



BYE-BYE BENIN BRONZES? ON PROVENANCE AS PROCESS AND RESTITUTION AS DISPLAY IN GERMAN MUSEUMS 2021 – PRESENT

Review of the exhibitions: *Benin. Geraubte Geschichte*, MARKK: Museum am Rothenbaum. Kulturen und Künste der Welt, Hamburg (December 17, 2021 – ongoing); *I MISS YOU. About missing, giving back and remembering*, Rautenstrauch-Joest-Museum, Cologne (April 29, 2022 – ongoing); *Benin-Bronzen*, Humboldt Forum, Berlin (September 15, 2022 – expanded April 24, 2024 – ongoing); *In Dialogue with Benin. Art, Colonialism and Restitution*, Rietberg Museum, Zurich (August 23, 2024 – ongoing).



Reviewed by
Sasha Rossman  & Jakob Weber 

In Germany, in 2021 a group of objects commonly referred to as “the Benin bronzes” were catapulted into the public limelight [Fig. 1]. Looted in 1897 by British troops on a “punitive mission” to subordinate Benin’s *Oba* and extend their colonial dominance in Nigeria, the so-called Benin bronzes comprise a multi-valent group of “objects” that had found their way into numerous German ethnographic collections shortly after the plunder of Benin City. The term “object”, with its implications of a Western epistemological gaze and static, diffused agency, is problematic and we will, therefore, place it in “scare quotes” before returning to address it below. Though the British, and not the Germans, had taken active part in destroying Benin City and stealing its cultural heritage, German

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ethnographic museums nonetheless actively engaged in collecting plundered “objects” through the art market and private channels.

On April 29, 2021, the German cultural minister Monika Grütters and five German museums possessing a significant number of “objects” from Benin City agreed to restitute them to Nigeria. Shortly before, the Berlin-based art historian Bénédicte Savoy had published her book *Africa’s Struggle for Its Art. History of a Postcolonial Defeat*, which detailed how old, in fact, Africa’s fight to recover its stolen cultural heritage was.¹ And how stubbornly European museums had refused to return what Europeans had plundered. One year before that, curator Dan Hicks published his widely read *The Brutish Museums. The Benin Bronzes, Colonial Violence, and Cultural Restitution*, which also put the Benin bronzes at the center of an increasingly public debate over the inheritance of empire in Western museums and the politics and process of restitution.² The Benin bronzes had long occupied a special status in German ethnographic collections as well as in the debates over restitution. Since their plunder, “objects” from Benin had been singled out in Germany as exceptional African cultural artifacts and were correspondingly featured prominently in German museum displays. At the same time, the circumstance of their looting left no doubt that the “objects” had been unlawfully taken, even though the German return of the Benin bronzes ultimately rested upon a perceived moral, rather than legal imperative. Perhaps as a result of their indisputably unlawful and violent appropriation by Western powers and museums as well as their unique status as “canonical objects” from Africa, the Benin bronzes thus became a focal point of public and political attention in the context of a renewed drive towards returning cultural heritage to Africa. Yet although calls for their return had been voiced since the early 20th century, it was first in 2021 and 2022 that German-speaking museums and publics not only broached the subject in an increasingly public manner, but also confronted a new question head-on: now that objects were indeed to be restituted, how was one to display this restitution and the politics and history that lay behind it? How might political decisions and museum practice overlap in the form of an exhibition? These questions cut to the bone, for they also implied a wholesale rethinking of ethnographic museums as well as “the museum” writ large.

In response to the unfolding restitution of the Benin “objects”, numerous German museums staged exhibitions on the subject of their restitution. Comparing these exhibits provides a fulcrum to think through difficulties as well as solutions, and possibilities curators in these museums have been developing to confront questions

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Bénédicte Savoy, *Afrikas Kampf um seine Kunst. Geschichte einer postkolonialen Niederlage*, Munich 2021; English version: *Africa’s Struggle for Its Art. History of a Postcolonial Defeat*, Princeton, NJ 2022.

2

Dan Hicks, *The Brutish Museums. The Benin Bronzes, Colonial Violence, and Cultural Restitution*, London 2021.



[Fig. 1]

The “Ehre” stool of Oba Eresoyen was taken from its vitrine and packed up for its journey
© SPK/photothek/Thomas Köhler.

over the display of problematic provenances, restitution as a political process, and rethinking the status of the (ethnographic) museum. Each institution that staged exhibitions on the topic faced two sets of shared circumstances: a set of historical and material contexts as well as the need to work quickly in order to keep up with current events. The debates on restitution are constantly evolving, also beyond the Benin bronzes. The situation following the transfer of ownership was, thus, an unprecedented starting point for curations in this context. The solutions that they developed to the problem of how one might exhibit looted “objects” that were to be returned (or in many cases, remain on permanent loan in the German institutions) were, nonetheless, quite different. In the following review, we examine exhibitions in Hamburg at the Museum am Rothenbaum – Kulturen und Künste der Welt (MARKK), Cologne at the Rautenstrauch-Joest-Museum, and at Berlin’s Humboldt Forum with a particular eye not to the question of restitution, but rather how – and what – was put on display in the context of the restitution of the Benin bronzes.³ We conclude by comparing the three German displays with an exhibition at Zurich’s Rietberg Museum in order to illuminate a different German-speaking context.

I. Museum am Rothenbaum – Kulturen und Künste der Welt (MARKK) Hamburg: *Benin. Geraubte Geschichte*

Entering the exhibition at Hamburg’s MARKK Museum – Museum am Rothenbaum. Kulturen und Künste der Welt (formerly the Museum für Völkerkunde Hamburg) – the visitor was greeted by a multi-sensorial and multi-media presentation staged against a yellow ground. One immediately could read a wall text contextualizing Benin’s “looted history” as well as two bronze objects in vitrines, a video mounted on the wall, and sounds emanating from the larger room. Curated by the museum’s director Barbara Plankensteiner (an expert on the arts and culture of Benin), both the experience of the display and its conceptual underpinning aimed to mobilize this multivalency to convey a polyphonic experience. Rather than offering a fully formed narrative, this exhibition put processes of multi-perspectivity and collaboration on display [Fig. 2]. Important to note: Plankensteiner’s team included, among others, curatorial advisors and colleagues such as Felicity Bodenstern, Godfrey Osaison Ekhtor, Enotie Ogbemor, Anne Luther, provenance researchers like Jamie Dau and Silke Reuther, as well as the exhibition designers Stefan Fuchs, Mitko Mitkov, and Max Guderian, not

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For the purposes of this review and space constraints, we have decided to limit ourselves to these four exhibitions. We have, thus, omitted the “display” of 263 Benin bronzes at the GRASSI Museum für Völkerkunde zu Leipzig in the context of a large-scale reconceptualization of their collection under the rubric REINVENTING GRASSI.SKD. In Leipzig, the museum initially decided *not* to exhibit the bronzes at all. This approach remained a radical outlier in the German museum landscape. In order to deal more fully with the larger analytical and practical frames of the Grassi approach, we plan to review its exhibition and the politics of non-display in a subsequent article not focused exclusively on the Benin bronzes.



[Fig. 2]

Exhibition view (film), 00:15, here 00:10 © *Benin. Geraubte Geschichte*, MARKK: Museum am Rothenbaum. Kulturen und Künste der Welt, Hamburg (December 17, 2021 – ongoing) / Jakob Weber 2024. Online resource: <http://heidicon.uni-heidelberg.de/#/detail/23939021>.

to mention numerous contemporary artists, artisans, and cultural producers whose voices and work permeated the show in the form of discreet works of art, videos, music videos, and interviews.⁴

This multimediality took numerous forms. For instance, moving through the L-shaped entrance, having already traversed explanatory wall text, video, and “objects” within a matter of a couple of meters, one could round a bend in which a text on the looting catastrophe of 1897 was accompanied by an animated video of the events leading to the looting as well as the looting itself; this was projected onto a screen hanging freely in the space. The screen could be viewed from both sides and the audio floated freely into the exhibition. The effect was one of layering, so that multiple forms of information intersected with one another, inflecting the information conveyed through a strategy of overlap.

This was somewhat awkwardly but effectively facilitated by the room’s architecture. The turn-of-the-century building’s architecture cannot be altered, which meant that the team needed to somehow deal with the built-in vitrines that are part of the permanent though now outmoded interior design originally conceived for the ethnographic collection. For this exhibition, these vitrines were boarded up and transformed into more wall space, while other extant walls had in fact been altered. These had been perforated with openings so that one could look through one thematic display section into another. These thematic sections included disparate topics, some of which were related to the original functions of the Benin artifacts (e.g., *Alltag und Hierarchie*), or to their histories and the history of the museum collection (e.g. *Provenienz*). Both visually and conceptually, the wall perforations spoke to the intersecting nature of these topics. In the center of the room was a permanent glass cabinet/vitrine that one could walk through. The curatorial team repurposed this colossal transparent box into a type of media hub. There, one could follow a timeline of the restitution history (which was designed to continue into the future) and watch videos that included, for example, footage and information about artists and artisans in Benin City working in the traditional manner on contemporary bronze casts. Viewing these varieties of video footage and timeline through the transparent panes of the display case added a layer that acted on the other displays by connecting past directly to present and future. This effectively expressed both the gap in knowledge that resulted from the city’s plundering and spoke simultaneously to the vitality and resilience of craft traditions. Contemporary art works on display added yet a further layer emphasizing the vibrancy and dynamism of current artistic production vs. the static character that ethnographic museums in Germany had traditionally assigned to the artifacts of non-Western cultures (the so-called *Naturvölker*).

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Benin. Geraubte Geschichte (exh. cat. Hamburg, MARKK Museum am Rothenbaum. Kulturen und Künste der Welt), ed. by Barbara Plankensteiner, Berlin 2022.

These types of overlaps presented an array of information that resembled a kind of multi-media database. This is unsurprising, since numerous collaborators on the show were also deeply involved in the Digital Benin project (also launched in 2022), which was led by the MARRK and funded by the Ernst von Siemens Kunststiftung. In the database, a comprehensive catalogue of “objects” is conjoined with oral histories, maps, provenance information, and *Ẹ̀yọ̀ Oṣo* (a section that flags correct Edo language terms that differ from Western museum speak, vocalized by voices speaking through the digital platform). Video, static text, various search filters, overlaps, and superpositions allow the Benin “objects” to become more like living “subjects” through the database, deploying strategies that the exhibition in Hamburg aimed to mobilize as part of an institutional display.

In a sense, this is also where the MARKK exhibition walked a tricky line. As experts on the subject, Plankensteiner and her collaborators put all the Benin “objects” in the museum collection on display and aimed to convey as much information as possible about them. The reasoning behind this was to show due appreciation and respect for the works, to problematize the history of their path into the museum (and the museum’s history more generally), and to map out possibilities for future exchange and dialogue; in this regard, certain vitrines contained photographic reproductions of “objects” that had already been restituted to Nigeria and the media-hub timeline could be extended as events continued to unfold. Yet one might ask the question of whether including as much information as possible – displaying the objects and explaining them to a lay audience – did not in some ways reproduce elements of the Western ethnographic museum which have long been rightly critiqued. As polyphonic as this exhibition-cum-database is, one might interrogate the political efficacy of this manner of display. If the museum is quarrying the right of these “objects” to be in its collection, why are they still there, being explained by the museum? One might argue of course, to the contrary, that part of the restitution process means laying bare *all* of the facts so that something new can emerge. The museum’s obligation is, thus, to bring together a polyphony of voices and expertise from Germany as well as Nigeria, and to present as much information as possible in order to counteract the cultural damage that was done not only in the initial looting but also by the institutional legacy of the Western museum. Information, accessibility, and collaboration thus become leitmotifs in the process of restitution, which makes itself manifest through a kind of pluralistic sharing, in which the museum, however, has not quite relinquished its authority. To a certain extent the exhibition still reproduced a historically imperial world order based on a certain knowledge about material culture(s), in which non-European, distinct cultures are characterized, delimited, and presented in the

European museum where they are explained.⁵ The very fullness of the MARKK exhibition stands, thus, in radical contrast to the exhibition of the Benin bronzes staged simultaneously in Cologne. There, at the Rautenstrauch-Joest-Museum, information was strategically withheld from the visitor rather than put on display.

II. Rautenstrauch-Joest-Museum, Cologne: *I Miss You*

Ninety-two dramatically illuminated Benin bronzes enclosed in a black cube initially remained hidden from visitors to the Rautenstrauch-Joest-Museum's special exhibition *I MISS YOU. About missing, giving back and remembering*. Rather than seeing the bronzes initially, as in Hamburg, visitors to the Cologne show were invited to first reflect on the recent process of restitution and the debates in academia, media and public contexts, which were laid out in folders on a large table, as well as timelines and information hung on the wall (and in videos shown on television screens and tablets). One was reminded that the presentation of the still numerous Benin bronzes remaining in German museums must be seen in the context of decisively changed circumstances. As previously mentioned, Savoy's book documented that requests for restitution had a long history prior to 2022 when German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock publicly transferred the ownership rights of the first objects with this important provenance in German museums to the Nigerian Ministry of Culture. In Germany, this transfer was not necessarily welcomed: although curators like the Rautenstrauch-Joest's Nanette Snoep and art historians like Savoy had long voiced support for returning stolen cultural heritage, numerous voices in Germany continued to mobilize the arguments against those detailed by Savoy in her book: e.g. what would remain in European museums if they began to give things back? How could things be returned to countries "lacking" the wherewithal to preserve the objects? To whom ought one to retribute "objects" if the circumstances of ownership today were no longer the same as at the time in which the "objects" were looted?⁶ Fears of loss permeate these spurious claims, prompting the question from which the Cologne exhibition title took its name: *I Miss You*. Who, the exhibition asks, misses these "objects", and who will miss them in the future?

This initial confrontation with the recent restitution process thus laid the necessary foundation for the following core question

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Ciraj Rasool, Rethinking the Ethnographic Museum, in: Clemens Greiner, Steven Van Wolputte, and Michael Bollig (eds.), *African Futures*, Leiden/Boston 2022, 56–66. On the historical connection between imperialism and collecting in European and other contexts: Maia W. Gahtan and Eva-Maria Troelenberg (eds.), *Collecting and Empires. An Historical and Global Perspective*, London 2019.

6

Brigitta Hauser-Schäublin, Benin-Bronzen gehen an den Oba. War das der Sinn der Restitution?, in: *Frankfurter Allgemeine*, May 5, 2023 (November 22, 2024); Klaus Bachmann, Annalena Baerbock und die Benin-Bronzen. Ihre Moral bricht geltendes Recht, in: *Berliner Zeitung*, May 27, 2023 (November 22, 2024).

of the exhibition. The table of information facilitated a space of discussion and debate, by providing visitors with tools through which to unpack the various voices in the debate over the Benin bronzes' restitution. One could find out who the players in the discourse over restitution were, which critiques had been made by whom, and how the process of restitution had unfolded. This set the stage for visitors prior to beholding any "objects".

Beyond the table loomed a dark display room, but before entering it, the visitor was forced to glance into a large mirror inscribed with illuminated letters reading "I Miss You". The mirror firmly located the visitor within the debates perused on the table, as well as with the statement, which became a question since the subject "I" and the object "You" remained ambiguous. This ambiguity in the darkly lit room into which the visitor subsequently walked revealed itself as responding to the historical dislocation of the bronzes. Confronted with one's own image, the connection of museum visitors with the bronzes came to mind. Who misses the bronzes currently? Who will miss them when they are restituted? Are the bronzes themselves in a state of mourning?

The installation of the bronzes indeed consciously evoked a sense of mourning. Placed in individually lit vitrines on the walls, the bronzes sparkled in the dark, celebrating their materiality, intricate design, and their forms. Unlike in Hamburg, there were no explanatory labels or text that accompanied them. They appeared instead with a recalcitrant silence, providing no information to visitors other than the shimmer that made them appear like effigies lit from within, navigating a chasm between a colonial past and uncertain future. Without any "metadata" – any further information along the lines of museological classifications – in the scenic light the bronzes in small glass display cases thereby took on a life of their own [Fig. 3].

A video projected onto the floor in the center of the room showed the symbolic removal of the "objects" museum labels by the hands of Peju Layiwola – Nigerian visual artist, teacher, and historian, relative of Oba Akenzua II of Benin. Her careful removal of each label thereby also withdrew the objects from the grasp of the museum, its epistemological and colonial underpinnings as well as its collecting and display practices. Along with the scenography, the video reinforced the rupture with the understanding of the Benin bronzes as scientific museum exhibits – as "objects". Once their labels had been removed and the bronzes were installed in a display in which they no longer served the purpose of providing information for Western consumption, they could – the exhibition suggested – begin to regain an animated agency and *subjecthood*.

Layiwola had already collaborated with Snoep and the museum on a previous exhibit of the Benin bronzes staged at the museum



[Fig. 3]

Installation view © Rautenstrauch-Joest-Museum, *I MISS YOU. About missing, giving back and remembering* / Fadi Elias.

before *I Miss You* (more on this below).⁷ The video work was developed in this earlier context, but was here reinstalled alongside the glimmering display of the bronzes (which she also designed) and for which her video now provided a kind of literal groundwork. In this new display, Layiwola imbricated both her own body and that of the visitor within a process that was in part mournful, and in part liberating. Without inventory numbers and ethnographic and historical classification, the present context of the bronzes in the museum was called into question, and a new interpretation provided in which they appeared in a state of transit. As such, the Benin bronzes can be understood as more than remnants of a colonial past, in which the museum was still anchored. Unlike in Hamburg, visitors hoping to have the German museum explain the bronzes to them were going to be severely disappointed. In its radical nature, this presentation stemmed entirely from an artistic intervention that broke with established museum forms of presentation.

The dramatic staging of the Benin bronzes in Cologne was never intended as a permanent presentation. Beside the table at its entrance, a reference was made through wall text to the dynamics that unfolded between the show's opening on April 29, 2022, and the transfer of ownership of the bronzes just a few months later. The contract for the transfer of ownership was prominently displayed next to the book table at the beginning. However, in view of the federal government's earlier declaration of their plan to return German Benin collections in 2021, the curators could already assume that a framing as subjects in transit would aptly come to fruition.⁸ Museum director Snoep declared that the exhibition would change, once the restitution had taken place, to offer new perspectives on the bronzes remaining at the museum, which would then be loans from Nigeria, rather than part of the museum's collection.

The themes of resistance (for instance, in the refusal to provide explanatory contextual information about the original functions of the "objects") indicate how *I Miss You* built on the preceding exhibition *Resist!* at the Rautenstrauch-Joest. Starting in early 2021, this exhibition aimed to collaboratively narrate, reflect on, and debate the long history of anticolonial resistance in the global South. For Snoep and her collaborators, a key aspect of this endeavor was moving away from an explanatory museum model to a conscious repurposing of the museum as a platform to create new networks of communication. These found an exhibition form through different fluid, overlapping "chapters" organized by a group of curators from different communities in the global South, as well as artists, activists, and local curators engaged in social movements like the

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Resist! The Art of Resistance. Snapshot of an Exhibition at a Certain Place at a Certain Time (exh. cat. Cologne, Rautenstrauch-Joest-Museum), ed. by Nanette Snoep, Ricardo Márquez García, Lydia Hauth, and Vera Marušić, Cologne 2024.

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Amt der Beauftragten der Bundesregierung für Kultur und Medien, *Erklärung zum Umgang mit den in deutschen Museen und Einrichtungen befindlichen Benin-Bronzen*, Berlin, April 29, 2021 (November 22, 2024).

BLM-protests that also took place in Cologne.⁹ Layiwola was one of the artist-researchers who worked on *Resist!* in which she conceived a display featuring the Benin bronzes in a form which presaged the themes of *I Miss You*. Layiwola's contribution to *Resist!* formed just one aspect of a larger ensemble, but the later exhibition put the bronzes center-stage, drawing attention to them while simultaneously undermining attempts to objectify them.

Upon leaving the site of mourning which was *I Miss You*, the visitor needed to once again pass by the table at the entrance. On it, one might now notice a tablet, featuring a conversation between Snoep and Layiwola. The latter, here, stressed that restitution could not be lead, or understood as a conversation spearheaded and framed by European institutions: "Each decision, about our heritage, our life, has to include us [...]. We want to be able to tell our stories."¹⁰ Through the mirror of her exhibition design, Layiwola placed not only her body into the conversation (through the vehicle of the video in which her hands reappropriated the bronzes from the museum vault), but also the bodies of the visitors into conversation with this act, and with the "objects". Who misses what or whom became an active and confrontational question through the vehicle of the display of the former museum "objects" in a state of transition. In Cologne and Hamburg, dialogue and conversation therefore emerged in entirely different constellations of exhibition design and priorities in imaging and choreographing visitor experience. This was also the case at the ethnographic museum's Benin display in Berlin's controversial Humboldt Forum.¹¹

III. Humboldt Forum Berlin: Benin Bronzes

The idea of bringing multiple voices to the table to build a dialogue through which an uncertain future may be negotiated formed the basis of the [Humboldt Forum's temporary exhibition on the Benin bronzes](#). Organized by Verena Rodatus, Maria-Antonie Ellendorff, and Kerstin Pinther, among others, the show literally foregrounded the context of debate in its installation. Entering the exhibit, the visitor was greeted by a relatively empty space, painted gray (a color of neutrality? Uncertainty? Adornian autonomy or resistance?), with a wall text labeled "The Future of the Benin Bronzes". In this space, the Benin bronzes were represented by one single "object": *Uhunmwun elao, Memorial Head of a Queen Mother (iyoba)*, from the 16th century, which was placed on a pedestal and protected by a Plexiglas cover. An orange stamp on the label marked the work

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Ibid.

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Ibid., 100.

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On debates over the Humboldt Forum, see, for instance, Friedrich von Bose, *Das Humboldt-Forum. Eine Ethnografie seiner Planung*, Berlin 2016.

as a loan from Nigeria, indicating that it had been restituted. Behind the *Uhunmwun elao*, visible through the Plexiglas box if one were to look through, were a series of multiple flat screens hung on the wall. In each screen was a different person. The people on the screens turned to listen to one another as they each took turns talking: signs of respectful listening. The people speaking were a variety of experts, politicians, and art historians from Nigeria as well as from German institutions (including the curator of the MARRK show, Barbara Plankensteiner). These “voices of debate” served thus as a backdrop for the presentation of the Queen Mother and an introduction to the question how the museum was going to deal with presenting the Benin bronzes in the future. This future, the installation indicated, was necessarily going to be based on a polyphonic dialogue which made it both contingent and open.

Accordingly, upon entering the subsequent room, a wall text informed the viewer that we were in an “intermediate state” and our view was directed to a large vitrine containing “intermediate” objects, rather than the “classic” Benin bronzes that one might expect to find as a greeting to a show entitled “Benin Bronzes”. Instead, the visitor was confronted with photographs of the looting in Benin City (1897), the display of Benin “objects” in the Berlin ethnographic museum in 1926, and a photograph of Oba Akenzua II and Lord Plymouth in Benin from 1935, showing the Oba wearing coral regalia that the British had returned. Beneath the photographs and explanatory texts, the vitrine contained numerous “objects”. These included the 16th-century bronze throne stool of Oba Esignie (also visible in the photograph of the 1920s Berlin museum display hung directly above it); an image of the 18th-century throne stool of Oba Eresoyen, which had come through the market from England to Germany and which was donated to the Berlin museum in 1905 (the provenance was included on the label); and plaster casts of the stools, which had been made by Berlin’s museums in response to restitution requests in 1936 by Oba Akenzua II for the thrones of his ancestors. The German museums kept the originals and charged Akenzua for the reproductions they sent instead. The ensemble announced not only the fraught history of the objects, but also the ongoing nature of debates over their restitution. Rather than presenting either an informative survey of the bronzes – as in Hamburg – or a dark wound and space of mourning – as in Cologne – the Berlin exhibition foregrounded the frame of debate, institutional history, and uncertainty.

A display of the Benin bronzes in the controversial Humboldt Forum had been in the works for quite a while, but Rodatus and her collaborators (who had taken over from earlier curators) worked quickly to change their predecessors’ exhibition plans.¹² Their aim was to create an exhibition in which various historical-institutional framings of the bronzes came to the fore, alongside the “objects”, as

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See the recent volume edited by Verena Rodatus, *From the Kingdom of Dahomey to the Postcolonial State. Case Studies on Benin’s Art History*, Münster 2024.

well as to create a new collaborative framework for a collaborative exhibition that would evolve over time. In scenographic terms, this was reflected in decisions to place the gray pedestals inside of the vitrines, for instance, on spindly orange legs pointing in inconsistent directions in order to convey not only the shifting terrain of the histories of the “objects” but also the uncertain future of the museum in which visitors found themselves in that very moment [Fig. 4]. Likewise, certain vitrines were placed on diagonals that cut against the right angles of others, indicating movement and “unfinished business”.

Directly adjacent to the “intermediate state” vitrine, were not the bronzes themselves but rather tables and vitrines laid out for educational purposes. One could see projects that school classes had worked on, as well as a table on which that work was done. Further vitrines featured presentations on Benin bronzes seen in a global context, on provenance and the history of the Berlin collection, on design and the deployment of imagery and text as an activist strategy in the 1960s and 1970s, and a large interactive touchscreen that allowed visitors to explore various topics such as Benin City today, or the workshops of bronze casters. Contemporary craftsmen working in the casting tradition, like Phil Odamawen, appeared in displays towards the end of the exhibition, as well as contemporary artists and designers like Adeju Thompson, the founder of the Lagos Space Programme, whose work with fabric dyeing and the “reserve technique” takes up technical aspects of traditional bronze casting. Certain contemporary artists like Victor Ehikhamenor, whose work on regalia and symbols connect past and present artistic production could be found – like Odamawen – in Berlin as well as Hamburg, creating a kind of living lingua franca between different exhibitions (and exhibition strategies).

In Berlin, unlike in Hamburg, the exhibition did not read as a database. There were fewer overlaps and less layering of screens, sounds, and images. Instead, the framing of the exhibition and its incorporation into seemingly unstable constellations served as a means of displaying “objects” whose meanings – political as well as symbolic, or artistic – have shifted so dramatically as they have moved violently through space, time, and institutions. In one display choice, for example, bronzes had been taken out of a set of vitrines and placed on various levels of a large diagonally tilted pedestal resembling both bleachers and an altar. The vitrines stood empty at the foot of the pedestal, containing only labels for the “objects” (certain of which had been restituted) that had exited their Plexiglas containers.

A photograph of an altar display of the bronzes in Benin City prior to the looting was juxtaposed with this display, encouraging the visitor to consider the contrast between the empty vestiges of Western colonial-epistemological violence in the form of museum vitrines and also to ask: who here is looking at whom? The “objects” – raised above the level of the label-containing vitrines – became challenging interlocutors [Fig. 5]. Meanwhile, the organizers incor-



[Fig. 4]
Installation view at the Humboldt Forum © Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Ethnologisches Museum / Pierre Adenis.



[Fig. 5]
Installation view at the Humboldt Forum © Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Ethnologisches
Museum / Pierre Adenis.

porated a kind of built-in interlocution strategy by setting up an ongoing series of residencies in the museum for visiting artists and researchers from Nigeria. New research is to be incorporated into new and changing vitrine displays, like the spotlights installed in April 2024 addressing the Kingdom of Benin's historical relationship to slavery and its ongoing effect on restitution debates. One might say in a very concrete sense that this is an exhibition whose mode of display addresses both the subject of the Benin bronzes and restitution as well as the facilitation of processual change, drawing concerted attention to the situatedness of institution frameworks and their limits.

IV. Conclusion: "I don't know why you say goodbye, I say hello"

To return to the question with which we opened this review: what, then, was actually on display in these exhibitions? Was it the "Benin bronzes"? Was it provenance history? Was it restitution as a political process in which museums were involved? Each exhibition articulated a different set of answers to this question through the shared legacy of the looted "objects" of Benin City as they were collected in German institutions after 1897. In Hamburg, the team at the MARRK very decidedly foregrounded the Benin bronzes as "objects" and "subjects". The museum attempted to honor them by providing the most context possible through a polyphony of perspectives and voices. The result, we have suggested, was akin to an expanded database, with the digital realm's aesthetics of overlap, filter, multivalency, and multisensory input. Does this mode of pluralism and multi-perspectival viewing as display, however, imply a new form of situatedness in the wake of restitution for the Western museum? The exhibition in Cologne combined information stations (on a table) with an enclosed installation in which the removal of information implied a critique of the museum as a purveyor of European knowledge. *I Miss You* situated restitution and the museum's collection of Benin bronzes in an affective *mise-en-scène* of mourning, missing, and remembering. Here, restitution did not open up a plurality of views that provided more information, but rather the question and debate of restitution opened onto a chasm, or gap that confiscated information from the Western museum in order to show how looting had violently wrested not only objects, but also knowledge and history from Benin. Resistance, here, served as a conceptual and also scenographic building block for setting new processes into motion in which the Western museum would no longer be the authority over knowledge coded as information – however pluralistic the point of view. From the perspective of the MARKK show, however, one might ask whether the removal of contextual information about the "objects" failed to do justice to their histories and significance, transforming them into purely aesthetic experience. In Berlin, situatedness and process were expressed in a different fashion. Nods to the temporariness and contingency of the conditions of display of the Benin bronzes manifested them-

selves both in the exhibition design, as well as in the attempt to set into place mechanisms of processual development in the exhibition itself, which was designed to change and evolve over time.

The politics of restitution, in the context of the Benin bronzes, thus provided opportunities for Germany's ethnographic museums to consider their present and future status. This did not mean, however, that they necessarily shed a particularly sharp light on the politics *behind* the German Bund's decision to restitute "objects" to Benin. That is to say, while the exhibitions made clear why the *museums* had determined that restitution was important, visitors learned little about the stakes for German politics in Nigeria, or globally. Are geopolitical interests perhaps at play that exceed the morals of restitution? Likewise, the German exhibitions provided relatively little insight into the politics of restitution inside of Nigeria itself: who stood to receive the "objects"? What controversies might be associated with the distribution of artifacts and who claims to "tell their stories" in the social and political context of Nigeria? These questions were sometimes gestured towards, but hardly delved into. Likewise, what is to become of the image rights, of copies and merchandise that the German museums had been producing of the Benin bronzes for over one hundred years? To what extent does the process of restitution interplay with the legality of knowledge as constituted by the possession of copyrights and reproductions? These are questions that the visitor would need to investigate on their own.

A final comparison provides a perhaps apt way to think about the long "farewell" of German museums to the Benin bronzes (a goodbye that is less of a goodbye than one might think since a large proportion of the "objects" is indeed to remain in German institutions on permanent loan from Nigeria). In Switzerland, numerous museum displays of the Benin bronzes also provide a means of thinking through the histories of both the "objects" and Swiss museums. But the Swiss have not *yet* restituted any of these objects. At Zurich's Rietberg Museum, we thus find the exhibition *Dialogue with Benin. Art, Colonialism and Restitution* presenting "objects" from Benin City in the context of the Benin Initiative Switzerland, not explicitly in the context of restitution *per se*.

The Benin Initiative Switzerland (BIS) was founded in 2020 by eight Swiss museums with "objects" from Benin City in their collections.¹³ The group aimed, then, to research the provenance of approximately a hundred "objects" and to discuss their past as well as current and future status.¹⁴ BIS launched extensive provenance research on "objects" from Benin in Switzerland and attempted to

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For more on the ongoing project, see the book published in conjunction with the exhibition and other presentations in the eight involved museums: Esther Tisa Francini, Alice Hertzog, Alexis Malefakis, and Michaela Oberhofer (eds.), *Mobilizing Benin Heritage in Swiss Museums*, Zurich 2024.

¹⁴

See *ibid.*, 5.

determine the circumstances of their acquisition, while also deepening understanding of their cultural significance. From the outset, BIS envisioned itself as a dialogic, collaborative endeavor, which would work together with researchers in Nigeria, like the historian Enibokun Uzébu-Imarhiagbe from the University of Benin. In Switzerland, Alice Hertzog (an anthropologist) took on the role of provenance researcher at the Rietberg. A series of collaborative workshops (for instance at the University of Benin in 2022) brought the BIS group – who received financial support from the Swiss Federal Office for Culture in 2020 – into further contact with the current Oba Ewuare II and other partners in Nigeria. Likewise, workshops and visits in Switzerland facilitated access, dialogue, and collaborative research for Nigerian researchers, artists, and scholars to BIS. Work that emerged from the project was made transparent and accessible through incorporation in the Digital Benin database, as well as through the series of exhibitions, which opened in 2024 throughout Switzerland, as at the Rietberg. The historical acquisition of the Benin bronzes in Swiss collections through the art market after 1899 means its direct colonial entanglements become less apparent vs. in the UK, as was also the case in Germany. However, Switzerland has only recently begun to engage in the ways in which the activities of Swiss entrepreneurs, merchants, bankers, missionaries, and mercenaries were implicated in the global colonial system. This work has tended to lag behind Germany's engagement with its difficult histories including colonialism. Provenance research on the Benin bronzes, therefore, dovetails with a move in Swiss museums such as the Swiss National Museum in Zurich, which has recently staged exhibitions on Swiss colonial entanglements.

While the joint declaration made by the Swiss Benin Forum in 2023 specified that objects that BIS researchers had determined to have been looted in 1897 ought to be returned to Nigeria, exhibitions like *Dialogue with Benin. Art, Colonialism and Restitution* focused more specifically on the keyword “dialogue” than restitution. In terms of the structuring of the curatorial team, this meant interdisciplinarity, on one hand: the curators included an art anthropologist, a performance scholar, a historian and an Afropean architect (Michaela Oberhofer, Josephine Ebiuwa Abbe, Esther Tisa Francini, and Solange Mbanefo). It also meant cooperation between scholars-curators in Switzerland and Benin. As architect Mbanefo explains in the catalogue, the exhibition design aimed primarily to highlight this multi-perspectivity. Entering the exhibition, the visitor first encounters a giant photograph of a woman in red walking a street in contemporary Benin City labeled in the image (on a giant arch spanning the busy intersection) “Guild of Enin, Bronze Casters, World Heritage Site”. Mounted on walls that fan out backwards from the visitor, the image functions simultaneously as a marker that the visitor is not coming to view the past, but rather finds themselves very much in the present, a contemporaneity that is folded and complex like the architecture of the walls buttressing the

image. This is a world that is anchored in the past, but confident and forward looking, like the woman in red who strides toward the visitor [Fig. 6].

The design of these striated wall structures, which formed a kind of central courtyard within the exhibition space, were laden with significance. They referenced fractals and triangles, which can be observed in Benin decorative motifs and mythology, here forming the defensive architecture designed to protect Benin City (ultimately destroyed by the British). The curatorial team conjoined notions of these angled, repeating forms with the Edo proverb, *Agbon r'obion*, Mbanefo explained, which means, "The world is a triangle". The idea of triangulation, in turn, played a key role in an exhibition design in which points of view were orchestrated to shift and to implicate the visitor within a set of contingent relationships: as the visitor moved through the space, certain elements would come into focus based on the contingent position of the visitor's gaze between triangulated or striated displays. Most obviously, this was the case with photographs mounted on the walls on top of "folded" supports so that one could only glimpse the image as a whole from a particular position. Otherwise, colored stripes on the sides of the folds interfered in the illusion of wholeness, in keeping with the dialogic ethos of both BIS and Mbanefo's scenographic concept. The latter drew moreover from the central courtyards which feature in traditional Edo architecture. Within the courtyard, the visitor could examine the Benin "objects" in an intimate setting, defined not only by the folded walls but also by their bright coral color, which referenced the royal monarchy and its ceremonial deployment of color in the service of tradition and power. Outside of the courtyard, on green-blue walls (a reference to Edo wealth gods as well as water, its gateway to global connectivity), visitors could find "framing" displays including object biographies, the FESTAC 1977 pan-African celebration of arts and culture, and other contextualizing topics. The design, thus aimed to build an Afrocentric and dialogic foundation into the display of the "objects", locating them within African epistemologies as made manifest in space. The dialogic prerogatives of BIS and the exhibition thereby found an echo in spatial structures which built on contingent points of view, Benin's formal cosmologies and traditions, as well as dialogues across the curators' various disciplines. These dialogical qualities were extended through the presence of museum staff who engaged visitors in conversation (as opposed to the more familiar presence of silent guards).

Whereas the German displays directly confronted restitution and what the implications of restorative justice staged through the return of looted objects might mean for German museums, the Rietberg show highlighted how dialogic processes embedded in the BIS research project could find an experiential dimension through exhibition design. In both cases, a take-away that poses important questions for museums of the future may regard not only the role of museums, but also the role(s) of curators-of-the-future. Each



[Fig. 6]

Installation view © Museum Rietberg Zürich / Patrik Fuchs.

of the exhibitions were at pains to emphasize the importance of dialogue, interdisciplinarity, and collaboration. Their display strategies worked against singular narratives and points of view, as we have analyzed. To what extent, then, must museums re-think the role of the curator as an individual “care-taker” (Latin *curare*) for “objects”? How can curating become explicitly collaborative, and how will this collaboration and polyphony make itself manifest in *display*. That is to say, how will visitors be able to experience it? Does this imply that curation and scenography will increasingly need to merge? That not “objects”, but display itself must become the curator’s primary domain?

To complicate this question further, these exhibitions – particularly *I Miss You* with its stark questioning of who misses whom – point to the potential pit-falls of situating the museum as a host, however multi-perspectival or polyphonic. As long as the museum remains the care-giver for its “guests”, how can the museum be decolonized? Hospitality relationships imply a mutual imbrication of obligation: hosts may provide for and welcome guests, but power relations may well remain imbalanced. The host is the giver, the guest the taker, even if taking is analogous to receiving “care”. What these exhibitions dealing with restitution and restitutorial justice in the museum imply is that the museum itself may ultimately need to relinquish its self-appointed role of host. What would it mean for the museum to become the guest of its “objects”? Could they allow these “objects” to become *subjects*, with their own agency to host? Breaking with hegemonic Western knowledge categories, the cultural significance of things may best be understood as always unstable and, as such, in a constant dialectic between leaps into the past such as “modern, (post) colonial or ‘native’”, as Homi Bhabha long ago observed.¹⁵ The way in which a museum facilitates relationships between actors and objects is thus bound to be the locus of radical dialogue if the museum is self-reflexive. This process must realize itself through the physical manifestation of display techniques. In the case of restitution, the museum is dealing not with singular events, such as a historical moment of looting and then a present moment of return. Instead, restitution is part of a process that alters the social relationships of all participants and all subjects.¹⁶ Could the museum, conceived as a guest, mobilize the unleashed potential of socially entangled material culture? Instead of Germany saying “farewell” to the Benin bronzes, we may therefore see the series of exhibitions reviewed here as providing a welcome springboard. They draw attention to the necessity of rethinking how socio-political processes and their “objects” might find new physical formats, ultimately through the creation of new types of display. “You say goodbye, I say hello.”

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Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, London 1994, 152.

16

See, e.g. Friedrich von Bose and Konrad Kuhn, Provenienzforschung und Restitution. Für ein Denken in un abgeschlossenen Prozessen, in: *Geschichte der Gegenwart*, July 7, 2024 (November 5, 2024); Rassool, Rethinking the Ethnographic Museum.