

The Ethnographic Museum: connectedness and entanglements

Anna Schmid

In the last decades until today the ethnographic museum, its preconditions, assumptions, historical entanglements, its intentions, purposes, image as well as its practices and altered societal circumstances were controversially discussed in monographs, anthologies, forums, blogs, feuilletons, at conferences and symposiums. As a specific institution the ethnographic museum struggles unabatedly with questions of representations, Othering, asymmetric power relations to name but a few.

How to get to terms with the wide array of disparate collections? Is it or was it ever adequate to mould objects into representations of others? How to handle objects acquired under difficult or even disputed circumstances? How to take into account the history of the institution as well as the history of the collections? What does this institution stand for today? How to transform this mostly nineteenth century institution into relevant spaces in a global post-colonial world? How could ethnographical museums become meaningful (again) today? Ethnographies of museums have given us many insights into implications of museal practices and productions. A strong and encouraging statement for the ethnographic museum was made by the art historian Kavita Singh (2013), when she stated her astonishment about the muddle around this institution and declared the “Future of the museum is ethnographic”. She even predicted that the “ethnographic mode will soon underlie all major museal and exhibitory forms” (2013, p. 3). Kavita Singh detects

four specific features of the ethnographic museum which might be helpful in analysing other museum genres:

1. collecting practices and use of collections as “metonyms for savagery and primitivism” (ivi, p. 4);

2. presentation of collections as simulations, thus reinforcing differences, but also attesting to contexts (“invisible dioramas”, 2013, p. 12);

3. questions about “contradictions of the circulation and re-designation” (2013, p. 17) of artefacts turned art piece as well as challenging the categories art/artefact;

4. ethnographic museums finally profess to a relativist world-view thus distancing themselves from purely scientific and rational treatment of subjects and eventually “Enlightenment begins to appear as an ethnic particular” (2013, p. 25). Against the background of the enormous boom of new museums all over the world these features might become ever more relevant to grasp the enduring glocalisation.

Instead of repeating the reasoning and rationale in the aforementioned debates, a statement by the German philosopher Bernhard Waldenfels (1990), who published widely on perceptions of “the stranger”, Other and Othering, defines one of the most important contributions of the ethnographic museum to contemporary society: “The multitude of forms of living and world view, which is constantly growing upon us, demands open and transparent institutions in which order is – above all – created and changed, and not only preserved and secured” (the original reads: “Die Vielzahl von Lebens- und Anschauungsformen, die sich uns mehr und mehr aufdrängt, verlangt nach offenen und durchlässigen Institutionen, in denen Ordnungen gestiftet und verändert und nicht nur aufbewahrt und gesichert werden”). This should lead the ethnographic museum to accept the responsibility to develop new

regimes of ordering and seeing (instead of gazing) as well as to put connectedness and entanglements centre-stage, instead of trying to reproduce conventional classifications. Implicitly, prevailing categories to this day like nation, region, ethnic group or other essentialist suppositions have to be replaced by relational denominations guiding museal practices. To this



Figure 1 - Agency – How can you act? One section of the exhibition “EigenSinn”, 2011. (© MKB, Photographer Derek Li Wan Po)

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aim, the Museum of Cultures in Basel (Museum der Kulturen Basel, henceforth abbreviated: MKB) has chosen five topics which are relevant for all human beings – belonging, agency, space, knowledge, performance – but differ widely in everyday life around the globe. Along these topics, parts of the vast collections are reinterpreted in every new exhibition – in permanent as well as in temporary ones. Before providing visual and textual examples I will shortly introduce the MKB itself.

The MKB

In 1849 alongside with art works and historical artefacts, ethnographic collections were presented in the newly opened Basel Municipal Museum. At the end of the century a committee was established to manage the ethnographic collection. The first meeting of this committee in 1893 is the founding act and birth of the museum. In 1917 the ethnographic collection was relocated to a new building connected with and adjacent to the old museum. In 1996 the Museum of Ethnology was renamed into Museum of Cultures, MKB.

After three years of comprehensive renovation, refurbishment and enlargement, the MKB opened to the public in September 2011. Between reopening and today the museum put on 36 exhibitions, making full use of the four exhibition floors (3000 qm), its new orientation in terms of content and design as well as the rich collections. Two architectural specificities support the new orientation: except one, all galleries are equipped with at least one window, so that visitors can relate to the outside space; at two locations in the museum, galleries range over two or three floors thus providing completely different angles from which to look at exhibits, thus reinforcing the qualities of perspective.

New orientations – the exhibitions

The MKB declared several features as central to the work of the museum. In focusing on the cultural dimensions of lives and its significance for contemporary societies, the MKB works almost exclusively with its own collection of more than 330.000 objects from all parts of the world. Apart from donations the collection is carefully expanded with objects that

bear testimony of cultural encounters, carry signs of the encounters and make a significant contribution to an exhibition. Working with the collections means that objects are constantly (re-)questioned and reframed. Time and again the artefacts are examined and analysed for their multi-layered potentials. The fact that objects of the collections are by now historical means, that each artefact has to be connected to several timeframes – namely the timeframe of its production, use, getting collected and transferred to the museum, its functions in and out of the museum. Furthermore, the exhibitions of the MKB are topic-oriented, the region is no longer a supreme category. Each exhibition needs to be anchored in the *hic et nunc* (here and now), to relate its topics to current, contemporary “indigenous” (i.e. European) examples thus making it easier for the audience to reflect upon its own settings, circumstances, rootedness, and its connectedness to the topic itself (see Schmid, 2011, p. 15). This offers or might lead to insights into other possibilities than the given ones. It certainly reduces the dichotomic attitude “us/them”.

The museum is first and foremost a space of the visual and a visual experience. Hence the potentials of the object have to be *shown* (needless to state: without mystifying the object) instead of described, explained, narrated. Texts and speech are auxiliary devices. This has to be kept in mind while going through the six outlined exhibitions staged resp. on stage at the MKB between 2011 and today. The photographs might help in imagining the visual impact of the

exhibition, but – as we very well know – photographs will not convey the bodily, spatial, emotional and so forth experiences which a physical visit and presence in the exhibition evokes and induces.

1. *EigenSinn*

The first exhibitions at the re-opening in 2011 “EigenSinn” (Intrinsic Perspectives – Inspiring Aspects of Anthropology) stood for the new programmatic approach of the MKB, focusing on the key concepts belonging, agency, knowledge, performance, and space. It was dedicated to the questions: What are the foundations of a society? How do basic condi-



Figure 2 - A glimpse into the exhibition during the opening ceremony of “Suspended. On the lightness of Stone”, 2012. (© MKB, Photographer Derek Li Wan Po)

tions and interdependencies create commonalities and differences in human societies? What makes us special as individuals and as communities? The show turned the attention to the principles and opportunities that humans possess in shaping their way of life within existing systems and structures (see MKB, 2011).

Objects have intrinsic meaning informed by the conditions of their production and the contexts of their use. Objects play a key role in the way we shape and experience our mode of life. They are the product of human agency and a token of social relationships. Exploring the diverse aspects of objects allows to forge links between intrinsic meaning and interpretation, between history and current situations, and between the seemingly known and the unknown.

In acting, people draw on established practices, perceptions, and reasoning to assess how they can best achieve a goal. Agency refers to an individual's ability to act within existing structures.

The artefacts assembled on this table (Figure 1) show variations in agency – critique, subversive action or resistance. The lantern from the carnival in Basel from 1929 deals with a lawsuit concerning the charge of embezzlement. Opposite sits an nkisi-figure from the Democratic Republic of the Congo, apart from other functions these statues played a significant role in conflicts between the colonial power and local groups; in-between rests a spinning wheel from India, a constant companion of Mahatma Gandhi's civil disobedience and non-violent resistance.

Obviously, visitors could simply enjoy the objects or the arrangements. Equally obviously visitors could reflect about the potential meaning of the arrangement – independent of any curatorial intentions. Thus, the assemblage of these objects required interpretation from the viewers. The captions offered the curatorial interpretations. In any case, the viewing implied reflecting on the Self thus providing a key to decoding and influencing everyday actions. The other topics were similarly treated: at first glance incoherent, not easily consumable, certainly abstract; yet at second sight telling, eye-opening, astonishing and stimulating.

2. *Suspended – on the lightness of stone*

Since decades, artistic interventions as part of an exhibition or whole art exhibitions with ethnographic collections are common in ethnographic museums. This does certainly not replace anthropological practices, it rather complements them; occasionally artistic interventions allow for new perspectives in an all too familiar setting, into which the museums seems to have crystallized.

The artist Justin Fiske, Cape Town, and the MKB decided on a cooperation in presenting an exhibition at the architectural unusual top-floor gallery of the museum. Thousands of pebbles, many kilometres of thread, and connecting mechanic devises were the ingredients for the suspended installations surrounding selected objects from the MKB's collections. This combination transformed the gallery into an enchanted space of reflection on the cycle of life. The lightness and poetic

energy of the stone sculptures were intriguing. To connect these with the exceptional architecture and ethnographic objects provided visual answers to questions at hand: in the part of the exhibition under the headline "Storm" the pebble-stone installation floated in mid-air. By setting the pebbles in motion the harmonious balance was disrupted and the stones rose up to form mighty and gusty waves. Metaphorically the storm stood for conflicting emotions: bliss and suffering, safety and

confusion, sorrow, anger, joy. Two Balinese masks lent expression to the ongoing struggle between good and evil (see MKB, 2012).

The exciting dialogue between space, installations, and ethnographic objects allowed for alternate readings of the ethnographic objects which were re-contextualized through the artistic position. Apart from differences in knowledge production and emotional experiences the dialogue between two heterogeneous formats – art work and artefact; art and ethnography – resulted also in a quite different behaviour of the audience. Occasionally visitors occupied the space in unexpected ways: one insisted on setting the installations in motion (which was initially possible, but had to be stopped, to preserve the installation) to develop a special sense of the space; others begged for permission to lie on the floor to experience yet another perspective (Figure 2).



Figure 3 - The major device to mount the artefacts in "Make up – Shaped for Life?" was a scaffolding of a construction site, 2013. (© MKB, Photographer Derek Li Wan Po)

3. Make-up – Shaped for Life?

The term make-up is commonly used to refer to cosmetics of all kinds but, of course, it can also relate to the invention of something or the way something is constituted or composed. Both meanings are applicable to the field of body modification and it was in this sense that the exhibition was designed: it showed and discussed how the human body is shaped against different cultural backgrounds.

Concepts of the human body differ widely. Perceptions may vary from a gift bestowed on everybody, a thing taken for granted, a personal possession, an object to be shaped, or a kind of construction area. Body modification seems to be a human trait.

For the purpose of moulding the body, human beings rely on a large range of practices, with attention mainly on, in and under the skin: people adorn it, make incisions to it, remove parts of it, add things to it or even insert things under it – for good or at least temporarily. The skin covers the body, encases it, delimits it, provides protection and serves as a canvas to work on. The range of options for configuring the body (now) almost appears endless: an immense body of knowledge and experience provides the basis for practices such as applying make-up, tattoos, piercings, implants or artificial scars.

Changes to the body and the skin convey social messages. However, the meanings and purposes of these messages depend on the cultural context in which they are embedded. Body modifications may have aesthetic, political, social or religious connotations. At times it is a matter of personal preference, at others it can be a social necessity. The motives why people choose to modify their bodies include conforming to the reigning ideal of beauty, realizing a life goal, the wish for individuality, to mark belonging to a group, observing a duty or law, or even achieving catharsis or reincarnation (see MKB, 2013).

By presenting body modifications from past and present, from distant and near, the MKB paid tribute to enormous differences in acting upon the body – without aiming at any kind of comparison of cultural practices in different regions. The exhibition design took up the attempt of body construction by placing the artefacts into a construction scaffolding. Some visitors came explicitly for inspiration, they wanted to know backgrounds of scars or asked for fashionable tattoo-design (Figure 3).

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4. StrawGold – Cultural transformations

This exhibition bears witness to social, religious, political and economic encounters, entanglements, and resulting transformations traceable in the presented objects. Human movement is accompanied by the transfer of material and immaterial goods. Knowledge, technologies and materials are either ignored, rejected, accommodated, or appropriated in specific ways, and meaningfully integrated into everyday life.

For a long time anthropological research focussed on societies that had – allegedly or actually – not been exposed

to global influences and commodities. Research on material culture was focused on indigenous technologies, local materials and regional economic cycle. But following up stories of entanglement and their material fallout, one discovers that encounters, exchange relationships and transformation processes lie concealed in objects in manifold ways. New things are often not just simply taken up as they are, they tend to be appropriated and converted: people change

the form, function and materiality of objects, they are integrated into new procedures, take on new properties and are given new meanings.

It is a question of perspective whether we conceive of something as worthless or valuable, as straw or gold: the same object may appear to someone as waste, to others as a valuable resource (see MKB, 2014) (Figure 4).

The exhibition “StrawGold” is classified as permanent, meaning the MKB shows it for five years. To engage the public during this rather long period with the transformations they encounter on everyday life, two sections of the exhibition are regularly replaced. The MKB has always been a place of inspiration for various persons: In the entrance the



Figure 4 - In the section “Fashion – the principle of the eternal new” the use of different fabric, its meanings, its change when transplanted to other regions, and its adaption by a fashion designer is exemplified, 2014. (© MKB, Photographer Derek Li Wan Po)

outcome of creative dialogues between persons who were influenced by the MKB's collection – also backstage – is presented under the headline “Zwiesgespräche” (Dialogues). In another zone of the exhibition, workshops and small presentations alternate; both formats aim at enhancing the dynamic of transformations.

5. Migration – Moving the World

In choosing the topic “Migration” the MKB brought up questions as to the future of coexistence and social diversity in a global community. What role is left to the nation state when international business rules politics? How important is the nation to people with double or multiple nationalities? Does mass migration call for a fundamental new debate on values? How valid are the principles of universal democracy today?

Migration has been a part of human existence throughout all ages: beginning with the Exodus from Egypt, to the mass migrations of the post-Roman period, to the European emigration to the Americas in the 19th and 20th centuries, right up to the present-day stream of refugees. This historical and social constant has shaped the face of the world. Some people see migration as a threat, for others it is enriching. It changes habitual lifestyles as well as worldviews and values along with social and economic developments.

The reasons for migration are manifold. Migration is often a matter of survival and the only way to escape environmental threats and economic decline. War and persecution for political, religious, social or cultural reasons force people to flee. But many choose migration simply in the hope of a better life, a higher social standing or more personal freedom. Occasionally it is the thirst for adventure or the wish for new experiences that drives people to “foreign lands”.

“Othering” seems to be an intrinsic aspect of migration. It usually comes with fears on the part of the migrants as well as among the people of the countries they come to. On the one hand, people assert the threat of culture shock, the difficult process of integration or the loss of status, others are afraid of the unknown, the “too many of them”, the loss of stability, and the threat to their jobs. But migration can also be a success story:

migrants are absorbed into their new environment, create new communities, and introduce different economic, social and cultural models to their new home.

Well into the 20th century migration usually meant severing all ties to one's place of origin. Staying in touch was very difficult. This has changed dramatically. The availability of modern technology means people can communicate across large distances and at all times. It is not without reason that mobile phones rank among the migrants' most important possessions, allowing them to communicate with family and friends across the world whenever they like. Apart from personal decisions, the global economic system and transnational interdependencies are at the heart of migratory flows, often even initiating them.

Next to drugs and arms, human trafficking is one of the most lucrative businesses in the world. Migration is “big business”:

it involves arranging transport by sea, land or air; courier services; handling financial transactions; providing security services for the protection of borders and camps; as well as the provision of passports, visas and other documents (see Glass, 2017).

The exhibition invited the audience to discuss pressing social, economic, cultural questions pertaining to migration processes. To facilitate this opposite the nine different migratory situations (from today's situation at the U.S.-Mexican border or the refugee situations of Afghans to the Swiss migration to all parts of the world at different times and the French Protestants migration to Switzerland in 16th and 17th centuries) 111 statues from the collection were installed: “Seeing migration with different eyes, speaking to themselves and to the audience” (Figure 5).

“Why are you staring at? We're not on display here! We're not the stars of the show. We're here with you to look. We just watch, at times with eyes wide open, at others with a strained look; critical, self-conscious, astonished, angry, grim, defiant, humble, scared, alarmed, bored, patient, indifferent, tired, dogged, questioning. Yes, those are just some of our feelings. You think you know us. But remember, appearances are deceptive. You look at us, but you don't see us.



Figure 5 - Installation “Seeing migration with different eyes”, 2017. (© MKB, Photographer Omar Lemke)

We're migrants; from all corners of the world. We served our cultures in different capacities. We were cherished, even venerated. We had a good life, until we became migrants. Our histories are as varied as we are: collected in the name of science; chosen because we were beautiful; sold for a bit of luxury; discarded because we had grown old.

The journey was rough at times. Some of us experienced veritable odysseys. We were packed and locked away in crates, suitcases and containers, in the dark for days, weeks, even months on end. Some of us changed hands several times. The customs and importing authorities usually ignored us. Occasionally we were vetted. Sometimes we look a bit tattered due to our unsettled life histories. We've always been confronted with new situations; so insecurity became part of our being.

Today we are no longer what we used to be. In the museum we were given new roles to play, told to represent a different, alien world. And ordered to look authentic! For this, however, we would need back our old lifeworlds. We are cared for and safe, but have to abide by countless rules and conventions.

Migration is a concept full of contradictions, as are we. We regard ourselves as homeless although we have a new domicile. We're doing well, but are we really happy? We don't want to go back. We live in our memories. We used to be responsible for rich harvests, loads of children, recovery from sickness, and safe journeys. There's nothing exotic about us, no matter how long you stare.

We're actually no different from human migrants. Don't turn away! Come, take in this show with us, this phenomenon called migration. You will see it with different eyes" (Mašek, 2017).

6. *Thirst for Knowledge Meets Collecting Mania*

In November 2017 the French President Emmanuel Macron in his speech in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, proclaimed "starting today, and within the next five years, I want to see the conditions put in place so as to allow for the temporary or definitive restitution of African cultural heritage to Africa" (Sarr, Savoy, 2018, p. 9). This statement fuelled the long-lasting discussion of provenance research and restitution.

Before this proclamation the MKB had planned an exhibition addressing problematic issues and areas of museum work like the institution's history, the conditions of collecting, and the forms of display. The opening of "Thirst for Knowledge Meets Collecting Mania" took place 21st March 2019.

In this exhibition, the tasks of ethnographic museums and the changes over time are analysed. Holding large collections from all regions of the world originally served the purpose of cultural demarcation and placing cultures into a hierarchal system. Again and again, early reports from collectors of ethnographica euphorically state that a white spot has been erased on the museum's world map, or that an existing typology has been extended by the acquisition of an important object. At first, the emphasis was on sheer quantity, later the focus shifted to qualitative aspects such as authenticity and contexts.

One motif for collecting mania was "collect as long 'as we still have daylight' because the custodians of our collections in the future will probably not have the opportunity to purchase such authentic objects at such reasonable prices" (Rüttimeyer, 1902, p. 7). This policy soon led to a shortage of storage space: "Meanwhile, the scarcity of space should not prevent us from augmenting the collections to the best of our ability, as we are convinced that, in a matter of a few decades, the tragic process of colonization will have reached even the most distant lands and the abundance of stylish and artistic objects produced by these fascinating foreign peoples will have disappeared forever" (Sarasin, 1906, p. 1.)

Rarely the provenance of an object is consistently documented; there is hardly any reference to the path it took between production and purchase, the original producers are scarcely ever

named; mostly documentation starts when an object either through sale, as a gift, or in an exchange reached the museum.

Although Switzerland was never a colonial power, the country – and with it its museums – was undoubtedly part of the colonial project. What needs to be investigated is: to what extent did MKB rely on colonial networks to increase its collections? Under what circumstances were objects purchased? Why were human remains included in the collection? What understanding of respect was applied when handling power-



Figure 6 - One Section of the exhibit "Thirst for Knowledge Meets Collecting Mania" dealt with weaponry, another with funerary goods, the one in front with human remains, 2019. (© MKB, Photographer Omar Lemke)

ful and sacred objects, and who defined that understanding?

This exhibition project is the beginning of an intensification in researching the collections and presenting the results in a public space, with information available on provenance, specifically information which is marked by e.g. tenuous circumstances. It is also a commitment to transparency, openness, readiness and willingness to engage in dialogue with any stakeholder, and any request will enrich the biographies of objects. The openness is further emphasized by the exhibition design: the sections of the exhibition are demarcated by cubic frames which are open on all sides (Figure 6).

Conclusion

Even if the ethnographic museum has many problems to deal with and to overcome, more than any other institution it stands for the absolutely necessary debates with the Other or the vis-à-vis. The Other is not the spatially distant or people with a migrant background from the neighbourhood. The Other is always present, is part of everyday life and always a mirror of one's own. This mode of reflexion is constitutive for any society. The exhibitions of the MKB offer this mode of reflexion and thus the possibility of insights and recognition (Erkenntnis).

To achieve this, experiments are needed, such as for example in the exhibitions "EigenSinn" or "Suspended". Equally, it is required to render visible the processes of dislocation and relocation (Basu, 2017, p. 2) as well as movements along regulated paths and diversions (Appadurai, 1986, p. 17) of objects, artefacts, things— such as shown in "StrawGold", "Migration" or "Thirst for Knowledge Meets Collecting Mania". While on the move, things get transformed into trophies, goods, holdings, witnesses as well as into artefacts and pieces of art in private collections but above all in museums.

In each encounter with things it becomes evident, "as Lévi-Strauss [and many others in his wake, AS] long ago observed, whatever else they may afford, things are also 'good to think' with" (Basu, 2017, p. 2). To "think with" is at stake in every encounter, in every exhibitions, when museum staff and audience alike are looking, seeing, regarding, considering, gazing at objects. The multiple possibilities of these encounters are the ultimate legitimation for ethnographic museums.

If this has to hold true for the future as well, the next urgent step means answering unsettling questions. When Achille Mbembe was awarded the Gerda Henkel Prize in October 2018, he spoke – inter alia – about the migration of objects from Africa to Europe, about the value of these objects, what they signify for Europe and what might happen upon restitution of these objects. He then asked (Mbembe, 2018): "First of all, what precisely does Europe want to divest herself off and why? What will remain of the traces of these objects in the West, once these objects have been repatriated and what mode of existence will their absence make possible? [...] Second, is the work that these objects we-

re supposed to accomplish in the history of European consciousness, is this work finished? What will it have produced in the end and who ought to bear the consequences of it?"

The Museum of Cultures Basel is facing these challenges!

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