Flee(t)ing Dances! Initiatives for the Preservation and Communication of Intangible World Heritage in Museums

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Holistic, or so-called traditional worldviews are characterized in particular by how the material, everyday realm and the immaterial, spiritual realm are experienced as inseparably intertwined, as two dimensions of one reality. In this sense, a dance performance – since it has its roots in both worlds – embodies a special type of medium, which allows these two dimensions to communicate (cf. Rein 2010).[1]

The task of collecting, exhibiting and communicating tangible and intangible world heritage – in this case, dance events – presents museums with a special challenge – one that I will further elucidate below.

A museum collection mainly consists of tangible things. If we look at the history of ethnographical museums, we must ask ourselves: to what extent have traditional dances, as largely intangible forms of cultural knowledge, been collected despite their ephemerality and been given equal status to tangible objects? To what extent are and have they been archived and used in museums to represent cultures?

1 I would like to thank Gabriele Klein and Sandra Noeth. Their critical questions caused me to develop further perspectives on the subject. I thank Heide Lazarus, Annette Hornbacher, Leontine Meijer-van Mensch and Reiner Zapf for their constant willingness to discuss the issues further with me.

All dances contain tangible (e.g.: dancers, costumes, stage, audience, etc.) as well as intangible aspects (timing, religious practice as an expression of an ontology, sequences of movement, music, etc.). Only when all components interact seamlessly is a traditional dance event judged successful by its participants.[2]

At the beginning of the 20th century, museums began commissioning collectors to document data on the material, origin and function of things. At this point in time, the museums realized that objects without accompanying data were without value for the institution – empty material shells, so to say (cf. Laukötter 2008: 4). With the advent of increasingly improving technical recording equipment, collections of intangible world heritage, e.g. large music archives, were for this reason established to supplement the collections of tangible artifacts.

"The inclusion of other legacies has been common practice, at least in leading institutions, for many years. They are no longer – or at least, no longer only – to be considered storage spaces of tangible traditions. Instead, they have defined themselves as the agents of cultural values and perspectives in a more comprehensive sense." (Beier-de Haan 2007: 56)

In contrast, the documentation of dance only became more widespread with the advent of more sophisticated film equipment, which also allowed their meanings within the respective indigenous contexts to be grasped and recorded in more diverse ways (cf. Rein 1994). It is the fleeting nature of a dance event that contains special potential within the diversity of cultural production and thus also requires a special approach.

In this sense, let us take an exemplary look at a film sequence of the Balinese temple dance *Rejang*[3] and its context as stored in a museum archive. Then we will examine the three steps in the musealization process, to finally explore what – in my opinion – other dimensions of action can be included in the museum's

2 After returning from field research, ethnologists have at their disposal the material brought back by them or their colleagues to analyze cultural events. In the case of dance, these are collected material accessories, notes, photos, music recordings and ideally film and video documents archived in an ethnographical museum. Here the documents are further analyzed and prepared for presentation in accordance with the museum's mandate to educate the public on traditional cultural production.

3 The results of my field research in 30 Balinese villages from 1985-1987 forms the ethnographic basis for this text. All of the cursive words in the text are terminology from ethnology or museology that are not explained further. The above film sequence was recorded by Reiner Zapf on October 19, 1985 in Subagan, an Eastern Balinese village.

educational mandate if we wish them to fulfill the expectation of translating and communicating non-Western world views and life practices.

BACK – FORWARDS – A LITTLE FURTHER BACK – PLAY!

Illustration: Rejang in Subagan (Bali), October 19, 1985

Photo: Anette Rein

The following film scene unfolds before my eyes:

Young girls stride in a circle around a shrine, while alternately raising their right or left arm. When their hands are down, they grasp the shawls hanging from their hips, lift them briefly and let them go when their arm is lifted to its highest point, so that the colorful floating fabric highlights the girls' movements. The sound of an orchestra can be heard; the shadows on the ground indicate that it must be around midday.

The film sequence ends and I press repeat. I watch the film again and again. I study the textiles that the dancers are wearing, individual details of the stairs that lead to the shrine that they are circling, and the temple wall in the background. The same events seem to happen over and over again, and they appear to be endlessly repeatable. The cameraman's perspective decides what I can see.

There is no camera pan to show me the wider surroundings of what I had observed at the time: the way the mothers stood around the circle and how they were bursting with pride watching their daughters dancing. No one tells us that some of the girls took part because they had been healed from a severe illness

and that their participation was part of their parents' vow to attain the help of the Gods.

It remains unclear why the girls in Subagan were still little children, while in the next village Timbrah, it was only young women, who danced at the *Rejang* until they married. Who is there in this film to tell me that each village had its own rules stating that in Subagan, the dancers stopped dancing the *Rejang* upon the onset of menstruation, while in Timbrah, they only began participating in the temple dance after menstruation had set in?[4]

The smell of the blossoms in the dancers' headdresses and the siblings' laughter in the temple's neighboring courtyard, unexpectedly chasing a chick that was to be sacrificed after the dance – none of this reveals itself to me while watching the film. The camera team determines what you see and hear; it reduces the complex *Rejang* dance to the girls' flow of movement. The musical accompaniment doesn't provide any further insights.

Still, this film sequence could be a part of an exhibition about Balinese dances. However, before this dance can be made public as an exhibit in a glass case or shown on a screen, it has to go through the process of musealization. This process removes the tangible and intangible cultural expressions from their original context in order to integrate them into the academic environment of the museum institution.

PROCESSES OF MUSEALIZATION

According to Anja Laukötter, the act of musealization takes place in three steps (cf. Laukötter 2010: 120ff). Figuratively they correspond with the classic model of liminality in rituals that, according to Arnold van Gennep[5], can be summarized colloquially as: *remove – recreate – reintegrate*.[6]

4 The use of past tense is here a conscious decision. An *ethnographic present tense* would suggest that the dance that was recorded many years ago still takes place in this form today. In fact, even these dance traditions have always changed over time.

5 In 1909, van Gennep described the structure of rites of passage for the first time. In the exhibition *Reisen und Entdecken. Vom Sepik an den Main* in the Museum der Weltkulturen Frankfurt am Main (October 27, 2007 – August 30, 2009) the various steps of musealization were staged and explained in a companion book to the exhibition (cf. Raabe 2008).

6 I wish to thank Dr. Matthias Jenny, director of the Palmengarten in Frankfurt am Main

First: 'removed' from their original context, the things are robbed of their function – they are taken out of time and space – in order to be exported in this still 'unclean' condition for further processing.

Second: the semantic change of the objects takes place along a prescribed path through the various departments of the museum: in a process of gassing, inventory, conservation, restoration and declaration. They are integrated into the museum's system of rules and regulations in the workrooms far from the public eye. Dislodged from their true symbolic context, the objects are sorted according to principles of materiality, authenticity, analogy, causality or functionality and then assigned to a culture – *ergo*, 'recreated'.

In this second step, the prerogative of interpretation is defined after physical appropriation has taken place. The objects become scientifically legitimized and are often declared exceptional. Especially chosen pieces are given this mark of quality by labeling them as *top exhibit* or *masterpiece* for the general public.[7] An object that has been sanctified in this way comes to represent an entire culture, since ethnographical museums never show the people themselves, but only their forms of cultural expression (cf. Köstering 2003: 17).

Third: the last step of musealization is its exhibition. The visitors' individual perspectives give the things their exclusive aura and thus turns them into museum objects (cf. Laukötter 2010: 121). Their new status is now also perceived by the public and thus they are 'reintegrated'.

"For the museum context, a single object was not sufficient. Instead, it needed […] an exhibited collection in order to fulfill the expectations that had been created." (Id.) Only with the help of the presented objects, a sheer vast mass of things, could e.g. ethnographical museums convincingly demonstrate to the public their expertise in the mastery of knowledge and the interpretation of the world in the midst of the ostensible chaos of cultural diversity. The final decision of what is shown in an exhibition, and in what way, resides with the curator – the established scientific expert (cf. Laukötter 2010: 122).[8]

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for the information that these three steps of musealization not only apply to things, but also to plants. The arrangements of plants in public shows are not to be equated with nature, but rather represent our Western idea *of* nature. The composition of arrangements and collections also lies in the responsibility of curators. In German the terms are *raus – rüber – rein*.

7 See *Being Object – Being Art. Meisterwerke aus den Sammlungen des Museums der Weltkulturen Frankfurt am Main*, http://www.mdw-frankfurt.de/Deutsch/ (March 21, 2010).

8 Only thanks to the demands of New Museology since the 1970s has the sole claim to

EXHIBITING AND COMMUNICATING

Even today, the collected objects with their static materiality remain at the center of interest in many areas. Interactive methods such as *hands-on* and *minds-on* seek to directly communicate the scientifically gathered knowledge about the objects, as demonstrated in the following play on words: 'grasping', under-'standing' and re-'living' knowledge.[9] In contrast, although dance is an undeniable cultural phenomenon – it simultaneously cannot be 'grasped' nor 'held tight'. A dance is an ephemeral 'in-between' shrouded in all sorts of manifestations that lend specific points of memory (cf. Kuhnt-Saptodewo 2006) to the ephemeral – and pose a great challenge for the museums' mandate to collect and communicate.

Despite existing knowledge of the many aspects of original dance events, we find isolated objects, such as dance masks, hung in glass cases like art objects even today. A complex dance event is in most cases still reduced to tangible aspects confined to glass cases after having run though the process of musealization and forced into an immobile, frozen form. They die the museum death (cf. Pazzini 1989: 124) in order to be reborn in a second life as a museum object.

The following situation illustrates the complexity of a dance event.

"A visitor standing in front of a glass cabinet illuminated by neon lighting, is peering into it with curiosity. A mask, a skirt-like brown costume, a foot rattle and a photo of dancing Indians are exhibited there. The text on the wall explains that the mask represents a spirit of the nature, who plays an important role in the initiation of Turkana girls. A foreign world opens up before the eyes of the observer; however, its vitality remains inaccessible. She doesn't see the squirming wild demons, doesn't hear the yelling of the crowd, the roar of the music instruments, doesn't feel the vibrating, buffeting bodies around her, doesn't smell the smoke of the fire and doesn't perceive anything of the fascination of the spectacle that possesses the revelers." (van Elsbergen 1998: 537)

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expert status in dealing with 'the world' been broken by the active participation of those affected (producers, users, etc.) from the countries of origin in the interpretation of the world. This was the beginning of the ongoing process of deconstructing expert knowledge and the role of the curator versus the knowledge of laymen.

9 Both of these terms stem from museum pedagogy and characterize the specific interactivity of programs in which touching things and being addressed by them are central.

Let me summarize specific aspects of ritual dances and their role in the ritual. Using the example of the ritual Balinese dance *Rejang*, I will argue that we have as yet no sufficient methods available to archive this phenomenon in an appropriate way – by which I mean the possibility of reproducing it in its original sense.

Ritual dances are always performed when extraordinary, exceptional areas of experience are meant for display. These dances, which are in the broadest sense improvised when seen from a Western perspective – are a "cultural setting" (Huschka 2009: 8) whose movement sequences are memorized by observation over many years. If we examine ritual dances with this aspect in mind, then it is clear that a specific form of knowledge transmission is taking place here: not by showing and repeating concrete sequences of steps and positions (cf. id. 2009: 19) – as in academic dance – but by imitating role models who, for their part, are also emulating a memory (cf. Rein 2000/1).

As described above, holistic worldviews see the ordinary and extraordinary dimensions of reality as constantly present and inseparably intertwined. In the case of Balinese ritual dances we can say with some certainty that dances take place in a ritual when spiritual entities manifest their presence. Dance steps that appear to be spontaneous represent a non-ordinary, spiritual dimension of reality that follows the spiritual beings presented in dance. It is the staged alternative to the ordinary human order (cf. Hanna 1987; Rein 1994; Kuhnt-Saptodewo 2006). This is expressed in the fact that profane dance movements are seen as owned by humans and are actively taught and trained. In contrast, ritual dance movements, in which the talent of an individual is meaningless, are seen as an expression of a holy choreography in which humans are the medium for the embodiment (cf. Rein 2000/2).

Central aspects of a three-phase temple festival on Bali may illustrate this better: the decoration of the temple; the arrival of the Gods and ancestors who come to rest on the seats that have been prepared for them; and the hospitality towards the spiritual guests and their return to their residence, the holy mountain *Gunung Agung*. According to Annette Hornbacher, during their stay in the temple the spiritual guests accept

"[…] smell and luster, or as the Balinese understand it, the essence (sari) of the aesthetically transforming material offerings and performances […]. In return, they leave their blessings and revert to their invisible state [in the end] (Hornbacher 2005: 358). The manner of ritual configuration [is not] unconscious performance, but rather an act of in-

sight […] (id. 2005: 362). The body [of the dancers] becomes the kinaesthetic form of representing metaphysical knowledge." (Id. 2005: 386)[10]

All of the media or 'configurations' used in the ritual – the decoration of the temple, the music groups and the ritual dances – communicate an aesthetic transformation of material reality to impart metaphysical knowledge (cf. id. 2005: 358). The dances don't provide symbolic images; they show the human body as a visible aspect of cosmic energies that can't be concretely represented. These dance movements are cosmic movements (cf. id. 2005: 387). They communicate the unity of *sekala* und *niskala* (cf. id. 2005: 385) of the tangible (ordinary) and spiritual (extraordinary) dimensions of reality (cf. Rein 2010: 9).

Against this backdrop, I would like to return to the museum as an institution with its various functions to offer a perspective of how a museum can comply with its educational mandate in the context of traditional dances.

THE EDUCATIONAL MANDATE OF MUSEUMS

The complex institution museum is composed of various central parameters: cultural heritage (in the form of collections and archives), functions (collecting, conserving, documenting, exhibiting and educating) and society (cf. Meijer-van Mensch 2009: 20). Each specific mandate is the consequence of a certain set of priorities and how the contents of individual parameters are defined. If we go along with the work groups on the homepage of the *Deutsche Museumsbund*, then we can differentiate between scientific museums, historical museums, museums of cultural history and art museums, museums for the history of technology and open-air museums (cf. Museumsbund.de). Irrespective of the subject, which a museum is devoted to, the initial foundation is a collection.

Museums have their origins in the royal art and curiosity cabinets of the Renaissance; to fill them, things were collected world-wide on the basis of personal preferences and research interests, arranged freely according to material and the diversity of form and presented, in constantly new variations, to only a select

10 "Duft und Glanz, oder nach balinesischer Auffassung das Wesen (sari) der sich ästhetisch transformierenden materiellen Gaben und Aufführungen entgegen […]. Im Gegenzug dazu hinterlassen sie ihren Segen und kehren [am Ende] in die Unsichtbarkeit zurück. […] Der Weg der rituellen Gestaltungen [sind keine] bewusstlose Performanz, sondern ein Akt der Erkenntnis […]. Der Leib [der Tänzer] wird zur kinästhetischen Repräsentationsform von metaphysischem Wissen." Additions and edits by the author.

group of people. In compliance with an encyclopedic principle of collecting, these things were supposed to showcase the entire world in all of its different manifestations (cf. Bredekamp 2009: 28). The spaces that housed the collections became places of an imaginary appropriation of the world. Exotic objects represented foreign worlds and made them seemingly accessible (cf. Bräunlein 2004/1: 32).

From the 19th century onwards, the objects were made accessible to a broader public according to a system influenced by the natural sciences during set opening hours in newly constructed buildings for presentation (i.e. museums) as national cultural heritage. However, the museums' own focus was still directed inwards and concentrated on the upkeep of the collections and on research.

In the 1979s Hilmar Hoffmann issued the slogan "culture for all" (cf. Hoffmann 1979), which formulated a shift towards a form of socio-pedagogical mandate for museums as "social places of learning" (Bräunlein 2004/2: 56). Museum educational service was professionalized as the social medium for knowledge transfer concerning all objects in the collections (cf. Meijer-van Mensch 2009: 21f). Museums developed into public, social institutions of learning that proclaimed an active role from an emancipatory point of view (cf. Bräunlein 2004/2: 57). According to Leontine Meijer-van Mensch, "the recommendations of the UNESCO for the involvement of all people in the shaping of cultural life […] (Nairobi 1976) […] was a further important milestone in that period" (Meijer-van Mensch 2009: 22).

Despite these recommendations, the perspective on the objects of the Others continued to be primarily aesthetic and relationships of power were mostly ignored. Despite this fact, the necessity to 'understand one's Own and the Other' transformed museums from places of learning to spaces of cultural tolerance and understanding over the following years. Ethnographical museums in particular were discovered as protagonists of multi-cultural enlightenment (cf. Bräunlein 2004/2: 59).

Accordingly, the work of ethnographical museums in the early 1980s concentrated on the presentation of collections in the context of current, socially relevant and comparative cultural issues. However, the *native point of view* still remained stuck in its reconstruction from a European point of view and the voices of the Others are even today not yet systematically incorporated in museum presentations. This concentration on data about material culture presents itself as a shortcoming in communication about complex indigenous systems of knowledge in the context of the (historical) artifacts in museum collections (cf. Rein 2009: 18; Rein 2010).

DANCE AS AN INDIGENOUS SYSTEM OF KNOWLEDGE AND OVERSTEPPING OF MUSEUM BOUNDARIES

The UNESCO Convention of 2003 raised worldwide awareness for the impending loss of the diversity of intangible world heritage due to the spread of globalization. Indigenous peoples suddenly had a voice – something no one had reckoned with at first (cf. Alivizatou 2007). Now their knowledge of oral history and cultural practices that had not previously been recorded in writing was much sought after. The call was also to document contexts in order to gain a better understanding of cultural diversity (cf. Seyppel 2007: 77).[11]

Traditional systems of knowledge and their oral transmission are directly tied to age, descent and gender. The small girls who dance *Rejang* in Subagan participate, because their parents want them to – they know little more than that about dance as a religious practice in life. Even the nubile dancers from the neighboring village Timbrah only know excerpts of religious knowledge about dances and temple rituals. They learn the holy songs, but don't understand what they mean. Only the village elders have this knowledge. As is standard in *gerontocratic* societies, one has to have reached a certain social status (i.e. marriage and children) and biological age in order to be completely able to participate in the respective gender-specific pool of knowledge.

The traditional knowledge tied to dance movements in Bali, is part of the intangible world heritage that was first publicly recognized this last decade for its importance as an autonomous system of knowledge and as a contribution to cultural diversity. Part of the knowledge of the meaning of dance movements is the temporally limited appearance of Gods during the dancers' flow of movements – after the dance, at the end of the ritual, daily life begins anew until the next ritual.

Documented through media and analyzed by academia, 'dances' are available in museums and archives for researchers and are also subject to their interpretations. Their previous ephemeral quality as an expression of a different, holistic worldview doesn't seem to matter anymore. Conserved on tapes and reduced to the material dimensions, dances, as well as objects die the museum death.

Ethnographical museums, who are committed to the transmission of non-Western traditions, are involved in an almost impossible balancing act between the demands of collecting, storing and presenting the diversity of world heritage

11 In the UNESCO list, rituals and festivals are in third place – after the performing arts.

on the one hand, and presenting non-Western systems of knowledge to local visitors in an understandable way that respects the original intentions of its producers on the other.

NEW PATHS

In my opinion, the following paths exist when dealing with museum collections (and dance) in order to integrate them as indigenous carriers of knowledge systems in the museum's educational mandate and to conform to the objectives of the UNESCO Convention from October 17, 2003 on the conservation of intangible cultural heritage:[12]

First: The direct involvement of knowledge producers in the archiving of their cultural products is essential. All aspects of documentation and collection should be discussed and realized together with them.

Second: Indigenous representatives should be invited to discuss historic collections and to tell their own stories about them (cf. Rein 2010).

Third: All (dance) performances that take place in the context of museums should be organized together with the performers (producers of culture), so that all participants are given a forum for inter- and trans-cultural dialogue.[13]

Fourth: Unlimited respect should be first granted to indigenous worldviews and systems of knowledge before the academic museum mandate and so-called expertise takes hold. New insights can only be discovered in mutual dialogue.

Even if these paths towards an 'inclusive museum' are strictly followed, the conflict – between collecting and storing, and the ephemeral quality of dance movements that is characteristic for the short-term, imagined presence of spiritual entities in a ritual – remains. The museums' attempt at archiving this concept of ephemerality in some way or another in order to communicate it through objects in its preserved state is doomed to fail – except if the institution museum expands its educational mandate to explain to visitors how to concentrate on the

12 Beier-de Haan states a difference between collection strategies and exhibition practice. For some years now, the latter has been attempting to secure a greater involvement of indigenous statements – whereby a generally required practice of participation does not yet exist (Beier-de Haan 2007: 57).

13 From 2000 to 2008 international musicians appeared in the Museum der Weltkulturen Frankfurt am Main in the *Musikalisches Wohnzimmer* and *Jardin du Monde*. The extraordinary thing was the close contact between the artists and the audience with many stimulating and very personal conservations about traditional music and world music.

staging of the ephemeral in the present, to enjoy it, absorb it and remember it themselves. This would mean allowing a dance event to simply occur in the here and now and to only remain stored as a fleeting event in individual or collective memory. A museum mandate that is expanded in such a way (beyond the museums' collections) would, in my opinion, equally contribute to preserving *and* communicating world heritage on the basis of explicit respect towards indigenous worldviews and traditions of knowledge.

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