“Finding Means to Cannibalise the Anthropological Museum”

A conversation with Toma Muteba Luntumbue

For this book, we have devised a set of interviews and position pieces with curators, since we regard curatorial practice as transversally agentive across the three main sections of this book: museums, contemporary art, and colonialism. We think that these are fields from which anthropology gets challenged and within which it is particularly mobilised in a generative way. Bearing this in mind, how would you situate your practice as a curator? Please elaborate with view to your involvement in rethinking (national) large-scale exhibitions and post-colonial and diasporic relations between Africa (esp. DRC) and Europe (esp. Belgium)?

I was the first non-white curator of Congolese origin to organise an exhibition in the former colonial museum in Tervuren (Belgium). Symbolically, this is significant, given the context of requests to which the museum was paradoxically just beginning to be subjected, and which were lagging behind the dynamics of the museum scene in the United States and Great Britain. The preparation of the exhibition was an opportunity to take stock of the mutual ignorance of two worlds in Belgium: that of art and that of ethnographic museums. It was Boris Wastiau, for whom it was also the first exhibition to be curated in the Royal Museum for Central Africa in Tervuren, who invited me to organise a contemporary art section, while imagining a specific means for displaying about twenty objects from the collection. The Tervuren museum had not previously organised an art exhibition as such, but ethnographic exhibitions often resulted in ethnographic artefacts being reclassified as objects of art. The staging was often entrusted to freelance designers who used modes of presentation similar to art exhibitions. The particularly
heavy physical setting – a neoclassical ‘palace’ of colossal proportions – was for me an opportunity to question the visual regime of this former colonial museum, a ‘showcase’ of colonisation according to Leopold II. The museum, in aesthetic terms, was the direct result of a universal exhibition organised in Brussels in 1897, and it employed modes of display characteristic of natural science museums. By confronting the works of contemporary artists with the means used in archaic demonstrations of objects, which often favoured a frontal relationship, I curated the exhibition ExitCongoMuseum (2000/2001) in a way to provide an opportunity for questioning the usual taxonomic presentations. More precisely, ExitCongoMuseum forced the Tervuren Museum to adopt a self-critical approach and to carry out an ideological decoding of its collection.

Fig. 5.2 ExitCongoMuseum, Johan Muyle, L’impossibilité de régner, 2001, © J.M. Van Dyck

Fig. 5.3 ExitCongoMuseum, Philip Aguirre y Otegui, l’Homme de Tarifa, 2001, © Koen de Waal
More recently, as artistic director, I organised the 4th and 5th Lubumbashi Biennales in the Democratic Republic of Congo, my country of birth.

The theme of the 4th edition was entitled ‘Meteoritic Realities’ (‘Réalités Filantes’). The exhibitions and events proposed for the Biennale questioned the diverse and complex way in which artists perceive a ‘disposable’ (jetable) reality, where nothing seems destined to last. This title was freely borrowed from the great Martinique poet, philosopher, and writer Edouard Glissant. The 5th edition was entitled ‘Bedazzlement’ (‘Eblouissements’), which evoked both the wonders, seductions, fascinations, and blindness specific to situations of cultural, political, and economic changes as well as upheavals affecting the world. Preparing and presenting an exhibition in the DRC, one is exposed to various risks, to real limits, both material and conceptual, but it also provides opportunities to unknown ‘elsewheres’. To show works of art in Lubumbashi asks you very seriously to imagine the representations, prejudices, and expectations of one’s audience.

The 4th and 5th editions of the Lubumbashi Biennale took place in a climate of political tension in a country close to a state of emergency. Working in a large mining city like Lubumbashi required us to grasp the energy, movement, and rhythms specific to the city, unconscious choreographies of bodies that ignore or tame each other in the public space, and to integrate them as essential parameters for the exercise of the exhibition.

To sum up, the role of curator allows for confronting artistic as well as cultural otherness. It is a position from which it is possible to observe, on the one hand, the planetarisation of artistic gestures and the language of images as essential vectors of communication and, on the other hand, the singularity of each person’s existential experiences confronted with a strong local context of a unique and irreducible reality.

Up until recently, art history and European art museums focused predominantly on (a history of) European art, while non-European art was mostly regarded and professionally constituted as the domain of anthropological research and anthropological museums. In what ways does your thinking and curatorial practice try to pervert or change the way we look at these distinctions of European/non-European, West/non-West? Could you perhaps expand on how the last Lubumbashi Biennale constitutes a case-in-point?

In 2003, I organised an exhibition of 28 contemporary artists, the vast majority of whom came from different African countries, at the Palais des Beaux-arts (BOZAR) in Brussels. The challenge for me at the time was to
demonstrate that the meaning of ‘African contemporary art’ was obsolete and abusive. It had the consequence of denigrating artists by racialising the notion of contemporary art. This move also imposes a neo-primitivist and exoticist view of the productions of non-white artists, leading to the marginalisation of groups to which an artificial unity is attributed simply by their supposedly belonging to a ‘Black Continent’.

Since ‘Contemporary African Art’ is perceived as synonymous with art from this so-called ‘Black Continent’, my selection of artists included artists living and working in Africa, but also others based outside the continent. I also invited an artist from the Philippines, Gaston Damag, and Keith Piper, a British artist of Afro-Caribbean origin. The title of the exhibition Transfers evaded the mention of ‘Africa’ or ‘African’ altogether in order to avoid the essentialisation of the participating artists. Abstaining from using the word ‘Africa’ in my title aimed at drawing attention to the works themselves, rather than to racial or geopolitical considerations. The management of the BOZAR in Brussels, by contrast, deliberately promoted a differentialist point of view, producing new posters with an explicit self-portrait of a Burundian artist, Aimé Ntakiyica, dressed in Scottish clothes and with the title Transfers, African artists of today. This conflict over the title of an exhibition is indicative of the permanent balance and tension of power in the cultural milieu at the time.

At the Lubumbashi Biennale, we asked ourselves how local artists could seize the opportunities for openness promoted by the Biennale without being victims of a form of homogenisation, neither of style nor of gaze. To this end, I imagined an experimental workshop to accompany young artists before the Biennale that took place between July and September 2017. Through this programme, the Biennale wanted to engage with ten young creators recruited in the country’s four major cities: Kinshasa, Goma, Kisangani, and Lubumbashi. They worked on the implementation of their artistic projects, focusing both on practical tools (workspaces, content) and on dissemination tools (places, actors, networks). The workshop programme consisted of practical and theoretical seminars during which young artists worked with local mentors (artists, curators, critics, researchers) and invited guests. The principal aim was to reduce the distance between local artists and artists from other countries by allowing them to associate for a longer period of time than just the few hours before opening of the Biennale.

**What does it mean for this art now to be collected at art museums rather than anthropological museums?** Can you describe how you
regard these disciplinary divisions, and whether and to what extent you see or even participate in breaking down these divisions?

These disciplinary divisions do not mean much to me, since I remain optimistic about the changing perspectives in museums. It is necessary to challenge, or even break, the codes of hegemonic representation of anthropology museums by producing exhibitions of contemporary art that cannibalise their method. Often the presentation of ethnographic objects is marked by a special ‘aura’ when they are exhibited in an ‘art’ museum. While they are historically attributed a lower market value, they are, at the same time, being given a magical character. In addition, the discourse that accompanies their productions is often spiked with pseudo-anthropological remarks that deny them any contemporaneity. For a long time, the way we looked at artists and talked about them resembled the way we look at objects. By hybridising display techniques, it is possible to create a space that allows these visions to be questioned and to show complexity in order to produce new meanings.

This is essentially what I tried to propose with the exhibition Ligablo, which I organised at the Royal Library of Belgium in Brussels between November 2010 and January 2011. The context that gave rise to this project was the commemorative frenzy surrounding the celebration of the fiftieth anniversary of the independence of the DRC in Belgium throughout 2010. These commemorations irritated some Congolese nationals living in Belgium for the strange way in which it smacked of the rehabilitation of colonialism. The Ligablo exhibition began with informal discussions and meetings with members of the Congolese community living in Brussels and elsewhere in Belgium. It was decided that the experiences of this minority could become the exhibition’s principal subject.

The title Ligablo refers to an object that is omnipresent in the urban landscape of Kinshasa. It is a stall, of variable size and morphology, made with

![Fig. 5.4 Ligablo (personal document), © Toma Muteba Luntumbue.](image-url)
wooden boards, on which various basic necessities are sold individually. More than an activity essential to the daily survival of the population, *Ligablo* is an act of resistance. It is the hallmark of the informal economy, a sign of an urban condition in which public deficiencies generate survival systems and alternative agents – particularly ingenious marginal agents. It is this polymorphic object that served as a model for the construction of the scenography, and which became the symbolic image of the exhibition.

A non-exhaustive corpus of emblematic objects – objects of everyday life, personal objects, video images, private photographs, and works by contemporary artists – were brought together with the idea of offering a kaleidoscopic vision through which nothing was spared: civil wars, years of dictatorship, criminal exploitation of resources, failures, dreams, and so on. This constellation of images, ways of thinking, desiring and dreaming was an attempt to respond to ethnographic narrative as a historically codified form of representation of an ‘Other’ that was privileged until then by numerous exhibitions. The *Ligablo* exhibition was neither linear nor chronological. The challenge was that discontinuity and heterogeneity become ramparts against a form of museum didacticism.

The constitution of the corpus of the exhibited objects went through several stages, methodical, disordered, fortuitous, lucky. The lenders were strangers, friends, intermediaries. During the preparation, it became very clear that Congolese networks, in general, were initially based on family networks. And that it was family ties that made it possible to keep the memory and transmit the identity of the community, an identity that was itself feverishly maintained thanks to a few – sometimes derisory – objects (identity documents, old bank notes, vaccination cards, school reports, driving licences from the country of origin, etc.) and an abundant private iconography.

**How do you relate to anthropology's legacies in the present? Where do you grapple with anthropology today? We mean this in the sense of where do you think that critical and, in your view, interesting or new knowledge production concerning anthropology takes place today?**

The study of transnational cultural processes, cultural globalisation, or urban anthropology are among the fields that interest me, especially in their methodological aspects. Anthropology is necessary to analyse the most urgent phenomena of our contemporaneity. Which grids for measuring the near and the distant coexist in the face of the telescoping scales produced by globalisation? Between “connectedness” (being in relation) and “contiguity” (being next door)? Which links exist between the places and territories experienced
by individual or rather, collective identity? What importance should be given to local places and local times today?

To answer this question more precisely, Jean Bazin’s words are helpful. He claimed that

Ethnography, the writing and staging of differences, the manifest signs of an essential otherness, have now multiplied and universalised: Ethnography is no longer restricted to the West’s gaze on ‘its others’ (…) – the indigenous peoples of its colonial empires who have become immigrants of its cities. Cultures are now just as much images of what these others manufacture and disseminate of their identity and that we consume. (…) Everyone acts as one’s own ethnographer and tries to display and make have their cultural difference recognised as an indication, as proof of their essential otherness. There have never as many cultures as today. (2002: 88)

In view of the different initiatives attempting to decolonise museums and academia in Euro-American contexts, how do you consider the role of curatorial practice and institution building in the Belgian context? In what ways, if any, do you see these initiatives around decolonisation as continuing, rethinking, or expanding the work of institutional critique? Feel free to comment on these terms themselves.

In a Europe that is increasingly forced to transform its ethnographic museums into places of exchange and cultural integration, it was long awaited that a new exhibitionary regime would emerge in Belgium’s Royal Museum for Central Africa in Tervuren. Many people thought that the new museum would review colonialism, while reinterpreting its own exhibition methods. It would, many hoped, subsequently commit itself to confront all kinds of taboo questions and, even if no answers could be found to the raised questions, at least enable the questions to be put at issue.

Since its reopening in December 2018, after a three-year closure for renovation, the Tervuren Museum has not ceased to be present in the media, due to the anxious expectations it had raised and to the opacity of its project management. The project’s theoretical and epistemological void contrasts with the media activism of the museum’s leaders: There is no real revolution, no project, no new narrative despite the museum’s efforts to present itself as such. Beyond its patrimonial, symbolic, and memorial importance, Tervuren is just one symptom among others of a sly and complex Belgian unease about its policies for representation of cultural alterity.

Following the example of its many foreign counterparts, the Tervuren Museum wanted to define as a priority the involvement of six experts of
African origin to work closely with the museum’s research department and the project team responsible for setting up the future reference exhibition. I was one of the six experts and witnessed how this collaboration – weighted of controversy, product of improvisation – developed over months in a climate of mistrust and rigidity. Overall, it is a failure, since the discussion space turned into a place of power struggles. It would therefore be inappropriate to talk about Belgian ‘decolonisation’ and even less so to talk about the advent of a ‘post-ethnographic’ or ‘post-colonial museum’.

Many decolonial critiques are especially aimed at anthropological museums and collections. What, from your point of view, makes an ‘anthropological framing’ in an exhibition? Are there specific display techniques, modes of exhibiting, and framing, that you would describe – for better or for worse – as typically anthropological? Is there such a thing as an ‘anthropological’ or ‘ethnographic’ exhibition?

The fact that the visitor is physically present in a museum or exhibition space is the common denominator of most exhibitions. Exhibitions offer visitors a variety of opportunities to entertain different perceptive relationships. Visitors can evolve in the space as a mobile eye; they stop, look, read, listen to an audioguide, concentrate on an object, and so on. But in a classic anthropological or ethnographic exhibition, the presentation of objects is marked by the primacy of discourse, which sometimes even borders didacticism. The scientific law often dominates the museography.

Classic presentation devices reflect violence, translating an aesthetic of colonial domination. For me, the showcase represents the zero degree of exposure. These dispositifs remain stuck in some museums in the manner in which aesthetic objects were exhibited in the 1930s.

Current forms of museology are a compromise between different forms of presentation. There may not be or no longer be a form of pure ethnographic museography. Although it is necessary to mention the modes of display and techniques specific to anthropology museums, it must be noted that much effort has been made to break down these old models. And of course some museums remain prisoners of an ethno-stylistic, aesthetic, formalist presentation; with the showcase as a privileged device, which, in turn, influences the public reception of non-Western arts. This display in vitro condemns objects to live out of time. It is one of the oldest criticisms of ethnographic museums that are marked by classificatory thinking, because they are denying contemporaneity and historicity to non-Western objects and their producers.

In accordance with a paradigm of post-coloniality or post-modernity, different practices associated with the museums have developed in recent
decades: ‘xenophile’ exhibitions, articulated through self-criticism, symposia, and publications in favour of the renovation of the anthropological museum, or the emergence of museums without objects. The recent development of participatory or inclusive museologies confirms this standardisation of practices – a practice of consulting, if not associating, any group which defines itself as a social or cultural entity corresponding to that which the museums represents.

But the question that recurs with great force is whether anthropological museums are the most legitimate places to address issues related to the representation of cultural alterity.

**Do you recognise these kinds of framings also in non-anthropological museums?** For example, in modern art museums that employ framings traditionally used in anthropological museums?

An exhibition of contemporary art can take the form of a pastiche, a quotation, an appropriation, or an archaeology of the *dispositif* of the ‘museum of ethnography’. It can also seek to deconstruct the history of the gaze through an analysis of the exhibitionary regimes of anthropological museums. The possibilities are extremely varied. In 2017, the Palais de Tokyo in Paris devoted an exhibition to the diorama, a *dispositif* inherited from the nineteenth century. Coming from theatre, the diorama has been widely used in natural science museums as a means of staging knowledge about the world and in anthropology museums in their desire to contextualise objects. The Palais de Tokyo exhibition thus addressed the visual heritage of colonialism by problematising the diorama as an exhibitionary *dispositif*. The architect David Adjaye structured his *Geo-graphics* exhibition in Brussels in 2010 in a thematic subdivision according to geographical areas that characterise the African continent: Sahel, Maghreb, Desert, Savannah, Forest, and Mountains. This organisation encouraged the idea that the natural environment influenced cultural production. In doing so, David Adjaye paraphrased the ecological distribution of four sections – desert-prairie-valley-forests – suggested by the American Museum of Natural History in New York at the beginning of the twentieth century. At that time, similar to anthropology, the contextual approach affirmed itself with its tendency to place the object in its cultural environment in relation to its social organisation, religious life, political systems. I find it difficult to determine whether this approach is a conscious or unconscious borrowing from the museography of anthropological museums, but this aesthetic affinity surprises in its deterministic and primitivist character.
Related to this question, it is evident that terms and problems once associated with the difficult legacies of anthropological work (we are here thinking of notions like ‘native’, ‘indigenous’, ‘subaltern’, ‘Global South’, etc.) are increasingly ‘en vogue’ in contemporary, especially, post-colonial art discourse. How do you witness the transition and migration of such terminologies?

In the field of post-colonial contemporary art, there is a desire to build a theoretical apparatus in the face of an ever more complex world, a result of the numerous disjunctions of globalisation, imposing new openings as well as limits that question inter-ethnic or interracial relations. Language remains a crucial determinant in such a context, particularly with regard to the survival of the traces of colonial hegemonic order.

It seems to me that the term ‘indigenous’ as it has been used recently in the French cultural space, has been used as a metaphorical reference and for its political charge. But such terms, according to the researcher Pap Ndiaye (2008), are inappropriate to translate contemporary social situations. Even if contemporary problems have an obvious connection with the colonial past, they should be thought in their relative particularities.

A paradoxical situation is reached when an inflation or denaturation of these terms takes place in the contemporary art world and they become pseudo-concepts emptied of their initial meaning.

Note

1. The image on p. 174 is Figure 5.1 4th Lubumbashi Biennial, 2014, © Georges Senga.

References
