

Introduction to the Special Issue

CoMuse: The Collaborative Museum Forging New Paths in Transcultural Museum Work

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Ethnographic and non-European art collections currently form a field that is particularly prominent in the public eye, since the methods of curating, exhibiting and working with cultural belongings have undergone significant changes over the past twenty years. These changes are rooted in postcolonial and decolonial approaches, especially since the institutions housing these collections are confronted with ongoing debates about their entanglement with histories of colonialism and unequal power relations (e.g., Sarr and Savoy 2018; Hicks 2021; von Oswald 2022). Consequently, new approaches were and still are needed to establish and sustain fair relationships between museums and the communities of the collections' places of origin (Deutscher Kulturrat 2019).

The current practice of cooperation and collaboration in ethnographic and anthropological museums shapes and is shaped by the debate surrounding social and cultural anthropology as a whole. Since the early beginnings of the discipline, anthropologists have practised and theorized collaborative curating and collaborative and participatory research, both in and outside museums. Examples include Boas and his colleagues, Latin American anthropologists working with social movements and African-American activist anthropologists (Fluehr-Lobban 2008:176). As ethnographic texts were 'hierarchical arrangements of discourses' (Clifford 1986:17), new research paradigms envisioned writing with and not purely about one's interlocutors, preferably in a dialog-

ical fashion with feedback loops and openness for co-interpretation (Crapanzano 1980; Marcus and Fisher 1986; Tedlock 1979). Sharing authority, rather than writing about the 'other' from a position of authority (Lassiter 2001:138), needed a reflexive approach that took into account historical and contemporary structures of domination and inequality. This meant collaborating throughout the entire research process, including writing and distribution (Rappaport 2008:2). The need for cooperation and participation between researchers and their subjects has not ceased to be of interest over the last four decades. However, when examined closely, the percentage of truly collaborative projects, i.e. those in which the research partners have an equal say in the design of the research, the authorship of the results and acknowledgement of the achievement, is small. There are different reasons for this. Firstly, academic research is time-intensive, covering many months or even years through different stages, from preparation to 'actual' research and writing: including research partners in this process requires the appropriate resources to enable them to participate and contribute on equal footing. Secondly, academic achievements are part of a career economy in which individual expertise and authorship, materialized in degrees and publications, is the currency of the academic market.

In this respect, the 'new' museums' collaboration models and practices seem to have an advantage, since their economy is different, and distributing authority, responsibility as well as acknowledgement and merit is common practice in many museum contexts these days. Many museums wanting to transform themselves aim to 'foster collaborative relationships on [an] equal footing with diverse stakeholders and willingly assume the risks entailed by entertaining novel positions' (Marstine 2011:7), thereby creating new authorities and work routines. Collaborative research into the intricate histories of artefacts from non-European contexts can counteract historical inequalities and thus contribute to a new ethic that embraces the decentralization of knowledge as a paramount value and the shared use of cultural belongings (Abiti 2019). This acknowledges postcolonial approaches by questioning the manifold hierarchical relationships imbued in the museums' workings. Moreover, collaborative work can help to create and develop new perspectives around the present and past lives of cultural belongings, thus creating 'fresh' relationships between people, objects and practices.

The 'New Museology' that emerged in the 1980s (Vergo 1989) inspired curators and academics to reconsider and reorganize exhibition-making practices. The concept of the museum as a 'contact zone' (Clifford 1997) transformed the notion of what a museum could achieve for and with all those involved in its creation. The 'New Museology' and the theoretical and practical activities surrounding collaboration have gained momentum by sharpening our understanding of museums and collections as tools for producing knowledge that are closely linked to governmentality and the production and representation of hierarchy and inequality (e.g. Bennett 1995; Hooper-Greenhill 2000; cf. Ballestero and Petschelis 2023).

Feminist theory has further inspired the ethics of collaboration in museums, envisioning them as places that uphold an ideal of social life-promoting, integrated relations

between self and other, self and nature, in a non-repressive, caring environment (Hein 2007:33). Hein (2007:39) adds that museums should prioritize process and practice over product and consumption, thereby exercising radical transparency. This approach prioritizes ethical responsibilities towards ‘source communities’¹ and Indigenous peoples (e.g. Kreps 2011), fundamentally changing established roles and the self-perception of curatorial expertise and authority. This differs significantly from the academic economy, where the final product, such as a publication or a successful third-party funding proposal, is what is recognized. The contributions to this special issue follow this practice-oriented approach, emphasizing the processual intricacies of collaborations in describing and reflecting on a selected number of projects realized within the Ethnologisches Museum and Museum für Asiatische Kunst’s CoMuse strategy. Furthermore, there is a need to bring closer together the agendas of museums and universities within the new collaborative paradigm of collection research, linking the different networks in the areas of the respective collections’ origins (cf. Dilger et al. 2025).

The Collaborative Museum/CoMuse: The Project

For the final opening ceremony of the Humboldt Forum in 2022, over eighty international cooperation partners were invited to Berlin, all of whom had been part of the planning process for the new exhibition spaces. Coming from diverse regional and professional backgrounds – such as Achilles Bufure, a museum director from Tanzania; Deepak Tolange, a film maker from Nepal; Michael Yahgulanaas, a visual artist from the American Northwest Coast, and Orlando Villegas, a community member from a rural part of Amazonia – these international delegates worked together in four thematic workshops. As a result of this encounter, they jointly developed a paper containing ‘ideas, proposals and expectations’ for an equitable future work on the museum collections, the ‘Joint declaration of the Global Cultural Assembly 2022 DIGNITY – CONTINUITY – TRANSPARENCY’, ‘Dignity Declaration’ for short, which identified the values of dignity, continuity and transparency as the most significant pillars for the possible future of museum work, and became a guideline for the planning of the programme of the Ethnologisches Museum and the Museum für Asiatische Kunst in the following years.

Among the ideas of the partners, prominent requests were the decentralization of knowledge and the circulation of people, ideas and cultural belongings. The two museums have therefore formed the Collaborative Museum², a large-scale three-year project, which explores new ways of dealing with the collections on many levels of the institu-

1 ‘Source Community’ is a contested term. It refers to cultural experts from areas of the respective collections’ origin.

2 Further information can be found here: <https://comuse.org/en/>, accessed 23.02.2026

tions in collaboration with various experts from the regions of origin. It is an important aspect of the project that many different working fields of the museums are addressed, such as curatorship, (provenance) research, outreach and conservation. This is of course not entirely new, but the scale of over forty subprojects running over the three years and the continuous critical companionship of the international partners makes it unique.

The Collaborative Museum is one crucial step in the process of decolonizing collections and turning museums into fully transparent collecting institutions that offer their material and immaterial collections to those who strive for shared research and reconnection. In considering ‘collections as relations’ (Dilger et al. 2025), the project aims to pave the way for the establishment of more symmetrical approaches to collection-based work, research and exhibition in post-colonial settings.

Why Collaborative – Why Museum?

For many years, collaborative approaches have shaped museum work, producing ‘remarkable exchanges of knowledge (...) and multi-vocal exhibitions, which highlight different perspectives on the material on display’ (Herle 2023; see also von Poser and Baumann 2016; Bachich 2022; Walda-Mandel et al. 2025). Peers and Brown state that relationships between museums and ‘source communities’ ... ‘are the most important manifestations of the new curatorial praxis’ (2007:531). Also, in the Berlin context, this practice is not new, and projects with, e.g., Yup’ik from Alaska from 1997 onwards (Fienup-Riordan 2005) or with local partners from Yakutia since 2008 (Lavaulx-Vrécourt & Nahser 2018) have been successfully conducted. More recent examples include the long-term collaborative exchange with partners in Tanzania (Reyels et al. 2017) and collaborative connections with partners in Venezuela (Scholz 2017).

Approximately thirty years ago, the idea of museum collections as ‘contact zones’ shaped the way collaborative work in these institutions was described. With the notion of a contact zone, James Clifford (1997) introduced a model for a space in which groups from diverse backgrounds, often affected by asymmetrical power relations, come together to work on the collections. In the following years, the notion of a contact zone has been widely used to describe forms of cross-cultural collaboration between curators, researchers and cultural experts from the regions of the respective collections’ origins, but the concept itself has also been criticized. In particular, the implication of equitable access that is suggested by the notion of a contact zone has been accused of muting neo-colonial continuities while maintaining the hegemonic position of museums (Boast 2011; Message 2015; Weber-Sinn and Ivanov 2020). Collaborative programmes in general must remain alert to the persistent power asymmetries in collaborative research in a postcolonial setting (Scholz 2019).

Therefore, it was crucial to find ways of overcoming the systemic barriers and raising collaborative work to a new level. In this respect, it is necessary to conceive of col-

lections as active bearers of historical injustice and violence (Geismar 2015:188) while at the same time seeing objects and artefacts as an integral part of a 'network in which people and things are entangled' (Fausto 2020:11). It also requires constant reflection on the intersecting positionalities of all the actors involved (Smith 2012). In the end, the relational aspect of collections is the core perspective that must be approached in a socioculturally sensitive and transparent way (Bell 2017, Dilger et al. 2025) if it is to free itself from accusations of mere tokenism (Golding and Modest 2016). It further must de-hierarchize knowledge systems and present a comfortable space for different research approaches (cf. Mithlo 2004; Moutu 2007; Wali 2023; Basu 2024).

Since collaborative approaches also require a new structure in the institutions, some structural adjustments have been launched in the wake of the Humboldt Forum's opening. One permanent curatorial position for transcultural cooperation has been introduced alongside one curatorial position for the visual media (historical film and photograph collections) and another for contemporary art in a global context. Furthermore, four permanent positions for postcolonial provenance research that are organizationally linked to the Zentralarchiv of the Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz have been set up to support exhibition production with background research on the chosen cultural belongings (Binter et al. 2022; cf. Förster et al. 2018).

A further important preparatory step was the digitization of the historical inventories (Erwerbungsbücher des Ethnologischen Museums) and all the acquisition files from 1830 to 1947 (Deterts and Ortlieb 2024). All these sources are now available online and ease the planning of projects for researchers and experts from all over the world. Also, the digitization of the material collections has continued, and currently there are over 125,000 objects visible online from the collections of the Ethnologisches Museum and the Museum für Asiatische Kunst³ (cf. Koch 2019).

In parallel, the research infrastructures in Dahlem are continuously being improved (von Poser 2023) in order to make the collections physically available to visiting fellows, researchers, and delegations. Rooms have been fitted with digital equipment for online workshops with partners from all over the world, and objects are prepared for collaborative work in a large restoration department (Gabsch 2023).

Through proactive provenance research and the resulting contact with relevant communities of implication, through existing contacts and recent requests from different regions of the world, and finally through public calls, collaboration partners have been found for a variety of projects.

One challenge that immediately became apparent was that building the necessary mutual trust for collaborative projects takes a long time and that partners in the world expect a sustainable, long-term partnership (Abungu 2019) – two points that are counteracted by the short-term project logics of German funding institutions (cf. Zenker and Vonderau 2023:146f.). It is therefore extremely important to ensure that the mu-

3 https://recherche.smb.museum/?language=de&limit=15&sort=relevance&controls=none&collectionKey=EM*&collectionKey=AKu*, accessed 23.2.2026.

seums' internal permanent structures can maintain the projects that have been started, at least in a reduced capacity, even in the case of funding shortages.

Another relevant network that has been initiated in response to the Dignity Declaration is the Global Cultural Assembly, a permanent board of cultural specialists from different regions and backgrounds that oversees the planning of collaboration and exhibition work in the Humboldt Forum (see the article of Dias and Scholz in this issue). This group also includes community representatives from Berlin because connections to the collections are also widely present in urban society (Schultz 2011).

The production of exhibitions and related writings is certainly more demanding in a collaborative setting than it would be without the inclusion of collaboration partners. It requires considerably more time, effort and engagement due to more complex coordination, but in the end the integration of multiple positionalities and perspectives yields enrichment on various levels.

This framework represents an essential step in the decolonization of the collections, with close attention being paid to the wishes and needs of the partners, as dictated in the paper 'Dignity, Continuity, Transparency' mentioned above. The resulting approaches often do not follow a simple logic of restitution, but are much more subtle, differentiated and diverse (e.g. von Poser 2017).

Many current processes of collaboration with various regions of the world are linked to the historical collections and the stories of acquisition and appropriation behind them. Moreover, media attention is often focused particularly on these areas.

This volume aims to bring together experiences from several of the Collaborative Museum's subprojects in the form of workshop reports and to present them to a broader readership, as the editors believe that this not only adds value to the field of museum anthropology but also carries wider implications for the discipline as a whole.

The contributions trace the changing landscape of collaborative museum practice by examining two interconnected areas: institutional transformation, and the work with cultural belongings. While the first cluster addresses the structural, communicational and technological changes needed to support collaboration within museum institutions, the second cluster explores the epistemic, ethical and emotional aspects of engaging with communities and collections across diverse historical and geopolitical contexts. Together, these articles highlight how contemporary ethnological museums grapple with inherited inequalities while experimenting with new models of co-production, relational accountability and shared authority. Instead of viewing institutional reform and collaborative collections work as separate fields, the section demonstrates how they influence and limit each other: structural changes enable collaborative practices, which in their turn reveal the strengths and weaknesses of existing institutional arrangements.

Institutional Structure and Transformation

This cluster brings together articles that examine how ethnological museums seek to reconfigure their organizational structures, communication practices and technological infrastructures to support more equitable forms of collaboration. The contributions reveal that institutional transformation is not merely a matter of adopting new tools or workflows but requires a more profound rethinking of authority, accountability and epistemic responsibility.

The article by Szöke, Ungar and Wischer frames these debates by outlining the conceptual and practical tensions that are inherent in institutional collaboration. Building on this, Erben and Schäfers provide a media-ethnographic analysis of the CoMuse podcast, showing how multilingual interviews, approval processes and guests' discomfort reveal the frictions that arise when democratizing institutional voices through a public-facing medium. Sigsfeld complements this with a critical examination of restitution governance, demonstrating how collaborative aspirations are frequently contained by structural limitations, legal frameworks and political shifts. Finally, Navarro offers a theoretically innovative and practice-oriented perspective on digital transformation, criticizing digital coloniality while proposing low-tech, care-centred alternatives that prioritize partner contexts over institutional efficiency.

Together, these articles trace the micropolitics of institutional change, illustrating that collaboration demands not only new methods but also new modes of communication, infrastructural experimentation and sensitivity to the uneven terrains on which museum work unfolds.

If institutional change forms the enabling environment for collaborative practice, the second cluster demonstrates what becomes possible when such conditions are taken seriously—namely, diverse forms of working with collections and cultural belongings that foreground community agency, relational ethics and epistemic plurality.

Engaging with Cultural Belongings

The articles in this cluster document a wide variety of collaborative efforts involving collections, cultural belongings and community knowledge systems, emphasizing the creativity, complexity and challenges of such work across global contexts. Together, these contributions demonstrate how provenance research, co-curation, the revitalization of knowledge and community-centred storytelling can transform museum practices from within.

Some articles—such as Bokop and Tolange's investigation of Nepali heritage and illicit artifact trafficking, or Krebs's work with Uyghur diaspora communities—highlight collaboration by carefully tracing material histories, emotional connections, or diasporic identities. Others, including the articles by Ellendorf and Mbala, Dias and

Scholz, and by Steffens, Quintupil and Bayer, focus on community-led processes of cultural revitalization, restitution and storytelling, emphasizing the emotional and political work involved in building long-term relationships. Contributions like those from the Talking Mats team or Stillfried, Schien and Cardozo show how inter-epistemic conversations, child-centred pedagogy and artistic projects can open up new ways of reconnecting with cultural belongings. Meanwhile, the articles by Knapp, Rodriguez and Mengel and by Schüren, Bayer, García and Dressen present examples of ongoing, trust-based collaborations that challenge archival ethics, sensory access and the ontological assumptions that have long shaped museum collections. Scholz's contribution emphasises the potential for long-term cooperation to evolve into deep, meaningful relationships, as demonstrated by the partnership between the Ethnologisches Museum Berlin and the Kotiria community in Colombia. By contrast, Wölfel et al. emphasise the role of replicas in fostering dialogue and supporting heritage building within a local community in Guatemala. Alternative approaches to knowledge production in museums are also explored, such as interdisciplinary discussions, as demonstrated by Kabanlan, Perrot and Tebbe. Helber and Scholz's article further develops this idea, focusing on the educational potential of objects and how the Humboldt Forum can address urgent global issues. The special issue concludes with Mareile Flitsch's contribution on the 'Workspace Series', a pioneering format by the Ethnographic Museum at the University of Zurich (2022-2024). This innovative approach promoted transparency in knowledge production, sharing museum collections and research with diverse stakeholders. This external perspective enriches the special issue, providing a thought-provoking conclusion.

Taken together, the articles in this special issue show that collaborative museum practice is neither merely a technical process nor a set of strict ideals. Instead, it is an ongoing negotiation involving infrastructures, epistemologies and historical responsibilities. The institutional contributions demonstrate how collaboration depends on reorganizing the fundamental conditions under which museums operate. Meanwhile, the collections-focused articles reveal how these structural changes are tested, reinterpreted and sometimes undone through direct encounters with communities, objects and lived histories. What emerges is a view of collaboration as a mutually influencing process: institutional change enables new ways of engagement, but it is through sustained involvement that the limits, blind spots and possibilities of institutional transformation become clear. By tracing these reciprocal dynamics, the special issue advocates a more integrated understanding of collaborative work, one that recognizes the interconnectedness of governance and practice, digital and material infrastructures, and of affective, political and epistemic commitments. In doing so, it helps to reframe what ethnological museums can and should be in light of ongoing postcolonial, technological and ecological challenges.

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