The Collaborative Museum? Navigating Bureaucracy, Structure and Hope at the Ethnological Museum and Asian Art Museum, Berlin

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Abstract: This article examines the complexities and structural challenges of collaboration in ethnographic museum work through a case study of the Collaborative Museum (CoMuse) project at the Ethnologisches Museum and the Museum für Asiatische Kunst in Berlin. In response to the growing demands for decolonization, inclusivity and epistemic justice, CoMuse aims to operationalize collaborative practice not merely as an ethical ideal but also as a structural intervention. Drawing on ethnographic observations and institutional analysis, the article situates collaboration within broader institutional entanglements such as contract law, labour regulation, digital infrastructure and administrative procedures, showing how these shape and often constrain relational forms of knowledge production. The paper argues that if collaboration is to be more than symbolic, it requires sustained engagement with the material and procedural infrastructures of museum work. The paper also highlights the tensions between bureaucratic regimes and relational accountability and explores how new roles, workflows and digital strategies can enable more equitable institutional transformation. Rather than presenting a model, CoMuse is offered as a situated attempt to rethink authority, co-authorship and institutional responsibility under the pressures of historical accountability and global entanglement.
[Decolonizing museums, museum collaborations, institutional transformation, museum bureaucracy]

Museum Collaborations

It is noon on a Wednesday. The late summer sun bounces back from the windows of the reconstructed Prussian castle in the centre of Berlin. Some light rays illuminate the table where museum staff discuss their ongoing projects. Perhaps their enthusiasm for contributing to a more just museum practice is strengthened at that moment, transcending the mere reflections on the baroque façade.

These moments of contextual enthusiasm are not simply displays of naive institutional optimism. Instead, they signal a future-focused attitude in daily museum work of delicate

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opportunities where hopes for fairer collaborations are expressed, even as they acknowledge current structural limitations.

Recent calls for decolonization, inclusivity and community engagement have intensified the pressure on ethnographic museums to reckon with their colonial foundations, not only in respect of what is displayed, but also in how knowledge is produced, structured and shared. Within this discourse, collaboration has emerged as both an ethical imperative and a methodological challenge, especially for historically marginalized and Indigenous communities. As Scholz and Turner (Scholz 2019; Turner 2021) note, collaboration in this context entails more than consultative inclusion: it requires rethinking institutional authority and redistributing curatorial power. When communities or international partners lead exhibition development, shape thematic direction, or co-determine research priorities, these practices begin to disrupt long-standing asymmetries in ethnological and general museum work. At the same time, the discourse on collaboration has expanded to address the museum's role within both the communities of implication and the broader public sphere in which the institution is situated. Mutibwa et al. (Mutibwa et al. 2018) argue that museums must move from their passive custodianship of collections to become active, dialogical spaces that facilitate the co-production and circulation of knowledge. This perspective aligns with Wang's (Wang 2023) Indigenous Museum Values Framework, which calls for community-centric models of museum practice that sustain cultural traditions through relational engagement and shared stewardship. Such frameworks are critical not only for expanding representational diversity, but also for reconfiguring institutional processes to acknowledge the epistemic and political agency of marginalized communities. Critiques of museum decolonization have grown increasingly nuanced, engaging with the complex entanglements of power, representation and the enduring legacies of colonialism in contemporary museum practice (Chipangura 2020). Social anthropological and museological scholarship has interrogated not only the ethical and epistemological dimensions of collections and curatorial authority, but also the structural constraints that inhibit meaningful institutional transformation. While decolonial discourse has gained considerable traction within museum agendas, a growing body of critical work warns that many initiatives risk becoming performative or tokenistic (Bacci 2024; Matilde 2025; Pirazan 2025), gestures that symbolically acknowledge colonial histories without substantively altering the institutional logics that sustain them. Here, the phrase 'institutional logics' denotes the funding structures, administrative procedures and temporal frameworks that shape museum work, particularly project-based financing and European grant cycles with predefined milestones. These structures often conflict with the slower, relational temporalities that are necessary for sustained collaboration, thereby constraining the transformative potential of decolonial initiatives.

Wali and Collins (Wali and Collins 2023) argue that, although museums have increasingly invoked the language of diversity and decolonization, their operational practices often continue to reproduce Eurocentric epistemologies that marginalize In-

digenous voices and those of communities implicated in colonial collecting practices. In a related critique, Liuni (Liuni 2023) examines the spatial and aesthetic dimensions of museum architecture and exhibition design, challenging the assumed neutrality of these forms. She contends that such spatial configurations frequently reinforce dominant ideological narratives, thus undermining the very decolonial commitments they purport to advance. Similarly, Duarte (Duarte 2024) highlights the persistence of colonial ideologies within museum governance structures, demonstrating how these frameworks actively contribute to the continued marginalization of historically oppressed communities.

These critiques underscore that decolonization cannot be achieved through symbolic gestures or isolated reforms. Instead, it requires a sustained confrontation with the institutional imaginaries, infrastructures and modes of authority through which museums have historically operated and through which colonial hierarchies continue to be reproduced in the present.

The politics inherent in the display and representation of collections further complicate the notion of decolonization within museums. As Schorch and Hakiwai (Schorch and Hakiwai 2013) demonstrate, museums frequently present themselves as forums for dialogue while simultaneously reproducing colonial biases through representational frameworks that constrain the articulation of Indigenous practices and perspectives. Rather than enabling genuine engagement, such frameworks often delimit what can be said, shown, or recognized as legitimate knowledge. In a similar vein, Tolia-Kelly and Raymond (Tolia-Kelly and Raymond 2019) argue that meaningful decolonization requires a fundamental re-evaluation of curatorial practice, one that confronts historical injustices and institutional power relations instead of relying on superficial strategies aimed at symbolically appeasing criticism. From this perspective, decolonization emerges not as an additive gesture but as a structural and epistemic intervention.

From the standpoint of social and cultural anthropology, these dynamics can be understood through a relational conception of knowledge and authority. Building on Strathern's (Strathern 1991) argument that relations are not secondary to entities but constitutive of them, collaboration in museums can be analysed as a reconfiguration of relations, rather than the simple inclusion of additional voices. Such a perspective foregrounds how institutional practices, curatorial roles and epistemic hierarchies are continuously produced through interaction, negotiation and partial connection. Collaboration, in this sense, does not dissolve asymmetries but renders them visible, making apparent the frictions that arise when heterogeneous actors, temporalities and expectations intersect within institutional settings.

In this regard, collaboration can also be approached as a cautiously future-oriented practice. Following Tsing's (Tsing 2005) understanding of friction as a generative force emerging from uneven and contested encounters, collaborative museum work may be read not as a utopian project, but as an orientation toward alternative possibilities that unfold within, rather than beyond, structural constraints. Such an approach allows

for optimism without denying the persistence of inequality, foregrounding process, contingency and the partial nature of institutional change.

Scholarship has further emphasized that interventions aimed at decolonizing museum practice must be grounded in collaborative models that prioritize community voices and relational forms of authority. Viau-Courville (Viau-Courville 2021) highlights the necessity of moving away from narratives dictated by institutional expertise towards dialogical processes in which curatorial authority is shared and continuously negotiated. This shift points towards participatory exhibition practices in which curation is understood as an ongoing collaborative process rather than a unilateral act defined by established professional roles (Chipangura 2023). Crucially, such approaches resist reducing collaboration to tokenistic inclusion by foregrounding co-production as a practice embedded in long-term relationships, accountability and situated knowledge.

Building on these debates, scholars such as Copeland et al. and Chipangura (Copeland es al. 2020; Chipangura 2023) have stressed that meaningful decolonization requires reciprocal relationships that redistribute authority rather than reproduce extractive dynamics within new ethical framings. These concerns resonate with broader museological discussions of institutional reflexivity and the limits of reform (Boast 2011; Golding and Modest 2016; Weber-Sinn and Ivanov 2020), highlighting the frictions that arise when collaborative ideals meet entrenched bureaucratic, legal and epistemic structures.

It is within this analytically productive tension that initiatives such as the Collaborative Museum (CoMuse) are situated. By embedding collaborative practices across curatorial work, provenance research, exhibition development and institutional infrastructure, CoMuse approaches decolonization as an ongoing, reflexive process rather than a fixed end state. At the same time, the project makes visible the challenges inherent in this work: questions about who sets research agendas, determines object interpretation or defines success remain contested, particularly when collaborative aspirations encounter institutional timelines, legal frameworks and funding logics. Rather than resolving these tensions, CoMuse treats them as part of the collaborative process itself, working through friction, constraints and negotiation to create the conditions for sustained engagement, shared responsibility and the careful articulation of relational futures within existing institutional limits.

A Collaborative Museum

In response to sustained critiques of their colonial entanglements and epistemic authority, such as those outlined above, the Ethnologisches Museum and the Museum für Asiatische Kunst initiated a pilot project in 2023 called the Collaborative Museum or CoMuse. Framed as a structural intervention in the institutional processes of heritage work, CoMuse seeks to operationalize decolonial commitments by engaging

the situated knowledge and agency of international partners. Drawing on the heterogeneous expertise of museum staff, the project foregrounds the need to reconfigure collection-based practices through dialogical and participatory formats. At its core, CoMuse aims to redistribute curatorial authority by enabling partners—often individuals or communities with historical, affective, or epistemic ties to the collections—to determine thematic orientations, identify cultural belongings for engagement and initiate projects within the CoMuse framework. In this way, the initiative aims to move beyond symbolic inclusion towards structurally embedded forms of co-authorship and institutional transformation. Conceptually, CoMuse understands collaboration not as a project-bound add-on but as a relational and process-oriented practice embedded in everyday institutional work. The model is grounded in a shared understanding of collaboration shaped by principles such as transparency, reciprocity, respect, shared responsibility, knowledge exchange and co-determination. Collaborative processes are structured around the joint articulation of goals and long-term visions, followed by the collective identification of thematic fields, including research, exhibition-making, mediation and engagement with diverse publics. These orientations inform the selection of concrete collaboration formats ranging from collection-based research and restitution processes to digitalization, co-curation and advisory structures. Moreover, presentation formats, such as exhibitions, publications, events, or digital outputs, are treated as contingent outcomes rather than predetermined endpoints. Residencies and other forms of sustained engagement play a key role in enabling the time-intensive processes of relationship-building, exchange and reflexive negotiation on which collaboration depends.

The following section traces how this conceptual framework was translated into institutional practice by reconstructing the planning and design phase of the CoMuse initiative.

Planning and designing the CoMuse initiative

An internal committee composed of museum staff selected the first round of CoMuse projects. A central requirement for all projects was that they be co-conceived and co-produced with international partners or members of Berlin's civil society. These partners included individuals and communities with personal or ancestral connections to the collections, as well as actors engaging objects through cultural, artistic, or scholarly practice. Rather than treating these collaborations as external contributions, CoMuse considers them constitutive of the museum's ongoing epistemic and ethical reorientation.

CoMuse deliberately goes beyond a project-based logic by addressing the structural conditions that shape institutional practice more broadly. In shifting the focus from individual collaborations to the systemic dimensions of museum work, the initiative recognizes that multiple, interrelated domains ranging from staffing, contracting and

labour structures to decision-making hierarchies require sustained critical engagement. This recognition does not arise from a lack of awareness by museum staff or leadership regarding these institutional challenges. Instead, it reflects a chronic under-resourcing of transformative work, particularly regarding human resources. CoMuse thus also sought to intervene at this infrastructural level by attempting to carve out space – both discursively and materially – for structural change within the constraints of the existing institutional and bureaucratic apparatus.

One of the earliest and most persistent challenges for the CoMuse team was the divergent understandings of what 'collaboration' entails. Far from being marginal, this conceptual and practical tension reflects the broader structural ambiguity that often accompanies co-creative institutional projects. As Lynch and Alberti (Lynch and Alberti 2009) observe, genuinely collaborative processes demand a delicate equilibrium among participants balancing openness, negotiation and shared authority, yet they frequently falter under the weight of divergent expectations, institutional asymmetries and the complex entanglements of multiple stakeholders. Similar critiques have been raised by Golding and Modest (Golding and Modest 2013), who caution that collaboration, while frequently invoked, is rarely treated as a central structuring principle. In response, the CoMuse project sought to embed collaboration as both a methodological principle and an organizational commitment. This involved rethinking existing workflow structures to increase flexibility and responsiveness, including introducing more iterative project cycles and timeframes for collaborative consultations on issues such as conservation and curation. A new team structure was created (around twenty newly employed personnel) to include roles tasked with mediating between institutional protocols and partners' demands, ensuring that collaborative intentions could be translated into operational realities. These included, for example, a postcolonial provenance researcher for in-depth research with partners, a restitution coordinator and the coordinator of a newly developed CoMuse fellowship program. At the level of curatorial practice, CoMuse adopted a co-curation model in which external partners were not simply consulted but empowered to shape thematic direction, object selection and narrative framing from the earliest stages. These interventions, while still constrained by broader institutional limitations, marked a shift towards treating collaboration as a form of situated labour, one that demands time, trust and ongoing negotiation, rather than one-off gestures or token inclusion.

Alongside these structural and procedural adjustments, the CoMuse team also began developing digital strategies (Navarro, this volume) to support and reflect collaborative principles. This work included, among other things, a critical reassessment of the museum's central database—long a domain of institutional classification and internal accountability—with a view to reimagining how it might accommodate the epistemic contributions of partner communities and the relational contexts in which such knowledge is produced. Rather than treating digital infrastructure as a purely technical concern, the team saw the database as a focal point for negotiating how collaboration could be materially embedded within everyday institutional practice.

A museum database working group examined how institutional frameworks shape the acknowledgment of collaborative knowledge. Drawing on sustained work with communities, a workflow was co-developed with partners. Rather than framing this as an external contribution to an established system, the proposal foregrounded collaboration as an epistemic process that had already shaped how data should be structured, attributed and contextualized.

The database is seen not just as a neutral tool but also as a mechanism that coordinates relations among people, knowledge and authority. The questions raised—whose contributions are visible, how their origins are documented and which knowledge forms are recognizable—point to the institutional work involved in reproducing or challenging epistemic hierarchies in daily practice. According to Strathern (Strathern 1991), these negotiations show that relations are not secondary to institutions but are constitutive of them: the database does more than store knowledge; it actively creates relations of accountability, ownership and authorship.

These issues became more urgent with the recent addition of a provenance module aimed at documenting multi-sited, postcolonial provenance research carried out with communities of origin. While the module enhances transparency, it also reveals the tensions between relational knowledge practices and infrastructural systems focused on standardization, documentation and auditability. Participants repeatedly discussed how knowledge shared by partners could be acknowledged meaningfully without losing sight of the social, historical, and political contexts in which it was developed. This dilemma aligns with Smith's (Smith 2012) critique of institutional knowledge practices that appropriate Indigenous expertise while disconnecting it from the relationships and responsibilities that give it meaning.

Rather than viewing these issues as technical problems to be fixed, the database working group exemplifies how collaborative museum practices develop through ongoing negotiations within institutional settings. The challenge is not merely to add new knowledge forms to existing systems but also to question how these systems organize recognition, value and authority. This discussion demonstrates how decolonial commitments are enacted—or limited—by everyday institutional practices, where aspirations for shared authority must be continually revised within inherited bureaucratic and epistemic frameworks.

Facing Structures and Bureaucracy

Participating in the CoMuse initiative highlighted how decolonial goals are often shaped and limited by daily bureaucratic practices. Instead of only appearing during curatorial choices or collaborations, the most significant challenges are found within the administrative processes, legal systems and institutional routines that either enable or restrict collaboration. Our key realization was that genuine decolonization in mu-

seum work requires engaging with these foundational governance and accountability structures.

Decolonizing museum bureaucracy requires a thorough review of the institutional procedures, governance systems and legal frameworks that uphold colonial hierarchies and unequal power dynamics. Such change is essential for creating museums that can effectively represent, connect with and be accountable to marginalized and Indigenous communities. Although collaboration is often seen as a key approach, it is usually understood at the level of research, exhibitions, or audience outreach, rather than as an action integrated within the institution's administrative structure. As Ariese and Wróblewska (Ariese and Wróblewska 2021) state, museums with colonial histories need a fundamental shift not only in their knowledge systems, but also in their bureaucratic processes for managing knowledge, authority and partnerships. Without this transformation, decolonization efforts risk being countered by the very institutional practices they aim to change.

The authors therefore aimed to engage the administrative domain as a critical site of decolonial intervention. We recognized that the contractual basis of collaboration is fundamental to the success of any joint endeavour. Transparent, accessible and equitable administrative procedures are essential for building and maintaining mutual trust. However, like all institutions under the auspices of the Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz (SPK), the Ethnologisches Museum and the Museum für Asiatische Kunst operate under national and supranational regulatory regimes – most notably public procurement and contract law – that are often ill-suited to the complexities of international and community-based partnerships.

Among the most acute challenges were the language of contractual agreements and legal constraints. Contracts were issued exclusively in German and were legally valid only in that language, making them inaccessible to many international partners and requiring time-consuming translation and mediation by museum staff. Furthermore, these contracts were often preceded by a formal bidding process – even for long-standing relationships – which could cause confusion or alienation when partners were unexpectedly asked to submit competitive offers to participate in co-creative work. These practices, while formally compliant, conflicted with the relational and processual ethos that underpins collaborative engagement.

Financial transactions added another layer of structural friction. Partners based in countries outside the SWIFT banking network often faced significant delays or outright rejections of international transfers. In some cases, collaborators lacked access to formal banking systems altogether, forcing staff to devise ad hoc solutions for remuneration and resource distribution. These bureaucratic obstacles not only strained museum staff but also risked eroding trust, undermining relational accountability and, in effect, devaluing the contributions and knowledge of community partners. In this sense, the museum's administrative apparatus emerged as a site where Eurocentric power structures or colonial residues persist – not necessarily intentionally, but through the

rigid preservation of forms that are ill-equipped for ethical and equitable international collaboration.

Another significant challenge emerged regarding German labour law, specifically the legal obligation to prevent so-called 'pseudo-self-employment' (*Scheinselbstständigkeit*). This designation applies when an individual is formally contracted as self-employed but, under legal criteria, should be classified as an employee and thus enrolled in the national social security system. In the context of CoMuse, this regulation required staff to assess the employment status of every contracted individual – including those receiving small honoraria – on a case-by-case basis. These assessments are often complex and time-consuming, frequently requiring several months to complete. The burden of documentation placed on international collaborators, many of whom are unfamiliar with German administrative and legal procedures, compounded these delays and frequently led to confusion or frustration.

The operational practices for administering collaboration, as stated above, clearly reveal the Eurocentric idea that underpins today's museum bureaucracy: cooperation occurs when there is a written contract, an agreed timeline is followed and public funds are documented through orders and receipts.

On the other hand, the challenges were not limited to the German bureaucracy alone: often, the partner organization's bureaucracy was equally obstructive to cooperation. Important information, perhaps obvious to partners, was not communicated, contracts were delayed and unrealistic demands were made. Consequently, part of the Comuse administration's role involved resolving cross-cultural misunderstandings, negotiating demands and devising flexible solutions acceptable to both parties.

This situation underscores the broader tension inherent in transnational collaboration: the assumption that nationally specific bureaucratic frameworks are universally applicable and comprehensible.

Besides co-curatorial work and the questioning of representation, effective collaboration demands a recognition of diverse forms of co-working.

In the CoMuse initiative, administrative procedures needed to be flexible, transparent and responsive to accommodate diverse legal, linguistic and infrastructural contexts across partner organizations. This often meant providing extra time for questions and clarifications and investing in staff training to improve communication with international partners and handle unfamiliar legal and administrative hurdles. Such adjustments could reduce misunderstandings and procedural inequalities when feasible. However, in cases where adjustments were not possible, collaboration risked perpetuating exclusion through opaque procedures and rigid legal systems, despite decolonial aims. From these experiences, we strongly advise institutions involved in collaborative projects to recognize administrative processes as critical points where inclusion or exclusion can be shaped.

Drawing on the complex experiences of managing international collaborations, the Collaborative Museum has taken initial steps towards co-produced project management. One such development is the introduction of a CoMuse Fellowship in Berlin.

This fellowship is intended to create space and time for collaborative work on site, addressing the challenges of long-distance cooperation that typically relies on digital modes of communication. It is based on a standardized contractual framework that includes provisions for travel, visa costs, accommodation and subsistence. The museum arranges accommodation. The fellowship is not outcome-driven, and it is explicitly not structured as a '*Werkvertrag*' in the sense of European contract law, which presupposes the delivery of a completed product within a specified timeframe. Instead, the fellowship format allows for open-ended collaboration that is free from the instrumental demands that are often placed on project outcomes by European institutions seeking to showcase partnership results.

In parallel with this, CoMuse has expanded the number of collection visits to four hundred visits in a year, including project partners in their regions of origin, but also by individuals or groups visiting the Berlin collections. These visits have fostered dialogue and shared reflections on the holdings. However, they also pose logistical and financial challenges, particularly for travel and hospitality arrangements. In response, the museum administration has introduced new budget categories ('*Titelgruppen*') to facilitate funding for guest hospitality, thereby institutionalizing practices of welcome and trust-building.

More broadly, CoMuse is engaged in standardizing contractual procedures that incorporate feedback from partner institutions. It has become evident to us that both content-related and contractual objectives must remain flexible throughout collaborative projects. Contracts must allow for modifications to timelines and budgets, necessitating frequent addenda and follow-up agreements. The management of such amendments has thus become a central component of CoMuse's administrative practice.

Conclusion

As this article has shown, decolonizing the museum is not confined to the gallery space or the exhibition label. Instead, it penetrates the very structures through which institutions operate: bureaucracies, databases, legal frameworks and internal hierarchies of labour and expertise. CoMuse, as an institutional intervention, does not present a solution to these entanglements, but it still offers a case study of how collaboration might be reimagined as a situated, ongoing form of negotiation that is material, procedural and epistemic. It also emphasizes that collaboration is complex and time-consuming. Therefore, experienced individuals are needed with the diplomatic skills to work effectively with international partners and navigate the structural particularities of German institutions.

The examples from CoMuse illustrate both the possibilities and the persistent frictions of institutional transformation. From rethinking workflows and staffing structures to embedding partner knowledge in the museum's digital architecture, the ini-

tiative seeks to realign everyday practices with decolonial commitments. These efforts, however, are continually mediated by broader regulatory regimes, such as contract law, labour legislation and financial infrastructure, that often inhibit rather than enable relational accountability. In this sense, CoMuse makes visible the often invisible scaffolding of power that underpins the modern museum. The ethnographic insights presented here suggest that meaningful change requires not only amplifying marginalized voices but also critically reconfiguring the institutional mechanisms that govern representation, authorship and authority. As a mode of practice, decolonization cannot be reduced to inclusion or thematic curation. It must engage the museum as a site of ongoing structural negotiation, one in which bureaucratic procedures, digital tools and curatorial ethics are understood as co-constitutive.

In the light bouncing off the Humboldt Forum's reconstructed façade, the aspirations for a more just museum practice may sometimes seem symbolic. Yet within the small-scale negotiations around meeting tables, database modules and collaborative contracts, we see the slow work of structural rethinking unfolding. If there is hope in these efforts, it lies not in the promise of institutional redemption but in the commitment to stay the course by remaining accountable, reflexive and open to the transformative demands that decolonial collaboration continues to pose.

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