

VISITOR OF A MUSEUM

*“When men die, they become history.
Once statues die, they become art.
This botany of death is what we call culture.”*

This statement from 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. Commissioned by the journal *Présence Africaine* and banned until 1960s by French authorities for being anticolonial, this visual essay reveals the impact of colonialism on museums. In the film, directors use the magic of cinema, by treating all the subjects in front of the lens without differentiating between humans, statues, environment, and architecture. It brings living and inanimate objects closer together. It questions what is alive and what is inanimate. This is the underlying problem of today's museums: could a dead object in a museum still be alive in the society it belongs to? As a museum worker, I liken today's museums architecturally to shopping malls, structurally to cemeteries, and functionally to prisons.



Photo 1. The interior of the Humboldt Forum, 20 November 2021. (Photographed by the author)

The experience offered by museums has now turned into an "event". As part of the cultural industry, museums have to compete with different variety of activities. In the age that we are living, the decision whether to go to a museum or a shopping mall has become an ordinary decision-making mechanism for the ordinary citizen. Museums have lost their charm. In order to become centers of attraction again, starchitects have been hired to use the attractiveness, novelty, and even nostalgia of the architecture. To pull the visitors closer to exhibition, the entire museum experience has becoming more interactive. In every exhibition, we see more touch screens, sound and visual installations that visitors can interact with and participate in. The more they try to compete with other "events", the more they become like them. Today, the sterileness and essence of museums are not different than shopping malls.

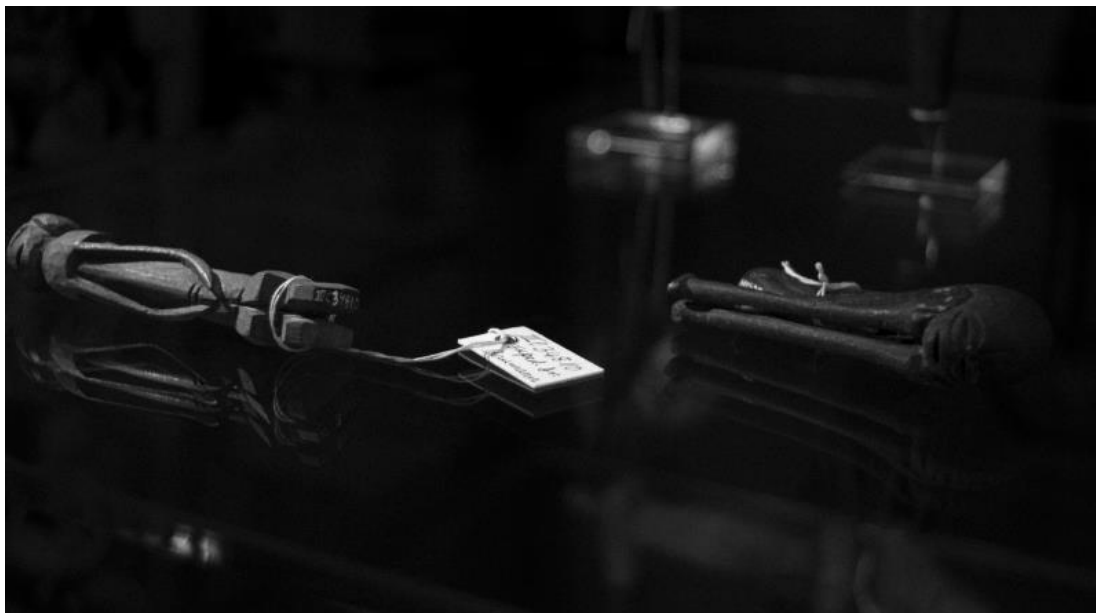


Photo 2. An object inside the showcase, the Ethnology Museum in the Humboldt Forum, 10 November 2021. (Photographed by the author)

The visit to a museum or a cemetery has the same level of silence. Undoubtedly, the reason for this silence comes from the respect for the dead. As the film, “*Statues Also Die*”, suggests when objects die, they become art. All these dead objects find a final resting place in museums. In a sense, museums are mausoleums for these objects. Theodor W. Adorno explains this resembles as:

“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.”¹

For many years, museums have been only for dead objects and artists. It is inevitable that they become “ceteries” as they display “dead” objects day by day. Defining today’s museum as “museal” is perhaps the most accurate assessment.



Photo 3. A shackled object inside the showcase, the Ethnology Museum in the Humboldt Forum, 10 November 2021. (Photographed by the author)

The objects in most ethnology museums are dead for the museum as they were captured, looted but alive for the community as they still have a vital relationship between them. Putting these objects behind a stylish showcase, spying on it with high-tech surveillance systems, and guarding it security guards sound like another institution: prisons. Michel Foucault argues that since the late 18th and early 19th century, the bourgeoisie’s aim is to maintain the authority by creating modern forms of subjectivity through a dual process: transforming an individual to a non-threatening, installing a new kind of identity. This form of discipline/power works “by producing knowledge, a defining ‘truth’ about individuals’ behavior and personality, only in order to discipline them through social definitions of normality, material institutions (like schools, hospitals and prison reformatories) and the

¹ Theodor W. Adorno, *Prisms*, (Neville Spearman: London, 1967), 175.

supervising judgement of professionals (doctors, teachers, judges, etc.)”². The history, mission, and purpose of the museum are parallel to this narrative. The museum is a Western invention that shapes the culture and knowledge. Until today, its true mission is to transform the object into a non-threatening subject and display it in a new identity within the museum. These knowledge production institutions used the colonial power of the empires for centuries to fill their collections and discipline *the other's* culture. In this sense, labeling the objects (prisoners), locking in them in showcases (cells), and surveilling them with security guards (wardens) are the defining actions of *museum discipline*.

Museums are dying, as they are resisting to reshape their structures, redefine their missions, and rewrite their colonial narrative. The narratives of the museums function as hiding tools of the destructive past of colonialism. It becomes clear how necessary decolonization is for the museums in order to keep them alive. In order to understand how decolonization of cultural and art institutions can be accomplished, I spent one year with the protest group “the Coalition of Cultural Workers Against the Humboldt Forum” as a researcher.³

The Humboldt Forum is one of the most controversial projects of unified Germany both for economical and ethical reasons. As the site of the building has many historical layers, building a cultural center in the form of the Berlin Palace led to public indignation. The Berlin Palace architecturally evolved over a period of more than 500 years. The *schloss*, whose foundation stone was laid by the Elector of Brandenburg – Friedrich II on 31 July 1443, served as the palace of Germany for centuries. On 9 November 1918, the Spartacist Karl Liebknecht denounced monarchy and announced the birth of the republic from one of the palace’s balconies. During the World War II, it was struck by Allied bombs. Partly collapsed, it was even served as backdrop in Soviet movie “*The Fall of Berlin*”. The palace remained in East Germany under the control of the Soviet Union after the war. First, it was demolished and then the *Palast der Republik*, which would serve as the East Germany parliament building and cultural center, was built. Since the reunification of Germany, the future of this site has been at the heart of political debate. The decision to demolish this building was not only for

² Anne Schwan and Stephen Shapiro, *How to Read Foucault's Discipline and Punish*, (Pluto Press: London, 2011), 12.

³ The basis of this article is the master thesis I did for the Visual and Media Anthropology program at HMKW/Berlin with the title “Decolonization of cultural and artistic institutions: the case of the Humboldt Forum”.

architectural reasons, but also about which ideology would dominate the other in reunited Germany.



Photo 4. "Tear It Down" protest by the Coalition of Cultural Workers Against the Humboldt Forum, on 16 December 2020, at the Schinkelplatz. (Photographed by the author)

The idea of colonialism has never ended. In fact, it formed into different ideologies. However, even today entrepreneurs such as Elon Musk, Jeff Bezos, Richard Branson, and many more discuss the colonization of the space, planets, and asteroids. In our world where colonialism is still a topic of discussion and business, saving museums from the ghosts of this past is an extremely difficult process. Challenges such as migration, climate change, and

economic inequality can be seen as the consequences of colonial rule⁴. We see many protest groups such as Decolonize This Place, Gulf Labor, and Liberate Tate fighting for change in these contexts. The Coalition of Cultural Workers Against the Humboldt Forum (CCWAH) is one of these groups which challenges the colonial structure of the newly opened Humboldt Forum. Along with CCWAH, many activist groups such as BARAZANI.berlin, No Humboldt 21, Berlin Postkolonial, Decolonize Berlin, and AfricAvenir takes collective actions against this institution which was reincarnated in the form of the Berlin Palace. Since today, these groups staged several physical protests under Covid-19 pandemic conditions and they are determined not to stop until the Humboldt Forum frees itself from the colonial structure. Although, Germany was a colonial late-comer, it played significant role for the colonial plunder. The Berlin Conference, which was held in 1884, regulated European colonization and trade in Africa. The story had started in Berlin and has to end in Berlin. Frantz Fanon describes the process of decolonization as “total liberation that involves every facet of our personality”⁵. 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 subjugated⁶. Therefore, the Humboldt Forum's decolonization efforts alone are meaningless without public pressure.



⁴ Elizalde Alona, “Foreword” in *Everything Passes Except the Past: Decolonizing Ethnographic Museums, Film Archives, and Public Spaces*, ed. Jana J. Haeckel, (Sternberg Press: London), 11.

⁵ Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, (Groove Press: New York, 1961), 233.

⁶ Alice Proctor, *The Whole Picture: The Colonial Story of the Art in Our Museums & Why We need to Talk About it*, (Cassell: London, 2020), 222.

Photo 5. The showcase of bust collection from Afghanistan, The Ethnology Museum in the Humboldt Forum, 10 November 2021. (Photographed by the author)

The Soviet movie "Visitor of 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 is not much different from each other today.

Here at the Humboldt Forum, in front of a stylish showcase full of a bust collection brought from Kandahar region of Afghanistan, I couldn't help but think this question to myself: How do the roads an Afghan must travel through in order to see and study the remains of his civilization in Berlin differ from the paths that the protagonist of "Visitor of a Museum" must take to reach "the Museum"? Since then, this question has been echoing in my mind every time I visit a museum full with still alive and looted objects. As museum enthusiasts, we don't have much time to save museums from being out of reach as in this dystopian story.