

**Report on the Workshop at the Übersee-Museum
13.08.2016, 10h-13h
Mona Schieren (Hochschule der Künste Bremen)
Johannes Ismaiel-Wendt (Stiftung Universität Hildesheim)**

On August 8, 2016, the approximately 20 fellows and mentors of the *Fellow me!*-project finished their second academy station “Shifted Objects – Postkoloniale Praktiken im Museum” with a workshop in Bremen. They had previously visited several museums and other cultural institutions in Bremen and Bremerhaven and had done a boat tour through Bremerhaven’s container terminal, a unique opportunity to grasp the region’s link to global trade.

To question museum discourse and its authority in the museum was the point of departure of the workshop organized by Mona Schieren (Hochschule der Künste Bremen), and Johannes Ismaiel-Wendt (Stiftung Universität Hildesheim). The workshop took place in Bremen’s infamous Übersee-Museum. In her brief introduction to the museum and its collections’ history, Hilke Thode-Arora, head of the Oceania collections, revealed the strong links between the museum and Bremen’s role as a trade hub. Given its connections to traders all over the world, the museum didn’t only collect ethnographic objects, but also naturalia, animals and plants. Still, the museum founder’s objectives resembled ethnographic museum’s objectives: to represent the whole world under one single roof with its more than 1,2 million objects.

Approaching contentious representations through fiction

The workshop started inside those collections, in the museum’s open storage¹. The group was guided into the storage’s section where fragments of historic exhibitions, namely requisites of dioramas, mannequins representing black people, were displayed. As part of what Ismaiel-Wendt framed as a “staged backstage”, the display in wooden boxes didn’t reduce the symbolic violence the figures incorporate. On the contrary, lined up in a single room, the figures even punctuated how racist images of the Other were constructed and materialized by museums at the beginning of the 20th century until not long ago. Ismaiel-Wendt and Schieren focused on those representations in their introduction, highlighting that “what you see are not black people, but racist constructions”, a “thingification” (Aimé Césaire), “white people’s imagination”. In Leipzig’s Grassi museum, the fellows had already critically reviewed ethnographic museums’ displays and systems of representation. The workshop in Bremen’s Übersee-Museum, however, was aimed at taking this discussion further.

Ismaiel-Wendt and Schieren thus proposed to work with and challenge the museum’s narrative strategies. Taking this constructivist perspective as a point of departure, they asked: why not imagine fictive stories ourselves, questioning the ethnographic gaze on the world? Where do we find cracks in the museum’s representation and narratives? In front of a group of objects in the storage, they tested the approach with the group. Interestingly, this first attempt failed: Even though they had announced that the object description was invented, the audience immediately engaged with it. Only when Ismaiel-Wendt started to talk about how an object communicated with aliens, the fellows understood the fictive character of the stories. Unintentionally, the exercise revealed the narrator’s strong authority in the museum. Here, the museum had served as a frame to legitimize the object description and make it “true”. After this first irritation about the workshop’s format, the fellows actively engaged in the task.

¹ The “Übermaxx” was the first open storage to open in Europe, in 1999.

Small groups vanished into the open storage and the permanent exhibition to work on their stories.

Fiction as a means to access and employ postcolonial theory differently

In the final discussion round, where the results of the workshop were shared, the method proved to be productive. As indicated by the academy station's subject "Shifted Objects", the process of imagining stories shifted the view on the museum and its collection. As one fellow highlighted, the process of constructing alternative narratives incited a creative incorporation and questioning of critical (postcolonial) theory.

In some stories, Western ontologies were questioned and revised. One group imagined what would happen if the objects observed the museum audience instead of the other way around. They explained how the objects would try to label the visitors as they had themselves been labelled. However, the objects failed to do so because of the multiplicity of stories that the visitors would bring to the museum. The story revealed first, how objects might take an active role in the museum's constitution, challenging the borders between objects and subjects, and thus, the objects' agency in the museum. Second, the story questioned the limits of representation – if the objects were incapable of labelling persons, what can we think of labelling objects and the persons that had produced them? Another group imagined how a future civilisation would approach the museum, when found as a relic of past times. Positioning the museum in the future allowed to establish a critical distance to it, challenging its ordering systems, today's role and meaning in society. Given that the imagined civilisation could only communicate with sound, the focus shifted from the objects to the sound recordings in the exhibition. Consequently, it questioned the Western focus on the material, and put sound at the centre of attention. Other stories highlighted the deep links between the museum's collections and colonialism. One group staged the museum as a crime scene, in which the former director used the museum's mission to collect as an excuse to satisfy his cruel passion of collecting body parts. While telling the story, one fellow was repeatedly presented as the "expert" of the imaginary museum's history. The story was not too far from reality: The former director of Berlin's Völkerkundemuseum Felix von Luschan for example, is known for his obsessive collecting practices concerning skulls, amongst other body parts. Highlighting the fellow's expert status in the frame of the museum gave her some further credibility, which made the audience almost believe the fictive atrocities. The last group imagined an object's trajectory between the museum and its origin of production, problematizing the relations between museums and so called "source communities". Highlighting the fluidity and conviviality of the imagined restitution process in the narration stood in sharp contrast to real restitution processes. The story could thus be summarized as an ironic comment on how those negotiations take place in reality.

Challenging "truth" in the museum

The follow-up discussion came back to what the workshop had initially been about - narrative strategies in the museum, the museum's authority in imposing "truth" and attempts to break those narratives. One fellow asked why, even though the exercise of inventing stories had been productive, he was still "craving for authenticity". One of the fellows had explained an object he/she knew well, and the group had realized how much more rewarding it was to hear the "real story of the object". However, the story of a kangaroo served as a point of departure to discuss what this "truth" in the museum actually consisted of. One fellow once saw a kangaroo in an exhibition, representing the flora and fauna of Australia. As he later found out though, the kangaroo had never been in Australia, but had been raised in a zoo next door to the museum. Was the kangaroo's story thus not completely invented? What was it actually representative for? Some objections were raised from other fellows: Given that the kangaroo

“really” came from Australia, it was completely fine that it had never been there. Also, if one wanted to integrate a kangaroo in the exhibition, it was actually much more environmental-friendly and less costly to take a kangaroo from next door than from Australia.

The fellows concluded that in the museum, almost automatically, the narration became institutionalized, one could even say “musealised”, and thus problematic because authoritative. They asked what kind of alternative and different narrative existed – from subjective to poetic – that could break with the museum’s authority.

From postcolonial to decolonial

During the station “Shifted Objects”, a shift from “postcolonial” to “decolonial”/“decolonise” had taken place. Thinking in terms of “postcolonialism” might suggest that colonialism had actually finished, and was considered a past period of time. However, especially the visit to the container-terminal had revealed that little of the exploitative North-South-relations have actually changed. A productive outcome of the station “Shifted Objects” thus seemed to talk of “decolonial thinking and doing”, such as Walter D. Mignolo suggests (2011:11).

One could interpret Johannes Ismaeiel-Wendt’s sound lecture, that closed the workshop, as such a “decolonial option” (Mignolo 2011:10). Playing his drum machine, Ismaeiel-Wendt lay open how music was strongly territorialized by Western thought, but at the same time, resistant to those categorizations. He highlighted how music “created stereotypes”, while at the same time “subverting them” and thus used music as a tool to overcome colonial hierarchies and structures.

Margareta von Oswald

Centre for Anthropological Research on Museums and Heritage, Humboldt Universität zu Berlin