presented do not have easy answers. They certainly provide more than a look behind the curtain or a peak into the museum's backstage, delving more deeply into questions of how the museum functions. Our aim was not to provide simple solutions but to discuss collectively the named key issues and to foster awareness within the museum so that when mediating between the objects and the public, the choices made about the presented classifications and exhibitions are more informed and conscious than haphazard. Museums are so concentrated on reaching their audiences that they sometimes overlook the need for spaces within the institution that enable their staff to communicate openly. This was one of the purposes of the Prep Room. By inviting museum colleagues, the Prep Room became a safe space in the process of dialogical curating. Franka and I were more than curators or residents, but in those meetings, we overcame the classical notions of curating as producing products and decision-makers. We were border-crossers in the Hooper-Greenhill way, and were defined by the author as such:

> Museums may be seen as cultural borderlands, where a range of practices are possible […], and where diverse groups and subgroups, cultures and subcultures may push against and permeate the allegedly unproblematic and homogeneous borders of hegemonial cultural practices. By viewing museums as a form of cultural politics, museum workers can bring together the concepts of narrative, difference, identity and interpretative strategies in such a way as to create strategies for negotiating these practices. In the post-museum, multiple subjectivities and identities can exist as part of a cultural practice that provides the potential to expand the politics of democratic community and solidarity. By being able to listen critically, museum workers can become border-crossers by making different narratives available, by bridging between disciplines, by working in the liminal spaces that modernist museum practices have produced. (Hooper-Greenhill 2007:140)

Reflecting on our curating method in retrospect, I associate it with methods of participatory action research. Perhaps it is a participatory multilayered curatorial work that emphasizes participation and action by the staff in cyclically constant reflection sessions with and by us, similar to a counselling session. It seeks to provide an opportunity to reflect on one's one practice, encourages dialogue, and helps target the spe-

cific challenges that the participating members raise. What is also unique about our work in the Prep Room is the desire and willingness to share these reflections, which are vulnerable to the people communicating them with the audience, highlighting the fact that, even after working at GRASSI for decades, foundational questions are being re-asked and definitive answers do not stay definitive forever. They are repeatedly being put on the table to be renegotiated, so that the thoughts around which the museum is organized are continually being updated.

Mixed Feelings: The Emotional Work of Reflexivity

For some years now, emotions in museums have become a research focus, what Andrea Witcomb calls 'Toward a pedagogy of feeling' (Witcomb 2015). Engaging in a collaborative process anywhere can be emotional simply because people invest themselves to some degree or another in the work. In an ethnological museum, emotiveness is inherent. What is presented in exhibitions may influence visitors in all kinds of ways, but it is mostly a matter of how it makes them feel while experiencing the place.

Dealing with decolonization and difficult heritage is emotional labour. Regularly, international researchers or involved community members visit the museum as guests to engage with the collection or their ancestors. Coming face to face with increasing emotions is something staff may not have anticipated or are prepared to moderate, but they still have to make a space for any collaborative project. I stress the uneasiness staff members felt regarding their own emotions and the consequences of them.

This is something not unknown in environments where decolonial practices have been driven by First Nations and Natives/Indigenous Peoples. Rewriting settler colonial narratives is a daily challenge.

In preparation for our Prep Room meetings, and in search for examples of best practice for decolonial workshops, I came across the work of Dr Carol A. Cornelius, an oral scholar, with Prof. Margo Lukens at the Abbe Museum, Main USA. I was interested in finding out how museum staff in other settler societies reacted to reflexive questions of institutional and local history.

Lukens recounts her collaboration with Dr Cornelius, who had facilitated cross-cultural reading groups, describing what happens when one encounters other people's versions of histories, one goes through a process, similar to the five stages of facing grief: denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance (Kübler-Ross 1969).

Facing the institution's historical wrongdoings and one's own entanglement and positionality entails a stage of loss – loss of the privilege of being comfortable and being implicated instead (Rothberg 2022). Here Rothberg suggests the category of the 'implicated subject' and the related notion of 'implication'. Derived from the Latin stem *implicāre*, meaning to entangle, involve, or connect closely, 'implication,' like the proximate but not identical term 'complicity,' draws attention to how we are 'folded

into' (implicated in) events that at first seem beyond our agency as individual subjects. This is uncomfortable, but a productive place to be in, as it opens up spaces for new encounters.

Although there have been many visitors to the Prep Room, two particular encounters highlight the potential for a) active visitor engagement: during my time of regular visits to the room, I used to converse with visitors; and b) for conversations with the museum's personnel. I will share short excerpts from these. One day a visitor approached me while I was working at the table in the room. It was her first visit to the museum. She had come especially to see the Benin bronzes, which she expected to be exhibited in the museum. She knew from the museum's website that they had some in the collection and wanted to see them 'before they are given back and it is too late', as she said to me. She must have been wandering the exhibition space for a while before entering the Prep Room, as she seemed to expect me to point her in the right direction. As I informed her, there was a new work 'At the Threshold' from Emeka Ogboh, a series of portraits of the Benin bronzes. She seemed interested, but the disappointment was written all over her face. I instantly picked up on her feeling and invited her to play a game with me I developed focusing on 'mixed feelings', which involves choosing a card with a feeling named and drawn on a square piece of paper. She chose the card 'pity' to represent her momentary state of mind. 'What a pity that there are no Benin Bronzes on display', she reputedly said, and made a drawing on the other card. I asked her if she could imagine why we were playing a card game in the middle of a museum and exhibition space. She had not considered it before, 'as many museums are now trying to offer different types of interaction.' I explained to her in my own words the idea of Backstage and how the Prep Room was connected to all this. Establishing an open space in the middle of the museum that allows internal conversations to be seen is an experiment in making the museum transparent and inclusive to its public. It also emphasizes that breaking with the notion of the museum as a superior place of knowledge production and thus making the public and ourselves, the museum staff, aware of how and why changes occur is an important step in decolonizing. After an intense but exciting talk, she pointed out that she had recently seen a 'critical film' on German television about the looting of the Oba palace in Benin, and how important it is to think about 'where these objects in the museum came from.' I agreed with her. She went on to see the exhibition by Emeka Ogboh.

In one of our final meetings with some of the museum personnel, we reflected on the museum's opening and some of the criticisms it has received by letting the artist group PARA repurpose one of the museum's stone plinths for a participatory restitution project. This stone plinth housed the bust of Karl Weule (1864-1926), ethnologist and director of the GRASSI museum. The action was critically seen by some of the staff members too. It was not the destruction of the 'Weule Säule' (Weule's plinth), as I used to call it, that was a symbol of 'getting rid of the old', but more the violence of the act itself. Questioning where the anger came from, it emerged that there was a general feeling of being left alone in difficult situations when, for example, watching the plinth

being destroyed, while at the same time trying to do the right thing by the artists' collective. During curatorial depot management studies or museology, one doesn't learn how to encounter situations with colleagues who see their ancestors or spiritual 'objects' in the storage spaces or for whom museum objects stem from a violent personal history. Often, some label such viewpoints as 'too emotional/not objective', whereas one's uneasiness is more readily accepted.

Our Prep Room project had truly become a safe space for discussions on curatorial epistemic challenges and showed the importance of such enabling spaces. As a future goal, I suggested implementing coaching sessions with the staff of the museum, which was well received.

Conclusion

My work with Franka Schneider on the Prep Room involved more than 640 emails, countless conversations in person, via Zoom or on the phone, around 50 visits to the museum and numerous organized events, all serving to create a safe space for museum personnel to engage with questions about objects they feel strongly about. This process of creating an open-ended dialogue, which is then made visible to the public and to which the public was in turn invited to participate, was informed by theoretical positions regarding dialogical curating and the significance of open-ended discussions. The collaboration with the GRASSI team proved fruitful because it shed light on the questions that needed to be re-asked and reconfigured to ensure the museum does the right thing by the communities of implication it wishes to work with and whose history it is still shaping. A key aspect of this project is the importance of making a space for emotions about an object, a question, or a certain curatorial practice and creating a space safe enough for people to doubt their view of the world and themselves. In opening a room for doubt and the possibility of change on the most fundamental level of museum practice, as in the definition and understanding of what an object 'is' and how it operates in the world, the public was invited to reconsider what the museum can do for them. It is no longer a temple for knowledge fixed in time, which only the curators possess, but rather a space where everyone is invited to ask questions and to suggest answers for sharing.

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