

Juana Awad
Fogha Mc Cornilius Refem
Gut of a Monster
Excerpts from
a Conversation
on Knowing, Arts,
and Exhibitions

Setting

Berlin. Late autumn. Morning.

We meet at the gate of the Weißensee School of Art and Design Berlin, grab a coffee at the cafeteria, and walk together to the Department of Theory and History, just above the printing workshop. Here we can sit in an office to gather our thoughts on questions of knowing, arts, and exhibitions. We know that we share at least two things in common: we are part of different diasporas, and both of our practices deal with public presentation either within the context of the ethnological museum or, more generally, the exhibition/presentation space. From perspectives that presuppose that there are many ways of being, that narratives are obviously dependent on forms, and that experience is definitionally situated, there is no doubting that knowledge is not merely discursive. We operate under the premise that the arts not only disseminate ideas but that they (also) create the world around us. The interesting question is how to move beyond colonial paradigms, especially within the exhibition complex, and in doing so, to think about plurality, and our role as diasporas engaged in decolonial work from within Europe.

The key opens the door to the office. Through the large window a willow can be seen. There is a desk by the window. In the middle of the white room with fluorescent office lamps stands a table, and against it, two chairs. We take off our jackets, gloves and scarves, sit down, and turn the recording devices on. Pause.

On Categories and Points of Departure

Juana Awad (JA) Yesterday you came to the course »Colonial Presents. Artistic and Curatorial Interrogating«¹ which I am currently teaching, in which we approach the question of whether or not it is possible to engage in decolonizing the museum—a colonial knowledge enterprise par excellence—and whether artistic and curatorial practices offer avenues that could set decolonization processes in motion, or if rather such practices help stabilize museums. Let us start from where we left off yesterday: thinking of those objects and beings that are sequestered and displayed in exhibitions, and death within the museum. I believe death and stasis offer us clues to think about paradigms within exhibitions, as well as within the complications between that which is exhibited and that which is known. I want us to slowly get to the entanglements of epistemology and the arts, and to think about how to problematize modern/colonial² hierarchization especially within the exhibition complex.

Fogha Mc Cornilius Refem (FCR) The important thing when approaching the epistemology or epistemologies of art is that even when we try to make epistemologies plural, we are imagining that other people, in other parts of the world, think of separating art and knowledge in this way. So that there is a science of making art, and then there is the science of knowing art. So maybe again, it could be a sort of universalization of European conceptions of what art is and what epistemology is; starting from the separation of subject and object. This means that in order to know art, you cannot be the art, as the knower must be separate from the known. Which divides, again, this kind of making and knowing, being and knowing. So in-

1 See Awad, Juana: »Colonial Presents« in: **Projekte**, weifensee kunsthochschule berlin, URL: <https://kh-berlin.de/projekte/projekt-detail/3690> (Accessed on Jan. 2, 2023).

2 The expressions modern / colonial or modernity / coloniality throughout this text highlight the co-constitution between modernity and coloniality. It follows the lead of Walter Mignolo, who has based his framework on Aníbal Quijano's analysis of the modern world-system and the concept of the coloniality of power. Mignolo states: »The modern world system locates its beginnings in the fifteenth century and links it to capitalism (Braudel 1885 [1949], 1992 [1979]; Wallerstein 1974-89, vol I; Arrighi 1994). This spatial articulation of power, since the sixteenth century and the emergence of the Atlantic commercial circuit, is what Quijano theorizes as 'coloniality of power' (Quijano and Wallerstein 1992, 549; Mignolo 2000d). It is indicative of Quijano's merit that he has shown coloniality to be the overall dimension of modernity, thereby distinguishing coloniality from colonialism.« Mignolo, Walter: »The Geopolitics of Knowledge and the Colonial Difference« in: **Coloniality at Large. Latin America and the Postcolonial Debate**, Durham / London 2008, p. 225-258, here p. 228.

stead, maybe we do not talk about *the epistemology* of art or *epistemologies* of art. The plural might mean different interpretations of what the European epistemology of that art is, which again is a valid thing, but it does not mean, by the necessity of interpretation, that these ideas are predominantly the same ways people would conceive art; i.e., as independent from being, as something separate that could be commodified, studied, and owned.

JA There we have the first and perhaps most important hurdle to tackle, because we start this conversation under the paradigms of modern/colonial conceptualizations, which organize »the world ontologically in terms of atomic, homogeneous, separable categories«³ including, primarily the division between the human and the non-human as »the central dichotomy of colonial modernity.«⁴ It seems extremely difficult for me to find the language with which to surpass these specific categorizations when approaching notions of knowledge of and in the arts. Like you say, even pluralizing epistemology takes as given a Eurocentric conception. This primacy of knowing that you mention still underlies a lot of my understanding, even when trying to liberate myself from its constraints. I was trained in the westernized university.⁵ Studying anthropology, in my first semester at the National University in Colombia over 25 years ago, we were reading Wittgenstein or Marx, not Guamán Poma. Do you know what I mean?

FCR Those are the pieces. If we even talk about epistemologies of art as a sort of decolonial move into pluralizing and understanding that there are different ways of understanding epistemologies, it does not do very much to bring us outside of that dichotomy between knowing and being, which is what we are trying to talk about or to break out from towards a plurality of different worlds and not a plurality of ways of seeing one world. So maybe we talk about the ontologies of arts. But we must be careful again not to mistake plurality for decolonization, if it was that easy, we could just add an »s« to everything and be done with it.

3 Lugones, Maria: »Toward a Decolonial Feminism« in: *Hypatia* 25 (4), 2010, p. 742–759, here: p. 742. URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40928654> (accessed on Jun. 29, 2017).

4 *Ibid.*

5 I borrow this term from Ramón Grosfoguel. See Grosfoguel, Ramón: »Epistemic Racism / Sexism, Westernized Universities and the Four Genocides / Epistemicides of the Long Sixteenth Century« in: Araújo, Marta / Maeso, Silvia R. (eds) *Eurocentrism, Racism and Knowledge*, London 2015, p. 23–46.

On Signs and Intelligibility

J^A You were mentioning how people, when they encounter art as spectators, describe what they perceive based on the language and the experiences that they have, to which I can only agree. The lived experience of a person absolutely imbues meaning. In my understanding, meaning is constructed in triangular relationships, or rather signs could be described in »triadicity [as] the sign not only stands for something other than itself.«⁶ A sign is not only a dyad of cause and effect, say smoke to fire, or portrait of a family to a family. In the construction of meaning, there is always a third element »and this third element is essential, regardless of whether the thirdness is actually here and now or only virtual and waiting to be realized.«⁷ Let's say, when we entered this room, we noticed that the chairs were upside-down. If I was going to infer meaning from this, I would not only think this upside-down chair stands for an object to sit on. It would mean to me that someone was here before, as chairs usually stand the other way around. And depending on my experience and the place we are in, I would think that there might have been a robbery, or that there might have been a rehearsal here and people were lazy and did not return the props to their place. And you might construct a whole different meaning out of it. When we get to the symbolic, this third element or »interpretant«⁸ becomes obvious. We know that meaning is dependent on the body that produces it and on the social construction of the self,⁹ and that we require social agreement in order to construct meaning.

FCR Still, the very experience of art in museums and of art itself as representation requires that the observer, the spectator be separate from it. What is taken for truth is not the reality but its representation. That pain is experienced as paint, care as perhaps a contribution to the museum for its important work. Earthlessness becomes a spectacle.¹⁰ When we start thinking about art from an epistemological perspective, we reduce art to an object, that is a finished product, one that can be owned and in fact, one that must be owned. Being able to know something under these conditions requires that what is known should be finite. In this way, we limit the art, and there is a requirement for the art somehow to die or to not live at the moment where it is known. If we think of art relat-

6 Deely, John: *Basics of Semiotics*, Bloomington 1990, p. 33.

7 Ibid., p. 34.

8 Ibid.

9 See Fanon, Franz: *Black Skin, White Masks*, London 1967.

10 See Vázquez, Rolando: *Vistas of Modernity. Decolonial Aesthesia and the End of the Contemporary*, Amsterdam 2020.

ed more to being than to knowing, we think of it as a mission that is incomplete at once; that puts the artist and the interpreter of that art, and the art in itself, in a relation where each one of them is completing the other; but also, in a sort of convivial relationship, where being is the center of things and not knowing or owning.

JA I really like that idea of the incomplete mission, or the completing of each other in the convivial relationship, because it points toward a collective body. In order to understand each other we need an agreement. The group needs to agree on the arbitrariness of the sign. We are part of historically determined systems of meaning that not only describe what we see, but are used or repurposed to make the world further.

FCR But maintaining knowledge and ownership at the center, or trying to make sense out of being is as if being itself was not sensible enough, it requires exclusion and separation. In fact, to live is already to know—to know how to stay alive. So, while it might look very universal to try to know the world as if everything could and will be known, this makes a sort of universalizing idea, creating the fiction that we are all part of one single historical evolution that understands art in terms of knowing, or that art in itself must be understood. When perhaps art could include an expression of ignorance, not necessarily a lack of knowledge per se, but a lack of one language in which to communicate. It is therefore interesting to see how so-called African art in museums becomes art only when pieces are brought into the institution, separated from their reality, and viewed by a distant spectator. There, all meaning is lost in the interest of aesthetics. Rendering everything sensible and discursive is a vestige and inheritance we have had of modernity: even when we do not want to explain why we exist, we have to explain why we do not want to explain why we exist. So, things like opacity could not just be opaque.¹¹ We are living in a society and a time where everything has to be explained in order to exist, where you could not just be, but you have to be intelligible, not just to anyone, but to Western epistemology. So, what we have then is the equation of being in itself to being as intelligible to Western epistemology and academia.

JA But you had also brought Bourdieu to the conversation ... I think that a lot of this need to explain oneself, especially within the arts, is also a matter of becoming part of the community and getting into

11 See Glissant, Édouard: *Poetics of Relation*, Ann Arbor 1997.

the system that allows us to pay for our existence. If your field is the arts, and you want to live a life in which it is possible to pay for food, for rent, and so on, then you have to know these categories, and how to navigate them and in them. Simply being will not secure income. Definitely not for an artist, a curator, or an academic—like you or I. And there I would like to add that managing to change the terms of the conversation is a tremendous privilege, because it is a paradox: the system needs undoing, we work on its undoing, and yet we are dependent on it to pay for our existence. Here is where I find this notion of smuggling¹² somewhat helpful. If you are willing to or have enough capital backing to get out of the system, it might be different. But if not, and you go at it head on, the rage of the establishment will come down upon you.

FCR And that is where we also get beyond the question of epistemology. We cannot talk about the decolonization of epistemologies without the decolonization of realities. But the truth is, I realize what you mean, and I play within this field. That is why, for me, it is also important to think about why the separation between the subject and the art object is considered so central or self-evident. The whole consideration, therefore, is that art does not happen in a vacuum, but against the backdrop of concepts of ownership and commodification.

On Relationality and World Making

FCR Art for me is also a thing which puts other things in relation, it is born of relation, the painting puts canvas and paint in relation, and the carving puts wood and chisel in relation, but beyond that, it helps us to make new connections with other realities that might not be accessible to us.

JA Putting elements in relation is the way in which I describe what happens in the sphere of the curatorial, with sets of multiple relations creating meaning.

FCR Well, what I am thinking about here is how art participates in world-making. So, we are not just making art, but art is also mak-

12 Awad, Juana: »On Smuggling as Strategy and the Possibility of Decolonizing the Curatorial« in: **wissenderkuenste.de**, Online-Publikation des Graduiertenkollegs »Das Wissen der Künste«, URL: <https://doi.org/10.25624/kuenste-1648> (accessed on Dec. 16, 2022), and »Schmuggeln« in the glossary of this volume.

ing the world, making new meanings, and new belongings for example. It has agency. But then art occupies a space that is and stays incomplete and is always building on the interpretations, the narratives, and the experiences of other people. So, for me, art is an act not a fact, for example, the piece by Monet, that got ...

JA *Kartoffelbrei* ...

FCR ... the soup thrown on it. It gains a new meaning. It has become now an icon of climate activism.¹³ So, the art in itself has a sort of spirit and a sort of life, an existence that goes way beyond that of the maker or the interpreter. And in any case, one can always interpret it differently. And it moves through space and time and would mean different things to different people including meaning nothing at all for some.

JA I would say that that is the part of the sign that I brought to the conversation earlier on, the interpretant. But I like how you position it in terms of agency. Agency connotes an active role in world-making.

FCR It is part of the art's agency, the ability to react and interact with other parts of society in ways that increase our understanding, not just of the art, but of the present and the past of that piece of work. The present and past here do not refer to the provenance—that is the history / present of ownership—but to (ir)relevance.

JA Your example made me think about the exhibition project *Picasso in Palestine*,¹⁴ which showed Picasso's 1943 *Buste de Femme* in Ramallah, and in doing so foregrounded the abnormality of the living situation in the West Bank and Gaza. I did a little research on this

13 See Letzte Generation @AufstandLastGen: #Kartoffelbrei auf #Monet: Was ist mehr wert #FürAlle – Kunst oder Leben?, URL: <https://twitter.com/aufstandlastgen/status/1584198680479137792> (accessed on Jan. 2, 2023).

14 *Picasso in Palestine* was a 2011 exhibition consisting of showing Picasso's 1943 *Buste de Femme* in Ramallah at the International Academy of Art Palestine (IAAP). It was initiated by Khaled Hourani. A specially constructed, temperature-controlled room was built for it at the academy, after a two-year ordeal in transporting the painting from the Van Abbemuseum's collection in Eindhoven to Ramallah. The project consisted in great part in the enormous amount of bureaucratic work, and difficulty in dealing with insurance companies, checkpoints, etc. Fatima AbdulKarim, co-curator and coordinator of the project, mentions in an interview that »[i]t wasn't clear what was the jurisdiction [...] Oslo missed out on one of our major fields of work: art and culture.« Tolan, Sandy: »Picasso Comes to Palestine« in: *Al Jazeera English*, Jul. 16, 2011, URL: <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2011/7/16/picasso-comes-to-palestine> (accessed on Dec. 16, 2022).

curatorial event and it seems to have transmuted *Buste de Femme*, altering it to gain immense cultural capital and a new relevance within the so-called global art landscape.¹⁵ Like the Monet with the *Kartoffelbrei* ... But what is also relevant is that, in my research on the project, I only found mentioned in passing, that there had been a performance of a Palestinian dance presented at the opening, about which guests seemed to be confused.¹⁶ For me that was a clear example that regardless of the good intentions of the art world in opening transnational alliances, local artists and art practices end up being constantly placed on the scale of the modern/colonial hierarchy which devoids them of contemporaneity,¹⁷ and are ultimately devalued because of their non-Europeaness.

FCR Nobody took it in that instance as a serious work of art. Especially because you cannot quickly separate the dancer from the art. It is embodied, and European modernity has not found an answer for how to own that, not at least since the abolition of slavery. Of course, there is artistic investment and creation in that dance, but what the spectators probably saw through their Western gaze was the spectacle of worldlessness ...

15 Critic Bassan El Baroni, states that the project has »made Picasso relevant again.« Ibraaz: »Art & Patronage Summit« in: **Ibraaz Contemporary Visual Culture in North Africa and the Middle East. 002**, Feb. 28, 2012, URL: <http://www.ibraaz.org/news/8#author57> (accessed on Dec. 16, 2022).

Moreover, Charles Esche, director of the Van Abbemuseum and co-curator of **Picasso in Palestine** states: »Our Picasso will be changed by its journey to Ramallah, it will take on extra meaning and the story will remain a part of the history of the painting from this moment on.« Blomfield, Adrian: »Picasso Exhibition Opens in Palestinian West Bank« in: **The Telegraph**, June 24, 2011, URL: <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/art/art-news/8597715/Picasso-exhibition-opens-in-Palestinian-West-Bank.html> (accessed on Dec. 16, 2022).

16 Baers, Michael: »No Good Time for an Exhibition: Reflections on the Picasso in Palestine Project, Part I« in: **E-flux**, Journal 34, Apr. 2012, URL: <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/33/68274/no-good-time-for-an-exhibition-reflections-on-the-picasso-in-palestine-project-part-i/> (accessed on Dec. 15, 2022).

17 Critical theorist Zulma Palermo describes the root of Eurocentric rationality as a »problem of difference and distance between cultures in conflict, as value systems established by the culture of domination, and then naturalized—owned—by the ones fallen under control. Difference installs the criteria of superiority[/]inferiority between cultures; distance marks a double span: on the one hand, physical: distance to the center of power; on the other, temporal: progress / backwardness that denies contemporaneity to the different; and both constitute the relationship between civilization and culture, as well as culture and nature.« Palermo, Zulma: **Arte y estética en la encrucijada descolonial**, Buenos Aires 2009, p. 16. Translation Juana Awad.

JA ... the experience of the *Damné*¹⁸ encapsulated in the public moment of the performance. I was bothered, extremely, by the way the dance appeared in articles and reviews as something bizarre for the international public, something for weddings, too >traditional<, too >folkloric<. Meaning in fact out-of-place, non-art, lower in hierarchy ... I wonder how much of that hierarchization ends up also putting the performers in a lower category in relation to their European counterparts.

FCR That is the thing: who gets to claim the conceptual knowledge to talk of what they are doing as art. Who gets to conceptualize it? But also, again, this is an example that it is not enough to just be within this system of thought, one must be intelligible to the Western episteme.

JA But even when trying to be intelligible it seems not to work out! The case with documenta 15, for example. The exhibition, curated by the Indonesian collective ruangrupa, who brought in other collectives to curate as well. From my perspective, they tried to open space not only for other formats but, more importantly, different categories. They were advocating for the conceptualization of art and being, partly in the way in which we are approaching it in this conversation. And we saw what happened, how the curatorial team and their concepts were crucified by the traditional art establishment. By that I mean not with the justified criticism of the appearance of antisemitic iconography in some pieces, but more so, how the coming together of art and life so strongly clashed with local expectations.¹⁹ So, it is a tricky thing, because there was a

18 This term appears as conceptualized by Nelson Maldonado Torres: »Following Fanon, I will use a concept that refers to the colonial subject, equivalent in some way to Dasein but marking the aspects of the coloniality of Being: the *damné* or condemned of the earth. The *damné* is for the coloniality of Being what Dasein is for fundamental ontology, but, as it were, in reverse. The *Damné* is for European Dasein the being who is >not there<.« Maldonado Torres, Nelson: »On the Coloniality of Being« in: *Cultural Studies*, 21:2, 2007, p. 240-270, here p. 253, URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09502380601162548>.

19 See for example the statement by Olaf Zimmermann director of the Deutscher Kulturrat: »One development of the last documentas is that the commercial art market is rebuffed. But documenta fifteen goes one step further and elevates collective work to the status of the sole artistic principle. The previously unbreakable link between identifiable artist and work is thus called into question. The entire practiced chain of commercialization of fine art, which relies on the sale and appreciation of the individual work that can be attributed to an individual artistic figure, is deliberately negated. How is the right of the artist to be secured if there are no individually identifiable creators of the works of art? How are income and value enhancement to be achieved via multiple sales if the creator is not identifiable?« Zimmermann, Olaf: »Antisemitismus und Israelfeindlichkeit

conflation of issues. On the one hand, we have the issue that documenta 15 was used as a scapegoat for Germany's culture sectors' own failings²⁰ feeding the dangerous trend at play right now here, which advances the idea that Black Persons and People of Color are blind to antisemitism²¹—something that contradicts historical and current alliances,²² and that is putting the livelihoods of people at risk.²³ And on the other hand, which is what I am actually referring to, and which gets overshadowed by the first issue, we have a situation in which epistemic paradigms, about what art is supposed to be and how it is supposed to look, are actually questioned; we are presented with ways of thinking, doing and receiving art that have more to do with daily life than with commodity consumption. And that leads to statements such as »[m]y main problem is the de-artististicization of the documenta« by art historian and documenta archivist Harald Kimpel.²⁴ So, ruangrupa did go as far as possible

keit haben keinen Platz im Kulturbereich!« in: *Politik und Kultur. Zeitung des Deutschen Kulturrates, Der Fall documenta fifteen: Macht die Postkolonialismusdebatte für Antisemitismus blind?*, Nr. 9/22, p. 17,
 URL: <https://www.kulturrat.de/presse/kulturpolitischer-wochenreport/34-kw-2022/> (accessed on Dec. 16, 2022). Translation Juana Awad.

20 Compare press reactions and statements from political figures between the case of antisemitic iconography in the Taring Padi Mural at documenta 15 and the antisemitic iconography on the facade of the Wittenberge City Church, about which the German Federal Court of Justice mandated to remain. See Bundesgerichtshof: »Bundesgerichtshof zur Wittenberger Sau«, Urteil vom 14. Juni 2022 - VI ZR 172/20, June 16, 2022.
 URL: <https://www.bundesgerichtshof.de/SharedDocs/Pressemitteilungen/DE/2022/2022094.html> (accessed on Dec. 16, 2022).

21 See Deutscher Bundestag Dokumente: »Debatte über Antisemitismus-Skandal bei der Documenta«, Jul. 07. 2022, URL: <https://www.bundestag.de/dokumente/textarchiv/2022/kw27-de-documenta-900546> (accessed on Jan 26, 2023).

22 See various events within the cultural landscape in Berlin for example at the Maxim Gorki Theater or at the Jüdisches Museum Berlin, including the event **Neues Judentum - Allianzen in der postmigrantischen Gesellschaft**, URL: <https://www.jmberlin.de/diskussion-neues-judentum-allianzen-in-der-postmigrantischen-gesellschaft> (accessed on Jan. 31, 2023).

23 We know that critiques are being instrumentalized to put in question the suitability of Black Persons and People of Color for positions of power, for example with the debates surrounding the entering director of the Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Bonaventure Soh Bejeng Ndikung. See dpa: »HKW-Intendant wehrt sich gegen Vorwurf der BDS-Nähe« in: *Monopol Magazin* Oct. 25, 2022, URL: <https://www.monopol-magazin.de/hkw-intendant-wehrt-sich-gegen-vorwurf-der-bds-naehe> (Accesses on Dec. 16, 2022), as well as questionable firings, including for example the removal of Mantondo Castle from KIKA, a public television channel for children and youth. See Hauenstein, Hanno: »KIKA-Moderator Matondo Castle gefeuert: Dies sendet das völlig falsche Signal« in: *Berliner Zeitung*, Dec. 12, 2022, URL: <https://www.berliner-zeitung.de/kultur-vergnuegen/debatte/kika-moderators-matondo-castle-gefeuert-dies-sendet-das-voellig-falsche-signal-li.294624> (accessed on Dec. 16, 2022).

24 See ZDF: »Kunstfreiheit und Antisemitismus: Das war die problematische

into shifting the categories, and within one of the most important and influential international art exhibitions; judgement could not be but damning.²⁵ It seems to be acceptable to organize so-called transcultural, transnational, or global art exhibitions, as long as the categories are not put in doubt and the sovereignty of enunciation is not questioned.²⁶

FCR In the case of ethnological exhibitions, whatever that means, often the person who created the art did not conceive of it in museological terms, and in some cases, it is not art until it is in the museum. I think this is something that you also touched on in your text about smuggling,²⁷ where the curator himself becomes an artist. In fact, sometimes I think the only artist is the curator, who reduces worlds and significances to simple aesthetic values. The curator puts different things in relation: to other worlds and meanings in relation to the museum, conservation practices, and the exhibition space. The result is art, which only exists because of its relationship with the museum, because these objects and beings have been taken out of their specific context. For example, an object's relation with an altar and a spiritual space might have made it a deity, or a relationship with a body might have made it simply a garment. So, you have to read the whole room as a single, a singular work of art that might be made up of different moving parts or different fixed parts. When it comes to the antisemitism question, I think there was some truth to the fact that some of the works displayed, even if not made as such, contained antisemitic images.

documenta 2022< in: ZDF.de Nachrichten Panorama, Sept. 25, 2022, URL: <https://www.zdf.de/nachrichten/panorama/documenta-rueckblick-antisemitismus-100.html> (accessed on Jan. 26, 2023). Translation Juana Awad.

25 The final report on documenta 15, which came out on Feb. 7 2023, after this conversation, states: »Even if the curatorial concept corresponds to the spirit of the times ... [it] invites the drawing of boundary lines and the creation of contrasting images that define an almost irreconcilable opposite. [...] The >we< also means that there is a >you<. Ruan-grupa have ultimately failed to live up to their own >de-colonial< claim.« Deitelhoff, Nicole et al.: *Abschlussbericht, Gremium zur fachwissenschaftlichen Begleitung der documenta fifteen*, URL: file:///Users/kathrinpeters/Downloads/230202_Abschlussbericht.pdf, p. 99-100 (accessed on Feb. 8, 2023). Translation Juana Awad. It seems as if naming the problem gets distorted into creating the problem.

26 In this respect, Hito Steyerl offers a very productive commentary on documenta 15 because she disentangles the debates, as well as questions universalists assumptions, calling for a »farewell to the arrogant paradigm of the world art show.« See Steyerl, Hito: »Kontext ist König, außer der deutsche«, in: *Zeit*, June 3, 2022, URL: <https://www.zeit.de/kultur/kunst/2022-06/documenta-15-postkoloniale-theorien-kunst-kontextualisierung/komplettansicht> (accessed on Jan. 26, 2023).

27 Awad 2020 (as in 12).

What defines antisemitism, as is the case with racism, I think must be said, is not the intentions or the explicit communications of the perpetrator, but the experiences of those who become the victim of this violence, epistemic or otherwise. Perhaps this is also a matter of relating to the epistemology or perhaps the hermeneutics of art, that its reading and interpretation is as much a political act as its making. Beyond that however, I think there is a sort of enforced silencing of People of Color, a form of instrumentalization—at least coming from certain spheres of society—making alliances between oppressed groups tense and almost impossible, so that the only relationships that can exist are the Rest to the West. That is perhaps as much as I will say at the moment, since I think we need more space for this conversation.

JA Yes, absolutely. One last thing is also that we need to keep at building these alliances, even if seemingly impossible, and work with, and along, the local critical voices—they are also there.²⁸

On Breaking the Law and Decolonial Action

FCR What is necessary is a decolonization, or rather a plurality of the realities. And also, that art could be the medium through which several realities are discussed ...

JA ... or maybe translated ...

FCR ... or translated, but the question is translated to what language and for whose understanding? The issue with museums and exhibitions is that you have these spaces in which it is clear that you are not supposed to touch. Things happen then only on paper. Museums do sometimes kill action, or they kill decolonial action and reward you for using fancy new words to discuss the wrongs that have been done to you, without really changing anything. You could write whole books about how Picasso appropriated art and never gave people credit, and nothing changes from the art piece itself. It is not like, for example, if I took a pen and went to the art piece now and wrote on it. Nobody would allow you to do that, they could say »that is something you do on the label.« That always only happens in a discursive manner. The principles on which you have understood the art, from the beginning, have limited the possibilities

28 See for example Czollek, Max: **Desintegriert Euch!**, München 2018, or Czollek, Max: **Versöhnungstheater**, München 2023.

of realities that veer from a discursive reality. Whatever reality you are cataloging must not change the structural integrity of the piece.

JA That brings me back to the idea of death, being frozen in time and space, a mummy to be kept forever. I think that is an obsession in this art, museum, and cultural context that we live in. This idea of freezing things, of maintaining the structural integrity at all costs, of not letting them decay. I am thinking about this also in relation to exhibitions. In exhibitions, you have all these different elements that you put in relation, creating a specific dramaturgy, a text. So, even when you try to destabilize, or break ways of looking via art and art objects and relationships, within institutional frameworks, then you are also freezing those so-called new ways of putting elements into relation. And within an institutional setting they become something like »the right way« of looking at things. It is not only the work of art that is frozen and which experiences this death but also the exhibitions and the spaces ...

FCR Within museums there are precepts that only allow a very limited manifestation of new realities to come to be, or more accurately to come to be intelligible. If you find an art piece that is made of wood, where the artists themselves are aware of the fact that the wood is not going to exist forever, you find, in an exhibition, that they would treat it with chemicals. And they would try to fix it in a particular state at all moments: what is known must be fixed. In that way, the whole idea of the original piece, the originality of art, has to be a very limited conception of what that is. So, what can change is the perception of the art and not the art itself. Ethnological (colonial) museums especially—because these are the spaces I love to hate the most—have very clear ideas of what African art is. For the most part, it does not take into consideration contemporary art in the places they seek to represent, contemporary iterations of reality, and contemporary ways of making the world. So much so that it gets reduced to tradition, a set way of doing things, and not a dynamic culture of being; the overall effect is that the only dynamism can be that of intelligibility. You are always discussing the past tense. The new incursion of contemporary art pieces into ethnological museums do nothing to problematize this invention of a pre-modern past. Not only the ethnological objects remain trapped in a historical past tense, but also the communities themselves or the people that made the art are not allowed to evolve because the museums have installed and frozen them in these categories.

JA When historical objects of contemporary peoples get frozen beside historical objects of extinguished societies – and this is but just one example of a constellation in a museum, albeit, a common one – the most obvious reading would be that there is a narrative about the past. Museums' visitors do not have much of a chance of reading anything else. But what you are referring to is also a problem of the modern/colonial paradigms at play in the division of the disciplines. The thinking that stipulates that the art within ethnological museums pertains to the discipline of anthropology, whereas the art in an art museum pertains to the discipline of fine art.

FCR Yes, and we know, of course, that Western art history is capable of dealing with art as something unpredictable, however this separation of disciplines also plays this function of predicting what art could be. It also limits what could be created already in the future, because if you want to be understood, then you would have to create it in a way that is intelligible to the ways of interpretation. But also, already you have a clear set of limits within which you can work. This means we are no longer seeing art as change or changeable, but the artistic as essence, to be intelligible, to be readable. So what has been classified is not just a determinant for the permanence of the state of what exists in the museum, but also for the limits of what can be made. An establishment of boundaries and borders in which those within do not have sovereignty. These constructions work through a philosophy of permanence.²⁹

JA It serves its disciplining purpose. I am thinking again of what you are saying in terms of the frozen beings inside the exhibition and the notion of death. Those beings become a metonym for something outside but more importantly they act as a definition, they get a normalizing effect. I do miss decay. I am an absolute supporter of art also dying, in a very material way, not a metaphorical dying, which is constantly happening; but an actual passing away, an undoing.

FCR That is what defines the very condition of life, dying. And museums refuse death and, by extension, life. We are also functioning within very clear categories of collecting and owning, as much as we can, within very limited space—in terms of the size of the earth

29 See Crampton, Alexandra: »Decolonizing Social Work >Best Practices< through a Philosophy of Impermanence«, in: *Journal of Indigenous Social Development*. Vol 4 Issue 1, 2015, URL: <https://hdl.handle.net/10125/37602> (accessed Jan. 16, 2023).

and the size of the museums in which those things are exhibited. Art is not allowed to die. A great part of life and knowledge is also forgetting, and there is no space to forget in these very clear epistemological categories so that new ways of life might emerge. I think Jose Saramago's *Death with Interruptions* might be a great way to start a reflection on what happens in the absence of death.³⁰

On Fixing, the Monster and the Noble Critic

JA The museum and the exhibition space have normative effects. Epistemology, as philosophy of knowing and as way of understanding meaning, is variable; it does not do the job of fixing by itself. The fixing needs to be enabled in the real world. Putting millions and millions into exhibition spaces, that you cannot simply throw into the garbage—you could have done something else with the money if that is what you were going to do—is central to the fixing of categories. So, for me, these meanings are not only frozen through the act of reflecting on the understanding of them, but even before, as they are made to appear in public in specific settings. This already does the fixing. The act of display in itself has a lot to do with it. When things get shown, they change status. Making something public—which is central to the idea of the curatorial—turns it immediately also into a discursive element. It stops just being for itself and it starts having to be known, discussed, and written about.

FCR Yes, the rules of the game freeze things and epistemology also requires that what is to be known needs to be fixed, at least until it is known. So, in order for the white man to understand the person they are colonizing, they must freeze them in certain biological attributes. They must freeze them in cultural and traditional attributes. Western colonial aesthetics requires that the world be objectified and rendered into a commodity in order to be conquered.³¹

JA But then what you are talking about is who has the right to change, who has the right not to be frozen. Because, of course, within the Western tradition there are a lot of different approaches to the grasping of the world.

FCR Who has the right to change within the Western rules of the game, within the knowledge system we are operating under? It is a knowledge paradigm that allows progress and change through

30 See Saramago, José: *Death with Interruptions*, New York City 2008.

31 Vázquez 2020 (as in 10), p. 39.

knowledge, but only for the knower; what can change is only the person that knows. That is the point I was trying to make. What gets limited is not only what we understand of realities, but also the possibilities of new realities happening because the modern/colonial paradigms do not allow for those realities, once known, to change. And the only thing that can change then is the person that knows or at least their understanding of the world. So, if the white person knows you through racist categories, and then you say, »no, this is not what I am« you are denied the possibilities of change. What they would say is, »I changed my mind,« or »now I'm anti-racist.« The promise of progress within Western epistemological traditions is for the white man. And then it comes to this whole idea of decolonizing the museums, so when we critique the museum the museum asks, »how do we decolonize the museum?« And then we say, »you are using a limited understanding of the reality of the world.« But the paradigms do not change. We do not hear back, »okay, let us go back and see how exploited parts of the world understand and relate to us.« What we hear is, »how do we pluralize ourselves?« But maybe also this knowledge paradigm we are speaking about is plural already, and maybe that is why it is so difficult to break out of it because we have been talking as if it was not yet plural.

JA We started the conversation exactly with the conundrum of the plural—epistemology and/or epistemologies—and your words on that seem extremely important, you said something like what we want is to move »towards a plurality of different worlds and not a plurality of ways of seeing one world« ... and that world is also already plural ...

FCR Sometimes what this kind of pluralizing assumes is that the West rejects the fact that they have had any form of influence on you.

JA And you on them ...

FCR And that again you were as pure, as noble as before. And that you can then assume this pure perspective, untouched by modernity. When in reality, we are creolized beings of the West to some extent. So that even in ourselves, we are already moving as pluralities and not as singular beings.

JA You make me think of Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui's image of the *ch'ixi*, the grey that is seen when a weave with complimentary colors

is looked at from afar: although the black and white or blue and orange threads never mix, their contradiction creates a complex state of motley being. We live on the borderlands³² and a *ch'ixi* world is possible.³³

FCR Yes, and the ethnological museum is not just a singular happening in Europe. It is not just a separation of the disciplines of modern or contemporary art and anthropological art. It was also constructed with killing and stealing from people. I think we really have to be honest about the fact that this knowledge system was built for the most part on violently taking from, killing, disregarding, ignoring, and stealing from—and even justifying it systematically—People of Color and people from the Global South. And that today we are calling on them again to help ameliorate the very system that has impoverished them ...

JA ... the case with ruangrupa or the whole thing about decolonizing the museum ...

FCR ... exactly ... because that system has gained capital based on the fact that it robbed them of their being. And somehow there is still some nobility in us, a beauty in the struggle, that trauma has been a good teacher.

32 For the concept of borderland see Anzaldúa, Gloria: **Borderlands: La Frontera: The New Mestiza**, San Francisco 1987.

33 For the concept of *ch'ixi* see Rivera Cusicanqui, Silvia: **Un mundo ch'ixi es posible. Ensayos desde un presente en crisis**, Buenos Aires 2018.

