

**A palace and protest in Berlin for the whole world:
the Coalition of Cultural Workers Against the Humboldt Forum
and the challenge of decolonization**

Title of the film projects: “Tear It Down”,
“Museal – The Story of Dying Museums”,
“Skating on the Ruins of the History”

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Abstract

This research focuses on how a protest group, the Coalition of Cultural Workers Against the Humboldt Forum, creates their audiovisual narrative in order to challenge a controversial institution. As an example of a museum with a colonial collection, the Humboldt Forum is at the center of decolonization debates. This attempt carries within and outside of the institution. The research explores these decolonization attempts by tracing the controversial layers that were the subject of protests.

Introduction

At the present time, museums are struggling to cope with responding to the need of society. As part of the cultural industry, museums have to compete with different variety of activities. Rather than solving their structural problems, the museums or more broadly the cultural and art institutions often try to find a way by using today's technology and visual esthetic elements. For instance, many newly founded museums are being built by starchitects to catch the attention of the public by using the attractiveness, novelty and even nostalgia of the architecture. In order to pull the visitor closer to exhibitions, the entire museum experience is becoming more interactive with sound installations, touch screens, and many other technological opportunities. Even the term "museum" is morphing into "institution" or "kunsthalle". To illustrate these points, the Humboldt Forum stands as an actual and controversial example. The institution which is formed by four partners, the Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz with the Ethnologisches Museum and the Museum für Asiatische Kunst der Staatlichen Museen zu Berlin, the Stadtmuseum Berlin together with Kulturprojekte

Berlin, the Humboldt-Universität and the Stiftung Humboldt Forum in Berliner Schloss, describes itself as “more than a museum”:

“The Humboldt Forum is taking shape in the historical heart of Berlin as a unique place of inquiry and encounters. A place with a significant past. A place for the arts and sciences, for exchange, diversity and a multiplicity of voices. A place where differences come together.

The outstanding collections that have been assembled under one roof and the varied programme of exhibitions, events and educational and digital offerings inspire visitors to gain new insights into the world of yesterday, today and tomorrow.”¹

However, the structural and fundamental problems of museums are too deep and historical to be solved by their efforts to keep up with the times and expansion by coming together with different institutions. The museum is a Western invention. Imperial, national, or universal museums in North America and Europe have been established as shrines where countries' military colonial pasts are presented as an achievement and show of strength. The definition of temple, shrine or altar used for museums is more than a metaphor. When the Louvre first opened as a museum, some visitors prayed on their knees in front of Rubens' retables (Savoy, 2020: 44). Museums are more than what they represent. To put it another way, anthropologist and curator Dan Hicks goes as far as to say that “as a border is to a nation state so the museum is to empire” (2020: 17).²

¹ <https://www.humboldtforum.org/en/about/> Last accessed: 12.10.2021

² This phrase reminds me the motto of the International Council of Museums (ICOM): Museums have no borders, they have a network.

The destruction caused by colonialism is still visible today. Artifacts exhibited under high security, in air-conditioned galleries and stylish showcases in universal museums present this destructive past to the visitors in a sterile environment. However, the narrative of museum's function hides this destructive past. At this point, it becomes clear how necessary decolonization is for cultural and art institutions with changing their narrative, reshaping the structure, and forcing for restitution. This research observes and examines the decolonization movement that emerged to purge cultural and art institutions from their colonial past, through the example of the Cultural Workers Coalition Against the Humboldt Forum protest group. The research explores how this protest group carries out its activities as part of a resistance to newly opened the Humboldt Forum. To support and widen the research that mainly focuses on this protest group, the Humboldt Forum itself and Skatepark Vogelfreiheit, where is an intersecting point of Berlin's controversial historical layers, have also been designated as research areas.

1.1. Museums turning into museals

Museums are more than physical places that hosts, preserves and displays historical objects. Linda Nochlin describes the born of the museums as “they were conceived in the optimistic days of the Enlightenment and borne to shore by the waves of the French Revolution” (1972: 8). In fact, the enlightenment idea of universal man lies at the core of emergence of myth of neutrality in museums (Raicovich, 2021: 37). Undoubtedly, today's "universal museum" narrative was created for this "universal man". However, this narrative has strong links with militarist and corporate colonialism. We are living in the age of activism and protest. Challenges such as migration, climate change, and economic inequality can be

seen as the consequences of colonial rule (Elizalde, 2020:11). In the shadow of controversy and protest, newly opened the Humboldt Forum is one of the institutions which tries to save this narrative from the colonial past. The founding director of the Humboldt Forum, Neil MacGregor³, argued that “the role of encyclopaedic museums in complex times of social change must be redefined” (Hicks, 2020: 213).

Museums are the outcomes of a material manifestation of one culture’s interest to another. As an enlightenment institution, their main goal is to build bridges between cultures by bringing the knowledge of different cultures, promoting cultural tolerance and understanding (Singh, 2008: 8). By contrast, the collection creating methods of the museums have been the opposite of all these missions of understanding and tolerance. Settler and military colonialism used the bridge that museums built between societies as a means of justification and legitimation for centuries. The reason why museums are in a controversial position today is the legacy and burden from their history. Dan Hicks describes such museums with brutal histories as "brutish museums":

“The Pitt Rivers Museum is not a national museum, but it is a brutish museum. Along with other anthropology museums, it allowed itself to become a vehicle for a militarist vision of white supremacy through the display of the loot of so-called ‘small wars’ in Africa.” (2020: 4)

Another purpose of museums is to shape identity and memory. Although they do not and cannot represent complete stories, the distilled narratives of museums often contain the most treasured and the most contested facets of identity or national (Procter, 2020). As

³ Neil MacGregor, the former director of the British Museums, was appointed as the founding director of the Humboldt Forum. He left his position in 2018, before seeing the opening of the institution.

museums are created and shaped by colonial and imperial history, the entire experience and discourse of the museums are presented to visitors with historical distortion of facts. To give an illustration, although museums are full of long wall texts and labels, their impact on visitors is rather limited because today the visitor's primary goal is to experience the museum and the object itself. Washington Post reporter, Blake Gopnik, clocked visitors who spend time in front of an artwork and wall text, like a tribute to Taylorist time-motion studies of American factory workers' efficiency:

“Average time spent reading the educational wall text: fifty seconds. Average time spent looking at a work of art: four seconds. Maximum time spent looking at a work of art: eight seconds. Minimum time spent looking at a work of art: zero seconds for a woman who came in, took almost a minute to read the wall text, then walked out again without a single glance at any of the pictures hanging there.” (Whitaker, 2009: 75)

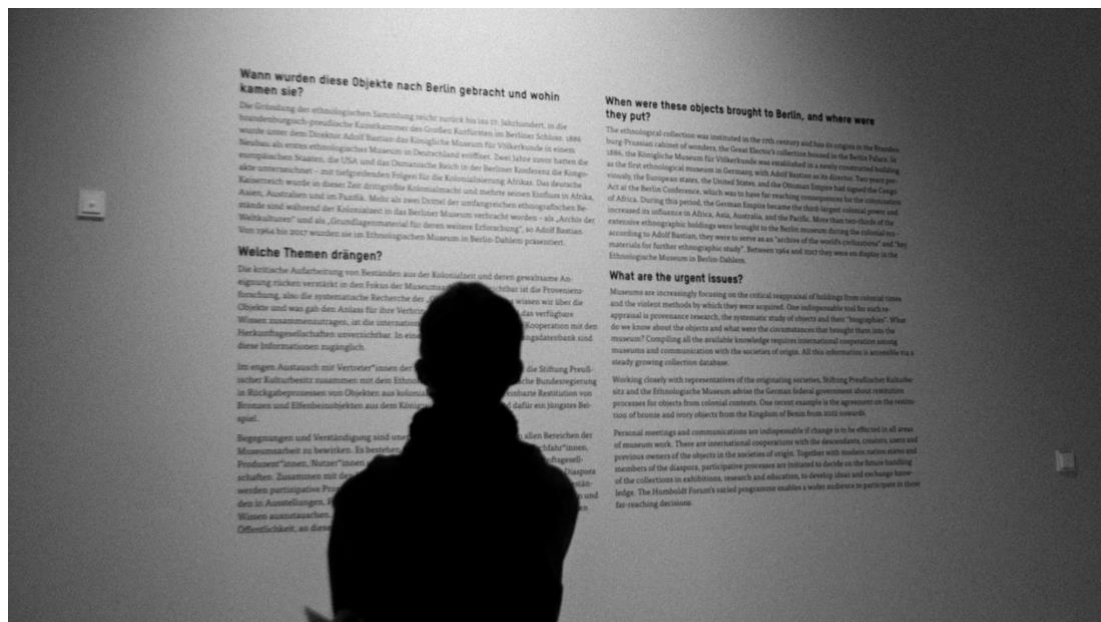


Fig. 1. Wall text addressing the colonial past of the collection at the Ethnology Museum in the Humboldt Forum.

(Photographed by the author, 10.11.2021)

Since our or regular visitor's experience in museums is not much different from Blake Gopnik's survey, it becomes clear that the solution of the structural problems of museums won't be solved with long texts as a sample of internal intention of change. The solution has two parties: museums (directors, curators, museum professionals) and the public (visitors, scholars, cultural workers). While museums try to build bridges with other cultures throughout their exhibitions, collections, learning programs, they avoid giving information about the provenance of the objects. In this sense, the identity and memory that museums create become a subject of debate: decolonization. The social movement of "decolonization" argues that this controversial narrative and history of the museums are out-of-date today. Protest and activist groups that generate this movement are often formed by cultural workers, scholars, activists, and even locals. In this sense, I decided to research on decolonization of the cultural and art institutions over the Coalition of Cultural Workers Against the Humboldt Forum, since they make efforts to argue the museum's way out of colonial past from inside and outside, as ordinary visitors and cultural professionals.

In his book, *British Museums*, Dan Hicks explains how the institution that he works, Pitt-Rivers Museum⁴, turns into a tool for the production of alterity as "the museum of weapons gradually transformed the museum as weapon" (2020: 182). As museums become institutional devices for cleansing, the opening of the Humboldt Forum brings the question of how ethnographic museums have to face demands for a critical reappraisal of their collections that are based on the assumption of "anthropological difference" and the representation of the

⁴ The founder of Pitt-Rivers Museum, Lieutenant General Augustus Pitt-Rivers served in the British Army as ethnologist, and archeologist. The museum founded by him holds one of the biggest Benin bronzes collection with the number of 283 bronze objects coming from the sacking of Benin City.

“other” (Haeckel, 2020: 17). This research focuses on how the “other” tries to battle against the colonial narrative of the museums in the age of social change.

In these contexts, as a museum professional, I liken today’s museums architecturally to shopping malls, structurally to cemeteries, and functionally to prisons. Museums are dying, as they are resisting to change and as they are not able to address their colonial and complex history. For centuries, only dead objects and artists have been exhibited in museums. Since they exhibit objects that have no vital relationship with the audience with a colonial narrative, they are doomed to die and decay day by day. Theodor W. Adorno defines the resemblance between museums and mausoleums with these sentences:

“The German word ‘museal’ [‘museumlike’] has unpleasant overtones. It describes objects to which the observer no longer has a vital relationship and which are in process of dying. They owe their preservation more to historical respect than to the needs of the present. Museum and mausoleum are connected by more than phonetic association. Museums are like the family sepulchers of works of art.” (1967: 175)

Commissioned by the journal *Présence Africaine* and banned until 1960s by French authorities for being anticolonial, the film “*Les Statues Meurent Aussi* [ENG: *Statues Also Die*]” directed by Alain Resnais, Chris Marker, and Ghislaine Cloquet in 1953, exposes the production process of what we call culture that is visible in museums. The film explains the cultural production through works of art from Jean Negroni's narration as:

“When men die, they become history. Once statues die, they become art. This botany of death is what we call culture.” (Resnais, Marker, Cloquet, 1953)

In the film, directors use the magic of cinema, by threatening all the subjects in front of the lens without differentiating between humans, statues, environment, and architecture. It brings living and inanimate objects closer together. As the title of the film suggests, this visual essay argues that the objects displayed in the showcases of the museum are now dead objects. On the contrary, Ariella Aisha Azoulay's film, "Un-Documented: Unlearning Imperial Plunder" (2019), stands against the claims made by the film "Statues Also Die". Adopted from her book titled as "Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism", the film argues that looted statues do not die. It is true that millions of objects were plundered and forced to exist in isolated museums as showcases condemned to death by imperial powers as Resnais, Marker, and Cloquet suggested in their film. However, these objects manage to survive. In her book and film, Azoulay argues that the looted objects which are in captivity in museums showcases are still alive. This different perspective between the two films stems from Azoulay's use of "unlearning" as a method of coping with imperialism or colonialism. For her, it is necessary for us to rewind the history and unlearn our imperial rights. She describes this method as "unlearning what one's ancestors inherited from their ancestors, and them from theirs, as solid facts and recognizable signposts, in order to attend to their origins and render imperial plunder impossible once again" (2019: 37). Since museums and archives are used as tools of imperial historiography, they are also one of the application areas of unlearning method. Just like Adorno, Azoulay also describes museums as "museal white walls", which is full with millions of looted objects from all over the world (2019: 24).

Museums cannot survive without reshaping their structure, redefining their mission, and rewriting their narrative. This fact has also been recognized by museum professionals. With a membership of over 40,000 museum professionals and organizations now, the

International Council of Museums (ICOM) was founded in 1946. For nearly fifty years the organization definition of museum was:

“...a non-profit, permanent institution in the service of society and its development, open to the public, which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits the tangible and intangible heritage of humanity and its environment for the purposes of education, study and enjoyment.”
(ICOM, 2017)

The purpose and meaning of the museum have always been a discussion topic. In April 2019, ICOM began publishing a crowdsourced list of museum definition from all around the world (ICOM, 2019). Meanwhile, a group of ICOM members decided to revisit this out-of-date definition. Danish curator Jette Sandahl, who chairs ICOM's Museum Definition, Prospects and Potentials committee, argued that the current definition, which ignored the demands of cultural democracy, did not speak the language of the 21st century. The new proposal for the definition of museum defined as:

“Museums are democratizing, inclusive and polyphonic spaces for critical dialogue about the pasts and the futures. Acknowledging and addressing the conflicts and challenges of the present, they hold artifacts and specimens in trust for society, safeguard diverse memories for future generations and guarantee equal rights and equal access to heritage for all people.

Museums are not for profit. They are participatory and transparent, and work in active partnership with and for diverse communities to collect, preserve, research, interpret, exhibit, and enhance understandings of the

world, aiming to contribute to human dignity and social justice, global equality and planetary wellbeing.” (Small: 2019)

However, it sparked controversy at the ICOM convention held in Kyoto in September 2019. Before the planned voting of the new definition, several branches of the council including France, Italy, Spain, Germany, Canada and Russia requested the postponement of the revision and the approval remained inconclusive (ibid: 2019). The redefined definition of the museum was found too political for most museums to employ by the ICOM members. This ineffective redefinition attempt is a good example of how museums cannot be changed by museum professionals alone without outside public pressure. At this point, what the protest groups who want to put pressure on museums wants to do is not to hammer the last nail in the coffin of these dying institutions, but to give them the kiss of life.

1.2. Never-ending colonialism

Although the topic of this research suggests that it is related to arts and culture management, the problem of colonialism is much wider and rooted than we consider. It is just an illusion that colonial politics is over. Colonial practices are still visible in different institutions, the military, and industry. As a simple proof, the first two books that I started reading about this research, “British Museums” by Dan Hicks and “Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism” by Ariella Aisha Azoulay, were categorized not in the “art” but in the “politics” section of the bookstore.

The phrase often attributed to Fredric Jameson and Slavoj Žižek, “that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than it is to imagine the end of capitalism”, (Fisher, 2009: 2) can

be adapted for colonialism too. Thinking that colonialism no longer exists and approaching the issue in this way is, in a sense, to deny the existence of the problem. As the showcases of strength, museums, are struggling to cope with their colonial structure, the discussions of colonization continue even out of this planet. It is a fact that, today, classic settler colonialism is not as intensive as it was during 18th and 19th centuries. However, the enthusiasm of humanity to settle and colonize no longer remains within the borders of the world. The race of the colonization of space and planets continue under the leadership of space-oriented entrepreneurs and corporations. Elon Musk (SpaceX), Jeff Bezos (Blue Origin), Richard Branson (Virgin Galactic), Peter Diamandis (Zero Gravity Corporation), United Launch Alliance (joint venture between Lockheed Martin Space System and Boeing Defense, Space & Security) are just some of the entrepreneurs and corporations investing in the colonization of space, planets and even asteroids (Nelson, Block, 2018). The colonization attempt of space shows us that the idea of colonization is still alive in the form of corporate colonialism. Colonialism's main theme was about plundering the raw materials and sources. This intention is still alive in the mind of businessmen in the form of space mining.

On the other hand, military and corporate colonialism often operates together. As a current example of this United States Space Force which was authorized by President Donald Trump can be given. Although the attempt of creating a military space force goes back till the Cold War era, the realization of it had to wait till 2019. This newly funded military force launched its first mission with Boeing X-37B spaceplane on May 2020. Efforts of corporations and entrepreneurs to get the contract for the exploration or colonization of space, planets, and stars are not unlike the expedition or colonization attempts made in the Africa continent at the end of the 19th century. As an example of today's military-industry complex's conflict interest, the bid for NASA's lunar lander mission that was won by Elon Musk's SpaceX for \$2.9 billion

and was taken to the court by Jeff Bezos's Blue Origin can be given (Morris, 2021). No matter what age, colonial expeditions were always led and supported by corporations. In the late 19th British Empire's Africa expeditions was led by British entities such as British North Borneo Company (chartered 1881), Goldie's Royal Niger Company (1886), William Mackinnon's Imperial British East African Company (1888), and Cecil Rhodes's British South Africa Company (1889) (Hicks, 2020: 58). Germany was a colonial late-comer and the German colonial empire lasted for only thirty years. German rule in African colonies began with an imperial charter for a private corporation (Conrad, 2008: 50). The Berlin Conference, which was organized by Otto von Bismarck, formalized the scramble for African possessions. It marked a shift in the history of European colonialism in Africa. Dan Hicks calls the period between the Berlin Conference (1884), which led to African colonial expeditions, and the outbreak of the First World War (1914) as "World War Zero" (2020: 226). He explains how anthropology museums were filled up with looted object from Africa during this era:

"Looting became something new during the three decades between the Berlin Conference of 1884 and the outbreak of World War in 1914, through the actions of anthropology museums. This is the brutish museum: a prolongation of violence in the name of sovereignty. These colonial museums became the infrastructure for a new kind of white supremacy. Violent military operations involving the theft and public display of art classified as 'primitive' or 'degenerate' were a key part of the ideology of white supremacy, foreshadowing the horrors of the 20th century. It is shameful for our national institutions to 'contest' this brutish complicity. The message of these chilling dispossessions was designed to live on through what visitors

and curators alike today increasingly recognise as violent and racist museum displays.” (2020: 233)

Assumption of the end of colonization is not valid as long as museums are full of these looted artifacts. The scar left by colonialism on societies is still bleeding today. Therefore, while I was doing this research, I acted with the awareness that colonization is not an out-of-date domination system but an up-to-date doctrine of cultural and commercial supremacy.

1.3. Decolonization of the cultural and art institutions

Frantz Fanon describes the process of decolonization as “total liberation that involves every facet of our personality” (1961: 233). This total liberation applies to the institutions too. As museum directors and curators are part of the institutional structure, the decolonization process cannot be imposed top-down by the museum. Instead, it should be led by people whose communities were subjugated (Procter, 2020: 222). However, in order for the decolonization struggle originate on the outside of the museum to be successful, the museum must unlock itself, relinquish the control, and be willing to change its colonial narrative. The success of decolonization relies on the collaboration and openness of the institution. In the formation of the museum, the vision has a central role. Anthropology museums are crucial public spaces that have to take the first step towards any prospect of decolonization (Hicks, 2020: 8).

Decolonization is a practice which “continues to be an act of confrontation with hegemonic system of thought; it is hence a process of considerable historical and cultural liberation. As such, decolonization becomes the contestation of all dominant forms and structures, whether they be linguistic, discursive, or ideological.” (Mehrez, 1991: 255). The

practice of “decolonization” of museums has been around since the end of 1980s (Bodenstein, Pagani, 2014: 39) as they are part of colonial structure. On the other hand, not every museum is willing enough to carry out these efforts. To illustrate these internal efforts of the institutions, I can give two exhibitions related to Benin Bronzes as examples. The exhibition, “*Benin: Kings and Rituals*”, was hosted in Museum für Völkerkunde Vienna⁵, the musée du quai Branly in Paris, the Ethnologisches Museum, Berlin, and the Art Institute of Chicago in 2007. At the time the directors of these institutions, Christian Feest, Jean-Pierre Mohen, Viola König, and James Cuno made this claim:

“From our 21st-century perspective the military action seems unjustifiable; however, we must recognise the role it played in bringing these works of art to far broader attention.” (Hicks, 2020: 164)

This statement clearly shows that how these objects, which are symbols of colonial plunder, participated in this world tour disturbed neither the participating museums nor their directors. Three years after this exhibition, in 2010, the Museum of Ethnography in Stockholm gave the curators the opportunity to formulate the fundamental question of the ownership and guardianship of 74 pieces of Benin Bronzes (Bodenstein, Pagani, 2014: 30). The exhibition, “*Whose Objects?*”, allowed the museum to confront the truth of colonial plunder. Today, 161 different institutions from 23 different countries. keep Benin Bronzes in their collections (Hicks, 2020: 248-252). In what kind of context these looted objects should be presented to the audience is vital. The new strategy of representation of the colonial heritage of an ethnography museum is not only the responsibility of museum directors and curator.

⁵ This institution was renamed as Weltmuseum.

In the last decade, museums have become centers of protest in a much greater way than before. Different varieties of protests have erupted around by whom and how the museums are funded, how they are organized, what they show and how, who forms the boards of directors and benefits from it, and how they reflect or fail to reflect (Raicovich, 2021: 21). Museums are non-profit, well-established institutions. With these aspects, the prestige it has provided for centuries is one of the biggest obstacles to change. As the public increased their demands for change with protests, some institutions showed resistance from the level of board of directors. Despite all these institutional resistances, museums are facing protests that focus on sponsorships, art workers' rights, and structural problems coming from the colonial heritage.

The sponsorship between Tate and British Petroleum⁶, which started in 1990 and ended in 2016, is one of the best examples of the struggle in museums. Oil company sponsorship over public institutions is not just a topic of “*artwashing*”. Tate and BP share the same colonial heritage. This corporate partnership is the clearest re-playing of the militarist-corporate-colonialist model of the 1890s (Hicks, 2020: 227). Mel Evans links cultural and art institutions with companies which as colonial past as:

“The arts and culture have a history intertwined with politics and economics. The buildings, collections, content and discourses of art galleries and museums all relate to the colonial empire, whether by theft or by theme.”
(2015: 35)

“Tate and BP both have origins intertwined with colonial histories and the Transatlantic Slave Trade. Tate Gallery was built on the site of the first panopticon, Millbank penitentiary, the jail that incarcerated people later

⁶ British Petroleum was rebranded as BP plc in 2000.

deported to the settler colony of Australia, where the nickname for English people remains P.O.M. (Prisoner of Millbank) to this day. Visitors are reminded of this history of the site allowing it to creep up through the building's foundations, yet the connection between Henry Tate, sugar and the slave trade has been given less space to critically permeate the building.”
(2015: 131)

It took six years for Liberate Tate to end Tate – BP sponsorship. One of the most important reasons of Liberate Tate's success was that it had a structure created within the museum by the museum members. First of all, in order to change or reshape an institution, it should be adopted by the public. With this sense of ownership, Liberate Tate managed to turn the museum into a protest and performance space and led many other protest groups.

Gulf Labor was founded by group of artists, scholars, and activists such as Haig Aivazian, Tania Bruguera, Sam Durant, Mariam Ghani, Hans Haacke, Ashkan Alwan, Walid Raad, Andrew Ross, Gregory Sholette, in order to protest the working conditions of migration workers in the Gulf region. Approximately 15 million migrant workers primarily from South Asia make up the labor force in Gulf states. Migrant workers' rights violations are longstanding issue in the region. With the construction of the Saadiyat Island, this issue became a current issue for the cultural workers too. The Saadiyat Island is a complex of several cultural and art institutions, located in Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates. Although, the project was revealed in 2004, the construction of the institutions is still going on. Louvre Abu Dhabi (designed by Jean Nouvel and opened in 2017), Guggenheim Abu Dhabi (designed by Frank Gehry), The Sheikh Zayed National Museum (designed by Foster + Partners and in partnership with the British Museum), and Abu Dhabi Performing Arts Center (designed by Zaha Hadid) are among

the cultural and art institutions in the Saadiyat Island. Gulf Labor started taking action against this project in 2010. Their main focus was workers' rights. One of the international organizations which is following this issue is Human Rights Watch (HRW). In the first report, "*Building Towers, Cheating Workers*", problems such as extremely low wages, confiscation of passports, poor working conditions were revealed (HRW: 2006). The second report, "*The Island of Happiness*", claimed that working conditions in these museums' constructions site were not much different than the other sites. For example, construction companies refused to return the passports of the migrant workers even if they quitted their jobs and asked for a large fine (HRW: 2009). In the third report, "*Migrant Workers' Rights on Saadiyat Island in the United Arab Emirates*", HRW directly addressed the Louvre and Guggenheim to take action against the UAE government, which was allowing all these violations in order to maintain the cheap labor (HRW: 2015). Today's working conditions in these regions are not much different than slave conditions. Slave trading was one of the outgrowths of the colonialism. During colonial times, more than 11 million Africans, Caribbean, North and South American was taken as slaves (King, 2010: 24). Gulf Labor is one of the protest groups trying to keep this issue on the agenda.

Decolonize This Place is one of the first examples of protests groups which takes direct action against museums for the decolonization. The group defines themselves as "*an action-oriented movement and decolonial formation in New York City and beyond.*"⁷ This collaborative direct-action group made huge impact on with their actions. Starting from 22 March 2019, "*9 Weeks of Art in Action*" protest series managed to put pressure on Warren B. Kanders, a board member of Whitney Museum and the CEO of the defense industry company

⁷ <https://decolonizethisplace.org/faxxx-1> Last accessed: 13.11.2021

called Safariland, and forced him to resign from the board.⁸ During this continuous protest series, more than 100 museum workers stood together with the protest group. On Indigenous Peoples Day, they staged a takeover of the American Museum of Natural History to give voice to indigenous people and communities (Procter, 2020:219). On 09 October 2021, two members of Decolonize This Place, Nitasha Dhillon and Amin Husain, attended a conference, “*Socializing Evidence*”, organized by Forensic Architecture at Haus der Kulturen der Welt. During the conference artist/activist Amin Husain argued the importance of putting public pressure on museums to decolonize is crucial as in the example of Decolonize This Place – the Whitney Museum (09.10.2021, fieldnotes). One of the main themes of this conference was the Humboldt Forum as the struggle continues today in Berlin.

As seen from the other examples, The Coalition of Cultural Workers Against the Humboldt Forum is not the first, and won’t be the last, protest group that demonstrate against the presence of colonial ideology and practice in cultural and art institutions. This group is a result of shared outrage against the reconstruction of the colonial-era Berlin Palace. For them, hosting the Humboldt Forum in this colonial reincarnated building, is an imperialist message. The Coalition of Cultural Workers Against the Humboldt Forum has more than 50 active members. The coalition brings together different people with different kinds of knowledge in the cultural sector. They think of the Humboldt Forum in terms of layers: earth/roots/rubble, cellar/storage, rooms, concrete structure, façade, dome/insignia, and globus cruciger.⁹ In one of our chats, I asked group member Erfan why they were considering this structure layer by layer:

⁸ <https://decolonizethisplace.org/9weeksofartinaction2#>: Last accessed: 13.11.2021

⁹ <https://ccwah.info/layers/> 08.01.2022

“Each layer represents a different historical past. We are putting together our research in these layers. As we gather the material, we are putting those into website to come into form and communicate to other cultural workers. With this research method we want to approach other cultural workers to participate our campaign.” (15.07.2021, fieldnotes)

The importance of being online has increased significantly in the conditions of the pandemic. The Coalition of Cultural Workers Against the Humboldt Forum uses this online presence actively and effectively. Except for the screening, all protests that I attended as a researcher was broadcasted live on social media by the group members. In this uncertain pandemic conditions, the group's website is kept active. In the protests I attended, I observed that the number of participants increased noticeably. Whether this is due to weather and pandemic conditions or the group reaching wider audiences over these online tools, it is a fact that this movement growing day by day.

One of the members, Lucas Odahara, explains the core of this group as it has many origins (Decolonize in Action, 2021). Many of the group's members come from countries affected by the destructiveness of colonialism. For this reason, this protest group becomes an application area of decolonization practice. The movement of decolonization of the cultural and art institutions have many components. As a result of this, the coalition often gets together with other protests groups to stage their performances. BARAZANI.berlin is one of these groups which joins forces with the coalition for the protests. Emerged from the Decolonize Berlin alliance, BARAZANI.berlin describes itself as a forum of colonialism and resistance. The word “barazani” means forum in Kiswahili language.¹⁰ One of the purposes of the protest is to

¹⁰ <https://barazani.berlin/about> Last accessed: 08.01.2022

become the voice of the “others”, “outsiders”, and “victims”. The Coalition of Cultural Workers Against the Humboldt Forum’s protests often have speakers from many activist groups such as No Humboldt 21, Berlin Postkolonial, Decolonize Berlin, AfricAvenir, and Bring Back Ngonso. In this sense, this protest group works not only for its own voice, but also for the voices of the others. The coalition acts as an umbrella organization as it allies with these other groups. The group’s headquarters at Spreuer 6 places a significant role as it is a gathering point for the decolonial movement. We can divide the activities of the group into three categories: protests, campaigns, and events. These events structure the protest movement. As a researcher, I was involved in all these activities to examine the group. During this research, I attended their four physical protests, a screening of a film program, and came across their poster campaign on the streets. The aim of all these activities is to create a movement that grows like a snowball by bringing together thinking people who are fighting for the same purpose. For instance, on 12 September 2021, in with collaboration BARAZANI.berlin, short film program curated by Nnnena Onuoha was screened at this place. The film program, REGARDING MUSEUMS On Colonialities, Ownership and Loss, brought many people together around the idea of decolonization.

2. Methodology and research question

This research explores how a protest group collectively forms its narrative and challenges a controversy in the field of museology. Anthropology museums have always been at the center of the colonial practice as they are fed by the looted objects and redefine the stories of the “others”. The research is an in-depth analysis of the discourses and actions of the protest group, the Coalition of Cultural Workers Against the Humboldt Forum.

Weeks after I started researching this topic, the Coalition of Cultural Workers Against the Humboldt Forum members decided to stage a protest. Since the protest itself is the core of this research, I would say the start date of the research is December 2020. On 15 December 2020, I emailed members of the Coalition of Cultural Workers Against the Humboldt Forum, Tanja Ostojic, Jumana Manna, and Ina Wudtke about their upcoming protest. This was the first contact with them. I participated in four different physical protests, under Covid-19 pandemic conditions, that took place during the research. The first protest “*Dead on Arrival – Second Rehearsal (feat. Tear-Down-Ensemble)*” took place at Schinkelplatz on 16 December 2020. The second event was in screening format called “*Defund the Humboldt Forum! Screening at Spreeufer*” on 19 July 2021. The third action was called “*Defund the Humboldt Forum*” at Lustgarten on 20 July 2021. The last protest was held on 22 September 2021 and named as “*Looking at Looted Art Again?*”. Besides these four protests, I attended the group's meetings several times at their headquarters, Spreeufer 6. This place is quite unique because of its history. Located in Nikolaiviertel, this shop was serving as tourism agency before the group took over. I didn't notice the signboard above the entrance until after several visits to this venue. In front of the Humboldt Forum, this venue was formerly the ticket office of Palast der Republik and the logo is still there. Before the Coalition of Cultural Workers Against the Humboldt Forum took over this place, on February 2020, I attended an exhibition called “*Owned by Others*” at the same place. Founded by Lutz Henke and Raul Walch, “*Owned by Others* is an artistic endeavor uncovering narratives, places, and artifacts from, around, and on Berlin's Museum Island. The dialogical initiative fosters actions, interventions, research, performances, and social encounters in the public realm which link the island's multi-layered history-scapes to global contemporary artistic practices.”¹¹ Since the Humboldt Forum is part

¹¹ <http://ownedbyothers.org/about> Last accessed: 05.01.2021

of the museum island, this exhibition project also became a part of my research. I also took part as the production manager in the second version of this exhibition project, which was held between September – December 2020.

As outcomes of this research, which lasted for about a year, three films were produced. As a researcher observing the action practice, the discourse, and the method of this protest group, I put together my fieldnotes and visual recordings in the film “Tear It Down”. The name of the film was inherited from the initial slogan of the Coalition of Cultural Workers Against the Humboldt Forum: “Tear it down and turn it upside down”. The protest groups slogan suggests to turn the Humboldt Forum on its head in order to reverse the logic of its neo-colonial claims (2020)¹².

Throughout the research, my research questions evolved as I tried to find answers to them. Each answer brought with it other questions. My second film, “Museal – The Story of Dying Museums”, is formed by the combination of these questions and the photographs that I took at the newly opened Ethnology Museum at the Humboldt Forum. The film takes its name from Theodor W. Adorno’s macabre definition of the museums.

The site of the Humboldt Forum has a very controversial history. The building itself, which was built as a replica of the Berlin Palace, is a statement which rewinds the time and even denies what happened in the past century. Berlin has many political and historical layers which are visible all around the city. Sometimes these layers lay down under a new building, sometimes they intersect with each other at somewhere else. Instead of making a film about the controversial history and architecture of the Humboldt Forum, I tried to explore how the

¹² <https://ccwah.info/about/>Last accessed: 05.01.2021

site's history survives in another historical spot in Berlin. Skatepark "Vogelfreiheit" was built with the ruins of the Palast der Republik in part of the former Tempelhof airport. Berlin hosts many subcultures and one of them is skateboarding. This skatepark is a perfect example of how Berlin's historical layers still trying to survive in different fields. The film, "Skating on the Ruins of the History", is a typical skateboarding video. However, its intention is to show that the ruins of the demolished history are still alive in a different place, under different conditions, and with a different purpose.

2.1. Following a protest movement under pandemic conditions

These three films are visual parts of my research that contains my observations, fieldnotes, and short interviews. Since they all were recorded under pandemic conditions, I needed to adapt my method, approach, and style over time. As I was on the field for the first time to record the protest from the Coalition of Cultural Workers Against the Humboldt Forum, I took this fieldnote which shows my concerns about the challenges of making research during pandemic conditions:

"Despite the cold weather, it is more crowded than I expected. There are more than 50 protestors and lots of press members... The protest is about to begin. Police is warning the attenders to wear masks and keep 1.5 meters of social distance. This is the first time that I will experience a protest in these conditions. I am not sure if there will be more in this uncertainty."
(16.12.2020, fieldnotes)

Video recordings and photographs that were taken with the awareness of the uncertainty of the future also reflected the esthetics and style of the videos. As parts of this research, I tried to give different angles in films as much as possible. The intention of this lies under the fear of pandemic measures such as lockdowns, protest or gathering prohibition.

At one of the weekly gatherings of the Coalition of Cultural Workers Against the Humboldt Forum members at Spreuer 6, I asked Erfan, a member of the group, why they held their protests in places such as Schinkelplatz, Schlossplatz and Lustgarten, rather than in the courtyard of the Humboldt Forum, which serves as a public space:

“For security reasons, there is no possibility to hold these protests in the Humboldt Forum’s courtyards, although they are public spaces. Every protest requires permission from the police. Physical protests under pandemic conditions are not like protests under normal conditions.”

(15.07.2021, fieldnotes)

One of the elements of the protest is the participants. Whether passers-by or conscious participants, their absence bring the question of the purpose and success of the protest. One of the points I carefully observed was how many people attended the protest, how many of these participants were protesters or how many were members of the press. At the *“Defund the Humboldt Forum!”* protest on July 20, 2021, I took these field notes on how pandemic regulations are affecting participation and behavior:

“Today is the official opening of the Humboldt Forum. There is a ceremony and live music. It is quite crowded with protocol and also first day visitors. But the protest is as crowded as the opening. I think the reason for this is that the protest is being held in a touristic area like Lustgarten. Weather and

pandemic conditions are relatively better than the previous protest. I think that adds a lot to the participation.

...

Although the police is warning about wearing a mask and keeping social distance, it is hard to control this crowd. It is obvious that everybody is fed up with the regulations. They want to enjoy the sun. But more importantly, they want to be part of a social event, whether it is a protest or the opening of the Humboldt Forum.

...

It is possible to encounter a daily protest in Berlin. This protest also attracts the attention of passers-by. I see a lot of people listening to the speeches that way.” (20.07.2021, fieldnotes)

Making research focusing on protests under pandemic conditions brought many questions and uncertainties. Constantly changing regulations were not only affected the protests' schedule but also the physical opening of the Humboldt Forum. As I moved to Berlin from Istanbul during the hardest days of the pandemic, settling here and focusing the research took long time.

2.2. From ordinary participant to participant observer

The ethnographer's field contains the idea that the researcher has to move to either geographical or social space (Balsiger and Lambelet 2014: 152). In research focusing on a social movement or a protest group, the field may be a specific place where the protests take

place, a periodic meeting point, even online forums or social media sites. A social movement can be formed with different groups which come from different backgrounds and take different approaches against the subject that they are taking action against. The movement of decolonization of the cultural and art institutions is one of the examples of this. The recent protest movement against the Humboldt Forum consists of many activist groups such as Coalition of Cultural Workers Against the Humboldt Forum, BARAZANI.berlin, No Humboldt 21, Berlin Postkolonial, Decolonize Berlin, and AfricAvenir. From the day the Humboldt Forum's construction plan was announced, these protest groups have held their protests in public spaces around the site such as Lustgarten, Schlossplatz, and Schinkelplatz. Many of the individuals forming these groups come from the field of art and culture from different countries and different backgrounds. As a result of this, multi-national exhibitions such as *Owned by Others* and *Dekoloniale* emerged. George R. Marcus suggests that most participant observation in social movements implies forms of "*multi-sited ethnography*" (1995). As the decolonization is a current and hot issue, one of the challenging parts of this research was the difficulty of the conduction of participant research on several sites at the same time. Although the social movements are usually not active 24/7, sometimes the groups' actions intersected with each other. Some time periods are more intense, others may be calmer. Especially under pandemic conditions, the event of protest is non-continuous. Aware of all these difficulties, my main research fields were protests sites and weekly meetings of the protests group at Spreeufer 6.

As a museum professional and a person with an activist background, I have been following the social issues related with the museums for more than ten years. Over the years, I have attended many protests as an activist and also as an ordinary participant. James P. Spradley explains the difference between ordinary participant and participant observer as:

“The participant observer comes to a social situation with two purposes: (1) to engage in activities appropriate to the situation and (2) to observe the activities, people, and physical aspects of the situation. The ordinary participant comes to that same situation with only one purpose: to engage in the appropriate activities. In the process of carrying out these actions, this person does not normally want to watch and record everything else that occurs, describe all the actors present, or make note of the physical setting.”
(1980)

However, in the age we live in, the role of the ordinary participant evolved. The purpose and power of the social media during the Arab Spring and later Occupy movements showed the transformation of the ordinary participant. With the social media devices such as Twitter and Instagram, now all the ordinary participants watch and record the events (protests), describe the situation, take and share their notes. Although my participation and experience in the Gezi Protests in 2013 was not within the framework of ethnographic research, it was closer to being a participant observer than an ordinary participant because of these reasons.



Fig. 2. My tweet from the Gezi riots, during a police intervention. During that era, Twitter was often used as a communication tool by the masses.



Fig. 3. 4. My Instagram posts during Gezi riots.

My transition from an ordinary participant of a protest to a participant observer of a protest group was the key point of this research. Mayo Fuster Morell suggests that “*there is no such thing as apolitical and/or neutral research*” (2009: 21). If I had not done research on this topic, I would have been a potential member of this protest group. Being aware of this, when I first contacted the group members, I detailly and openly explained the research subject, my position, and approach. The purpose of this research is not making the protestors’ voices heard to a wider audience and helping them reach the masses, but investigating how they make their voices heard and in which ways they do it.

2.3. Making descriptive observation with fieldnotes and video recordings

After the end of the fourth protest that I was involved as researcher/observer, I had more than six hours of footage and pages of fieldnotes. When I started to analyze my visual and written data, I realized that my questions and answers changed day by day, as Spradley claimed (1980: 73). Before I attended the first protest on 16 December, 2020, I started working on my descriptive questions that lead to descriptive observations. These questions are:

- Who forms this protest group? (Age range, occupations, gender and nationality diversity)
- How do they create the narrative of the protest? (Slogans, performances, speeches, banners)
- How the other parts of protest act? (Security forces, ordinary participants)

Although it was challenging to take fieldnotes during filming, I often used my smartphone to take short notes during the time of incident and compile them right after the protests:

“As the name of the group suggests, many members of the group are people working in the field of culture and arts. One of the main features of such protest groups is the direct involvement of the artists. Artists I know such as Jumana Manna and Tanja Ostojic are also members of the group.

...

The members range in age from the twenties to the fifties. I might say that diversity of gender is quite balanced.

...

Since the subject of the protest is colonization, it is possible to find participants from almost every nationality. Could this be proof that colonization affected the whole world?” (16.12.2020, fieldnotes)

“Projecting an image or a video on the façade of the building is one of the most effective and creative way of taking direct action. Today's screening is “Defund the Humboldt Forum!”¹³ which is produced by the members of the Coalition of Cultural Workers Against the Humboldt Forum and BARAZANI.Berlin. The video is both in English and German and around four and half minutes.

...

The video is projected onto the wall of the pathway on the East-facing façade of the Humboldt Forum. This spot is very convenient as it is a public space and can be viewed from the Rathausbrücke.

...

Today’s sunset is at around 21:15. The screening is starting around that time.

...

*It is 22:30 and still passers-by stop on the bridge and watch the video.”
(19.07.2021, fieldnotes)*

¹³ CCWAH – Defund the Humboldt Forum:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bTGgXkzIhuI&ab_channel=ccwah Last accessed: 05.01.2021

“The presence of the police is much more intense than other protests. This is understandable as it is the opening day of the Humboldt Forum. An official ceremony is also held. The road between Lustgarten and Humboldt Forum is occasionally blocked by the police.

...

I cross the road to observe the protest from a wider perspective. The official opening ceremony of the Humboldt forum has ended, but the protest continues. It is clear that the interest has shifted from the official opening to the protest. Great timing for the protesters. The Humboldt Forum staff including security guards are among those who watch the protest from distance.” (20.07.2021, fieldnotes)

“Although it is a weekday, many of the group members are attending today's protest. Today is the opening of the Ethnology Museum inside the Humboldt Forum. I asked group member Erfan why the entrance area at the Schlossplatz was chosen as the starting point of the protest. He answered that the protocol would enter from here. Undoubtedly, today's target group is protocol members rather than ordinary participants.

...

Berlin Mayor Michael Müller welcomes high-level attendees at the door. At this point, the voice and tone of the protest also hardened. The police kindly warn that the protesters, members of the press, and even me, to not leave the designated area.

...

German President Frank-Walter Steinmeier arrived at the Humboldt Forum to deliver his keynote speech. It is quite interesting to me that it is only protected by two police motorcycles. He glanced briefly at the protest as he got out of the car. I am glad that I manage to film this scene." (22.09.2021, fieldnotes)

The reason why I did not conduct any interviews, I believe that the voice and narrative of the protest itself is an interview. Instead of interviews, I preferred casual conversations with the group members and protest attenders and took fieldnotes from these conversations. The protest is a collective action. Instead of hearing individual voices, the collective voice is more important. The chants, speeches, performances form this collective discourse.

2.4. Synthesizing the filming and research method

As Spradley claims that all descriptive observations include a considerable amount of information about the ethnographer, first their actions. The description of “*where I went, what I did, where I sat, how I overheard things, and who I saw*” (Spradley, 1980: 76). This descriptive observation method was also adapted as my filming technique. How I physically position myself in protest is the best example of this. Jean Rouch proposes that the use of the camera transforms the cameraman himself/herself (1975).

One of the first things I do before starting a film project is to ask myself these questions: What is the purpose of this film? Who am I shooting this film for? Can I make a connection

between the filming technique and the subject in order to create a different artistic essence?

Dziga Vertov describes the connection between the work of the camera and the world as:

“Everyone who cares for his art seeks the essence of his own technique.

Cinema’s unstrung nerves need a rigorous system of precise movement.”

(1995: 8)

In this sense, the camera functions not simply as a way to amplify perception, but to change the filmmaker’s perception, including limitations of esthetics and methods.

In this research, the footage that I recorded also serves the same purpose as my observations. In other words, my footage is my observation and my filming technique is my research method. To link up this, first I tried to deconstruct my research subject by writing down all the words related to it. From hundreds of words/terms, I identified my filming/researching technique: I was going to “follow” a “protest” in “movement”. My main film “Tear It Down” is more than “following a protest movement”. The act of following can be seen in most scenes. Sometimes a protestor, sometimes a hand gesture, sometimes a banner, sometimes an ordinary participant. Movement is an act of motion. However, the act of the social (protest) movement has a metaphorical meaning. I kept myself, the person behind the camera, constantly in motion in order to strengthen this linguistic relationship and to give the audience the sense of “movement”. Instead of static scenes, the film has more dynamic and unsteady shots. There are only a few scenes that I used a tripod to film. I should mention that I wrote my fieldnotes during the shooting of these scenes.

As guides for participant observer, Spradley offers nine major dimensions of every social situation: Space, actor, activity, object, act, event, time, goal, and feeling (1980: 78). I

tried to adapt these into a visual dimension in my film, “Tear It Down”, both by recording and editing:¹⁴

1- Space: the physical place or places

The protests took place in three different places: Schinkelplatz, Lustgarten and Schlossplatz. However, I constantly filmed the Humboldt Forum on purpose, because the focus of these protests is the building itself.

2- Actor: the people involved

Members of the Coalition of Cultural Workers Against the Humboldt Forum are the main actors of this film. On the other hand, a protest has many components. For this reason, I also tried to film the other components such as police and security guards, ordinary participants and passers-by, even the people who just stare at protest as unrelated environmental actors

3- Activity: a set of related acts people do

The protest is the main activity of the film. However, what happens before and after a protest is not something that attendees experience. Preparations, cleanings, and other actions are also parts of this act. I tried to shoot as many of these scenes as possible to show them to the audience.

4- Object: the physical things that are present

During a protest, many objects are used as visual or functional elements. With close up shots of banners, posters, protest materials (such as pans to make noise) I tried to give the idea that these elements are also part of the act of “protesting”.

5- Act: single actions that people do

¹⁴ The first lines in italics are the definitions of James P. Spradley.

Protest is often a collective action. On the other hand, it contains many single acts such as single-person speeches, a member acting alone for organizing, or even single ordinary participant watching and observing. In addition to the collective images, many of these one-man acts can also be seen in the film.

6- *Event: a set of related activities that people carry out*

As this protest group is a coalition of cultural workers, their most actions are collective. Performances, marching, demonstrations are all examples of these actions and they play key role as visual esthetics in the film.

7- *Time: the sequencing that takes place over time*

I used my pages of fieldnotes and more than six hours of footage to create sequence. Combining my fieldnotes and recorded footage helped me to create a timeline.

8- *Goal: the things people are trying to accomplish*

This protest group's main goal is to decolonize the Humboldt Forum. With my editing style, I tried to show that this is not just a visual exploration of a protest movement, but research that focuses on their intent. To do that, I used lots of close-up shots to banners and other visual elements that create the narrative of "decolonization".

9- *Feeling: the emotions felt and expressed*

A protest has lots of emotional moments. Sometimes it calms down, sometime it heats up. This emotional change can be seen in many scenes. Also, individual emotions such as anger, disappointment, and joy are among the emotional elements of the film.

3. The past, the present and the future

In this section, I will discuss what and how the Coalition of Cultural Workers Against the Humboldt Forum challenges the idea of a colonial, universal museum. In order to do that, I will address the narrative of the protests, the historical and political layers of the site, the questions the institution brings with it, and the proposed solutions.

3.1. The voice of the protest: chanting, performing, demanding

The protest is an action of objection and disapproval. It can be in many forms such as demonstration, marching, civil disobedience, occupying, striking, rioting, boycotting, silent protest, and many more. In every form of protest, routines and rituals play a significant role. As a participant observer, one of my main focuses in this research is about these routines and rituals.

The Coalition of Cultural Worker Against the Humboldt Forum uses demonstration as a method of protest. Marching, performances, slogans, speeches are tools of these methods. To examine the physical movement of the group, I tried to map the movement of the group in each protest. The protests started for me when I met with the members of the group at their headquarters for the preparations and ended at the same place.



Fig. 5. Scene from the “Tear It Down” protest. (Photographed by the author, 16.12.2021)

My first encounter with the Coalition of Cultural Workers Against the Humboldt Forum was their poster campaign started in December 2020. This poster campaign was designed to reason why they don't want to participate in the cultural production of the Humboldt Forum. The discourse of a protest movement consists of many elements such as the rhetoric of the banners and slogans. The purpose of the poster or banner is to draw attention in the simplest way by using the image and language in a creative and simplified way. From more than forty different posters glued on the walls of the streets and used during the protests, I noted the ones that attracted my attention in my fieldnotes:

- *“We won't participate and their funding should be redirected”*
- *“I won't participate because I'm tired of waiting for these collections to decolonize me”*

- *“Let us not participate in this show inside the Werner Otto’s Mausoleum, in this Shopping Mall – Museum franchises”*
- *“I won’t participate because decolonial discourse happens elsewhere”*
- *“I don’t participate because the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house”*
- *“We refuse to participate because they refuse to point at themselves when it comes to evaluate the institution’s own role in German colonialism”*
- *“We won’t participate because of the impoverishment of cultures whose artistic treasures were expropriated to decorate western museums”*
- *“I won’t participate because the institution hides why & how every single piece came into their collection”*
- *“I don’t participate because of Germany’s unwell to deal with their colonial history”*
- *“I don’t participate because their reconstruction is a reconstruction of colonial structures”*
- *“We don’t participate because we like the original more than the copy”*
- *“I don’t participate because Germany’s colonial past”*
- *“I don’t participate because I am unlearning imperialism”*
- *“I don’t participate because it was German Nationalism which initiated this building”*
- *“I don’t participate because the dead have no one to trust except the living”*
- *“I won’t participate because this is a 677 million Euros contribution to the commodification of colonial history”*
- *“I won’t participate because you don’t listen”*

- *“I refuse to participate because this is a house where white folks worship the consumption of bodies of color”*
- *“I refuse to participate because my silence could be understood as consent and I most certainly do not consent”*
- *“I refuse to participate because this institution stores drawers and drawers full of human skulls and bones and other stolen artifacts and that is nothing but sick and evil”*
- *“I won’t participate because the prison isn’t better if it’s in Mitte and it costed 677 million Euros”*
- *“I refuse to participate because this collection tries to gild ugly social and historical facts with the patina of high culture, science, taste and beauty.”*

Protests are collective actions which requires the participation of the attenders. Slogans are the one of the examples of ensuring this participation. Chanting a slogan collectively is not a simple action. It ensures that the discourse of the protest is embraced by the wider masses. It should be simple, easy to memorize, and catchy. The most used slogans of the Coalition of Cultural Workers Against the Humboldt Forum are “Tear it down and turn it upside down” and “Defund the Humboldt Forum”. Performance by singing and acting is another method of this protest movement. Tear-Down-Ensemble was founded by the group members in order to stage their performances which are readaptations of popular and classic songs. The group members staged *“What Goes Up Must Come Down”*, *“Tudo Vira Bosta”*, *“Mutter Beimlein”*, *“Mumie”*, *“Wartende Schönheit, 1736”* in their three protests.

All these visual and literal discourses emphasize and summarize the demands of the group in an esthetic way. A symbolic target for protest is part of the visualization of the

discourse. For the Coalition of Cultural Workers Against the Humboldt Forum, this symbolic target is the golden orb and cross of the Humboldt Forum. The group staged their first protest on 15 August 2020 at the Schinkelplatz just days after my arrival to Berlin. In this protest, which I couldn't attend, group members tossed a papier-mâché replica of the golden cross. In an interview about this protest, group members answered the question of Pablo Larios from Frieze Magazine about this performance as:

“On 30 May, the Humboldt Forum was adorned with a golden orb and cross, which we copied in papier-mâché for use in our first public rehearsal at the Schinkelplatz, across the river from the building, on 15 August. The structure is not simply a prominent representation of a cross, as both the Humboldt Forum itself and much of the media have so far interpreted it. Appended to a golden orb representing the world, the cross becomes the globus cruciger, or Reichsapfel in German: an explicit symbol of Christian global domination dating from the 11th century, which has been deployed as an emblem of power by various European monarchies, including Prussia's.

There is no way to misread the symbolism; yet for anyone left in doubt, the Humboldt Forum's architects have dared to go even further by re-inscribing its base with a band of text originally composed by Kaiser Friedrich Wilhelm IV: 'All in heaven and on earth and beneath the earth should kneel in the name of Jesus.' This demand completely discredits the Minister of Culture and Media's recent dubious attempt to justify the cross as representing values of 'charity, freedom, open-mindedness and tolerance' and as 'an invitation to get to know the various cultures that will be at home in the

Humboldt Forum,' as quoted on the Humboldt Forum's website." (Larios, 2020)

While group members explaining why they target this symbolic icon directly, my observations during the protests also suggests that this intention was used as the main image:

"The golden cross is the most used image in the banners also for the other materials like brochures and donation box." (20.07.2021, fieldnotes)

"The main theme of the fourth protest is the golden cross itself. It is visible and hearable in speeches, slogans, and the banners. I think this intention makes the difference between just protesting a cultural institution's structure and protesting an institution which sustains the colonial discourse (voluntarily or involuntarily). Direct action to an image/symbol..." (22.09.2021, fieldnotes)

3.2. Historical layers and the controversial past of the site

In the past century alone, Berlin has witnessed many historical and political events such as two world wars, the destruction, the economic depression, being the laboratory of the politically polarized world, reunification, regaining the title of capital in the shadow of neoliberal policies. All these political, economic and sociologic developments left a layer on top of each other. Today, Berlin lies on these historical layers. I discuss the history of the site in layers, as the Coalition of Cultural Workers Against the Humboldt Forum did for the Humboldt Forum. These layers are political, historical, and controversial. Sometimes they lay on top of each other, sometimes they intersect.

Assmann and Czaplika suggests that *“through its cultural heritage a society becomes visible to itself and to other”* (1995: 33). The controversy of the Humboldt Forum brings is also related to this. The Humboldt Forum’s site has a historical and controversial past. As a replica of the Berlin Palace now, the building evolved over a period of more than 500 years (Wolter, 2019: 109). In what form this cultural heritage of this city should appear to its own community and to others has always been a topic of discussion, not just today. Architecture has always been *“used as a means of communication with the public and setting parameters for a discourse about what should be valued and whose interests should be represented”* (Russell, 2017: 9). As a cultural and art institution, the Humboldt Forum hosts four different institutions: the Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz with the Ethnologisches Museum and the Museum für Asiatische Kunst der Staatlichen Museen zu Berlin, the Stadtmuseum Berlin together with Kulturprojekte Berlin, the Humboldt-Universität and the Stiftung Humboldt Forum in Berliner Schloss. In the form of old Berlin Palace, the institution suggests that it *“is radical new building full of exciting architectural juxtapositions, references to the eventful history of the site and modern interpretations”* (Humboldt Forum Magazine, 2020). In the architecture press release of the building, the architect Franco Stella describes the building as:

“The reconstruction creates a fresh experience and understanding of the relationships between the most prominent sites and buildings in central Berlin. The open portals connect the squares around the castle to its inner courtyards to form a spacious public space in the heart of Berlin.”
(Humboldt Forum, 2020)

However, the Humboldt Forum's reconstruction in the form of the Berlin Palace is more than rebuilding a cultural heritage, it is reincarnation. With a cost of 670 million euros¹⁵, the building became one of Europe's most expensive and ambitious cultural centers. The Humboldt Forum is not only a cultural but also an economic challenge like newly opened Berlin Airport. As the capital of three different Germany¹⁶, the architectural development plans of Berlin have always been in the hands of different political systems. Throughout this range of political systems, the site of the Humboldt Forum has evolved into a place with many historical layers on top of each other. However, the decision of which cultural representation would incarnate in which form in this historically layered area turned into a decision of which culture (East-West) would dominate the other in the new (or on the contrary, old) capital city of a united Germany. In 1997, during the Schlossdebate for the deconstruction of the Palast der Republik, the CDU Senator for Building in Berlin stated:

“Overall, regarding the design of Berlin Mitte it can be said: if we want to give it an identity, in the new reunited capital city, we must base this identity on the roots of our shared history. Not only German history but also European history (...) However, it must also be in the common awareness that there was a unified Germany in a shared Europe and a common development line before the division of our country.” (Russell, 2017: 59)

Curator Bonaventure Soh Bejeng Ndikung describes the social level of West Germany domination over East Germany after the reunification as “not only did the people of the former GDR lose, expeditiously, their social, economic and political structures and ways of life, they

¹⁵ <https://berliner-schloss.de/en/new-palace/financing-of-the-humboldt-forum/> Last accessed: 28.12.2021

¹⁶ The German Empire, Nazi Germany, and reunified Germany.

also lost their bearings, as their street names were changed, monuments were contested, political figures chastised, identity questioned and shamed, and history challenged, in an effort to erase the communist past” (2018: 39-40). This war of social domination between the West and the East is one of the recent manifestations of colonial domination. The construction of a new identity after the reunification was carried out by gradually erasing the elements representing the ideology and culture of the East. To illustrate this, I can give two examples: one outside the Humboldt Forum and one within. The newly built Berlin Palace, which hosts the Humboldt Forum, has three baroque façades. However, the eastern façade which faces the Marx-Engels Forum was built in contemporary way. This is where the Marx-Engels Forum representing the East and the Humboldt Brothers Forum representing the West meet. As a public park, Marx-Engels Forum named after Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, the authors of the Communist Manifesto. The park was opened to public on 4 April, 1986. The famous Sculpture by Ludwig Engelhardt of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels originally faced to the East, set against the backdrop of the Palast der Republik. After the reunification, the monument was moved from the center of the square to a shady corner. It was also turned 180 degrees and is facing the West now. The Humboldt Forum was named after the Humboldt Brothers. President of the Prussian Cultural Heritage Foundation Hermann Parzinger explains this naming decision as:

“Wilhelm and Alexander von Humboldt are not only closely linked to the location but are also considered leading figures for the ideological concept of the Humboldt Forum. Wilhelm represents the importance of classical thought for European intellectual history, the understanding of non European cultures (...) Alexander symbolizes curiosity about the world, openness to foreign cultures, the exploration of America and Asia across

disciplines, and the idea of the inseparable unity of nature and culture. The Berlin Palace in particular was a site where Alexander von Humboldt was able to present and debate these ideas. King Friedrich Wilhelm IV invited him regularly, together with the historians Leopold von Ranke and Barthold Georg Niebuhr, the philosopher Friedrich Wilhelm Schelling, and the architect Karl Friedrich Schinkel, to participate in discussions at tea in the salon at the palace.” (2011: 18)



Fig. 6. The contemporary east façade of the Humboldt Forum from the corner of the Marx-Engels Forum.

(Photographed by the author, 07.09.2021)

These two forums are one of the best examples of Berlin's historical, political and controversial layers. The historical story of these two forums is an "outside" example of the political battle fought in forging the identity of a unified Germany. The other example situated in the

Humboldt Forum, but in unusual place. When I started researching the history of the Palast der Republik, I often searched for souvenirs related to this iconic building. Christos Varvantakis claims that “the dismantlement of a monument becomes a monument in itself” (2009: 32). He gives two postcards as how history becomes nostalgia:

“As the PdR is being dismantled and becomes part of the past, these postcards are becoming souvenirs of the building, and it is becoming part of their domain to maintain a share of memory of the building. As such, both postcards are (or are becoming) nostalgic objects.” (2009: 29)

Today, it is possible to find many other nostalgic objects such as plates, cutlery, glasses, armchairs, couches, lamps belonging to this building in second-hand stores and flea markets. Palast der Republik was not only the parliament building but also a cultural center. It was referred as “Erich’s lamp shop” because of its iconic lamps. Before the opening of Humboldt Forum, I came across these iconic lights in the second-hand market many times, in the price range of 50€ - 250€. Today, the Humboldt Forum’s official souvenir shop sells reproductions of these lamps in the price range of 350€ to 3.895€. ¹⁷ While the ideology of the East and the West clashes “outside” as two forums, the nostalgia of the east is offered for sale with expensive price tags “inside” the souvenir shop of the west.

¹⁷ <https://shop.humboldtforum.org/en/collections/leuchtmittel> Last accessed: 08.01.2022



Fig. 7. Reproductions of iconic Palast der Republik lamps which is sold at the Humboldt Forum's souvenir shop.

(Photographed by the author, 10.11.2021)

As Berlin hosted many historical events, it is very rich in souvenir and memorabilia. Piece of a Berlin Wall is one of the most popular souvenirs all over the world. As no visible trace of the Palast der Republik has been left on site today, the remnants of it have turned into souvenirs just like the Berlin Wall. A piece of the building's famous gold-steamed façade glazing is sold for 79€.¹⁸ The recycled steel from the deconstruction of the Palast der Republik was used in the construction of the tallest building in the world, the Burj Khalifa (Loy, 2012). However, the story of the granites saved from destruction is even more interesting than any of these.

The “Save the Granite” initiative was launched in view of the demolition of the Palast der Republik in 2005 and was able to secure several hundred square meters of fine granite paving. This initiative, which started under leadership of Adam Sello, tried to find an inner-city location for building a skatepark with these granites for a long time. In 2010, supported

¹⁸ <https://aus.berlin/weihnachten/1523/broken-memories-palastkristall-der-republik> Last accesses: 08.01.2022

by the then senator for Urban Development Ingeborg Junge-Reyer, the idea of the skatepark “Vogelfreiheit” evolved. Located in the Tempelhofer Feld, this skatepark brings two historical sites of Berlin together: the Tempelhof Airport and Palast der Republik. In cooperation with the project initiators Adam Sello and Robert Merk, mostly young skateboarders worked on the project physically by shaping the granite blocks with hammers and chisels. Adam Sello, who is also a skateboarder too, describes the choice of material as “granite is the stuff that skater’s dreams are made of” (BZ-Berlin, 2012). Several skateboarders and architects worked on the design of this skatepark. Skateboarding veteran Lennie Burmeister describes the architecture of “Vogelfreiheit” skatepark as:

“I also helped adjust the heights, slopes and angles. It’s a pretty rad location now because it’s not a skatepark where everything is idealised. In the street nothing is perfect; the ground is bad, you can’t jump or slide as well. So it really combines the best of both worlds. I think that’s the future of skating.”
(Helms, 2019)

I first heard about this sculpture skatepark in the middle of my research. Right after I learned about the “Vogelfreiheit”, I made my first trip to the skatepark on 10 June, 2021. The skatepark is located in the southern part of the Tempelhof Feld, at the edge of the park. I had chance to have conversation with several skateboarder at that day. The fact that most of them do not know about the history of this place was an important reason for me to make a film about this place:

“I talked with several skateboarders about the history of the park. Only one knew which historical pieces they were skating on. He was a regular user of this skatepark.”

...

There are two information plaques about the skatepark, a concrete building which looks like a shelter and ping-pong tables. As this place is in a remote corner of Tempelhofer Feld, it is quieter than the rest of the field.”
(10.06.2021, fieldnotes)

In July 2021, I started looking for a skateboarder to film at “Vogelfreiheit” for my film “Skating on the Ruins of the History”. I spent a lot time on skateboarding forums, Reddit pages to find a skateboarder. Coincidentally, at a dinner I was invited to, I met a skateboarder who regularly goes to this skatepark. We made an appointment with my friend Sophia for 8 August, 2021 to film Heiko at park. Before I started shooting the film, I had the opportunity to talk to Heiko about the park. Although he had skated in this park many times, he had no knowledge of the park's history. He explained the reason why he did not wonder about the history of the park as *“so many historical events have taken place in Berlin over the years and there is not enough time to know all of them”* (08.08.2021, fieldnotes). As he suggested Berlin has many historical layers...

As Heiko mentioned, Berlin has many historical layers. As an example of them, the Berlin Palace is a 500-year-old construction story. The Foundation stone for the palace was laid by the Elector of Brandenburg, Friedrich II on 31 July 1443. About 570 years later, on 12 June 2013, the Humboldt Forum’s laying of the foundation stone took place. In these 570 years, many historical events have been engraved in the memory of this area. On 9 November 1918, the Spartacist Karl Liebknecht denounced monarchy and announced the birth of the republic from one of the palace’s balconies: “The Palace now belongs to the people” (Varvantakis, 2009: 30). The Palast der Republik (the Palace of the Republic) served its people from 1976 to

1990. Now, the Humboldt Forum reincarnated at the same site as the replica of the Berlin Palace with a broader discourse: a palace in Berlin for the whole world.¹⁹

3.3. The Humboldt Forum and the questions that it carries with it

Although I put my political views aside for ethical reasons while doing this research, it is not possible for me to do the same for my profession, as it is a part of my identity. As a museum professional who was doing research about the decolonization movement, I didn't position myself within the protest group, even if the group's ideology suits mine. However, I had a chance to visit the Humboldt Forum many times in different conditions and purposes, simply as a local tourist, museum enthusiast and professional. This section of the thesis is mostly about my observations within the structure and the narrative of the Humboldt Forum. Many different questions appeared in my mind while searching for the answer to my research questions.

I had the opportunity to have a conversation with dozens of people about the Humboldt Forum during the one-year period of my research. My experiences and observations as a researcher and museum professional have often been the main subject of these conversations, as many of them have refused to visit the place. I often describe this building's architecture as like a cake. Inside, it is full of layers of frosting and sponge cakes at the top of each other. Outside, it is covered with simple and shiny decorations. Three sides are baroque, one side is contemporary. Some people will like it, some people will hate it. It is a matter of taste. Just days after preview for the press, Die Zeit compared the Humboldt Forum to an "insurance

¹⁹ The Humboldt Forum often uses the phrase "a palace in Berlin for the whole world" as their motto.

office” (Rauterberg, 2020). Der Spiegel also satirically noted the interior of the building looked “easy to clean” (Knöfel, Minkmar, 2020).

My film “Museal - The Story of Dying Museums” is about the questions within the Humboldt Forum. These questions are also valid for any ethnographic museum as they are full of looted objects. The purpose of my visit to the Ethnology Museum in the Humboldt Forum on 10 November 2021 was to see what questions this institution would bring to my mind. As I wandering among the galleries, standing in front of the stylish showcases, I asked these questions about these museums filled with colonial past:

“Are museums turning into museals?”

How many historical layers does this building stand on?

Does this museum fully tell its own story before it tells the stories of the others?

If there were no artifacts looted from other countries, would the fancy showcases of the museums stay empty?

Are other countries storages for your museums where you can take artifacts whenever you want?

How many cultures have been destroyed during your race to fill your museums?

Can history be reconstructed inside of a museum with the objects plundered from their homeland?

If museum showcases are not prisons, why are the artifacts shackled?

Are the labels death certificates of the objects?

How are museums different from prisons or cemeteries?

How long should artifacts wait to return to their homelands?

Does the exhibition environment created for the objects make them feel at home?

Are endless labels enough to tell the whole story?

Don't museums have enough artifacts to fill their empty spaces?

How much does it worth a piece of history?" (10.11.2021, fieldnotes)

3.4. The gift and the restitution: overdue and slow responses

The existence of unprovenanced, undocumented, or alienated objects in museum collections is one of the problems posed by the colonial system. James Cuno, the president of the J. Paul Getty Trust, explains how important this problem is for the museums as:

"We cannot afford to waste time debating the same tired question of whether or not museums should acquire unprovenanced antiquities. That just won't do. We can do better. We have to." (2008: 36)

The vast majority of objects in the museum entered through trade and exchange or as gifts. Marcel Mauss's essay, "The Gift: Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies", focuses on how societies exchange objects in order to build relationship. Influenced

by Mauss, Dan Hicks positions “the notions of debt, the obligation to receive and the law of reciprocity, and the desire of gift itself to make a return” at the heart of anthropological reflections on material things. In this sense, most of the looted objects were *gifted* to colonizers (ending up at museums) by indigenous communities as obligations. Mauss describes the underlying reason of this obligation to gift as:

“The obligation to give is no less important; a study of it might enable us to understand how people have become exchangers of goods and services. We can only point out a few facts. To refuse to give, to fail to invite, just as to refuse to accept, is tantamount to declaring war; it is to reject the bond of alliance and commonality.” (2002: 17)

It is a fact that anthropological museum was formed by “given” and “taken” objects. However, anthropological museums refuse the most of the restitution demands as these objects were “gifted”. In a sense, this anthropological approach to gifts has been distorted by anthropological museums for the justification of the vested interest on “given” and “taken” objects. Cameroon’s Mandu Yenu throne is an example of these “taken” gifts to the German emperor, which ended up in the collection of the Ethnologisches Museum in the Humboldt Forum.



Fig. 8. Mandu Yenu throne at the Ethnology Museum in the Humboldt Forum. (Photographed by the author, 10.11.2021)

Although many objects in museums are not included in the museum collections by legal procedures, the provenance information of the objects is extremely important for the restitution demands. Most of the looted objects were brought by the officers and soldiers to the market as spoils of colonialism. To illustrate the extent of this plunder, Dan Hicks argues that the total looted objects from Benin probably numbered more than 10.000 relics and curios. They were all brought to Britain to be sold on the open market and kept in private collections. The dealer William Downing Webster alone, sold 563 Benin objects between 1897 and 1901 (2020: 147). As the looted Benin Bronzes are held in 161 different institutions from 23 different countries today, they are good examples to understand the concept of restitution in global scale. Ethnologisches Museum of Berlin State Museums holds 255 pieces of Benin Bronzes in its collection (ibid: 243).²⁰ These objects ended up in the museum during the era of Felix von Luschan, the Deputy Director of the Ethnologisches Museum Berlin. The first attempt of

²⁰ Although the exact number is still unknown, it is estimated to be around 500.

catalogue raisonné of Benin Bronzes was made by von Luschan in 1919. As an anthropologist, Felix von Luschan describes Benin Bronzes as “the spoils of war (Kriegsbeute) made during the conquest of Benin on 18 February 1897” and calls them as “the biggest surprise that the field of ethnology (Völkerkunde) had ever received.” (ibid: 137). Felix von Luschan describes these objects as "received" rather than "given" or “taken”. In 1897, One of the German explorers of Africa, Richard Kandt expressed his opinions about colonial collecting to von Luschan as:

“Generally, it’s difficult to acquire an object without employing at least some violence. I reckon that half the objects in your museum were stolen.” (ibid: 37)

The Ethnologisches Museum of Berlin State Museums is a partner of the Humboldt Forum. One of the chapters of the mutual understanding and goals of the Humboldt Forum, which is published in June 2021, is the “Decolonialism and Provenance Research: Different Ways of Thinking and Acting”. The Humboldt Forum accepts that “colonialism and racism belong to the history of the site as well as to the history of the collections that are accessible here to the public” (Dorgerloh, Koch, Kunst, Parzinger, Spies, 2021). The declaration continues as:

“The objects from Africa, the Americas, Asia, Australia and Oceania are witness to a long colonial and racist history. In collaboration with representatives of the societies of origin and with international partnerships, the Humboldt Forum provides resources for and is heavily involved in programmes that confront colonialism and its crimes. In analysis and science, such as provenance research, it has instituted changed procedures with the purpose of enabling forward-looking activities in dialogue with

visitors and contributors. The Humboldt Forum promotes the continuous questioning and decolonizing of knowledge in science, art and culture through its exhibitions as well as its events programme and educational resources.” (2021)

The Humboldt Forum’s mission of decolonialism and provenance research has evolved into an active restitution process. The issue of restitution is global. In 2018, the French president Emmanuel Macron asked French art historian Bénédicte Savoy and Senegalese academic writer Felwine Sarr to make a report about permanent and full repatriation of looted African objects during the colonial era (Small, 2018). Savoy, who resigned from an advisory board of the Humboldt Forum in 2017 in disagreement with the museum's way of dealing with colonial history, mentioned that “the German authorities realized that it isn’t just a local issue, limited to Berlin, but on the contrary, a much broader and deeper one” after this report (Savoy: 37). The Coalition of Cultural Workers Against the Humboldt Forum often takes the restitution process into the core of their protests and describes the Humboldt Forum’s efforts as long overdue (CCWAH, 2020). Weeks before the official opening of the Humboldt Forum in July 2021, the Nigerian delegation met with German Foreign Minister Heiko Mass, Andreas Görden of the German Foreign Office, Minister of State for Culture Monika Grütters and the director of the Prussian Cultural Heritage Foundation, Hermann Parzinger. The Edo Museum of West African Art (EMOWAA) in Benin City, Nigeria will be hosting works of art from the former Kingdom of Benin, located in present-day Nigeria. As a result of these negotiations, Hermann Parzinger announced that they are working on a roadmap for the return of Benin Bronzes in 2022.²¹ On 22 September 2021, while I was filming the protest of the Coalition of Cultural

²¹ <https://www.smb.museum/en/whats-new/detail/benin-bronzes-discussions-with-the-nigerian-delegation-in-berlin/> Last accessed: 08.01.2022

Workers Against the Humboldt Forum's protest outside the Humboldt Forum, the president of Germany, Frank-Walter Steinmeier gave his keynote speech inside. He addressed to the public, aware of the fact that decolonization efforts are not a local problem, but a global one:

“Despite all criticism the conversation has started and we see the first results the restitution of the significant Benin bronzes that were negotiated in cooperation with Nigeria. It is a signal of change and I am very grateful to the foundation to the Prussian Cultural Heritage Foundation the Humboldt Forum to the Minister of State and the Federal Foreign Office for their commitment.

...

This process will be painful that is for certain but we as Europeans we have a responsibility with regard to this history.

...

Every country for itself but also we as Europeans jointly...” (Steinmeier, 2021)

As the most of these objects are still being held in international collections, Nigerian government runs a global restitution campaign of Benin Bronzes. The Benin Dialogue Group initiative, which was brought to life in 2010, continues their dialog campaigns in Germany, the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, Austria and Sweden.

As a result of dialogues with the Nigerian delegation and public pressure from the outside, the Humboldt Forum decided not to show any Benin Bronzes for their opening

exhibitions. However, another German museum famous for its Benin Bronzes collection takes a different way. Museum um Rothenbaum – Kulturen und Künste der Welt (MARKK), or better known as the Museum of Ethnology – Hamburg, announced that they will exhibit 179 artefacts from the kingdom of Benin in the “Benin. Looted History” exhibition to explain how they arrived to the museum and why they are returning to Nigeria in 2022. This attempt of decolonization by display and restitution may set an example for other museums in the future. Barbara Plankensteiner, the director of the museum, explains the logic and intention behind this method as

“We want to show their provenance and how they came here, but also explain their function and how they were used.” (Hickley, 2021)

The exhibition gives a specific focus on the provenance of Benin Bronzes. The museum’s approach to intertwined history of the controversial story of the objects with the Hamburg trade networks, shows us the connection between the ethnological museums and the market. Dan Hicks suggests that the colonial violence travels across the time and space through the double agency of the institution and the market (2020: 176). For him, the market functions as a tool of transformation of sacred and royal materials culture into objects (ibid: 180). Rather than just telling a story of repatriation, the “Benin. Looted Exhibition” takes one more step to explain how the colonial system works in cooperation with the market and the museum. In this sense, this exhibition differs from all previous restitution efforts.

It is assumed that around 10.000 objects were looted from Benin during colonial expedition and sold in the market. German museums are not the only ones who discuss the returning these objects. In 2018, France agreed to return 26 artworks that was looted from Benin (BBC, 2018) In 2021, The Metropolitan Museum of Art (MET) announced that two

brass plaque from its collection will be returned to Nigeria (Bahr, 2021). University of Aberdeen agreed to send back a bronze sculpture which was looted by British soldiers in Benin (BBC, 2021). However, the British Museums continues refusing the restitution demands of looted Benin Bronzes. Since 1950, the British Museum sold more than 30 Benin Bronzes in the market. Most of the objects sold by the museum have been bought by Nigeria (BBC, 2002). In 2021, a group of artists from Benin City has offered to donate bronze artworks to the British Museum as a way to encourage the museum to return original Benin Bronzes. The artists used the same technique to sculpt the bronzes and used PDF copies of the catalogues from the British Museum as reference (Owolabi, Shirbon, 2021).

Between 80% and 90% of Africa's cultural heritage is stored in European museums, experts claim (Steffes-Halmer, 2022). The question arises whether museums will be empty if all these cultural objects are returned to their societies. Felwine Sarr explains why the fear of empty showcases is not relevant as "the desire does not seem to be to empty museums." (Storm, 2019). Restitution is a tool of decolonization to understand and unlearn the structure of colonialism. However, the restitution alone may not make sense because "making reparations; apologizing can also be used as an excuse for not doing things today." (Jenkins, 2016: 283). Decolonization with no reparations is an effort of relegating the colonial violence to a temporal realm beyond accountability. (Azoulay, 2019: 145). Although the demands of restitution of looted objects begin to meet by the museums, the process is delayed for years and progresses slowly. For instance, unlike the example of Benin Bronzes, the Humboldt Forum decided to exhibit the statue, Ngonnso, which was stolen from the Nso tribe at the northwest of Cameroon in 1909 under German occupation.²² Bring Brack Ngonnso initiative members, Gad Shiynyuy and Silvie Njobati attended the protest and gave a speech on the opening day of the

²² <https://www.trtworld.com/magazine/the-inconvenient-truth-of-berlin-s-new-cultural-centre-14093>

Ethnologisches Museum in the Humboldt Forum, demanding the return of the statue back to the Nso tribe. The example of Ngonso shows us that decolonization efforts are too important to be left to the initiative of museums alone. At this point, the importance of the function of the protests to create public pressure on museums is understood.



Fig. 9. Ngonso sculpture in a showcase at the Ethnology Museum in the Humboldt Forum. (Photographed by the author, 10.11.2021)

The Soviet movie "A Visitor to a Museum", which was directed by Konstantin Lopushansky in 1989, tells the story of a post-apocalyptic world after an unspecified ecological disaster. In this world, the population is divided and decimated, including "degenerates" or "mutants" and the survivors of the previous civilization. The protagonist of the film is one of the few survivors who has managed to retain the human form and way of thinking and he tries to reach "the Museum". This museum exists in the depths of the sea and can only be reached during low tide. It carries the remains of past civilizations but is extremely difficult to reach. Undoubtedly, this museum is an "ethnographic museum" that houses the remains of the previous civilization. Although this is a science fiction movie, the story of museums and those

who want to reach them for visiting, examining, and experiencing is not much different from each other today.

The protests groups such as Decolonize This Place and the Coalition of Cultural Workers Against the Humboldt Forum do not fight just not only restitution but also for recognition of the “other”. It is a fact that, “universal museums” are too slow and insufficient to respond the urgent calls of restitution. The demand of the restitution of all the looted objects, which forms “the museum”, sounds utopic. This argument is often expressed by both museum professionals and also the ordinary audience. “Museum without objects” is a radical idea. Without objects there would be no museums. “We will destroy museums...” proclaimed Filippo Tammaso Marinetti in his Futurist Manifesto (1909). “We will free Italy from her numberless museums which cover her with countless cemeteries... Museums, cemeteries!” he continues. Kazimir Malevich suggests that “the museum is a relic of dusty past, and must be destroyed” (Zhilyaev, 2015: 34). He argues that burning down all the art. For Malevich, even experiencing the dust of a Ruben painting will be enough to inspire us. He offers that our contemporary life should have as its slogan:

“...all that we have made is made for the crematorium.” (1919: 270)

These utopian approaches have something to show: the function of museums has been radically criticized for so long. Decolonization is not only a topic of a problem for museums, it is a way of salvation from extinction. The resistance of museums to change comes from their historical roots. Since these roots are centuries old, to shake the museum’s tree we need public pressure. It is not just museum directors or curators who will save the idea of “museum”. The demand must come from the community.

Although we are going through dystopian times in every aspect and constitution of life, the Coalition of Cultural Workers Against the Humboldt Forum's vision is not utopian. Their demands are challenges about reinventing the idea of museum. To accomplish this, the group tries to put pressure on the institution with protest. In each protest, it can be observed that the participation increased compared to the previous one. My observation of the increase of news in the press is not due to selective perception. Before the physical opening of the Humboldt Forum, the institution agreed to begin talks of restitution of Benin Bronzes. At the same day, during the protest, the coalition kept going on challenging the institution as their demands are more fundamental. In the forthcoming months, the group plans to stage more protest till their demands meet. On 11 January 2022, Claudia Roth, the new Minister of State for Culture, met with forty representatives of German museum institutions to discuss decolonization efforts.

Conclusion

Ethnography as a method is linked to physical being-there of the researcher. Participating and observing a physical protest gave me insights. These insights can be read through the audiovisual language of the protest group. As observed and analyzed, the discourse of the protest group was formed by physical objects like banners, posters, protests materials and spoken-written rhetorics like statements, slogans, speeches. Analyzing the demands of the protest group through their discourse, it is possible to consider that their challenge was not against the existence of the Humboldt Forum. On the contrary, their resistance is about reshaping the structure of the museum, redefining its mission, and rewriting its colonial narrative. Planning, mobilizing, and constantly updating a protest movement under the conditions of the Covid-19 pandemic were the main challenges faced by the Coalition of

Cultural Workers Against the Humboldt Forum. However, as decolonization is a global and current issue, the group has managed to attract more attention.

This research was planned in three layers. The top layer of the research focuses on the protest itself. The underlayers consist of the challenge (the Humboldt Forum) and the demand (decolonization). Although protests were not continuous, “Tear It Down” shows the dynamics of a protest movement in a chronologic timeline with my fieldnotes. “Museal – The Story of Dying Museums” takes the main research question and breaks into more questions in order to clarify the deepness of the colonial problem. “Skating on the Ruins of the History” discusses the controversial history of the site. Rather than explaining the story of the site as like a ghost from the past, it tells the story of ruins that serves a different purpose in another part of the city.

Throughout this research, I also observed and witnessed the effort and progress of decolonization that was made by the institution itself and the government. In this sense, this research and the visual projects give the opportunity to provide a roadmap on how a protest movement should challenge a colonial idea.

As decolonization of the cultural and art institutions is a long-running struggle, this thesis intends to explore the issues related to decolonization for further future research projects.

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