CHAPTER FIVE

Managing plethora: Caring for colonial collections

The Museum’s staff entrance was situated within the courtyard. A sign indicating ‘registration’ (Anmeldung) was written in capital letters on the big glass door. Once you entered, you found yourself in a controlled area. On your left, three to four men, sealed off behind glass, looked down at you: the security guards’ room was elevated in such a way that you needed to reach up to get a list, on which you would need to fill in your name, affiliation, and the time of your arrival. When you left, you signed out the same way. Security staff frequently commented on late arrivals and absences, clearly indicating that they observed one’s behaviour and work routine. In exchange for the list, slid under the window, you received your keys.

With my keys, I had access to the museum storage.1 When the key manager handed them to me, I could see who had made use of the keys to access the museum storage in the last ten years. The list was short, and I knew almost all the names – access to what has been described as the ‘continuously throbbing heart of a museological collection’ has been highly restricted (Griesser-Stermscheg, 2012, p. 81).2 Walking into the Museum’s East Africa storage, located in the cellar, I felt as if this was as far as one could get in entering the Museum’s backstage. A former air-raid shelter, the storage closed with an impressive and heavy metal door: the air was charged and heavy, noises muted, random interactions with other people were unlikely, and one was alone. The overwhelming number of objects seemed to conceal uncountable stories, and despite the order, it felt almost impossible to orientate oneself, to get an overview. A particular sense of discovery, similar to exploring one’s grandparents’ attic and thus of adventure came together with a feeling of risk, the fear of breaking things, or of disarranging the seemingly neat order.

As Mirjam Brusius and Kavitha Singh framed it, ‘museum collections are, like archives, simultaneously the outcome of historical processes and the very condition for the production of historical knowledge’ (Brusius & Singh, 2017, p. 7). The curator Paola Ivanov repeatedly described the historical context
we were dealing with as one of ‘collecting mania’ (Sammelwut) (Ivanov, 2005, p. 43). This frenzy would have lasting consequences for how the work of conserving and storing was organised in the Ethnological Museum. In the museum storage, the colonial collecting frenzy materialised, and the politics of the Ethnological Museum collection’s constitutions became graspable. A museum curator stated in conversation about the Museum’s collections and the difficulties of doing research with them that

[i]f we are honest, we don’t know anything about what we have here. The musealisation is an end in itself [ein Zweck an sich]. The whole story consisted in appropriation. The Museum put the objects in storage, for the objects to be there, with a pseudo-label, and that’s what constitutes all the knowledge. And this plethora develops agency [Agency der Unmenge]! The sheer mass of objects is stifling. I think that the collection is so stifling – it’s crushing us! It’s even preventing us from recording the collection.3

This chapter focuses on how museum staff handled this abundance of collections in the Museum. It focuses on one historic moment and one person’s narrative, that of storage manager Hans-Joachim Radosuboff.4 After the fall of the Wall, the ethnological museum in Leipzig repatriated approximately 45,000 objects, war booty, to the Ethnological Museum (see chapter two). How does the managing and ordering of collections articulate in a context of scarce resources? How does this responsibility for the collection articulate in the Museum’s everyday – collections handed down from the past with the mission to keep it for future generations?

Through Radosuboff’s narrative of his own twenty-year-long career in the department, the chapter addresses the imbalance of resources – financial, personnel – and of attention attributed to the caring and managing of the results of colonial collecting. The chapter thus depicts the Museum as a space fragmented by hierarchies. Between different tasks and obligations, the Museum is organised along practices understood as mundane, which can be summed up as ‘care’, versus practices associated with the ‘representation’ of the Museum.

Collection neglect past and present

In a personal conversation in 2018, one museum curator commented on why the situation of the museum storage was ‘symptomatic’ of what characterised, in the curator’s view, the Humboldt Forum’s general attitude: it was
‘representation’ that took a place of pride, instead of what was understood as ‘substantial’ museum work.\textsuperscript{5}

The museum storage is symptomatic of what generally happens in the Humboldt Forum. Since it is not possible to profile the Forum with the museum storages, there is absolutely no investment. The situation in the museum storage is devastating and it is getting worse and worse. For me, working on a research project, this is a disaster. Only the minimum requirements are met. Currently, apart from objects for the Humboldt Forum, the objects considered at risk are taken out: ‘at risk’ means those objects which might become subject to restitution claims in the next few years. The rest of the objects will be covered for an indefinite amount of time under plastic tarpaulins. If insects come and devour the collections, this will hardly be noticed! If the collections are closed off, we do not have any control of what is happening in there.

The organisational prioritisation of ‘representation’ over conservation and storage was confirmed and went public with an article in 2019 entitled ‘Contaminated, Corroded, Flooded’ (‘Verseucht, zerfressen, überflutet’). The journalist Jörg Häntzschel described the conditions of museum storage in German ethnological museums, and particularly in Berlin, as ‘administrative emergencies’. Referring to the museum storage’s current operation as ‘passive de-collecting’, he criticised what he understood as a lack of transparency concerning the state of conservation of the collections, which are ‘to say the least, not ideal’ and even ‘catastrophic’ (Häntzschel, 2019).

The neglect of the care of collections in favour of what museum staff framed as ‘representation’ had a history in the Ethnological Museum. In the context of debates on the Humboldt Forum, the museum storage’s poor condition was used to argue for the collection’s move to the city centre. In 2010, when the plans for the Humboldt Forum were put at risk, the museum director Viola König argued that

[t]he storage space’s conditions don’t correspond in any way to the collections’ requirements […]. In the summer it is too hot in the uninsulated building, whereas in the winter, there is condensation running down the walls. (\textit{Die Welt am Sonntag}, 13 June 2010 quoted in König and Scholz, 2012, p. 76)

In an article published at approximately the same time in the national newspaper \textit{Süddeutsche Zeitung}, similar statements were made:
Bad news arrives on the director’s desk every day. In addition to fire protection, the air conditioning and electrical engineering are partly in a miserable state. ‘We could only bear the situation because we knew that it was not long until the collection’s move’ says König, who still pleads for a relocation of the collections from Dahlem to Mitte. (*Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 8 June 2010, quoted in König and Scholz, 2012, p. 76)

In 2013–2015, during my time at the Museum, conditions had hardly changed for the better. The Africa collections were housed in a building originally constructed to show exhibitions.\(^6\) The rooms were thus not suited for storing objects: the floor was made out of wood and the windows were big. With no air conditioning, the museum storage rooms were exposed to marked temperature fluctuations, going up to 35°C in the summer. Not only were these temperatures difficult to endure in terms of working conditions, but they also risked damaging the objects, such as causing cracks in wooden objects. In contrast to the museum storage’s situation, the exhibition spaces were entirely air-conditioned. Probably, museum staff sometimes joked, this was to pretend that everything worked professionally in the Museum. ‘What is most absurd in this context is that the objects have to be transported in so-called “climate boxes” [*Klimakisten*]’, museum staff explained to me.\(^7\)

Alerted by the damage caused by fire to the Anna Amalia Library in Weimar in 2004 and the collapse of the Historical Archive of the City of Cologne in 2009, checks on the buildings’ capacity to host the collection were carried out. If a fire broke out, ‘better save yourself, don’t even try to rescue the objects’, members of museum staff stated. The building would simply collapse. Even though the consequent measures – the evacuation of the collections – were supposed to be realised immediately, they hadn’t taken place yet. Staff concluded that the Museum’s concerns were rather about ‘representation than about the objects’.\(^8\) At the time of writing, the West Africa storages are closed for an indefinite amount of time, as fire protection is not secured.

The lack of planning, funding, and personnel (concerning the collections) was incomprehensible to some of the people working in the Museum. ‘It is not as if the Humboldt Forum is a particularly new idea’, one member of staff claimed. The discrepancy between what was spent on the Humboldt Forum\(^9\) and external curatorial projects\(^10\) in contrast to the collections’ care was just too significant in museum staff’s eyes. ‘It is not only the museum’s task to do new and costly exhibitions. The museum is also there to conserve!’ another employee stated, referring to the ICOM definition of the museum’s multiple roles (ICOM 2007).\(^11\)

In the local news programme *Abendschau*, broadcast on 23 August 1990, the director of Leipzig’s Museum für Völkerkunde, Lothar Stein, showed
himself relieved to know that ‘the objects returned finally to where they rightfully belong’. The journalist, joking, shot back – ‘Ah, to Africa or Asia?’ to which Stein responded, ‘No, this is another issue. Many conferences have been devoted to this topic. In Dahlem, the objects can finally be treated appropriately from the point of view of restoration’ (Abendschau, 1990).12

Hans-Joachim Radosuboff, responsible for the Africa storage from 1991 until 2012, was the one dealing with this precise ‘point of view of restoration’ the museum director Lothar Stein alludes to – inventorying, reorganising, cleaning, and moving objects within and between old and new storage spaces. In what follows, I depart from the particular: the history of Hans-Joachim Radosuboff and the ‘object love’ (Macdonald, 2002, p. 65), devotion, and passion that accompanied his work at the Museum. Countering the organisational neglect individually, this history not only pays homage to his achievements. It underlines the impact of individuals and their agency in the Museum’s history, opposing anonymised understandings of what constitutes the Museum.

The making of the East Africa storage

When visiting and working in the East Africa storage, one constantly stumbled on Hans-Joachim Radosuboff’s traces. The cupboards were organised by topic, and similar objects were neatly arranged next to each other. Opening the cupboards, taking out the objects to properly look at them, I imagined hearing Hans-Joachim Radosuboff’s successor sigh as I had heard so many times before: once something was taken out, it was not always easy to reconstruct the complicated hanging system that Hans-Joachim Radosuboff and his assistant, Jürgen Tröster, had put in place. Beautifully installed, the objects would not touch each other; they were draped and arranged behind glass following what Hans-Joachim Radosuboff called ‘movement and aesthetics’. Jürgen Tröster contributed to these particular hanging systems significantly insofar as he had previously worked for the prominent German porcelain manufacturer Königliche Porzellan-Manufaktur and had installed their displays at fairs (Verkaufsmessenausstatter).

When I contacted Hans-Joachim Radosuboff to do an interview, he replied enthusiastically. He was happy to report on his ‘85,000 children’,13 referring to the approximate number of objects in the Africa collection. We met in January 2015. Hans-Joachim Radosuboff had been retired for over two years, and he still knew the collections by heart. He had prepared well for the interview and had reread the diary that he had kept from 1991 to 2002. His speech was accurate and detailed, spiced with funny details.14 He came to visit the Museum, ‘not so much for the Museum as for the people’.
With a likeable Berlin accent, he was always ready for repartee. He greeted everyone and quickly made appointments for a chat when we encountered museum staff during our tour. We installed ourselves in the office just next to the West Africa storage. Immediately after we sat down, Hans-Joachim Radosuboff started his narrative.

Hans-Joachim Radosuboff (HJR): I arrived here out of the blue in 1991. If you look at my CV, I am not an expert. I didn’t have anything to do with Africa.

Margareta von Oswald (MO): What did you do?

HJR: I was a craftsman. At one point, I learned how to be a mason and then, for many years, I worked as a craftsman in manual sectors, in technical areas. My last job before coming here was at the Museum of Decorative Arts (Kunstgewerbemuseum), as a guard, in the guardhouse. There was a notice that the Museum für Völkerkunde was looking for a storage keeper. And I applied and it worked. And then I walked in here as we did today. The only difference was that it was somehow much less chaotic, but still, much more chaotic than it is now [laughs]. And Mr Koloss [Hans-Joachim Koloss, the Africa curator at the time] who employed me, he picked me out of 128 applications. This was the time when the Wall just had come down. One and a half years after. Anyone applied for anything. Do you understand? Koloss gave me a few brief explanations. When I started to ask interested questions, he was suddenly gone. That’s how it was! In that sense, he was not an instructor! And after a few questions and a few gruff answers I told myself: ‘OK, you have to do your own thing.’ And very quickly, I understood why I got the job here. After a short time of working in the Museum, the door swung open, two of my colleagues stood there with these huge carts, filled with objects from Leipzig. ‘Achim, your first objects are here!’ So, and then of course, I had to help myself – unpacking and disinsectising and such. And then, the hall here was filled with another 25,000 objects.

When the objects arrived in Berlin, the Museum was confronted with an exceptional situation. As put by Christian Feest in 1991, ‘[n]o sane museum ever acquires 45,000 objects in a single stroke’ (Feest, 1991, p. 32). Of the objects acquired, 25,000 belonged to the Africa collections. Hans-Joachim Radosuboff was most directly and immediately confronted with this situation (see figures 5.1 and 5.2).
Figures 5.1 and 5.2 Photographs of ‘emergency cupboards’ (Notregale) as interim storage for the collections, Ethnologisches Museum, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, photographer: Hans-Joachim Radosuboff
When I arrived at the Museum, I had a lot of ideas in a short period of time. But then I realised, that every single idea I have, I need to keep up 65,000 times. Do you understand? If I don’t keep this particular idea, I create more disorder than anything else.

In his diaries, Hans-Joachim Radosuboff wrote: ‘Only the humble question remains: “Where to put things?” It certainly doesn’t fit in a hat-box.’ He found a timely solution. Given that the museum’s air-raid shelter in the cellar was out of use due to the end of the Cold War, he decided to reuse it as storage space. To have clearly distinct entities in the two different storage spaces – one located in the building’s cellar, the other one under the same building’s roof – Hans-Joachim Radosuboff separated the regional collections within the Africa collection. He dedicated one space to the East Africa collections and the other to the rest of the Africa collections, which consisted mainly of objects from West Africa and today is commonly referred to as the West Africa storage.

When the 25,000 objects arrived, I started to get an idea of the amount and the kind of work that I was going to be confronted with. Mr Koloss said to me: ‘Well, this will keep you occupied for approximately four years, won’t it?’ [Hans-Joachim Radosuboff looks at me, and laughs out loud.] As I said, I didn’t have much of an idea of what I was doing. I also had no one to talk to. I was what you call an autodidact. However, I knew that in four years, I could never deal with this amount of objects [laughs again]. I had a little bit of experience already and if I did my job correctly, I knew that I could only do twenty-five objects a week. At the most! That’s one hundred objects per month, and then we have to consider vacation and sick leave. This added up to about one thousand objects a year. I had twenty-seven years left, there are 25,000 objects. So then, I said to my boss, Koloss, everything would work out: by the time I retired, he would have his two study collections. This information blew him away! Koloss was a Cameroon fan and of course he wanted to see and process everything that concerned Cameroon right away. And this is how I got him to get help. Koloss organised assistants to support me.

And I said to myself: ‘OK, the East Africa collection holds approximately as many objects as what has been returned from Leipzig as repatriations.’ One didn’t have any measure in terms of physical mass. An object could be a pearl or a drum. Still, I knew that the quantity of inventory numbers from the East Africa collection was about 25,000, and thus,
the number of objects that were returned. So I said to myself: ‘We need
to get a whole region out of here. If not, we’ll have a mess again.’ And
this turned out to be East Africa.

As a non-professional, I had a dream: I wanted to create a study collec-
tion, where you can see possibly everything, but were you do not need to
touch anything and where no object touches another object. This was the
most important rule. And then there was the question – what motivates
the object’s arrangement? Well, I said to myself, by topic: It’s organised
a bit like a thesaurus.

MO: And how did you assign the objects to each category?

HR: I actually created a thesaurus. When I added objects, they appeared
immediately in the database, but only as a list of names. I then I assigned
certain functions to those objects, and functional groups appeared. [...] 
As a result, one could say that this museum’s database’s Mama, the
Ur-Mama (‘great-mother’), comes from me.

The Leipzig repatriation incited the Museum to start the collection’s digi-
tisation earlier than other SMB museums. The collections from Leipzig were
all inventoried when they arrived. However, as Hans-Joachim Radosuboff
explained, it was done in a rough way.

If an object came back from Leipzig which was made out of wood, they
would just write ‘piece of wood’. Then, the object was assigned a Leipzig
number [Leipzignummer] and that’s it. For me, that was an insufficient
procedure.

As a reaction, Hans-Joachim Radosuboff expanded the Museum’s
current database GOS and started to define notions (Sachbegriff) and sub-
ject groups (Sachgruppen), departing from the collections themselves. In the
old storage system, the objects had already been sorted by subject groups.
This meant that the different regions represented in the collection were
mixed up (see chapter four for details of the geographical division of ob-
jects). Hans-Joachim Radosuboff thus had to go through all the cupboards
in the old storage system as well as through all the war repatriations, to first
identify objects marked ‘III E’, designating East Africa. He then physically
laid out the objects according to his self-defined subject group in the muse-
um’s hallways and prepared cupboards for those objects in the basement.
Jürgen Tröster, his assistant, then sorted the objects into the cupboards.
In the cupboards, the objects were arranged by subject group, such as ‘masks’ or ‘dress’, and then, within those thematic cupboards, by region, for example, ‘Tanzania’ (see figures 5.3 and 5.4).

In addition to expanding GOS as a database, a system that would be taken over by the entire Museum at the end of the 1990s, he created another thesaurus at home to acquaint himself further with the collections. He said that he didn’t know anything about the collections, of terms ‘of which I don’t even know if it’s a river, a country, a region, or an ethnic group’. A database would help to orientate himself in the thousands of objects. Hans-Joachim Radosuboff designed an Ethniendatenbank, a database of ethnic groups, based on the works of international and German anthropologists William J. Waterman Roome, Herrmann Baumann, George Peter Murdock, and Walter Hirschberg. He kept and continued this database during his entire career, but it never entered the museum system. The database of ethnic groups, he admitted disappointedly, was conspicuously ignored in the Museum. Despite the inventory and database work, it was still difficult to find his way around in the collections, as he noted in his 1994 diary:

I want to mention it once more. It’s not easy for someone like me to identify where the objects come from, as I have just started to get a feeling for the appearance of an object. The old collection with its narrow shelves stuffed up to the farthest corner was roughly sorted according to subject groups. But that was also the only comprehensible order that existed in this storage. The object catalogues as well as the fragmentary index cards are sorted by sequence numbers. This didn’t say anything about the origin and locations of the objects. A 1,000m² storage area with several hundred cupboards of approximately eighty metres of shelves, stuffed with war repatriations. Here I had to do the trick of bringing all East Africa objects together, according to subject groups. If I were to overlook some, there would be problems later in the East Africa study collection because of too narrow space calculation.

The challenges inherent in creating systematised ordering structures – imposing names, establishing hierarchies, creating meaning – became evident when I addressed the topic directly. He explained the genealogy of the different categories, listed on the East Africa storage plan – ranging from ‘toys’ to ‘dancing tools’ (Tanzgeräte) to ‘extrasensory’ (übersinnlich).

MO: Could you explain how the ascription in functional groups worked exactly?
Figure 5.3 Map of the East Africa storage, designed by Hans-Joachim Radosuboff, http://www.radosuboff.de/em/1993/afro_jahr1993.html, consulted 20 December 2017, Ethnologisches Museum, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin

HJR: That resulted first from what was there as a collection. For example, there is hunting [Jagd]. You can add hunting to livelihood [Lebensunterhalt]. There is active hunting, when you shoot with bow and arrow. And there is passive hunting. But at one point, I dropped passive hunting because anyway, passive hunting consists in traps. So it becomes ‘active hunting’ and ‘traps’. Then we went on. The ‘traps’ group consists of forty or fifty traps. This is confusing. When you have more than ten terms in a group, you create a subdivision: traps for small animals, traps for big animals.

And so it went on and on. No one wanted to talk with me about this thesaurus. There was no one here to discuss with me, they all dodged when the topic came up [...] So I consulted dictionaries or experts. For example, ‘What is the difference between medicine [Medizin] and drug [Arznei]?’ Well, I talked to my dentist. Actually, I talked to different people all the time. And later on, when this information was needed for MuseumPlus, every one, constantly, had demands. And they mocked me, in particular for those ‘magical objects’. Just to explain to you. For me, ‘magic’ was not an obvious category. If someone has a crucifix hanging on the wall, it’s religion for me. When an African in Cameroon has got his object of faith in his hut – what does that mean to me? Is it ‘magic’ [Magie] or ‘bewitchment’ [Zauberei] or what-do-I-know? But this is an unfair perspective [ungerecht]! Why would a crucifix be ‘religion’ and the Cameroonian object be ‘magic’ or ‘bewitchment’? So, for me, this whole area was simply extrasensory [übersinnlich]. Why? It is something that my senses cannot perceive, so for me it’s ‘extrasensory’. Later on, it became ‘spiritual’ [laughs]. This is how such things emerged. With this expression, without being unfair, this African spiritual object could be on equal terms with a European spiritual object. This is how I thought about those issues.

MO: And how did you associate objects with functions? There exists so little detail about most of the objects...

HJR: Yes, but when you’re here for ten, fifteen years, then you know how to assign what. What comes up sometimes, for example, is that an axe is a tool but might also have a magical purpose. One can make cross-references in the database: ‘see also’. So that works as well.

MO: But in that case, you put the axe in a cupboard for tools?

HJR: Yes, exactly.
MO: So, you have created a hierarchy concerning the assignment?

HJR: Right.

MO: You have to, I guess.

HJR: Yes, you do. As I said, there are about 65,000 objects in the collection. You have to keep track, not only physically but also mentally. If they come and say that they want to have an exhibition about hairdressers, you need to be able to go to the cupboards with ‘body hygiene’.

In 1999, parts of Hans-Joachim Radosuboff’s dream to create a functioning study collection, at least for East Africa, were realised. In his account of this time on his website, he recalled the situation in detail.

Today, I can add up. A full-time and a part-time position have jointly set up a study collection of 16,500 objects in five and a half years and entered them into the PC with all relevant information. Since there was no experience for such an undertaking, we had to create a concept (learning by doing) and sometimes adapt completed works to new experiences.18

The East Africa storage can be framed as a personal success within an organisational framework that would not prioritise care of collections. As Hans-Joachim Radosuboff described, it was thanks to his personal commitment to the collections and his determined will to realise the storage that he was able to accomplish the task. In his narrative, he continuously described his efforts as ‘autodidactic’, with little support from either the curator or other museum staff in the Museum. This narrative of ‘learning by doing’ is repeatedly confirmed by committed employees in different departments within the Museum – in which knowledge gained through experience and time in the Museum is not documented nor passed on for and to future generations of museum employees. Both Africa museum storages are generally speaking referred to as comparably well organised, but the East Africa storage in particular is described as standing out in the museum’s different storages.

‘Object love’ to circumvent neglect

The work of inventorying, ordering, and classifying didn’t stop with the process of finishing the East Africa department. Until he left in 2012, Hans-Joachim Radosuboff continued working on the organisation of the
West Africa department. Since then, his successors have been in charge of the inventory job, which has not been accomplished to date. This is testified to by the different accounts of the number of objects that are part of the Africa collection. The official number communicated to the public is a collection of 75,000 objects. In 2014, the curator Peter Junge talked about 42,000 to 45,000 objects already inventoried in the database, with approximately 30,000 still to be done. However, Hans-Joachim Radosuboff would talk of his ‘85,000 children’, then referring to ‘65,000 objects’ to be dealt with. In a meeting with Boris Gliesmann, the database manager, we added up the different accounts and protocols for the department’s war repatriations (Leipzig, Wiesbaden, Berlin, Celle). The calculation amounted to 53,815 objects, with a loss due to war of approximately 12,000 objects. The number of objects is not only imprecise because of the absence of an overview of the collection, but is further distorted by an inconsistent inventory system, which has not been agreed on and has been realised differently and unsystematically in the different departments, depending on the individuals responsible for the inventory. The precise number of objects can thus not be determined.

Whereas, on the organisational level, the constant lack of resources devoted to collection care can be framed as a history of neglect, on an individual level, Hans-Joachim Radosuboff expressed ‘object love’. Object love, as used by Sharon Macdonald in the context of curatorial work, translates into a general commitment to the collection, a feeling of responsibility, honour, and the need to care for the objects (Macdonald, 2002, p. 65; see also Geoghegan & Hess, 2015). Radosuboff attested to his particular relation to the objects through his personalised narrative and choice of metaphors and words. He referred to the objects as ‘my children’, or framed it as his duty ‘to protect’ the collections. In 1996, he commented on the leaking roof, stating that ‘Sometimes, something swashed in the storage which would burden my soul.’ To counteract ‘lakes of water’ causing damage, he was forced to install internal gutters, which drained into buckets that he needed to empty daily. Keeping the storage tidy, organised, and neat was, for him, a ‘matter of honour’ (Ehrensache) (see figures 5.5, 5.6 and 5.7 for care practices and solutions within the storage).

Care for the object also translated in a diversity of sometimes improvised practices. Hans-Joachim Radosuboff always had a pen and paper lying beside his bed. ‘Sometimes I would wake up at 4 a.m. and would say to myself: “Ah, this is how I am going to do it!” And I would write it down immediately.’ When walking around in storage, Hans-Joachim Radosuboff pointed to the different techniques he had invented to store the objects safely. In the context of what he described as a lack of budget, ‘I needed to
Figure 5.5 Protecting objects from the leaking roof, Ethnologisches Museum, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, photographer: Hans-Joachim Radosuboff

Figure 5.6 The installation of internal gutters, Ethnologisches Museum, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, photographer: Hans-Joachim Radosuboff
have a lot of energy and ideas!' One prominent example was the placing of yoghurt cups in the cupboards, which I had repeatedly come across while working in storage. The cups had been filled with camphor, a chemical solid that had historically been used as a pesticide. Hans-Joachim Radosuboff had put camphor in every single cupboard to protect the objects from what the museum staff described as infestation (Befall), an invasion of insects in a particular group of objects.

It was always the question: How do I protect the objects best? Because there was the story about the insects. A danger for the Museum, it was said. And there was always so much drama around this topic, because I had taken over the tradition from colleagues of putting a spoon of camphor in the cupboards. Maybe you can still notice it, when you open the cupboard doors, there’s maybe still a bit of a smell of menthol. I mean, I felt it was successful, I did have very little infestation! But it was very much disliked by my colleagues. Well, it’s true, the smell, camphor, is an insult to the nose. But then people said it was harmful. But come on, this stuff is part of baby lotion!

Figure 5.7 Buckets of dirty water that needed to be emptied daily, Ethnologisches Museum, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, photographer: Hans-Joachim Radosuboff
Whereas the use of camphor was controversial in the Museum, as Radosuboff acknowledged himself, he pointed to further procedures for protecting the objects in the context of scarce resources. After lengthy negotiations, he had managed to convince the curator Hans-Joachim Koloss that new storage cupboards were needed. When he received them, however, they had no fittings or shelves. So that he could install the objects, Hans-Joachim Radosuboff asked all his friends to give him old cardboard tubes and clothes hangers from the dry-cleaner. He pushed his colleague, a wine drinker, to never throw away the cork. Wedges made out of cork would avoid putting objects directly on the shelves and would stabilise them.

The list of his solutions and inventions continued. As an entire part of the Museum’s histories and presents, those stories and names, if mentioned at all, usually disappear into the footnotes of those doing archival work or fieldwork in the Museum. Radosuboff’s career and narrative stand in for the many untold histories of personal passion, engagement, and effort that shape the making of these organisations profoundly.

Conclusion

‘A treasure too big is no treasure no more.’ Hans-Joachim Radosuboff opened his diary with this observation, pronounced in 1991 at the time of the press conference on the Leipzig repatriations by Gerd Höpfner, then curator of South East Asia collections.23 Dealing with the ‘treasure’ over the course of his entire career, Radosuboff embodies both the pleasures and difficulties of what the responsibility of keeping a collection entails from a practical point of view. The chapter thus devoted attention to the objects’ museum life and what it means to ‘be kept’ in the museum storage, an aspect hardly taken into account when talking about museum objects, although this life concerns the greater part of the collections (as opposed to being exhibited) and the lion’s share of their lifespan.

Working through colonial legacies articulates here as an individual attempt to reckon, in very practical terms, with the ambitious project of collecting the world. His story stands in for the many untold stories about museum life and careers, which remain undocumented and unrecognised. In this chapter, I decided to let Radosuboff’s narrative stand on its own to give room to his personality and life. Radosuboff’s personal narrative reveals how managing shortage (lack of budget, resources, and knowledge) results in improvisation, and how it leaves its personal marks in the organisation’s structure and materiality.
Notes

1. I received the keys once my research stipend had been confirmed.
2. My translation from the German: ‘das kontinuierlich pochende Herzstück einer musealen Sammlung’.
3. Field notes from 27 November 2013, with the demand not to be quoted directly.
4. If not otherwise indicated, all quotations from Hans-Joachim Radosuboff have been transcribed and translated from an interview I conducted with him on 7 January 2014. Other interlocutors are quoted anonymously here.
5. Field notes from the conversation between the curator and me, 25 April 2018.
6. In conversations with both storage managers from the Africa department, they could not tell me why this was the case, email from Hans-Joachim Radosuboff, 23 August 2018, and conversation with current storage manager, 17 July 2019.
9. See the introduction for details.
10. The critique concerned, for example, the Humboldt Lab Dahlem, which received more than 4 million euros for its projects between 2012 and 2015.
12. My translation from the German: ‘Das ist eine andere Frage, da sind schon ganze Konferenzen abgehalten worden zu dieser Frage. In Dahlem können die Objekte restauratorisch angemessen behandelt werden.’
14. Since then, he has printed his memoirs (including photographs), bound them as books, and deposited the diaries in the museum library under the title ‘Museographie’, in several volumes. The books are consultable in the museum’s library. The accounts here are based on his website, which was accessible at http://www.radosuboff.de/starttage/indexMi.html, and consulted on 20 December 2017, but which he has since deleted.
20. Field notes from a guided tour with the curator, 20 November 2014.
22. This is exemplified when it comes to the inventory of object bundles. What to do and how to categorise object bundles that consist of several parts, such as a quiver with arrows? This question was addressed to Boris Glesmann during a museum workshop with staff. Even though Boris Glesmann insisted on describing an object bundle as one object consisting of several parts (one object number), other museum employees suggested inventorying every single object (several object numbers), while others suggested categorising the object parts with ‘a, b, c,...’ (one object with parts a, b, c,...). Field notes from a workshop with Boris Glesmann, 4 November 2013.