

Beyond Compare

Juxtaposition, Enunciation and African Art in Berlin Museums

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And then they die in their turn. Classified, labelled, conserved in the ice of showcases and collections, they enter into the history of art, paradise of the forms where the most mysterious relationships are established. We recognize Greece in an old African head of 2000 years; Japan in a mask from Logoué; and still India; Sumerian idols; our Roman Christ; or our modern art. But at the same time it receives this title of glory, Black art becomes a dead language and that which is born over its death is the jargon of decadence.

(Marker, Resnais and Cloquet, *Les Statues Meurent Aussi*, 1953)

What is and is not considered art is entirely subjective and often fiercely contested. Historically, art museums in Europe have excluded works from other—and othered—cultures, relegating them to the realm of the ethnographic. However, the subsequent accession of non-Western artworks into these institutions is not necessarily corrective, and has itself been sharply criticised, notably in *Statues Also Die (Les Statues Meurent Aussi)*, the source of the above quote. Perhaps the best-known documentary about African sculpture, the 1953 filmic essay is directed by Chris Marker, Alain Resnais and Ghislain Cloquet. The filmmakers criticise the confinement of ‘Black art’ to Le Musée de L’Homme, an ethnological museum, as against the contemporaneous displays of European pieces in the Louvre, an art museum (Wilson 2006: 22). They nevertheless caution against the new-found designation of African sculpture as art. Receiving this ‘title of glory’, they warn, can be just as violent as prior exclusion from art institutions: so much so, in fact, that they liken the attendant processes of being ‘classified, labelled, conserved’ to death.

Half a century later, similar concerns about stark institutional divisions between objects associated with Africa and Europe, art and the ethnographic, inform another trio, curators at the Berlin State Museums (*Staatliche Museen zu Berlin*): Julien Chapuis, Jonathan Fine and Paola Ivanov. They co-curated *Beyond Compare: Art from Africa in the Bode Museum (Unvergleichlich: Kunst aus Afrika im Bode-Museum)*, an exhibition placing

African art from Berlin's Ethnological Museum (*Ethnologisches Museum*) beside European pieces in the Bode Museum, an art museum.

This chapter interrogates the use of juxtaposition as a method of enunciation (Bhabha 2004: 31) in *Beyond Compare*, suggesting that, in its treatment of the past, present and future of African collections at the Berlin State Museums, the exhibition re-inscribes some of the same modes of Eurocentricity that it otherwise claims to transcend. As *Statues Also Die* warns, the exhibition of sculptures from Africa in the Bode Museum, 'classified, labelled, conserved' and juxtaposed with other examples of European art, perpetuates the violence of exoticisation: continuing stereotypical, ethnocentric and colonial perceptions that reduce living sculptures to museum objects.

I begin at the exhibition's opening display.

'...But this is comparison, isn't it?'

'I'm really interested to know,' I overhear, 'what do you think about this?' Five steps away, on the other side of the vitrine at which I stand taking photographs, two visitors take in the display titled 'Becoming Art?' ('Wie wird Kunst zur Kunst?'). In a glass case of about one-metre in height, two cast-metal figurines of roughly the same size have been arranged side-by-side. Both are humanoid, unclothed and with their arms bent upwards. Despite these similarities of posture, their visual forms are markedly different. Whereas one is reminiscent of sculptures from early West African kingdoms such as Oyo and Benin, the other resembles Roman statues. Labels hint at their dissimilar origins, identifying them as 'Statue of the goddess Irhevbu or of Princess Edeleyo' and 'Dancing putto with a tambourine', respectively. Together, they comprise the first of many such experimental juxtapositions throughout Berlin's Bode Museum as part of *Beyond Compare*. Staring at the figurines, I wonder what it means, curatorially, to juxtapose pieces in a way that seemingly invites comparison, yet to title the exhibition—and perhaps—provocatively so—'Beyond Compare' or, as the German version has it, 'Incomparable' ('Unvergleichlich')? From across the glass, snatches of conversation from my fellow visitors drift over once more. 'They are saying "Beyond Compare"', the one tells the other, his tone mirroring my own bewilderment, 'but this is comparison, isn't it?' I take this visitor question as a point of departure to examine the use of object pairings in the exhibition. Close-reading the opening display 'Becoming Art?', I ask: How is juxtaposition used in *Beyond Compare* and to what extent does the exhibition's depiction of the trajectory of these African artworks fulfil its promise to transcend a mere compare-and-contrast model?

This chapter consists of four sections. The first introduces *Beyond Compare*, analysing its use of juxtaposition and comparison and arguing that they are performances of cultural diversity rather than enunciations of cultural difference (Bhabha 2004: 34–35). Instead of problematising institutional divisions between the sculptures from both continents, the exhibition, I contend, reinforces these binaries in three main ways: its historicisation of African art in the Ethnological Museum's past, its contextualisation (or lack thereof) of African art within the Bode Museum's present and its conceptualisation of African art in the Humboldt Forum's future. In the second section, I use historiographi-

cal methods to challenge the exhibition's construction of a past in which African objects were purely ethnographica, incomparable with European art. Citing early 20th century museum catalogues, I suggest that this historicisation, while providing convenient justification for the exhibition, is inaccurate. Moreover, it contributes to the exoticisation of the exhibited African art. In the third section, I examine the placement of the object pairings in the physical space of the galleries. I show that *Beyond Compare*, by failing to interrogate the Bode Museum setting, replicates the Eurocentric gaze in the present. Whereas the African statuettes have been brought into the museum for the exhibition, most of their European counterparts remain in their original display positions. Given that the Bode Museum's galleries are arranged according to regional and chronological themes, this results in a situation in which the included African objects are visually and contextually othered, reinforcing hierarchies of cultural supremacy in art museums. Lastly, the fourth section considers *Beyond Compare* within the wider context of the newly opened Humboldt Forum. Specifically, *Beyond Compare* was conceived as a test for a universal exhibition concept titled *On the Way to the Humboldt Forum*. Zooming in on the concept of the encyclopaedic museum, I outline how ideas of universality flatten the various colonial 'emplacements' (Foucault 1998: 178) in which these objects as well as the museums that contain them are enmeshed, subsuming a range of perspectives under a dominant Western framework.

Art from Africa in the Bode Museum

Beyond Compare

Running from October 2017 until November 2019, 'Beyond Compare: Art from Africa in the Bode Museum' was a special temporary exhibition curated by Julien Chapuis, Jonathan Fine and Paola Ivanov. Its aim was to 'introduce superlative works of art from Africa from the Ethnologisches Museum into the peerless sculpture collection of the Bode Museum'.¹

Founded in 1873 as an amalgamation of various royal cabinets of art, Berlin's Ethnological Museum—originally the Royal Ethnological Museum (*Königliches Museum für Völkerkunde*)—is one of the largest collections of non-European artistic, cultural and historical items in the world. It contains objects, sound recordings, photographs, films and written texts from Africa, Asia, the Americas, Australia and the Pacific, many of which were acquired during the colonial era. In 2017, pending the relocation of the collection to the Humboldt Forum—a multi-museum complex situated in the reconstructed Berlin Palace (*Berliner Schloss*) on the city's Museum Island—the museum suspended exhibitions at its former base in Dahlem (Staatliche Museen zu Berlin 2019). In the meantime, selected pieces from its African collection were selected for display in the Bode Museum as part of *Beyond Compare* (Chapuis, Fine and Ivanov 2017: 6). The Bode Museum, which is also located on Museum Island, began as the Kaiser Friedrich Museum, an institution devoted to the high art of the Renaissance. At its opening in 1904, the museum stunned visitors by displaying both painting and sculpture side-by-side, 'a presentation strategy that differed radically from that of traditional museums'.²

Echoes of the Bode Museum's foundational practice of experimental juxtaposition ripple through the design of *Beyond Compare* more than a century later. Within the exhibit, artwork from the Ethnological Museum's Africa collection is set beside European sculptures in twenty-two object pairings spread throughout the two floors of the Bode Museum's permanent collection, as well as through hundreds of other objects grouped under six broader themes in the basement-level special exhibitions room. These pairings are intended to catalyse conversations between the artworks from either continent, as well as among visitors who come to see them. As the museum website explains:

These experimental juxtapositions reveal possible correlations and differences between the objects, and raise multiple questions. What causes us to view objects as similar or different? What insights can we gain from the joint display of works of art with different histories? Why were some objects classified in the past as 'ethnological' and others as 'art'?³

This intention to provoke contemplation and debate (Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, *Beyond Compare*: 10) is evident in the various subheadings under which the pieces are paired—including 'Opposite or Complementary,' 'Dissimilar Similarity,' 'Must a Portrait be True to Life?' and 'The Gaze'.

4.1 The temporary exhibitions room in the basement contains objects grouped by six main themes. Photograph by Nnenna Onuoha, 2019. Reproduced courtesy of the Ethnological Museum, State Museums of Berlin.



Aside from inviting viewers to consider various juxtapositions, *Beyond Compare* also points to specific similarities and differences between the objects. In the section of the print catalogue devoted to the opening object pairing, each paragraph begins with a direct comparison: 'Both works show...Neither object was conceived...Both objects were acquired...The two objects were understood...The differences between the two objects was

emphasized'. (Staatliche Museen zu Berlin: 132–35) The text articulates specific convergences and divergences in style and perception that the curators want to underscore.

This brief description of the exhibition outlines how its object pairings frame African sculpture against their European counterparts. Though I refer to both juxtaposition and comparison in my analysis, these two complementary processes are not quite the same. I understand juxtaposition as the method employed by museum exhibits, catalogues, audio guides, etc. whereby disparate objects are placed near each other, side-by-side or in other assemblages to facilitate conversation (Thomas 2010: 7). The response mode afforded by juxtaposition is comparison, i.e. considering objects or ideas simultaneously and in relation to each other, in order to rank or outline similarities and differences (Malraux 1978: 14). This exhibition employs both processes.

In separate conversations with curators Jonathan Fine and Julien Chapuis, both said that they had intended for the juxtapositions to provoke comparisons that would subsequently unsettle the ways in which sculpture from Europe and Africa are associated with categories like art and ethnographica. 'We wanted the public to consider not merely that these African sculptures are art, but also that these European statues are ethnographic.' Reflecting on some of the feedback to the exhibition, however, Fine concedes that this second aim—othering European art—may not have been as successful.

Difference and diversity

In his book *The Location of Culture*, Homi K. Bhabha distinguishes between diversity and difference as approaches for engaging a culture. Whereas cultural diversity is described as an "epistemological object...a category of comparative ethics, aesthetics or ethnology," which relies on the idea of historically disparate societies, and reinforces binaries about past and present, tradition and modernity, cultural difference is a more discursive process. When cultural difference is enunciated, meanings and symbols can, rather than remaining fixed, be 'appropriated, translated, rehistoricized, and read anew.' (Bhabha 2004: 37) The enunciation of difference creates a third space where it becomes possible to transcend the exoticism of cultural diversity that has been created by the hegemonic, Western gaze, and instead develop more liberated, critical and hybridised conceptions of culture. *Beyond Compare* positions itself as wanting to do exactly this: moving past stereotypical modes of depiction in which African art has historically been placed, and provoking visitors to rethink preconceptions of what art is or the status European sculpture in the hierarchy of art.

Appointed curator for the Ethnological Museum in 2015, Fine had been struck by the institutional traditions in the Berlin State Museums—and German museums more generally—which, since the 19th century, had separated non-Western and Western artefacts into separate collections. He conceived of the idea of an exhibition that would trouble these outdated categorisations of Western as art and non-Western as ethnographic. With the Bode Museum on board, he set out to create a format that would exhibit African and European sculpture together. The format would create space within which to shatter the binary divisions between art and ethnographica and to make way for new ways of relating to the objects. *Beyond Compare* aimed to use juxtaposition as a means for the enunciation of difference.

4.2 *Beyond Compare*'s official exhibition imagery features a logo with a painted pink X. Photograph by Nnenna Onuoha, 2019. Reproduced courtesy of the Ethnological Museum, State Museums of Berlin.

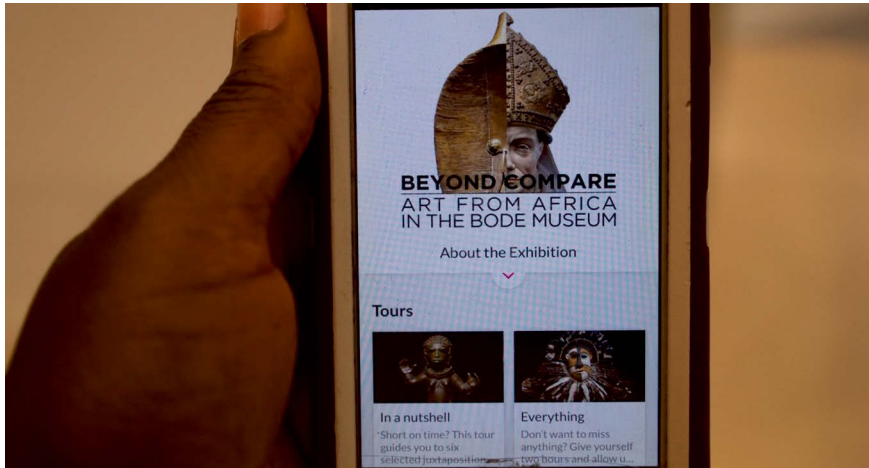


This intention is evident in the design of the exhibition logo, which features a pink cross over 'Beyond Compare' and 'Unvergleichlich.' Visually, the "X" symbolises disavowal. As the title suggests, *Beyond Compare* wants to transcend earlier, racist and Eurocentric instances of evolutionary theory and scientific racism by ethnologists and earlier dismissals of African sculpture as primitive by art historians. On a related note, the 'in' of 'incomparable' ('Unvergleichlich') makes clear that comparison itself relies on subjective hierarchies of value that merit scrutiny (Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, *Beyond Compare*: 10–11).

Whereas the exhibition's message that African sculptures from the Ethnological Museum should be considered 'art' is more accessible, the other side of this assertion, which sought to displace the assumption that the objects from the Bode Museum were the standard of art, and instead inspire their consideration as ethnographic objects, is largely lost in translation. Consequently, the exhibition seems to uphold European art as a standard with which the African sculptures now have the honour of being compared. Though the exhibition wants to unsettle fixed, dominant narratives, it ends up reinforcing them, making the museum, as Coombes describes, 'a repository for contradictory desires.' (Coombes 1997: 2) It is precisely these contradictory outcomes of underlining rather than overturning essentialised cultural categories, performing diversity instead or enunciating difference, that I unpack in the sections that follow.

To do this, let us return to my position beside the vitrine.

4.3 In addition to the exhibition catalogue, *Beyond Compare* is also accompanied by a smartphone app. Photograph by Nnenna Onuoha, 2019. Reproduced courtesy of the Ethnological Museum, State Museums of Berlin.



African art in the history of the Ethnological Museum

Unthinkable?

I consult the exhibition's dedicated smartphone application, also called *Beyond Compare*. The app provides supplementary information to accompany the museum labels. The extras generally comprise high-definition photographs of the artefacts, audio interviews of the curators describing the pairings, background text on, say, the provenance of objects, and, occasionally, video footage of the conservationists who prepared the artwork for display. Having opted for 'Everything' i.e. all twenty-eight stations of the virtual guide, I 'Begin Tour', and play the first audio file. Over headphones, Jonathan Fine explains:

The figure from Nigeria was acquired as an example of metal-casting in the kingdom of Benin. It was not acquired for its artistry. Today we understand both sculptures as very important works of art, but at the time they were acquired only one of them was considered art. Art from Benin is often concerned with decoration, with form, and one sees that splendidly with this sculpture: it's three-dimensionality, it's stability, the woman's beautiful skin. The details of the sculpture's ornamentation are depicted: the scarifications on her body; the very shiny, flat surfaces on her skin are really shown down to the smallest detail. While for the sculpture from Donatello, it's important to show the moment when the putto pulls back his hand before he strikes his tambourine, when he shifts his weight from one foot to another, and how he pivots in this moment of dancing and playing. All that is to say that despite the formal similarity of both sculptures, each has a completely different goal, a completely different artistic intention. The idea of comparison per se wouldn't have occurred to the people

who acquired the sculptures for Berlin's museums. It was unthinkable that they would even put them in the same category.

(Bode Museum, *Beyond Compare* [Exhibition App])

Two points stand out in Fine's description. First, and most immediately apparent, is the comparison of style, i.e. the aesthetic dissimilarity between the two figurines. Fine observes that the Benin sculpture emphasises corporeal details whereas the Italian one focuses more on bodily movement. A second takeaway, which serves to justify the importance of this exhibit's existence today, is the claim that the ways in which these artworks are considered within the museum space has changed significantly since they were originally acquired. Descriptions of a moment in which 'only one of them was considered art' and 'the idea of comparison...wouldn't have occurred' signal that their juxtaposition is a drastic departure from past norms.

This sense that the exhibition is radical in its use of juxtaposition, and that putting African and European objects together is something heretofore 'unthinkable', is echoed in the print catalogue, where Fine writes that 'the two objects were understood quite differently... difference...was emphasized by the institutions in which each was held and displayed.' (Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, *Beyond Compare*: 134) But who were 'the[se] people who acquired the sculptures for Berlin's museums'? And did the idea of comparison really never occur to them?

The Benin Bronzes

'Statue of the goddess Irhevbu or of Princess Edeleyo' was one of thousands of artworks looted from the Kingdom of Benin by the British during the punitive expedition of 1897. Erroneously christened the Benin Bronzes,⁴ these pieces 'immediately caused a stir in the professional circles' ('erregten-sie gleich in Fachkreisen lebhaftes Aufsehen') of the European art world (Heger 1921: 4). That August, at the annual gathering of the German Anthropological Society (Deutsche Anthropologische Gesellschaft) in Lübeck, Justus Brinckman, the director of Hamburg's Decorative Art Museum (Museum für Kunst und Gewerbe), delivered a lecture on the Bronzes that left German museums scrambling to acquire as many pieces as possible.

Franz Heger, the director of Vienna's Ethnological Museum recalled that this lecture brought to light the great importance of collecting these Benin antiquities, especially in Germany (Kunst & Kontext 2018: 70–71). The following year, more than half of them ended up in German museums and private collections, sourced from Lagos and London, acquired on auction from the British government and through mass art dealers (Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, *Beyond Compare*: 134; Coombes 1997: 60; 'Königreich Benin—was fehlt?': 68–72; Bode Museum, *Beyond Compare* [Exhibition App]). The scramble for the Bronzes was especially competitive between the Hamburg Decorative Arts Museum under Brinckmann, and Berlin's Ethnological Museum, led at the time by Felix von Luschan. When Fine says that 'the idea of comparison per se wouldn't have occurred to the people who acquired the sculptures for Berlin's museums' he was no doubt thinking about von Luschan (Bode Museum, *Beyond Compare* [Exhibition App]). But wouldn't it?

Felix von Luschan

Felix von Luschan served as assistant to the Director of the Ethnological Museum from 1886 and Director of the Africa and Oceania Department from 1905. He was also the Humboldt University's⁵ first chair in anthropology. In competition with Brinckman, von Luschan oversaw the acquisition of hundreds of the Benin Bronzes for Berlin's Ethnological Museum. He also wrote several reports and museum catalogues on the subject. Two publications illustrate von Luschan's views on the Benin Bronzes: *The Karl Knorr Collection of Benin Antiquities in the Museum for Countries and Ethnology in Stuttgart* (*Die Karl Knorr'sche Sammlung von Benin-Altentümern in Museum für Länder und Völkerkunde in Stuttgart*), published in 1901, and *The Antiquities from Benin* (*Die Altentümer von Benin*), a ten-volume catalogue of the Ethnological Museum's complete collection of Benin Bronzes, published in 1919.

In the 1919 catalogue, von Luschan specifically mentions the 'Statue of the goddess Irhevbu or of Princess Edeleyo', which at the time was known as 'Big Round Figure of a Woman with Raised Hands' ('Große Rundfigur einer Frau mit erhobenen Händen'). One paragraph about the Bronzes, which he originally wrote in 1901 and then republished verbatim two decades later in the catalogue, is of particular interest:

Turning to the technique of these works of art, we arrive at one of the most important sections of our investigation. These Benin works are at the highest level of European casting technology. Benvenuto Cellini could not have done better and no one before him or after him to this day could have done so either. Technically, the bronzes are at the highest level of achievement.

(Wenden wir uns nun zur Betrachtung der Technik dieser Kunstwerke, so gelangen wir zu einem der wichtigsten Abschnitte unserer Untersuchung. Diese Benin-Arbeiten stehen nämlich auf der höchsten Höhe der europäischen Gusstechnik. Benvenuto Cellini hätte sie nicht besser giesen können und niemand weder vor ihm noch nach ihm, bis auf den heutigen Tag. Diese Bronzen stehen technisch auf der höchsten Höhe des überhaupt Erreichbaren).

(von Luschan 1901: 11; and von Luschan 1919: 15)

Not only does von Luschan refer to the Bronzes as 'works of art' ('Kunstwerke'), he declares them to be "at the highest level of European casting technology...at the highest level of achievement.' Elsewhere in the catalogue, he likewise praises how they have been fashioned with 'utmost care and virtuosity' ('größter Sorgfalt und Virtuosität').

Von Luschan was not alone in his regard for the Bronzes. Heger, too, described them as being 'at a level of perfection hardly reached in Europe at the time' ('auf einer Höhe der Vollendung, wie sie in dieser Zeit kaum in Europa erreicht worden ist'). (Heger 1921: 9). Such pronouncements are at odds with *Beyond Compare's* assertions that, upon acquisition, the aesthetic value of the African pieces was not appreciated. Equally questionable is the statement that it would have been 'unthinkable' to compare these works with European sculpture at the time. On the contrary, not only does von Luschan compare the Bronzes with works of the famed Italian sculptor Cellini; elsewhere in the text he likens them to German carvings from Nuremburg and to art from France, Portugal, Holland,

etc. Although *Beyond Compare* repeatedly justifies its importance by alluding to a past in which thinking about African sculpture in relation to European ones was inconceivable, the historical record suggests that comparison did in fact occur.

Exoticising the past

Rather than being purely historical, these age-old dichotomies between art and the ethnographic, Africa and Europe that *Beyond Compare* sets out to remedy seem, in part, to be 'invented traditions' (Hobsbawm and Ranger 2014). This is not to say that they are completely false. In line with racist, colonial assumptions of the time, Africa was indeed generally regarded as inferior. In Britain, for instance, esteem for the Bronzes was so low that the government refused to allocate funds for their acquisition, paving the way for Germany's large-scale stockpiling of them. And across Europe, debates raged as many scholars who could hardly conceive of Black Africans creating anything so masterful rushed to attribute the craftsmanship of the Bronzes to various foreign influences. Dismissive attitudes towards African peoples and cultures were rampant in the late 19th century. They still are.

However, *Beyond Compare*'s suggestion that calling these objects 'art' and comparing them with European works is something new, begs questioning. While it may have been possible that African sculptures were never juxtaposed with their European counterparts in the physical space or catalogued within the same museum collections, von Luschan's writing demonstrates that these comparisons certainly abounded on paper in that era. Instead of acknowledging these nuances, *Beyond Compare* simplifies the history of African objects in the Ethnological Museum, erasing the impact that they had on the art world upon their arrival in Berlin. In essence, then, this particular interpretation of history falls short of any real enunciation; instead it confines the past of African art in Berlin to the category of ethnographic.

Having examined how the exhibition minimises African objects within the history of the Ethnological Museum, I now turn to how its juxtapositions function in the present. How are African objects situated within the physical space of the Bode Museum?

African Art in the galleries of the Bode Museum

Aesthetic context

A section in the exhibit's printed catalogue titled 'Becoming Art?' provides an account of the conditions under which 'Dancing putto with a tambourine' and 'Statue of the goddess Irhevbu or of Princess Edeleyo' were first displayed in the Bode Museum and Ethnological Museum, respectively. Whereas the putto's placement alluded to its original cultural setting, no such care was paid to the Benin sculpture, which we are told was exhibited in a 'crowded display case':

The difference between the two objects was emphasized by the institutions in which each was held and displayed. As a masterpiece of Renaissance art, the putto was given

pride of place in the Kaiser-Friedrich-Museum...to evoke a sense of the culture in which the [works was] created...In one stroke, Bode emphasized Donatello's position in the artistic pantheon, the importance of the sculptures that seemed to have absorbed his influence, and the pre-eminence of the museum itself for possessing these key works. The Benin sculpture, by contrast, was considered an ethnological specimen and relegated to a crowded display case alongside dozens of other objects from Benin without attempting to evoke its original aesthetic context.

(Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, *Beyond Compare*: 134.)

The use of 'relegated' here emphasises the curator's conviction that this lack of attention to crafting a more careful contextual background for the statuette diminished its appreciation in the eyes of others. Having read this critique of how the pieces were first shown, and understanding this exhibit to be, at least in part, a response to those circumstances, I find it impossible not to apply the same aesthetic and contextual analysis to the exhibit before me. In what ways does the juxtaposition of the figurines overcome these stated inequalities?

In the Basilica

'Becoming Art?' stands at the front entrance of the Bode Museum's Basilica, a two-floor high exhibition space at the centre of the museum. In this glass case next to the putto, the Benin statuette is no longer 'crowded' in. Visitors can walk around the display and enjoy a clear, undisturbed 360° view of the statue, and even notice the inventory numbers on the backside from its early days in the Ethnological Museum. But what of the second half of the critique? Having criticised earlier displays for failing to provide one, does *Beyond Compare* situate the Benin sculpture in an appropriate cultural context?

The set-up is clean, and minimal: the sculpture stands in a glass case accompanied only by the other half of the pairing, the putto. At first glance, the putto seems equally bereft of context. At least, this is the idea given by the exhibition's catalogue and smartphone app, which provide only close-ups of the objects. Yet the picture they paint is incomplete. In reality, the pairings are not in a vacuum, but in the material space of the Bode Museum, an institution largely created around European Renaissance art. In person, *Beyond Compare* offers an unequal contextualisation of the two sculptures being juxtaposed. Take a close look at the glass case, and you see two objects paired in seemingly the same manner. Step back and suddenly one sculpture fits in while the other is out of place. The larger context for the glass box is the Bode Museum's Basilica. With six reconstructed altars, each replete with religious paintings and sculptures, the space replicates a Florentine chapel from the Renaissance era. In terms of architecture and the objects it contains, the Basilica provides the perfect context for the putto.

Continue to look around and even more signs of what belongs in this room, and what does not, emerge. To the bottom left, less than a metre away from the glass case is a box of museum pamphlets about the putto and how it was discovered in a Florentine church-setting not unlike the Basilica. Separate from *Beyond Compare's* labels, this double-sided, A3 text provides further detail and photos about the putto and its history in the Bode Museum. Even without scrutinising the context of this text visually, the mere presence

of this information contributes to the putto's aesthetic positioning within this exhibition space. While it may seem unusual to expect any museum to pay so much explicit attention to the walls within its objects are displayed, it is important to note that such in-depth contextualisation is entirely in character with the Bode Museum. In front of each of the miniature altars, exhibition images display the architectural plan of the room, and a brief text provides information on 'The "Basilica" as a Museum Space'. It is therefore striking that in a setting so self-aware, such a level of spatial consideration has not been extended to the art from Africa.

Othering the present

4.4 *The two statues, 'Statue of the goddess Irhevbu or of Princess Edeleyo' (right) and 'Dancing putto with a tambourine' (left), minimally arranged, in a glass case. Photograph by Nnenna Onuoha, 2019. Reproduced courtesy of the Ethnological Museum, State Museums of Berlin.*



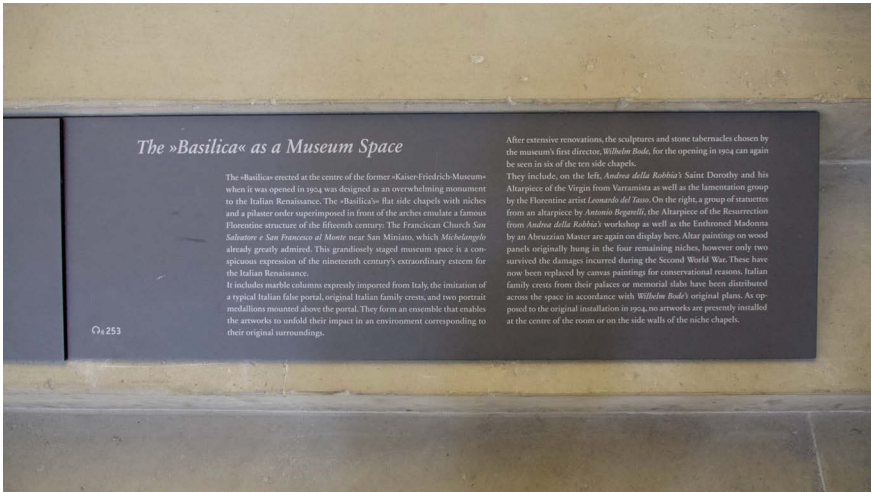
4.5 The glass case stands at the entrance to the Bode's Basilica; to its bottom left is the supplementary material about the putto. Photograph by Nnenna Onuoha, 2019. Reproduced courtesy of the Ethnological Museum, State Museums of Berlin.



4.6 & 4.7 The supplementary materials, as well as the general aesthetic of the Basilica, provide context to the putto while leaving the Benin statue out of place. Photograph by Nnenna Onuoha, 2019. Reproduced courtesy of the Ethnological Museum, State Museums of Berlin.



4.8 Plans and exhibition texts indicate that the Bode is no stranger to considering how its own walls and architectural style influence the experience of exhibitions. Photograph by Nnenna Onuoha, 2019. Reproduced courtesy of the Ethnological Museum, State Museums of Berlin.



4.9 The two sculptures are juxtaposed not only with each other, but more broadly with the physical space of the Bode Museum as a whole. Rather than rejecting the distinction between African sculpture as ethnographic and European sculpture as art, the placement in the Bode Museum seems to highlight and even reinforce it. Photograph by Nnenna Onuoha, 2019. Reproduced courtesy of the Ethnological Museum, State Museums of Berlin.



The putto was originally part of the baptismal font of the Sienna Cathedral. Its placement in a large two-story room of other Renaissance artworks ‘evoke[s] a sense of the culture’ and ‘emphasize[s] Donatello’s position in the artistic pantheon’. By comparison, the Benin statue is displayed ‘without attempting to evoke its original aesthetic context’. And such is the case throughout the other pairings of the exhibit. Whereas the African art has been brought into the Bode Museum to provide visual rhymes, the European objects are almost all displayed in their original, temporal, stylistic and geographically-appropriate contexts.

Although the exhibition seems to want to challenge the distinctions between art and anthropology, Africa and Europe, the way in which the art from Africa is incorporated into space of the Bode Museum more broadly reinforces hierarchies of what is art and, by extension, of what belongs in a museum and what does not. Though within the pairings the objects seem on equal footing, within the broader museum experience the African sculptures are out of place while the European sculptures fit right in. The exhibition appears to neglect the other levels of juxtaposition—and alienation—between the objects, their physical space and the aesthetic context of the Bode Museum.

Following the examination of how African art is othered within the Bode Museum at present, I turn to plans for the future. How will African art be conceptualised at the Humboldt Forum?

African Art in the Humboldt Forum

On the Way to the Humboldt Forum

Beyond Compare is one of a series of temporary, cross-cultural exhibitions launched in 2017 by the Berlin State Museums under the name *On the Way to the Humboldt Forum* (*Auf dem Weg zum Humboldtforum*).⁶ Late that year, the Ethnological Museum and the Asian Art Museum (Museum für Asiatische Kunst) closed their doors in Dahlem as they prepared to relocate their collections to the Humboldt Forum in the newly rebuilt Berlin Palace (Berliner Schloss). The series allowed visitors to see parts of the Asian and African collections until the Humboldt Forum opened to the public. Most of the temporary exhibitions took place at European art museums such as the Bode Museum and the Museum for Decorative Arts (Kunstgewerbemuseum).

Bringing these Asian and African collections in dialogue with European ones through juxtaposition demonstrates the State Museums’ objective of becoming a ‘universal’ institution. Like the new Humboldt Forum, the temporary exhibitions promise to place Asian and African pieces together with European ones so that visitors can consider them collectively. In an interview titled ‘Comprehending the World in its Entirety’, the director of the State Museums, Michael Eissenhauer, indicated that such comparative methods are to become a part of the State Museums’ identity. ‘Transcend[ing] the boundaries between collections’, he explained, ‘are already a matter of course for an encyclopaedic or ‘universal’ museum like the Staatliche Museen zu Berlin.’⁷

The encyclopaedic museum

This plan for an encyclopaedic or ‘universal’ museum grew out of the 2002 Declaration on the Importance and Value of the Universal Museum. Signed by 18 major museums in the West—including the Berlin State Museums—the declaration was a response to calls for the repatriation of inappropriately acquired objects to their communities of origin. The declaration argued, controversially, that the objects had become part of their host countries’ own heritage and that their new locations provided more insightful context than the artefacts might otherwise have in the communities from which they were taken (Cleveland Museum of Art 2003).⁸

Elsewhere in the interview, Eissenhauer associates the exhibition series, and by extension the Humboldt Forum, with a much older, genealogy of universal museum: late-16th-century cabinets of curiosities (*Kunstkammer*).

This is the idea that we want to revive in the Humboldt Forum, where world cultures will be brought together with the historical cultures of Europe. The exhibition ‘Art from Africa in the Bode Museum’ provides a foretaste of this, as do other exhibitions like ‘New Neighbours’ or ‘Vis à Vis: Asia Meets Europe’, which showcase the collections of the Ethnologisches Museum and the Museum für Asiatische Kunst on the Museumsinsel and at the Kulturforum.⁹

The juxtapositions are meant to reflect the broader visitor experiences anticipated to accompany the opening of the Humboldt Forum, when, according to *Beyond Compare*’s curators, ‘visitors will be able to see objects from all over the world in close proximity to the archaeological and European art historical collections on Museum Island.’ (Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, *Beyond Compare*: 6) *On the Way to the Humboldt Forum* was, in other words, a curatorial experiment with a ‘brand new exhibition concept’¹⁰ that could be adopted once the Humboldt Forum was completed and the objects were returned to permanent exhibition.

For some Berliners, however, the most important outcome of the *Beyond Compare* was the inappropriateness of exhibiting colonial collections in buildings such as the Bode Museum and the Berlin Palace.

The Berlin Palace

I return to *Beyond Compare*’s opening vitrine, this time on a thirty-person tour of the exhibition led by activists Mnyaka Sururu Mboro and Christian Kopp, as part of a conference on restitution. Voicing their myriad oppositions to the exhibition concept, Mboro and Kopp repeatedly stress the inappropriateness of the building itself:

Though it may be good to have African and European art in the same room, to break down institutional divisions, this building [the Bode Museum] as a ‘Temple of European Art’ which pays homage to the German founding fathers is as ill-fitting as the Humboldt Forum.

With their royal, imperial structures, both of them are the wrong place to present objects from colonial contexts.

Built with profits from the slave trade and filled with statues of German colonial monarchs and officials, the Bode Museum, Mboro and Kopp emphasise, is a violent home for African art. For them, the temporary display of colonial-era African art in the Bode Museum was just as inappropriate and condemnable as their permanent relocation at the Humboldt Forum.

Since the launching of the Humboldt Forum as a space to 'Be in Touch with as Much of the World as Possible', activist groups such as *No Humboldt 21* and *Berlin Postkolonial* have opposed it on the basis that its non-Western collections were acquired through colonial violence. They have also condemned the plans to display these objects in the refurbished palace of Hohenzollern monarchs—who were responsible for and profited off of 'the enslavement of thousands of people from Africa as well as genocides and concentration camps in Germany's former colonies'¹¹—as disrespectful, asserting that they glorify the colonial past. Moreover, they point out that gathering all non-Western art into one museum, while Western art continues to be exhibited in a variety of museums, reinforces hierarchies that position European art as superior and art from Asia, Africa, etc. as other.

Universalising the future

Understandings of non-Western cultural artefacts that seek to grasp 'the world in its entirety'¹² are framed by dominant narratives. In the case of *Beyond Compare* and the Humboldt Forum, the narratives arise from the architecture of the space and the Western gaze of the museums' directors and curators. As one visitor to *Beyond Compare* remarked to me: 'The exhibition doesn't seek to understand non-European culture in its own terms.' Of course, the mere fact of a European perspective on non-Western cultures is not in and of itself the subject of critique here; rather, it is the fact that the European perspective is presented as somehow broader and more generalised. Its 'universal' claim effectively otherises all others, and often precludes them from consideration. (Abungu 2004) In this way, *Beyond Compare*, like the idea of an encyclopaedic museum in general, ends up reinforcing the stereotypical divisions it purports to undo.

'So what is the basis of their universal value?' the former director of the National Museums of Kenya, George Abungu, asks with regard to the Declaration on the Importance and Value of the Universal Museum. 'Are Universal Museums based solely in Europe and North America?' (Abungu 2004) Abungu's challenge exposes the forms of othering inherent in the idea of the encyclopaedic museum, not least those concerning who makes the decisions and which perspectives get to be designated as 'universal'. Despite being presented as neutral, universality often erases the various 'emplacements' (Foucault 1998: 178), such as colonialism, within which these objects and the museums that contain them are enmeshed (Curtis 2012: 79). In the case I have considered here, the emplacements that universality seeks to erase are nowhere more obvious than in the architecture of the Bode Museum and Humboldt Forum themselves.

Conclusion

As the first, most popular, most intricate and longest running of all the exhibitions that comprised the *On the Way to the Humboldt Forum* series, *Beyond Compare* can perhaps give us some hints about what kinds of critical cultural spaces and modes of engagement we can expect from the recently opened Humboldt Forum.

In this chapter, I have focused on the use of juxtaposition in *Beyond Compare*, paying particular attention to how the exhibition frames the past, present and future of African art in Berlin museums.

My first example focused on how the exhibition material situates African artworks within the Ethnological Museum's past. The exhibition told the story of an earlier era in which the African objects were considered purely ethnographic, European sculptures were considered art and the two were utterly incomparable. Despite the undeniable racism of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, this account is inaccurate. Many of these objects in Berlin were admired for their aesthetic value—so much so, in fact, that theories accounting for their origins abound, the presumption being that such masterpieces could not have been created by Africans. In erasing this nuance, *Beyond Compare* oversimplifies history, and creates an exaggerated past in which African sculpture is utterly alienated from the European art world.

As a second point of analysis, I examined how the object pairings are set within the Bode Museum. The exhibition brings African objects into the museum and places them next to European pieces. But the museum's geographic and chronological presentation means that the European objects are contextualised by the gallery and the other objects, whereas the African objects seem incongruous with their surroundings. By failing to consider the physical space, *Beyond Compare* further amplifies the African objects' out-of-placeness in the Bode Museum.

Lastly, I have focused on how African collections fit into the Humboldt Forum's future. *Beyond Compare* is part of the series *On the Way to the Humboldt Forum*, which tests out comparative methods for giving visitors a glimpse of 'the whole world in its entirety'. However, 'universal' approaches often disguise the very real colonial entanglements built into the structures of these museums such as the acquisition of colonial collections. By framing dominant narratives from the West as shared, the idea of a 'universal museum' silences other perspectives and reifies existing hierarchies.

Ultimately, then, though *Beyond Compare* seeks to undo stereotypical, Eurocentric perceptions and disrupt institutionalised cultural distinctions, it re-inscribes hegemonic ways of engaging with African art. Rather than enunciating difference, the exhibition performs diversity, subjecting the sculptures to the very fate that *Statues Also Die* cautioned against so long ago.

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Notes

- 1 *Beyond Compare: Art from Africa in the Bode-Museum*, Press Release, <https://www.artsy.net/show/bode-museum-beyond-compare-art-from-africa-in-the-bode-museum> (accessed 8 November 2018).
- 2 Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, 'Staatliche Museen Zu Berlin: Museums & Institutions – Bode-Museum – About Us – Profile', Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, <https://www.smb.museum/en/museums-institutions/bode-museum/about-us/profile.html> (accessed 25 March 2019).
- 3 Bode Museum, *Beyond Compare: Art from Africa in the Bode Museum*, version 1.16.2, iOS, English (Berlin: Staatliche Museen zu Berlin – Preußischer Kulturbesitz, 2017).
- 4 The Bronzes are actually made of brass.
- 5 Originally *Friedrich-Wilhelms-Universität*.
- 6 The other exhibits include *Vis-à-vis: Asia Meets Europe (Asien Trifft Europa)*, co-organised by the Museum for the Decorative Arts (Kunstgewerbemuseum) and the Asian Art Museum (Museum für Asiatische Kunst); *China and Egypt: Cradles of the World (China und Ägypten. Wiegen der Welt)*, by the Neues Museum and the Shanghai Museum; *Exchanging Gazes Between China and Europe (Wechselblicke Zwischen China und Europa) 1669–1907*, by the Berlin Art Library (Kunstabibliothek); and *Faces of China Portrait Painting of the Ming and Qing Dynasties (Gesichter Chinas Porträtmalerei der Ming- und Qing-Dynastie) 1368–1912*, by the Kulturforum.
- 7 Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, 'Interview with Michael Eissenhauer: 'Comprehending the World in Its Entirety'', 22 November 2017, <http://www.smb.museum/en/whats-new/detail/michael-eissenhauer-im-interview-die-welt-als-ganzes-begreifen.html> (accessed 22 November 2017).
- 8 Cleveland Museum of Art, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, and The British Museum, Declaration on the Importance and Value of Universal Museums (Cleveland Museum of Art, 2003), <http://archive.org/details/cmapr4492> (accessed 22 November 2017).
- 9 Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, 'Interview with Michael Eissenhauer: 'Comprehending the World in Its Entirety'', 22 November 2017, <http://www.smb.museum/en/whats-new/detail/michael-eissenhauer-im-interview-die-welt-als-ganzes-begreifen.html> (accessed 22 November 2017).
- 10 Berlin, 'Staatliche Museen Zu Berlin'.
- 11 No Humboldt 21, *Resolution*, <http://www.no-humboldt21.de/resolution/english/> (accessed 15 December 2019).
- 12 Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, 'Interview with Michael Eissenhauer: 'Comprehending the World in Its Entirety'', 22 November 2017, <http://www.smb.museum/en/whats-new/detail/michael-eissenhauer-im-interview-die-welt-als-ganzes-begreifen.html> (accessed 22 November 2017).

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