

# ON PROPERTIES OF RELATION, IN THE PROCESS OF REPATRIATION

Khadija von Zinnenburg Carroll

How are artists' interventions expanding potential responses to questions arising from museum collections, such as the return of the Benin bronzes to the place where they were looted? As an artist focusing on colonial collections in European museums I have worked with interventions, meta-museums, appropriations, duplications, museopiracy, hacks, rehangs, research, rewrites, recontextualizations, illuminations, narrations, juxtapositions, subversions, perversions, pathologies, therapies, critical theories, conceptual acupunctures, metaphoric trampolining, plays in 100 different ways, disarrays, parades, processions, performances, spectroscopies, endoscopies, archives, essay films, documentaries, speculative fabulations.<sup>1</sup> All these different genres and artistic strategies together define the institutional critique of colonial collections.

My artistic research on repatriation aims to expand our knowledge of human-object relations. Whereas European philosophy has conceived of subject and object as separate entities, Edo culture conceives subject and object as bound together. My research thus advances beyond the European conception of an object in a universal museum to what Achilles Mbembe has called "not mere objects but active subjects". The bronzes are ancestors, members of the family; they not only inhabit the shrines, they lead ceremonies. The

1

For my essay on artist interventions that formed the basis of my contribution to the Joint Ventures conference see: Khadija von Zinnenburg Carroll, Object to Project. Artist's Interventions in Museums, in: Christopher Marshall (Ed.), *Sculpture in the Museum*, Farnham 2012, 216–239. For meta-museums see: ead., Small Mirrors to Large Empires. Towards a Theory of Meta-museums in Contemporary Art, in: Jaynie Anderson (Ed.), *Crossing Cultures, Economies of Desire. Art Collecting and Dealing Across Cultures*, Proceedings of the 32<sup>nd</sup> Congress of the International Committee of the History of Art (CIHA), Melbourne 2009, 1012–1017. For museopiracy see: ead., Museopiracy. Redressing the Commemoration of the Endeavour's Voyage to the Pacific in Processions for Tupaia, in: *Third Text* 33 (special issue *Exhibiting the Experience of Empire. Decolonising Objects, Images, Materials and Words*, ed. by Imma Ramos, John Giblin and Nikki Grout), 2019, 541–558, DOI: <http://doi.org/10.1080/09528822.2019.1652424>.

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word “object,” with its associations to “objectivity” and European claims to exceptionalism, is not a useful term for subjects like the Benin bronzes.

My project reflects on the ways in which humans and material are treated discreetly, how they are valued and traded, how they are legalised or categorised differently in migration and repatriation discourses. As Severin Fowles has argued, objects replace people in postcolonial ‘object studies’ because people have become too problematic to study; in effect salvaging the authority of Euro-American scholars at the precise moment when their claims to represent non-European people seem to be evaporating.<sup>2</sup> In my experience, for artists of the diaspora, the mobile/diasporic/looted objects in museums become stand-ins for their own mobility, separation from home, as well as feelings of loss and desires to regain contact. Through performance in particular the agency of material subjects can be played out and made tangible for an audience.

This short text addresses the situation of artist interventions in museum repatriation from the perspective of my artistic research project called REPATRIATES, and in particular a performance titled Iyagbon’s Mirror (2017-ongoing).<sup>3</sup> REPATRIATES is a five year European Research Council project that compares different repatriations around the world from the perspective of stakeholder communities and artist responses – in the case of Iyagbon’s Mirror, to its return from Europe to Nigeria [Fig. 1].

Iyagbon is a female deity who mothers the Earth. For her, the artist Samson Ogiamien created a mask which is the central character of Iyagbon’s Mirror. The mask is taken on a site-specific and immersive journey by the multidisciplinary theatre company Onyrikon (directed by Juri Caneiro, based between Switzerland and France), which reverses the usual passage of the looted Benin Bronzes.<sup>4</sup> Accompanied by actors and musicians in a two-hour play that moves through space along different stations, the audience is led in a procession of the mask to a ritual. In the middle, Samson Ogiamien addresses the Iyagbon mask and tells us that it and other things in his collections “were never meant to be in the museum” [Fig. 2].

Ogiamien descended from royal lineage from Benin City, as an heir to the techniques of bronze casting that are still practised by the Royal Guild of Casters. In the Edo language the word for memory, *sa-e-y-ama*, literally means to cast in bronze. Edo is not a written

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Severin Fowles, The Perfect Subject (Postcolonial Object Studies), in: *Journal of Material Culture* 21, 2016, 9–27.

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Full credits of all performers involved can be read on the festival website: La Strada Graz, Cie Onyrikon & Samson Ogiamien, <http://www.lastrada.at/en/cie-onyrikon-samson-ogiamien-fr-ch-at-ng/> (31.01.2022).

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See the company’s website: Onyrikon, Iyagbon’s Mirror, <http://www.onyrikon.org/shows/article/iyagbon-s-mirror> (31.01.2022).



[Fig. 1]

Video still from: Iyagbon's Mirror, Neue Galerie Graz, 07:25 mins, short video by Khadija von Zinnenburg Carroll, 2021 (<http://vimeo.com/640260056>), 03:21 min.



[Fig. 2]  
Video still from: Samson Ogiamien in conversation with Khadija von Zinnenburg Carroll  
about the Royal Bronze Casters, Neue Galerie Graz, 2021 (<http://vimeo.com/645747195>),  
01:06 min.

language and the bronze sculptures that accompany ceremonies in the palaces are the vessels of cultural memory.<sup>5</sup> In the final scene of *Iyagbon's Mirror*, an auctioneer sells the mask and thereby brutally extracts it from the sacred context built up by the ritual that has just been performed [Fig. 3].

The frequently made assumption that, after an erasure of modernisation and colonisation (Rolando Vazquez), restitution recovers original treasures in a place where they are salvaged is surprisingly countered by the example of Samson Ogiamien, a bronze sculptor and founder of the Edo Cultural Forum in Graz, Austria.<sup>6</sup> On a studio visit he takes me to a clearing near a river on rural farmland in lower Styria in central Europe, where there is an inconspicuous metal drum in the ground. This could be mistaken for a rusty home-made coffee table in the garden. Ogiamien moves the lid aside and reveals a coal pit and the remains of his last copper-casting session.

In Benin, casting is not done in a mould that can reproduce multiples of the same sculpture. While one other Styrian bronze caster (near Ogiamien's studio) uses moulds to mass produce sculptures, Ogiamien always makes originals. In my project REPATRIATES and New Originals, I explore the potential of replicas to mediate the spaces left in museums once looted artifacts have been repatriated. What is interesting about Samson is that he is both a contemporary artist, trained as such in Graz (which is why he moved to Austria) and also a bronze sculptor steeped in the manufacture of and activism for the restitution of bronze sculptures from Benin City. His sculpture, *Iyagbon mask*, is an assemblage of Benin bronzes in a single piece, an over life-size meta-melt. The technique of recycling metal that the bronze (and copper) casters use is an interesting material and also conceptual process in which existing artefacts are literally melted down to form a new piece.

The first scene of *Iyagbon's Mirror* is intended to create an atmosphere of tension and unease. The actress Estelle Ntsende moves among the audience and begins to speak to individuals, first quietly and then in ever increasing volume, as if she were just en passant: "Excuse me, do you know how this work got here?"

As can be seen in my film, people in the audience begin to intervene and try to help her, thinking this is a spontaneous outburst and not scripted action. The performance of *Iyagbon's Mirror* will tour from Graz to Geneva in May 2022 and on to a series of German ethnographic museums who are aware of the scripted action. While in Graz's Neue Galerie Samson constructed an ethnographic-style exhibition of Nigerian art (mostly from his own collection, as the

5

Barbara Plankensteiner, Samson Ogiamien and the Art Traditions of the Kingdom of Benin, in: *Yaruya. Der Bildhauer Samson Ogiamien zwischen afrikanischer Tradition und europäischer Realität Yaruya/The sculptor Samson Ogiamien between African tradition and European reality* (exh. cat. Graz, Kunsthau Graz/Universalmuseum Joanneum), ed. by Günther Holler-Schuster and Katrin Bucher Trantow, Graz 2016, 22–27.

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Rolando Vázquez, *Vistas of Modernity. Decolonial Aesthetics and the End of the Contemporary*, Amsterdam 2020.



[Fig. 3]  
Video still from: Samson Ogiemien in conversation with Khadija von Zinnenburg Carroll,  
Neue Galerie Graz, 2021 (<http://vimeo.com/645743696>), 02:05 min.



[Fig. 4]  
Video still from: Samson Ogiemien in conversation with Khadija von Zinnenburg Carroll,  
Neue Galerie Graz, 2021 (<http://vimeo.com/645746465>), 00:08 min.

national Weltmuseum Wien made the loan of original Benin bronzes prohibitively expensive). *Iyagbon's Mirror* particularly seeks to intervene in actual ethnographic museum displays, installing Iyagbon as if she were part of the museum in a custom-built showcase [Fig. 4].

Samson Ogiamien often emphasizes that “we are in the same boat”. The implication is that both victims and perpetrators, Europeans and Africans – for want of more nuanced dichotomies or categories – are afflicted by the legacies of colonialism. It is through our collaboration that we begin to heal these wounds. The repatriation debate recurs, as Savoy has historicized in *Africa's Struggle for its Art* because it is a symbolic transfer, with the powerful potential to signal awareness and willingness to repair this colonial wound.<sup>7</sup> By performing together in a public space, collective action takes centre stage rather than those individual or national monetary interests and political instrumentalizations which often derail repatriation claims. Since the theatre allows us to create a micro-universe in which to experiment with ideas, *Iyagbon's Mirror* built precisely the boat in which we are all sailing in the wake of the third passage.<sup>8</sup>

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Bénédicte Savoy, *Afrikas Kampf um seine Kunst. Geschichte einer postkolonialen Niederlage*, München 2021 (soon also available as *Africa's Struggle for Its Art. History of a Postcolonial Defeat*, Princeton 2022).

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The notion of working in the wake is used in: Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake. On Blackness and Being*, Durham, NC 2016. See also the section “The Wake of Tupaia”, in: Khadija von Zinnenburg Carroll (ed.), *Tupaia, Captain Cook and the Voyage of the Endeavour. A Material History*, London 2022.



Samson Ogiamien sees his art as a bridge between cultures and as an opportunity to bring people together. He was born in Nigeria and has been working as a freelance artist in Graz, Austria, for several years. After his training, focussing on art and design as well as welding and construction, he managed a sculptor's workshop and came to Austria in 2004. Here the young artist attended the two-year master class in sculpture at Ortweinschule Graz, from which he graduated with distinction in summer 2007. In 2014, he received the award of the city of Graz promoting outstanding artists. After performing at the international festival for Street & Puppet Theater, La Strada, the artist was invited to participate in the Colombo Art Biennale, Sri Lanka. He is part of the European network IN SITU. In 2018 he produced the ongoing *Iyagbon's mirror* project in collaboration with Onyrikon. Ogiamien's works are based on the traditions of his home country and usually show the human form in semi-abstract style, often using "contemporary" materials such as concrete, iron, varnish, resin. It is important to him that people less familiar with art should also be able to understand his works. Samson Ogiamien likes to help people experience and express their own creativity. Thus the artist passes on his talents in workshops.