

Situating the Digital Strategy of the Collaborative Museum

Cristina Navarro

Ethnologisches Museum and Museum für Asiatische Kunst, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin

Abstract: This article aims to formulate and frame the digital strategy of the Collaborative Museum conceptually and to outline the main lines of its immediate implementation plan from a reflexive perspective. The digital strategy is presented as a practice, ‘a doing’, of situated knowledge with specific intentions and urgencies. The article will highlight the fundamental principles of designing access and circulation as core areas of action in the structuring and conception of specific digital projects. By concentrating on the foundational aspects of the digital strategy and offering specific examples of use, I hope to share some of the possibilities and limitations of using digital technologies in decolonial museum work in a way that resonates with readers who access this article.

[digital strategy, decolonial, designing access, circulation principle, cosmotechnics, cosmopolitics]

Introduction

It matters what subjects we use to think other subjects;
it matters what stories we tell to tell other stories;
it matters what knots knot knots, what thoughts think thoughts,
what descriptions describe descriptions, what ties bind ties.
It matters what stories create worlds, what worlds create stories.¹

Donna J. Haraway

In an era when digital transformation is reshaping how people engage with culture and identity, a digital strategy is no longer optional for museums – it is essential.² Digital strategies for museums in the Western world often focus on a close analysis of what

1 Haraway 2016:35. Haraway notes that she has borrowed this idea from Marilyn Strathern (Strathern 1990).

2 By 2007, awareness of the need to address the digital within museum studies and practices as a vehicle for transformation and renewal had become established in English-speaking academic environments (Din et al. 2007). This awareness has grown internationally in recent years, leading to major initiatives in Germany such as museum4punkt0 and NFID4Culture. On the European level, large-scale projects such as ECCCH The Cultural Heritage Cloud reflect the same trend towards digitalization, serving diverse communities of professionals and researchers working with heritage.

a digital society expects from a museum, how relevance can be maintained in a digitally networked world and what new forms of communication are enabled by digital technologies and methods (Jank 2019:62–69). These strategies typically emphasize the digital transformation of the entire institution and claim that agile methods increase staff and audience engagement. This, in turn, tends to create more points of access and a wider range of perspectives in museum displays, leading to more online and onsite visitors and, ideally, to greater revenue and financial opportunities for the museum. In these narratives, the museum itself is framed as the primary beneficiary, being celebrated in stories of success.³

However, should this idea of ‘success’ be the reference point in the context of an explicitly decolonial project such as *The Collaborative Museum*?⁴ As with older established areas of museum practice, such as education, outreach, or conservation, the digital⁵ sphere is deeply entangled with the legacies of narratives and power relations connected to the collections that museums hold. This issue is particularly complex in the case of the two museums in which the Collaborative Museum originated as a large-scale project: the Ethnologisches Museum, and the Museum für Asiatische Kunst. Both are European public institutions that store and display non-European objects and knowledge. This framing presents a challenge not only for the digital aspect of museum practice, but for every aspect.⁶

Moreover, digital technology has specific characteristics as a form of cultural technology that is embedded in everyday life (Parry 2007) and is used widely outside museum contexts, often enabling and reinforcing new forms of extractivism.⁷ For this reason, a deep reflection on digital practices is necessary when reconsidering their cross-sectional implications in decolonial approaches.

From its inception, therefore, the digital strategy of the Collaborative Museum has been shaped by tensions between what is necessary in decolonial settings, what is pre-

3 An illustrative case can be found in the self-description of the digital strategy of the Städel Museum: <https://www.staedelmuseum.de/en/digital/digital-strategy>.

4 The central aim of *The Collaborative Museum* is ‘to develop multi-perspective approaches to collection-based research and to test new formats for collaborative processes in order to sustainably intensify the decolonization and diversification of museum practice’: <https://comuse.org/en>.

5 Here, I use the term ‘digital’ to refer to all kinds of digital formats and processes related to digitization, digital outreach and the curation of digital media and technologies within museum practice. All these perspectives correspond to the scope of the digital in museum practice as defined by the Deutscher Museumsbund: <https://www.museumsbund.de/themen/digitale-themen-im-museum>.

6 See the statement by the Ethnologisches Museum on confronting its colonial history and the implications for current museum practices: <https://www.smb.museum/en/museums-institutions/ethnologisches-museum/collection-research/colonialism>, as well as the statement by the Museum für Asiatische Kunst: <https://www.smb.museum/museen-einrichtungen/museum-fuer-asiatische-kunst/ueber-uns/kolonialismus>.

7 Philosopher Remedios Zafra reflects on a form of extractivist self-exploitation that is characteristic of precarious creative labour. She describes a new culture of immaterial work, marked by people isolated in front of screens while connected over the internet (Zafra 2021).

sented as imperative in highly digitalized societies and what is feasible within a narrow context of implementation. Several assumptions need to be questioned, beginning with the need for a digital strategy at all, and continuing with the methods by which it should be designed.

The guiding question at the start of this conceptual work was: How can we build a mindset capable of structuring and guiding (digital) efforts so that it responds meaningfully to the growing demands to decolonize exhibition practices and critically examine collection histories for looted art, colonial entanglements and systematic exclusions?

To address this question, the approach proposed here is that we look beyond the central fields of digital humanities and museum studies to draw instead on critical thinkers and practitioners who understand the decolonial beyond the museum, the digital beyond the screen, sustainability beyond climate concerns. Taking this broader view helps to clarify the motivations and reasoning that led to the current mission statement of the digital strategy for the Collaborative Museum, as well as its implementation plan and its limitations, which are presented below.⁸

Situating a Digital Strategy for the Collaborative Museum

Unlike other digital strategies, that developed for the Collaborative Museum does not aim at a profound digital transformation of the two museums involved, the Ethnologisches Museum and the Museum für Asiatische Kunst, as cultural institutions and museums.⁹ Nor is it a digitization strategy in the narrow sense of producing digital copies of analogue objects or transferring older media content to new digital formats.¹⁰ However, if fully implemented as conceived, the actions outlined in this strategy will encourage institutional transformation and support access to collections through digitization. I view these changes as side effects of a shift in focus driven by other motivations.

The digital strategy serves instead as a framework for structuring, guiding and sustaining future contributions to the digital sphere as part of the reimagined museum

8 While not central to the scope of this article, significant initiatives relevant to the decolonization of exhibition and collection practices are being undertaken by the international network Global Indigenous Data Alliance: <https://www.gida-global.org>, as well as by several digital repatriation working groups, including the Passamaquoddy People: <https://passamaquoddypeople.com/digital-heritage>, and Te Mana Raraunga: <https://www.temanararaunga.maori.nz>.

9 This task has been developed not only for both museums, but also for other institutions of the Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz by the Digitale Transformationen team since at least 2018. It is also the aim of the published digital strategy of the Jüdisches Museum Berlin for the years 2023-2025: https://www.jmberlin.de/sites/default/files/media/documents/jmb_digitalstrategie.pdf.

10 This work is primarily being carried out by the department of Musikethnologie, Medien-Technik und Berliner Phonogramm-Archiv. See Mengel 2023: 76–78.

practice of the Collaborative Museum. Its central motivation is to use current digital technologies and media in ways that support fairer museum practices¹¹ that are still achievable under current conditions. A key goal is to strengthen long-term, sustainable shifts in institutional attitudes, driven primarily by collaborations with international partners across multiple disciplines. These collaborations take the form of technological services and curatorial work involving digital technologies and media, as explained later.

Before outlining the digital strategy in detail, it is important to reflect on several concepts that underpin the thinking behind the terms used below. By doing so, I hope to activate the reader's capacity to connect with these ideas.

Micropolitics and Cosmopolitics

A crucial step in developing the digital strategy for the Collaborative Museum was to bring Suely Rolnik's concept of *micropolitics* (Rolnik 2019)¹² into the dialogue with Isabelle Stengers' concept of *cosmopolitics*.¹³ Both ideas have significantly shaped my work over recent years at the Ethnologisches Museum and the Museum für Asiatische Kunst. Both criticize the dominant and colonial logic of Western modernity, but at complementary levels. Both are therefore essential to any self-critical practice.

For Suely Rolnik, decolonial work takes place within us. She argues that capitalism operates hand in hand with colonialism and extends far beyond the economic sphere. It works intrinsically and inseparably within culture and subjectivity and possesses 'perverse powers, subtler and more difficult to combat'.¹⁴ Rolnik calls for the 'decolonization of the unconscious', urging us to confront internalized logics of oppression by opening ourselves up to other ways of sensing, knowing and relating. She advocates engaging in *micropolitics*, an ongoing multiplicity of revolutionary micro-political processes that arise both from individual subjectivity and from 'temporary communities aspiring to act in that direction [to reappropriate vital forces] in the construction of the commons' (Rolnik 2019:15).

In her vision of *cosmopolitics*, Isabelle Stengers challenges the scientific and epistemic imperialism that reduces the plurality of worlds and knowledges to a single universal framework. Her primary concern is to explore how diverse forms of knowledge – scientific, Indigenous, experimental and spiritual – can coexist without domination. To

11 These initiatives exemplify practices aligned with the CARE Principles, as articulated by the Global Indigenous Data Alliance: <https://www.gida-global.org/gidacarebrief>.

12 At the end of this book, Rolnik offers ten suggestions for those who wish to decolonize their unconscious (Rolnik 2019:175–178).

13 Stengers proposes our participation in multiple, irreducible worlds at the level not only of knowledge and concepts (epistemological pluralism), but also of being (ontological pluralism). Stengers 2010:vii.

14 Rolnik illustrates how 'forces and forms' of life operate by describing the performative artwork *Caminhando*, created with a Moebius band by Brazilian artist Lygia Clark (Rolnik 2019:35ff).

achieve this, she calls for a practice of listening and attentiveness to others, both human and non-human. Stengers advocates a kind of ontological pluralism in which knowledge emerges from encounters and embraces uncertainty, complexity and multiplicity.¹⁵ At the same time, she insists that decisions must be made in the presence of those who will bear their consequences.¹⁶

Bringing together Rolnik's micropolitics and Stengers' cosmopolitics highlights the extensive work required of us as individuals and as members of collaborative projects. These concepts form the intellectual foundation of the Collaborative Museum's digital strategy. They remind us that collaboration is always work in progress, an effort to be undertaken within ourselves and with others, while opening up our collective practices to ways of knowing and creating a reality that may be unfamiliar to us.

Digital Technologies and Digital Media

The terms *digital technologies* and *digital media* are closely related but refer to different concepts. Digital technologies are the complex systems of hardware and software that enable the processing, storage and transmission of information or, more accurately, knowledge. They are, in a sense, to the digital realm what architecture is to a building. In digital technologies, specific functions and purposes are deliberately designed, just as an architect envisions and plans spaces to serve as a shop, an opera house or a restroom. In this way, digital technologies can be understood as cultural technologies: they are shaped by the human practices, biases and social structures within which they are created (Alsaleh 2024).

Consequently, the way digital technologies are designed, implemented and used reflect social values, economic interests and political contexts. From a mainstream perspective, this is not necessarily good news. Philosopher Paul Preciado treats contemporary digital technologies, particularly smartphones, as examples of technologies created 'within systems of patriarchy, colonialism, and capitalism, meaning they perpetuate exclusionary narratives and hierarchies' (Preciado 2022:60ff). Yet, while Preciado sees these technologies as inherently laden with such power structures, I partly disagree: they are capable of carrying non-exclusionary narratives if they are intentionally designed for that purpose.¹⁷

15 Stengers defies strict boundaries between causes and effects, or between conditions and events, creating instead multiple 'universes of value'. She further argues that there are no causes or conditions acting from the outside, as these conditions are themselves immanent values—ingredients acting within specific events—which acquaint us with a logic of qualitative multiplicity (Stengers 2010:194).

16 Stengers speaks of 'symbiotic agreements' to describe events in which different modes of existence stabilize one another. These agreements concern ethical practices of knowledge and decision-making, calling for responsibility in which our actions actively participate in the struggles and challenges of the modes of existence with which we engage (Stengers 2010:35).

17 A noteworthy point of reference for best practice is the *Loulu app*, a freely available game designed to heighten players' awareness of toxic discourses through participation in an interactive fiction framed

Digital media, on the other hand, refers primarily to the formats in which information (or knowledge) is stored and distributed, whether high-resolution images, digitized historical documents, videos or audio files. If digital technologies are comparable to the building's architecture, then digital media are like the materials – wooden floors, concrete walls, etc. – from which the building is made. Digital media thus serve as carriers that hold, and thereby shape, specific forms of knowledge production. However, the impact of digital media is inseparable from the technological infrastructure that supports it. In this sense, digital media form a constitutive part of digital technologies.

From a user's perspective, just as architecture and building materials are experienced together in a space, digital technologies and digital media are deeply intertwined from the moment an idea becomes a project. Meaning emerges only when the two interact, that is, when digital technology and media come together in an application or platform.

This raises the critical question: how can we avoid reproducing, or at least minimizing, the power imbalances and exclusionary narratives embedded in digital systems while working with digital technologies and media?¹⁸

Cosmotronics and Conviviality

One inspiring approach to the question posed above is to understand technology – including digital technology – as Yuk Hui does with his concept of *cosmotronics*.¹⁹ Hui defines *cosmotronics* as how cultures integrate their understanding of the cosmos into the technical and moral systems they create. He urges us to reject the monolithic view

within an Instagram-like platform: <https://www.hau4.de/en/onlinetheaterlive-loulou>. In a similar sense, the digital application '*Speaking the Truth: Indigenous Perspectives on Jacobsen's Travelogue*', first released during the second opening of the Ethnologisches Museum in 2022, was specifically designed to provide a counter-narrative to the greed and arrogance of 19th-century European museum collecting. It responds to Johan Adrian Jacobsen's 1884 travel report, published as an accompanying volume to newly acquired objects from the Northwest Coast of North America. A simplified version of the application is available here: https://storage.smb.museum/qr/hf/modul19/Jacobsen_EN.pdf. The German version is available here: https://storage.smb.museum/qr/hf/modul19/Jacobsen_DE.pdf.

18 The persistence of these power imbalances is reflected in digital projects such as Digital Benin, whose primary aim is to provide access to collections of objects and knowledge held in Western museums to communities of origin. The project seeks to foster 'an inclusive exploration as part of decolonizing practices in digital heritage'. Initiated by the MARKK in Hamburg and focused on the well-known bronze sculptures looted from Benin City during the Kingdom of Edo, Digital Benin will be transferred to a main host in Nigeria with the aim of 'fostering further research, especially for Nigerian scholars, who are presently disadvantaged by the difficulties in accessing research materials and sources held in European and American museums and archives' (Luther 2022). I understand this (re)placement of hosting as a structural issue in international collaborations with communities of origin.

19 Hui states: 'Scientific and technical thinking emerges under cosmological conditions that are expressed in the relations between humans and their milieu, which are never static. For this reason, I would like to call this conception of technics *cosmotronics*.' (Hui 2016:18).

of technological development as a single universal trajectory and instead to decolonize our perception of technology.²⁰ Hui calls for recognition of multiple technological traditions that exist beyond Western frameworks, each rooted in different ways of imagining the relationship between humans, nature and the cosmos.

A second valuable reference is Ivan Illich's idea of conviviality, which can be applied in the context of the Collaborative Museum to how we perceive digital tools. In *Tools for Conviviality* (Illich 1973), Illich defines conviviality as the ability of individuals and communities to use tools in ways that foster autonomy, creativity and social well-being. In this sense, digital technologies can serve human freedom and mutual support. As Illich writes:

Convivial tools are those which give each person who uses them the greatest opportunity to enrich the environment with the fruits of his or her vision. (ibid. 1973:31)

Reading Hui's concept of cosmotechnics alongside Illich's notion of convivial tools helped shift the focus during the development of the digital strategy. It highlights the need to diversify conventional ways of thinking and using digital technologies and media. The digital strategy's task, therefore, is to create practical yet inspiring tools that foster relationships between humans, objects, nature and the cosmos, relationships that may remain unfamiliar to us as European collaborators educated in Western institutions.²¹

Thinking the Digital Within the Collaborative Museum

If there is one thing that rightfully belongs to anthropology, it is not the task of explaining the world of others, but that of multiplying our world, 'populating it with all those expressions that do not exist outside its expressions'. Because we cannot think *like* the Indians; at most, we can think *with* them. (de Castro 2010:211)

²⁰ Hui revisits various histories and philosophies of technology with the aim of decolonizing the minds of philosophers, engineers, architects and designers as a precondition for decolonial design to occur (Hui 2016:269).

²¹ I understand the term *relationships* in an extended, yet related sense to the term 'Cultural Belongings' as formulated by the Global Cultural Assembly in their statement during the opening gathering of the Ethnologisches Museum and the Museum für Asiatische Kunst in 2022: 'They [Cultural Belongings] convey relations between people, localities, cultural and artistic practices, relating to the past, and the present and the future': <https://www.humboldtforum.org/en/dignity-continuity-transparency>.

The permanent exhibitions of the Ethnologisches Museum and the Museum für Asiatische Kunst at the Humboldt Forum were partially opened in 2021 and finally opened in 2022, following around seven years of intensive digital-related work. Most of these efforts focused on producing digital media and infrastructures to contextualize the displayed objects and create access points for visitors' journeys through both museums. The primary aim was to provide diverse perspectives and narratives about the objects to a broad audience (Probst and Rostásy 2016).

With the launch of the Collaborative Museum in 2023, the focus of digital work gradually shifted. Collaboration, as defined in the first memorandum,²² emerged as a guiding principle across all areas of museum practice. Consequently, the production of digital media for the exhibition spaces took on new emphasis. For example, before the Collaborative Museum, the purpose of a media station about Lienzo Coixtlahuaca II²³ was to explain what a *lienzo* is, when and where it was created, how and when it came to Berlin, how to interpret it iconographically, and how to contextualize the place and Indigenous community of Coixtlahuaca.

From 2023 on, with collaboration as the guiding principle, the digital task regarding the same exhibit shifted to documenting, through audio-visual means, the collaborative process of knowledge exchange with representatives of the communities involved. These discussions addressed key questions such as whether the Lienzo should be restored, and if so, how. Video documentation of collaborative research and artistic approaches, produced by and with fellows of the Residency Programme, and of interventions in displayed exhibits and collection visits concerning knowledge exchange and/or restitution processes, has since become an essential line of work.²⁴

In the same spirit of collaboration, digital infrastructures and workflows, as well as digital access to non-displayed objects and their associated database information, have become central tools for enabling cooperation. An example is the initial digital contribution to the collaborative project *Talking Mats: Interwoven Stories – Connecting Peoples*.²⁵ This took the form of an interactive pdf file,²⁶ a technologically accessible format developed as a working tool for an interdisciplinary workshop in Lamu (Kenya)

22 The memorandum, written prior to the official launch of the Collaborative Museum, was formulated by Lars-Christian Koch and remains unpublished.

23 Also referred to as 'Lienzo Seler II' (Ident. Nr. IV Ca 46178). Basic information from the museum database is accessible here: <https://id.smb.museum/object/107917/lienzo-seler-ii>, accessed October 23, 2025.

24 Most of the video documentation will be available online in the coming weeks on the website of the Collaborative Museum: <https://comuse.org/en>, accessed October 23, 2025.

25 See the article by Bokop, Sophia / Hassan, Mohamed / Ivanov, Paola / Mahazi, Jasmin / Mwenje, Mohamed / Omar, Munira Mohammed / Perrot, Myriam in this volume.

26 The interactive PDF file is available for download: https://comuse.org/fileadmin/user_upload/Ext_Daten/Talking_Mats_Mikekas-Berlin.pdf, accessed October 23, 2025. The first version used during the September 2024 workshop did not include the option to listen to the poems inscribed on eight of the twelve mats.

in September 2024. The pdf compiled and translated German information into English from the museum database, providing access to twelve mats made in Lamu that were previously only available to museum staff. The database information was further enriched with transcriptions and translations of poems in Kiswahili found on some of the mats, as well as findings from provenance research and key details about the collaborative framework.

The decision to use an interactive pdf was based on the assumption that, despite participants' diverse backgrounds and disciplines, all would have a smartphone capable of opening pdf files.²⁷ The built-in comment function of the pdf made it easy for participants to leave specific feedback or add personal notes. Making the pdf interactive was crucial for navigating a large volume of complex content in a user-friendly way.²⁸

In summary, within the Collaborative Museum, the digital serves as both an enabler and an amplifier of collaborative processes. It encompasses technological infrastructure as well as curatorial work involving digital technologies and media.

Importantly, by applying the lessons of Rolnik's micropolitics and Stengers' cosmopolitics, and by envisioning digital outcomes that reflect Hui's cosmotechnics and Illich's convivial tools, the Ethnologisches Museum and the Museum für Asiatische Kunst are not positioned as the primary beneficiaries of this work. Instead, the principal beneficiaries are the collaborative partners: those whose knowledge is embodied in, and connected to, the objects held in the museums' collections.²⁹

The central aim of the Collaborative Museum's digital strategy is therefore to narrow the distance between what is held *here*, in the museum's collections and databases, and *there*, in the places and communities to which these objects and forms of knowledge belong. To echo the words of Donna J. Haraway about the task of individuals in the Anthropocene, the digital strategy will be successful if it can 'reciprocally cultivate, in every conceivable way, future epochs that can restore refugia'.³⁰

Basic Principles: Designing Access and Circulation

The world has always been equivalent to our knowledge of it, and the moment we change the principles on which our knowledge is based, reality also changes. (Graeber 2019:70)

27 This assumption was based on first-hand observations by project team members who lived in Lamu or have family there. During the workshop, the URL of the interactive PDF file was made accessible via a QR code.

28 For a broader yet targeted perspective on the changes and challenges of user-friendly or human-centred design, see IDEO.ORG 2015.

29 However, I strongly believe that, in a globally connected world, fostering the capacities of partners within their own frameworks indirectly benefits the knowledge and perspectives held by the museum.

30 Haraway refers to her own task as making the Anthropocene as short or narrow as possible (Haraway 2016:155).

Grounded in the conceptual framework outlined so far, I propose two basic principles for structuring a range of actions and projects within the implementation plan for the Collaborative Museum's digital strategy. These principles form the core of the proposed mission statement and are referred to as the *designing access* and *circulation* principles.

Designing access means much more than simply making objects and database information available.³¹ The emphasis on *designing* highlights the collaborative process of working together, of forming temporary communities with international partners (Rolnik) to determine what knowledge it is most urgent to access, in what forms (Strengers) and how to shape that access in relation to partners' infrastructural conditions and cosmotechnics (Hui). In practice, this involves exploring and adapting digital technologies and tools, often developed in Western contexts, so that they can become convivial tools (Illich) in environments that may be partially or completely unfamiliar.

The need to move from *making accessible* to *designing access* became evident during the first conceptual draft of a digital application for the collaborative exhibition following the milestone workshop on *Talking Mats: Interwoven Stories – Connecting Peoples*. The initial draft reflected a common museum mindset, placing the mats, old and fragile collection objects, at the centre as the most valuable elements for the digital outreach to make them and the knowledge surrounding them digitally accessible. However, as discussions with project team members who prepared and participated in the workshop made clear, this draft failed to reflect the central aims and messages of the collaborative project.

Listening attentively and becoming more familiar with the cosmotechnics associated with the mats led to a radical shift in the concept and the main message of the digital application. The mats were understood primarily as material carriers of traditional weaving and plaiting techniques, rather than as auratic objects. These techniques were themselves valued as expressions of matrifocal Swahili coastal culture, grounded in a call-and-response oral tradition (Mahazi 2024).

The next draft therefore focused on transmitting knowledge of the milestone workshop orally through a dramaturgically structured scrollytelling format in which a response followed every contribution, and each response led to the next. The contributions, mostly sung or recited poems, were kept in Kiswahili and aimed, both individually and collectively, to evoke the performance of Swahili coastal knowledge rather than explain it.³²

The second principle, the *circulation principle*,³³ involves making the most of what already exists by re-using digital media and technologies that are (or were) part of the museum's framework. This approach values adaptation as a creative force to minimize

31 I consider enabling online access to the museum's database to be a prerequisite for collaboration, not an endpoint.

32 In doing so, I aimed to translate into digital form Mahazi's intention 'to facilitate the co-creation of new sites of knowledge that incorporate dialogue across epistemologies and traditions' (Mahazi 2024:9).

33 My main inspirations for circular principles are ecofeminism and the circular economy, both of

resource-use and increase sustainability. The aim is to recontextualize recent digital work, adapting it to new needs and ensuring it continues to serve relevant purposes.

A first example of the circulation principle, hopefully implemented before this article is published, involves extending and technically adapting the augmented reality application *A Collection: Many Perspectives*.³⁴ This application was initially developed to digitally extend three key objects displayed in the section of the Humboldt Forum dedicated to ethnological collections from the northwest coast of North America. It offers three virtual windows providing access to Indigenous voices about the objects' roles and meanings within their First-Nation communities,³⁵ along with information on their features and histories. Initially, the application was designed for use within the exhibition space through devices provided by the museum.

The digital team of the Collaborative Museum is currently working with a design and innovation studio to make the augmented reality application accessible off site, for example, at the heritage sites or educational institutions of the First-Nation communities to which these objects belong. The proposed solution involves placing a life-size 3D digital scan of each object as a trigger for the augmented experience³⁶ and adapting the existing navigation and code to meet the technical requirements of distribution platforms such as the Play Store and App Store. Conversations with representatives of the First Nations to agree on whether and how to shape this initiative are about to begin.

As described above, the successful implementation of both principles — *designing access* and *circulation* — depends on profound acts of listening and attentiveness (Stengers). This involves questioning which aspects of our own subjectivities, especially as members of collaborative teams, may have blind spots regarding structural power imbalances. As the Bolivian feminist activist and thinker María Galindo warns:

Patriarchal capitalism is able to offer women's rights, colonial capitalism is able to offer Indigenous rights, heterosexist capitalism is able to offer LGBT rights, predatory capitalism is able to talk about environmental protection, the capitalism of the healthy, strong, white man is able to offer rights for the so-called disabled, without altering a single one of its power structures. That is what I am talking about, the idiocy of believing them, the idiocy of playing their game, the idiocy of adopting their language to talk about oneself. (Galindo 2021:93–94)

which are closely interconnected with social justice in the work of the Spanish anthropologist, environmental engineer and ecofeminist activist Yayo Herrero (Herrero 2022).

34 This digital application was first released during the second opening of the Ethnologisches Museum in September 2022.

35 The collection objects featured are a Chief's Seat belonging to the Heiltsuk First Nation (Ident.-Nr. IV A 2475: <https://id.smb.museum/object/819688>), a copper plate belonging to the Haida First Nation (Ident.-Nr. IV A 988: <https://id.smb.museum/object/1306884>), and a Hamatza-Mask belonging to the Kwakwaka'wakw First Nation (Ident.-Nr. IV A 1330).

36 The AR Foundation will be used in the current implementation plan to adapt the existing application developed in unity for placing 3D digital scans of the three exhibits.

These words by Galindo resonate especially strongly now, as we await the next iteration of the digital outcome of the *Talking Mats* project. This iteration aims to provide global access to the scrollytelling developed for the Lamu exhibition. All Berlin-based project team members are eager to observe on-site and listen to the feedback from the Lamu-based team members once they have the devices in hand and installed in the exhibition. The next crucial step before implementing the globally accessible version will be to clarify what, when and how to modify the application to reach the audiences that should be prioritized and to test what is feasible in practice.

Practice First: Towards an Implementation Plan

The digital strategy of the Collaborative Museum identifies two main areas of implementation. The first is strengthening the museum's existing online channels, primarily the website of the Collaborative Museum. Besides serving as a general access point to the projects, the website will function as a key implementation area for the digital strategy. It is intended to become the platform for globally circulating digital media that is currently only accessible in Berlin. This includes a substantial body of digital projects produced for the permanent exhibitions of the Ethnologisches Museum and the Museum für Asiatische Kunst, which are currently displayed exclusively in the exhibition rooms of the Humboldt Forum. Examples include video productions such as the multichannel installation on the ongoing restitution process of the Benin bronzes, 'Voices from Nigeria and Europa', as well as digital games like 'Do you want to build a *drua* with us?', which introduces children to the main components and construction process of a Fijian double-hulled boat.

The second main area of implementation focuses on the development of specific collaborative projects. This involves designing and circulating digital technologies tailored to the objectives of each project. While the requirements vary from case to case, these solutions generally involve the use of so-called 'low-tech' tools.³⁷ Prioritizing low-tech approaches is not only desirable, because it enables the museum to undertake as many tasks as possible with its internal resources,³⁸ but also necessary when working in contexts with limited digital infrastructures.

37 For the purposes of this article, I interpret 'low-tech' in contrast to 'high-tech'. The former refers to technologies and devices that are simple, relatively inexpensive and widely accessible. For example, developing digital access through a PDF file that can be downloaded to commonly available smartphones constitutes a low-tech approach. Conversely, the creation of a virtual reality application within a three-dimensional digital environment, requiring a high-performance computer and a virtual reality headset, exemplifies a high-tech approach.

38 That is, designing and implementing digital projects that can be realized using the existing skills of current museum staff.

Further areas of implementation include improving digitization processes,³⁹ supporting the Fellowship programme with one digital residency per year,⁴⁰ testing and evaluating digital pilot projects with international partners, and conducting a series of internal workshops to review working dynamics and outcomes.⁴¹

In a future development phase of the digital strategy, after evaluating the effectiveness of low-tech solutions and the website through various examples of use, I propose focusing on two additional areas that build on the fundamental principles of the strategy, *designing access* and *circulation*.

The first focus will be on exploring ways to dismantle, or at least reduce, existing language barriers, thereby extending access to collections and knowledges held in Berlin.⁴²

The second focus will investigate the potential of green IT solutions⁴³ in relation to the circulation principle.

Specifying the detailed objectives, measures, resources and timelines for each of the ongoing and planned components of the digital strategy is a key task for the implementation plan, but it lies beyond the scope of this article.

Final Remark: a Highly Nutritious Compost

Drawing on the work of the critical thinkers and practitioners mentioned throughout this article, as well as on the experiences gained so far from working at the intersection of non-European objects and knowledges, my goal is to create and implement digital technologies and media that build meaningful bridges to people and knowledge beyond the walls of the museum in Berlin.

Above all, I hope to contribute practical tools and infrastructures that address the immediate needs of the museum work with which I am directly involved. On a deeper

39 The plan includes testing artificial intelligence tools with specific segments of the collection, but only after training a person as an AI expert who already has extensive experience with the sensitive content and the ethical and legal implications of the collections held in the Ethnologisches Museum and the Museum für Asiatische Kunst.

40 The first of the fellows with a strong interest in producing a digital outcome from her research is Nhi Duong, who completed her residency between June and August 2025: <https://comuse.org/en/fellowship/nhi-duong>.

41 The first in this series of evaluation workshops will be the exchange session planned ahead of the next iteration of the 'Talking Mats' project, mentioned above, and scheduled for early October 2025.

42 The first action area I propose to prioritize will be expanding access to information in the museum database, which is currently only available in German. The languages to prioritize will depend on the main languages spoken by the communities connected to the respective convolutes of cultural belongings.

43 The two primary sources currently informing this area of implementation are the guidelines of the Deutscher Museumsbund: <https://www.museumsbund.de/green-it-green-durch-it-digitalisierung-und-nachhaltigkeit-im-museum>, and the publications of the Green Culture Anlaufstelle: <https://www.green-culture.info/wissen>, accessed October 23, 2025.

level, the long-term aim of the digital strategy is to leave behind a 'highly nutritious compost' (Haraway 2016:98) of know-how, tools, infrastructure and knowledge for future generations.

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