

Across the Past and Present of Engaging with Colonial Contexts in the Arts and in Cultural Institutions

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- 1 Over the summer of 2020, as statues were tagged and fell across North America and Europe, the question of how to deal with colonial legacy saturated media coverage, it became clear that we are as yet analytically ill-equipped to deal with the issues being brought up by different forms of public activism: the representations of and reparations requested in relation to the history of slavery, extractive colonial economics and the ideological constructions of racism. It is not the role of this review to examine why the summer of 2020 has emerged as milestone for a more widespread recognition of the need to address these questions with greater *rigueur* and public engagement, but what appeared for many as a surprisingly sudden rise in sentiment and concern cannot be tied to the circumstances of 2020, no matter how tragic and shocking these may have been. What the three books in review here have in common is to present us with different and important aspects of how counter- representations (and with them also revendications of a social and political nature) emerged, creating a visual, curatorial, artistic language that react to colonial forms of thought as embodied by practices of appropriation and representation. It is not a story of the summer of 2020 but one that goes back to anti-colonial strategies of the early 20th century, to the crisis of representation that has been ongoing in ethnographic museums since at least the 1980s and to forms of artistic practice which have been according to David Joselit's central thesis, *Heritage and Debt* a driving force in constituting "Global contemporary art" since at least the 1960s. As these issues, long at the heart of cultural theory in North America and Canada becomes more central to the policies of European cultural institutions, in particular ethnographic museums, the volumes under review here provide us with some key elements to understanding a phenomenon that is *in fine* questioning and reformulating the notion of heritage itself and its modes of accounting for the past – requesting forms of ambiguity and plurality of memory, qualities that are uniquely lacking in 19th century monuments to great men of the past¹. Fittingly all

three books are in a sense also collections, assemblages, juxtapositions, whether it be of different dioramas (Noémie Étienne), artworks (David Joselit) and points of view (Margareta von Oswald and Jonas Tinius) that are carried by a strong central argument – each formulating from a different angle, how specific artistic practices deal with the impact of colonial pasts on our current experience of the world.

- 2 Heritage studies and contemporary art have over the last decades engaged in an ever more-lively relationship with one another. Whilst on the surface, they appear to constitute and deal with separate spheres of production, these have in fact merged quite significantly. Indeed, heritage studies, as a field of enquiry that fully emerged in the 1980s, did initially focus on conservation practices and discourses related to historical monuments, recent examinations of heritage processes, be they in the past or in the present, are increasingly looking to production of images², and the analysis of representative strategies in order to gain a better understanding of how the past is/was reactivated (including through artistic practice) to stabilize dominant forms of identity formation but also and increasingly as a means of questioning these formations. Whilst the issue of nation building has been identified as a key force in the historical constitution of the heritage complex, in particular in the 19th century³, increasingly contemporary heritage construction are examined through what has been termed as “critical heritage studies”, mainly driven by academics working in former settler colonies (Canada, Australia, North America) focusing on heritage constructions principally as mechanisms of domination in particular in relation to the representational demands of minorities.
- 3 In different and complementary ways, the books reviewed here question the nature of the relationship between contemporary creation and the construction and transmission of representations relating to the *fait colonial*, past and present, from different disciplinary and institutional points of departure. However, the forms and strategies of heritage building related to artistic practice that appear here, are present at all levels of social construction, inherently active as a kind of resource in constant negotiation – it is neither the top-down story of a group that creates heritage for all, nor is it a tale of open resistance.
- 4 Both Noémie Etienne’s and David Joselit’s work are grounded in a North America approach to visual studies and analyze “images” produced to represent but also to contest what heritage might be. The elegant and solidly documented essay by art historian and specialist of collection and restoration history, Noémie Etienne is anchored in the author’s expertise on heritage making processes in Early Modern Europe⁴, and in the detailed reading of the museum archive, as she focuses here on a very different terrain: the diorama installations created by the German anthropologist Franz Boas and his successor Clark Wissler in Natural History Museum of New York and those produced under the supervision of the anthropologist of Iroquois-Seneca origins, Arthur Caswell Parker. Largely condemned as inauthentic, outdated and essentializing mechanisms of cultural representation, in Etienne’s work, *Les Autres et les ancêtres : les dioramas de Franz Boas et d’Arthur C. Parker à New York, 1900*, the image of the diorama is literally taken apart and examined through the variety of material processes (casts, modeling, painting, taxidermy) that its production implicates, to gain a better understanding of the complexity of the display of First Nations in the early 20th century. It is a cultural history with a very unclear dividing line between the representation of the self and the other; by carefully examining the dioramas as a

medium in their own right with a complex genealogy, she sidesteps the many negative associations of historical diorama and also considers their efficiency as a form of communication and their emancipatory and identity building use in the case of Albany as mediators between two worlds. In particular she examines how Parker's approach uses the notion of "authenticity through contact" to question the Western notion of heritage as related to the essentialized production of traditional cultures, untouched by modernity, and to allow for the representation of the future of First Nations through their contemporary productions. A point of interest is how her work takes into account the particular role that different producers, in particularly artists have continuously played, in the elaboration of museum diorama installations in North America since the beginning of the 20th century⁵. She shows how artists, far from being merely indispensable intermediaries, have largely co-invented scholarly representations and concludes with the analysis of the contemporary productions (i.e. p. 284, *The National Great Blacks in Wax Museum*) that clearly offer examples of how the diorama has been appropriated in order to provide effective counter narratives to dominant notions of identity⁶.

- 5 David Joselit's work, also considers the troubling of the boundaries between the realms of heritage and contemporary/global art, from a perspective that is grounded in a North American school of visual studies but that clearly leads out from the field of art history and global economics as he looks in particular at how "the Eurocentric presumption that heritage is dormant and safely sealed in the past" (p. xviii) has been placed into question by Native and post-colonial thinkers and artists since the 1960s. The carefully curated selection of works that he examines as "global art", products of the "three worlds" of Cold War geopolitics, use "traditional references" as a living resource, that has in the last half a century been offering forms of "reactivation" and demonstrating "art's potential to redress cultural dispossession through the revaluation of forms of knowledge hitherto marginalized in the West" (p. xix). The history of "Western modernism's cultural dispossession of the Global South" (p. xvii) that Joselit refers to has led artists to address this situation of an extremely unevenly distributed resource, through the reinvention, reactivation of heritage to a variety of ends, the main being to negotiate the "rest" of the world's debt to Western modernity. This is one of the processes that he sets out to analyze by establishing the terms of a complex global equation between heritage and debt, where the latter is defined as an extra-territorial form of control and where the workings of the art world tend to obscure the vast asymmetries of power that govern a global post-colonial and post-socialist world. In the third chapter entitled "Contested Properties" he shows how artists have appropriated the "readymade strategy" to demonstrate how a single object may "simultaneously occupy diverse frames of references", thus allowing simultaneously for the reclaiming or the challenging of specific instances of dispossession by another cultural group but also for the integration of cultural elements from that same group to challenge their status as "other" or foreign. This allows certain forms of artistic practice to play very different and indeed perhaps seemingly antithetical roles, a situation perhaps most clearly demonstrated in his discussion of Australian Aboriginal paintings in acrylic (p. 98-114). By moving away from bark and adopting a medium, that commands greater respect in a Western hierarchy of the arts, this production contributed to reversing the process by which their traditional practices could be appropriated. By combining both Western and

indigenous practices, this group of artists formed an effective strategy for furthering other revendications, including land requests and a better political representation.

- 6 Margareta von Oswald and Jonas Tinius are both social anthropologists whose fieldwork has been focused on Berlin's cultural institutions and their most recent transformations, in particular the establishment of the Humboldt Forum, as the recreation of a former Prussian castle, which is set to house Berlin's main collection of Extra-European objects. The reaction to this highly controversial state project has clearly shown that there was an initially unanswered desire for this institution to embody a new set of relations by reconsidering the contexts of origins of their collections and those members of the source community and diaspora in Berlin that might identify with them.
- 7 The diversity of actors contributing to this debate serve as the backdrop initially for the editor's reflexive approach, as they consider how anthropology as a discipline is currently confronting its own colonial "legacies". Though anthropology as a discipline has long sought to reinvent itself through a rigorous critique of its own colonial roots, these roots are also being increasingly questioned from outside and indeed "across anthropology" causing the discipline to be extended, infiltrated, borrowed but also side-stepped by those actors in exhibition practices that have played a key role in exploring these questions in the last two decades. By opening the debate up to a European perspective, with contributions related to the French, Belgium, Dutch and Italian contexts, this anthology offers a well-balanced set of statements, interviews and experiences that allow for different practices to resonate and establish common terrains of concern and enquiry. The editors have proposed a rich selection of points of view that neatly embody one of the key requests for a revision of the colonial past: that its narrative be formulated through new forms of pluri-vocality, that "trouble", and thus avoid the smoothing effect of the singular institutional voice.

NOTES

1. Young, James E. "Memory/Monument", *Critical Terms for Art History*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003, p. 234–49. Ed. Richard Shiff and Robert S. Nelson
2. Troelenberg, Eva-Maria. Savino, Melania. *Images of the Art Museum: Connecting Gaze and Discourse in the History of Museology*, Berlin: de Gruyter, 2017
3. Poulot, Dominique. *Musée, nation, patrimoine: 1789-1815*, vol. 1, Paris: Gallimard, 1997 (Bibliothèque des histoires); Swenson, Astrid. *The Rise of Heritage: Preserving the Past in France, Germany and England, 1789-1914*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013
4. Etienne, Noémie. Natale, Mauro. Poulot, Dominique. "La restauration des peintures à Paris, 1750-1815: pratiques et discours sur la matérialité des œuvres d'art", Rennes: PUR, 2012; Noémie Etienne et al., *Exotic Switzerland?: Looking Outward in the Age of Enlightenment*, Paris: Diaphanes, 2020
5. The role of diorama's in contemporary practice was also largely developed in the exhibition and the accompanying catalogue, *Dioramas*, at the Palais de Tokyo from the 14.06.2017 to the 10.09. 2017.

6. For a longer review of Noémie Etienne's book by Dominique Poulot, see *Cultures et Musées*, no. 36, to appear in November 2020.

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Felicity Bodenstein is an art historian specialising in the history of museums and collections. Since 2019, she is a lecturer at Sorbonne Université in Contemporary art history and Heritage history. She defended her thesis in 2015 at Université Paris-Sorbonne on *L'Histoire du Cabinet des médailles et antiques de la Bibliothèque nationale (1819-1924)* [The History of the Cabinet of Medals and Antiquities at the Bibliothèque Nationale (1819-1924)]. Since 2015, she has been working on the case of the spoils stolen in Benin City (now Nigeria) in 1897. This project, supported by postdoctoral fellowships at the Max Planck Institute, the Quai Branly museum and the Technische Universität in Berlin, attempts to retrace the history of the objects' dispersal and to understand how their memory is articulated in Benin City. Since April 2020, she co-manages the Digital Benin project, based at the Ethnographic Museum in Hamburg, which aims to create a digital platform in order to gather information on the dispersed royal collection.