Curated as (Un-)Comfortable Past and Present
Colonial Commodities in Museums

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In the past few years, the term *discomfort* has emerged as a key concept in discussions focusing on how to decolonise museums.[1] It is a term that describes the frictions that may arise on an emotional level when acknowledging the colonial past and present of many European museums. The *Curating Discomfort* project at the Hunterian Museum in Glasgow, for example, takes as its starting point the uncomfortable feelings and defensive reactions that may occur in observers when faced with depictions of a violent and exploitative colonial history. The aim of the project is not to overcome these feelings and reactions, but to curate them instead.[2]

1 One early example and two more recent ones: In 2009 the Austrian exhibition collective *schnittpunkt* published an anthology entitled *Das Unbehagen im Museum* (›Discomfort in the Museum‹); see: Belinda Kazeem/Charlotte Martinz-Turek/Nora Sternfeld (eds.): *Das Unbehagen im Museum. Postkoloniale Museologien*, Wien: Verlag Turia + Kant 2009. Work in *white* cultural institutions more broadly (including work in museums) is discussed in the anthology *Allianzen* (›Alliances‹): Here, Nana Abusei-Poku writes about the emotional labour involved, referring to the feeling of discomfort as part of the work of decolonisation; see: Nana Abusei-Poku: »Everyone Has to Learn Everything or Emotional Labor Rewind«, in: Elisa Liepsch/Julian Warner/Matthies Pees: *Allianzen. Kritische Praxis an weißen Institutionen*, Bielefeld: transcript 2018, pp. 34-49, see p. 40. Amal Alhaag, Rita Ouédraogo, and Irene de Craen engage in a discussion about discomfort as a curatorial strategy; see: *Discomfort as (curatorial) strategy: A Funeral for Street Culture* (2022), https://www.magazine.artconnect.com/interviews/discomfort-as-curatorial-strategy-a-funeral-for-street-culture [accessed 17.12.2024].

2 See Geraldine Kendall Adams: *Working Life | Zandra Yeaman*, in: People – Decolonising Museums, Museums Journal (2021), https://www.museumsassociation.org/museums-journal/people/2021/05/working-life-zandra-yeaman/ [accessed on 03.11.2023]; The Hunterian: *A Declaration of Discomfort*, https://www.gla.ac.uk/hunterian/about/achangingmuseum/curatingdiscomfort/ [accessed on 03.11.2023].

This critique of museums is informed by de- and postcolonial activism and theory and calls on staff members, museum scholars and the institution to self-reflect on their position within a society that continues to be shaped by its colonial past.[3] Becoming aware of the *white* speaker position – which also happens to be the position of the author of this article – or of one's own entanglement in relation to domination and violence can cause discomfort.[4] This article looks at a set of objects and a field of colonial museum history that situates Europeans in a particular position, namely that of colonial consumption and resource exploitation. This history has only been researched rudimentarily and has for a long time been the object of nostalgia. More recently, it has been challenged by a number of museum projects.[5] With these factors

3 The terms *postcolonial* and *decolonial* were developed in different disciplines and belong to different traditions of thought. In short (but also at the risk of abbreviation): While a decolonial way of thinking tries to free itself from the existing and imposed structures of knowledge of the past, a postcolonial way of thinking analyses the time after the official end of colonialism and makes colonial continuities visible. I will use both terms in this article, not as synonyms, but to make clear that both were relevant to my research: In my German academic context the term *postcolonial* is more frequently used, while in the Dutch museum context the term *decolonial* is the first choice. For a brief summary and clarification of the terms, see: Michael Tsang: *Decolonial? Postcolonial? What does it mean to ›decolonise ourselves‹?*, in: Decolonising Modern Languages and Cultures (2021), https://blogs.ncl.ac.uk/decolonisesml/2021/01/21/decolonial-postcolonial-what-does-it-mean-to-decolonise-ourselves/ [accessed on 03.11.2023].

4 I write Black and *white* in this specific way, drawing on a practice introduced and established predominantly by Black thinkers and activists, to make visible that these words do not refer to a colour, but to a social construction of bodies, one of which suffers from racism, the other of which does not. Black as a political self-description is capitalised; see Tupoka Ogette: *ABC. Ein rassismuskritisches Alphabet*, München: cbj-Verlag 2022, p. 5; Xart Splitta: *Glossar*, in: The Living Archives, https://thelivingarchives.org/glossar/bipoc/ [accessed on 03.11.2023]; Netzwerk bla*sh: *Sprachmächtig: Glossar gegen Rassismus*, https://www.el-maawi.ch/assets/templates/public/image/Flyer/Glossar%20RACE.pdf [accessed on 03.11.2023]; Anna Greve: *Koloniales Erbe in Museen. Kritische Weißseinsforschung in der praktischen Museumsarbeit*, Bielefeld: transcript 2019, pp. 26, 29.

5 A number of museums have addressed this question in recent years: The Museum der Arbeit (›Museum of Work‹) dedicated a special exhibition in 2020/2021 to the links between colonialism, industry and resistance, using rubber, oils, cocoa and ivory as examples; see https://www.shmh.de/ausstellungen/grenzenlos-kolonialismus-industrie-und-widerstand/ [accessed on 03.11.2023]. As part of the project *Objekte aus kolonialem Kontext in österreichischen Bundesmuseen* (›Objects from a colonial context in Austrian federal museums‹), a research group from the Technical Museum in Vienna is examining products such as rubber, coffee and cocoa in its collections; see https://www.technischesmuseum.at/tmw-

in mind, the two guiding questions of this article will be as follows: (i) How were colonial commodities exhibited in the past? (ii) How are colonial commodities displayed today? In addition to these inquiries, I hope this paper will also serve as a starting point for a discussion of the following question: Can a strategy of *curating discomfort* help to exhibit the history of consumption and resource exploitation with greater awareness of its colonial dimension?

In order to address the key questions of this article, I will first illustrate the role and significance of colonial commodities in museum exhibitions of the past by presenting two case studies: In the first part, I examine raw materials from the Dutch East Indies (today's Indonesia) exhibited in the Koloniaal Museum Haarlem (Netherlands) around 1900 (part I). In part II, I unfold the history of colonial goods shops in museums, using the example of a shop exhibited in the Stadtmuseum Münster (Germany) since 1989. The combination of these two examples from different geographical and temporal locations reveals how differently museums deal with the history of colonial commodities, even as both cases demonstrate past modes of display that do not critique the production, trade and consumption of colonial resources. To address the question of how colonial commodities are exhibited today, I turn to the role of discomfort in the case of a recent project dealing with the colonial goods shop in Münster (part III). Finally, part IV discusses an exhibition framed by a critical perspective on colonialism that opened in 2022 in the Tropenmuseum, a successor institution to the Koloniaal Museum Haarlem. While discomfort was an ongoing issue in the discussion leading up to the exhibition, the team ultimately decided not to focus on discomfort in the displays.

My research for this article originates from different fields of knowledge: On the one hand, it is based on the historically orientated research I conducted as part of the doctoral research group *Exhibiting Knowledge | Knowledge in Exhibitions*; on the other, it draws on my experiences and research during a one-year residency at the National Museum for World Cultures (NMWC, Netherlands).[6] The combination of these different fields of knowledge helps

zine/nachhaltigskeit-zine/forschungsprojekt_und_decolonial_summer_school_zu_objekten_aus_kolonialem_kontext [accessed on 03.11.2023].

6 As I have gained many valuable ideas through exchanges with colleagues at the NMWC, which are not so easy to cite due to the nature of meetings and verbal exchanges, I would like to thank Wayne Modest, Amal Alhaag, Alessandra Benedicty-Kokken, Rita Ouédraogo, Wendeline Flores, Rik Herder, Mara Molenkamp among others. The exchange with these colleagues is also the reason why this article is published in English (although much

me to illuminate some of the frictions, tensions and problems that arise when trying to decolonise museums. In this sense, this article also aims to contribute to the *political history of knowledge* – as this anthology calls it – by showing how research into both historical sources and museum practices can help to better understand the negotiations and orders in ›the exhibitionary complex‹.[7]

(I) The Museum as a Hub of Colonial Agriculture and Exploitation

The Koloniaal Museum Haarlem was opened in 1871, not far from the city of Amsterdam. Contrary to what one might initially expect from the name ›Koloniaal Museum‹, it did not display many ethnographic objects, that is, material culture collected with the aim of describing people from all over the world. Instead, it housed many goods and raw materials from the colonies.[8] Maurits Greshoff, a former deputy director of the museum, noted at the Paris World Fair in 1900 that many countries were showcasing themselves and their colonies by means of ethnographic objects. He commented that these were not suitable »[f]or a global competition in the colonial-industrial field […] they are dead and have little to do with the present, let alone with the future of the country or of a colony«.[9] Following this logic, the Koloniaal Museum Haarlem presented and described itself as a »productenmuseum«[10] (›product museum‹). Most of the exhibition rooms were arranged according to specific products; there were rooms full of wood, bamboo, minerals, types of fibre and even food (Fig. 1 & 2).[11]

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of the discussion I draw on in my own research is in German), as this allows my colleagues abroad to be able to read it.

7 Drawing on Foucault's analyses of prisons, Tony Bennett coined the term *the exhibitionary complex* to analyse and understand the transformation of the museum in the 19th century. He situates the museum in a field of power and knowledge; see Tony Bennett: »The Exhibitionary Complex«, in: *new formations* 4 (1988), pp. 73-102.

8 See David van Duuren: *125 jaar verzamelen*, Amsterdam: Koninklijk Instituut voor de Tropen 1990, pp. 5, 13-17.

9 Maurits Greshoff: *Een bezoek aan de Parijsche wereldtentoonstelling van 1900*, a report given to the commission of the Koloniaal Museum on 27. October 1900, Amsterdam: J. H. de Bussy 1900, p. 16 [translated by Johanna Strunge].

10 Ibid., pp. 15-16.

11 See van Duuren: *125 jaar verzamelen* (footnote 8), pp. 5, 8, 15.

Fig. 1: Department of fruits, caoutchouc, guttapercha and foods, 1911/1912 (photo: Berend Zweers, Collection Nationaal Museum Van Wereldculturen, Coll. no. TM-60040435).

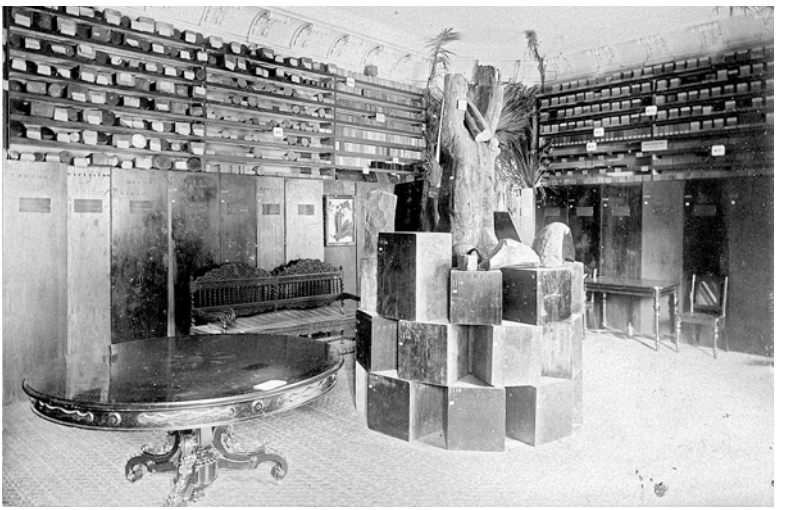

Fig. 2: Wood Gallery, btw. 1871-1926 (photo: C. Zwollo, Collection Nationaal Museum Van Wereldculturen, Coll. no. TM-60040409).

In its main building, the museum dedicated a permanent exhibition to the colony of the Dutch East Indies (today's Indonesia). The overall aim of the museum was to serve the Dutch public and in particular those working in the field of the colonial economy. Founded by the *Maatschapij van Nijverheid* (›Society of Industry‹), the museum ran a small branch office at the *Handelslichting te Amsterdam* (›Trade information Center in Amsterdam‹) and offered free admission to anyone who wished to emigrate to the colonies. By means of its visual appearance – rooms almost bursting at the seams – the exhibition was intended to give a strong impression of the wealth of resources and materials available in the Dutch East Indies. In detail, the arrangement, with each product (group) having its own room, made it possible to get to know the products in depth. It emphasised practical knowledge that led people to grow the resources locally or to process the resources they obtained. The combination of raw materials and processed furniture, as can be seen for example in the *Wood Gallery* (Fig. 2), showed the different uses of Indian woods and combined them with the imperative to use these resources. The fauna of the Dutch East Indies played a subordinate role as compared to its flora. Animals were presented mainly as commodities or as plant pests, which reinforces the impression that the knowledge to be gained here was orientated towards the extraction of resources relevant to the West. A laboratory set up in the annex of the Koloniaal Museum also contributed to another colonial practice – the transplantation of plants with the aim of increasing cultivation in one's own empire. The laboratory was used to study these plants, including vanilla, which was introduced to Java in 1841 by a Mr. Teysmann, who also happened to be a donor to the museum.[12]

Even if this is only a brief glimpse into the history of this museum, it already shows that the museum was actively involved in the colonial extraction and processing of resources. Of course, this did not apply only to the Koloniaal Museum Haarlem, but that institution can nevertheless be seen as a ›prototype‹ of museums that had the word »colonial« in their title and that pursued colonial, economic and commercial interests.[13] Following a trade

12 My interpretation of the functioning of the Koloniaal Museum is the result of a close analysis of the comprehensive 1912 museum guide; see Koloniaal Museum Haarlem (ed.): *Gids voor de bezoekers van het Koloniaal Museum te Haarlem,* Amsterdam: J. H. de Bussy 1912.

13 See Van Duuren: *125 jaar verzamelen* (footnote 8), p. 13. For a broader discussion of the complex interplay between museums and empires, including the collection and display of raw

exhibition in Berlin in 1896, to give a later example, a Deutsches Kolonialmuseum was opened in Berlin in 1899. This museum started its exhibition tour with an import room and an export room. The import room mainly displayed raw materials from the German colonies, while the export room showcased the goods that German companies sold to the colonies, including agricultural machinery, tropical medicines and fertilisers.[14]

(II) The Museum Preserves the History of Colonial Retail Trade

Moving the timeline forward into the 20th century, and continuously following colonial commodities, we see that as former colonies fought for their independence, most of the rooms filled with colonial resources disappeared from exhibitions. Former colonial powers had no use for rooms full of Indian wood and display boards showing imports and exports to and from their former colonies.[15] This does not mean, however, that colonial commodities disappeared completely from museums, or that they no longer found their way into museum collections. In fact, one of the ways in which colonial commodities entered museums in the 20th century was through the museumisation of former *Kolonialwarenläden* (›colonial goods shops‹).

The so-called *Kolonialwarenladen* represented a specific form of retail trade in the German state(s) in the 19th century. It was preceded, however, by various forms of retail trade in colonial commodities, although they were less widespread and they operated under different shop names.[16] The nine-

materials from the colonies, see Sarah Longair/John McAleer (eds.): *Curating Empire. Museums and the British Imperial Experience*, Manchester: Manchester University Press 2012.

14 See Joachim Zeller: »›Das Interesse an der Kolonialpolitik fördern und heben‹ – das Deutsche Kolonialmuseum in Berlin«, in: Ulrich van der Heyden/Joachim Zeller (eds.): *Kolonialmetropole Berlin. Eine Spurensuche*, Berlin: Berlin-Edition 2002, pp. 142-149, see p. 142.

15 For the example of the *Tropenmuseum*, see Sonja Mohr's book chapter »From Colonial Museum to Tropenmuseum«, which also briefly illustrates that the post-war period was one in which objects of the previous collections lost their importance; see Sonja Mohr: *Displaying the Colonial: The Exhibitions of the ›Museum Nasional Indonesia‹ and the ›Tropenmuseum‹*, Berlin: Regiospectra 2014, pp. 32-36.

16 Shops selling colonial commodities existed throughout Europe, but the German case is interesting because it was common for shops to have the word »kolonial« in their title. This was not only the case in Germany. Shops with similar titles also existed in the Netherlands or the Czech Republic, but not in all European countries.

teenth-century *Kolonialwarenladen* was often a small general store that focused on the sale of durable goods and, to a significant extent, traded in tea, coffee, sugar and spices.[17] Especially in the second half of the century, these shops opened in large numbers, enabling more and more people to consume these commodities.[18] By the end of the 19th century, urban families were already buying everyday goods from such shops on a regular basis,[19] while in many villages and rural communities similar shops were opening for the first time (Fig. 3).[20] The 20th century brought an end to many of these shops, either due to the two world wars, the inflation of the 1920s or, finally and most importantly, the development of retail towards self-service and supermarkets, especially in the 1970s.[21]

17 Museum research has shown that in most cases the term *Kolonialwarenladen* referred to a shop with a mixed range of goods; see for example Andreas Fahl: »Wer in Hannover kauft, ist gut beraten. Gemischtwarenläden in der Großstadt«, in: Kreismuseum Syke (ed.): *Als Tante Emma noch bediente …: zur Geschichte der Gemischtwarenläden in Norddeutschland*, Syke: Kreismuseum Syke 1996, pp. 9-17, see p. 10; Torkild Hinrichsen: *Dufke-Laden. Ein ländliches Gemischtwarengeschäft aus Altenwerder*, Hamburg: Altonaer Museum in Hamburg 1991, pp. 35-37.

18 Towards the end of the 19th century, *Kolonialwarenhandlung* became the common business name for many general retailers, as can be seen from historical address books throughout the German Empire. This development is part of a general growth in retail trade during this period; see Hans-Jürgen Teuteberg: »Vom alten Wochenmarkt zum Online-Shopping«, in: Peter Lummel/Alexandra Deak (eds.): *Einkaufen! Eine Geschichte des täglichen Bedarfs*, Berlin: self-published by Verein der Freunde der Domäne Dahlem e.V. 2005, pp. 19-46, see pp. 22-23. Similarly, Manuel Schramm, in his periodisation of the history of consumption, attributes the rapid development of retail trade to the second half of the 19th century; see Manuel Schramm: *Konsumgeschichte 3.0*, in: Docupedia-Zeitgeschichte (02.09.2020), http://docupedia.de/zg/Schramm_konsumgeschichte_v3_de_2020 [accessed on 03.11.2023].

19 See Teuteberg: »Vom alten Wochenmarkt zum Online-Shopping« (footnote 18), p. 23.

20 See Ralf Vogeding: »Von der Theke zum Einkaufskorb. Gemischtwarenhandel auf dem Lande. Dargestellt an Beispielen aus dem Landkreis Diepholz«, in: Kreismuseum Syke (ed.): *Als Tante Emma noch bediente …: zur Geschichte der Gemischtwarenläden in Norddeutschland*, Syke: Kreismuseum Syke 1996, pp. 19-42, see p. 23.

21 This transition towards self-service and supermarkets can be traced through the example of the history of the Edeka purchasing co-operative; see Uwe Spiekermann: »Die Edeka. Entstehung und Wandel eines Handelsriesen«, in: Peter Lummel/Alexandra Deak (eds.): *Einkaufen! Eine Geschichte des täglichen Bedarfs*, Berlin: self-published by Verein der Freunde der Domäne Dahlem e.V. 2005, pp. 93-102, see pp. 99-101.

Fig. 3: A family gathering in front of their Kolonialwarenladen, Mudau (Odenwald) 1910 (photo: Bezirksmuseum Buchen, Bildarchiv Karl Weiß).

With a few earlier exceptions, the museumisation of these shops also began in the 1970s. Museums actively sought out former shops, and in some cases the shops were offered to the institutions by their owners. They were of interest to different types of museums, which also shows how central questions of (colonial) consumption are to German museum culture. City history museums, maritime museums, children's and youth museums, cultural history museums, industrial museums, local history museums, open-air museums and specific museums such as the Chocolate Museum collected these shops.[22]

22 *Kolonialwarenläden* can still be seen today in the following museums, among others: Schifffahrtsmuseum Flensburg, Haus Peters Tetenbüll, Industriemuseum Elmshorn, Altonaer Museum, Museum für Hamburgische Geschichte, Freilichtmuseum am Kiekeberg, Übersee-Museum Bremen, Stadt- und Regionalmuseum Perleberg, Stadtmuseum Münster, LWL-Freilichtmuseum Hagen, Schokoladenmuseum Köln, Wetterau-Museum, Freilichtmuseum Hessenpark, Junges Museum Frankfurt, Museum Schloss Fechenbach und Stadtmuseum Sinsheim.

Fig. 4: Kolonialwarenladen Henke, exhibited at Münster's city museum, 2021 (photo: Johanna Strunge).

Since the late 1980s and the beginning of 1990s, many of the collected shops have been integrated into exhibitions and in many cases can still be visited today. In exhibitions, the shops usually fill an entire room. In other cases, the illusion of entering the shop in its original state is created by employing various strategies, such as the installation of room dividers or special floors. The shops are often presented with little or no description or accompanying text, giving the impression that these spaces are self-explanatory. They are mainly reminiscent of a past shopping experience, and in some cases are framed by the museum by means of the term *nostalgia*.[23] Although the word *Kolonialwarenladen* is used as a title in many presentations, the relationship of these shops to colonial history is rarely explained in detail. One such example is the Laden Henke in the Stadtmuseum Münster (Fig. 4). The shop opened in Münster in 1907, received its wooden interior in 1911 and advertised itself using the word »Colonialwaren«. In 1989, the museum incorporated the shop

23 See for example the 2009 exhibition flyer from Haus Peters Tetenbüll (*Als Tante Emma noch bediente*).

into its exhibition, where it has been on display ever since.[24] Visitors enter through the former shop door and explore the shop from the customer's perspective, standing in front of the counter.

A key difference between the two case studies presented here is the way they relate to the ›colonial‹: The Koloniaal Museum Haarlem advertises the commodities from the Dutch East Indies, while colonial goods shops are often displayed without even explaining the term *Kolonialwaren* (›colonial goods‹). The reference to the colonial in case study I, as a representation of wealth, power and technological superiority, makes sense at a time when colonies are still an essential part of the European self-image. The museumisation of colonial goods stores, however, takes place more than half a century later, under fundamentally different societal circumstances. Nevertheless, what they have in common is the attempt to create familiarity and reduce the distance between visitors and the commodities on display. But how can these modes of display be changed if the de- and postcolonial curatorial goal is to further distance the viewer from these objects?

(III) (Dis)comfort and Positionality

Upon entering the Laden Henke in Münster with its many historical details, I felt like I was stepping into the past – a feeling that may be shared by many visitors. This feels good, because it evokes a shopping experience in which social interaction at the counter was commonplace, when shopping was done without too much hustle and bustle and where wondrous worlds and exciting smells came together in the smallest of spaces. But as a visitor who also knows about the entanglements of colonial trade, this presentation also makes me feel uncomfortable: Isn't the exhibition too devoid of problematisation and contextualisation?

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the museum launched the YouTube series »Stadtmuseum ganz persönlich«, in which friends of the museum presented their favourite parts of the museum and its exhibition in short videos. Many of them feature the Henke family's colonial goods shop. One video that stands out among the videos reminiscing about this shop is that of Emman-

24 See Andrea Güthge: »Laden Henke«, in: Verein Münster Museum e.V. (ed.): *Geschichte der Stadt Münster, Exhibition Guide*, Münster: Stadtmuseum Münster 2005, pp. 240-243.

uel Edoror, who is an actor and dancer in Münster. As a Black man, he reminds the viewers of the bitter aftertaste of the history of the *Kolonialwarenladen*, thereby making it apparent that a sense of comfort surrounding this topic is also a question of one's position in society.[25] Or, to put it differently, it is a predominantly *white* privilege to remember the *Kolonialwarenladen* as a nostalgic place.[26] For many *non-white* visitors, it has likely already been difficult and uncomfortable for a long time to visit such a shop in a museum that is presented solely from a nostalgic perspective. This also applies in a more general sense to the idea of (dis)comfort. In other words, feeling comfortable or uncomfortable is also rooted in one's position in society.

(IV) The Frictions of Curating Discomfort

Throughout my time at the NMWC, the idea of having uncomfortable conversations within the institution and enduring this discomfort was a recurring theme, itself woven into the consensus that decolonising the museum is difficult. As an example, I would like to mention Puawai Cairns. She is the Director of Audience and Insights at the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa and one of the experts the NMWC invited to think through the decolonisation of their museum. On the subject of discomfort, she said in essence: We should not look for harmony; discomfort can be more productive and bring more change.[27]

25 See Stadtmuseum TV: *Emmanuel Edoror – Stadtmuseum Münster ganz persönlich…*, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iwJCLk_0rNA [accessed on 03.11.2023].

26 In a similar vein, writer and cultural programmer Simone Zeefuik calls on *white* Dutch people to question their experience and idea of a comfortable museum landscape; see Simone Zeefuik: »Something in the Stray of Things«, in: Stephanie Endter/Nora Landkammer/Karin Schneider (eds.): *Das Museum verlernen? Kolonialität und Vermittlung in Ethnologischen Museen*, volume 2, Wien: Zaglossus 2021, pp. 113-126, see p. 122.

27 Puawai Cairns was on the panel »Healing Materialities« as part of the *Caring Matters* conference: Research Center for Material Culture: *Caring Matters | Healing Materialities* (24.09.2020), https://www.materialculture.nl/en/events/caring-matters-healing-materialities [accessed on 03.11.2023].

Fig. 5: Detail of the exhibition room Wealth from overseas, 2022 (photo: Rick Mandoeng, Nationaal Museum Van Wereldculturen).

Fig. 6: Exhibition opening night, 2022 (photo: Kirsten van Santen, Nationaal Museum Van Wereldculturen).

One result of the attempts to decolonise the museum was the redesign of the permanent exhibition in the Tropenmuseum, which still houses some collections from the Koloniaal Museum Haarlem. In 2022, the Tropenmuseum opened the new exhibition called *Onze koloniale erfenis* (›Our colonial inheritance‹),[28] which also attempts to problematise colonial resource extraction and trade. One of the main exhibition rooms, titled *Wealth from overseas*, focuses on the extraction and consumption of colonial resources and goods (Fig. 5 & 6). The main design elements are green crates, which provide a visual link to the themes of trade, transport and the loading of goods. In the centre of the room, various commodities are sorted into these boxes. Above these are large posters with historical drawings of plants, indicating the commodities on display: palm oil, tobacco, coffee, sugar (cane), salt, opium and industrial raw materials such as oil, tin and aluminium.

The goods are always displayed alongside a contemporary product. In this way, continuities are drawn with the present day, which brings us to a point of discomfort: It can be uncomfortable to realise that, despite the independence of almost all former European colonies, we Europeans continue to participate in the exploitation of people in other parts of the world through the purchase of raw materials and the consumption of goods.

There would have been many opportunities (e.g. exhibition design, accompanying texts) to focus more on this discomfort, but in my interpretation of the space, the exhibition team – in this case made up of both descendants of formerly colonised people and colonisers – chose not to do so. Instead, they focused on an idea that also complicates the concept of *curating discomfort*: A central focus that visitors encounter throughout the exhibition is the strong emphasis on stories of resistance against the colonial order. In the room *Wealth from overseas*, for example, we learn about the protests of local people against the construction of dams by European companies. We also encounter indigenous knowledge and its potential to create more sustainable use of natural resources. Furthermore, art from New Guinea is displayed to illustrate the resilience of the local people under colonial conditions.

28 See Tropenmuseum: *Onze koloniale Erfenis*, https://www.tropenmuseum.nl/nl/zien-en-doen/tentoonstellingen/onze-koloniale-erfenis [accessed on 03.11.2023].

Telling these stories of resistance is a key concern of de- and postcolonial museum practice.[29] For the first time, those who have long been excluded from museum audiences are truly included. In this way, the descendants of the formerly colonised can encounter a history to which they can relate not only as victims, but as resilient subjects with historical agency. It is a story that does not usually make people feel uncomfortable; on the contrary, it is designed to help overcome the discomfort that the formerly colonised and their descendants may have often felt when visiting museums.

How does this apply to the concept of *curating discomfort*? When curating discomfort, the curators must examine whether they want to take into account the long-standing discomfort, unease and grief of the formerly colonised and their descendants, or whether they would prefer to accompany a predominantly *white* audience on their rather recent ›emotional journey‹ through the colonial past. Certainly, if it is our objective to deal with the colonial history of museums thoroughly, it is necessary to implement different exhibition strategies. We must do both: narrate to unsettle, that is, to call into question the common stories of the privileged, but also to empower the formerly colonised and their stories. However, doing both in a limited space can represent a challenge, as each strategy may produce a different set of feelings – a challenge that could also be described, in the vocabulary of this anthology, as friction. This friction was also present in various meetings at the NMWC. Black museum staff repeatedly asked whether *white* staff members imagined exhibition visitors to be *white* and whether it was time to start making exhibitions for Black people. Designing an exhibition about Europe's colonial past and aiming to reach those (often *white*) people who know little about it, as well as those whose biographies have been significantly shaped by the colonial past, is indeed a challenge.[30] It is a challenge which, as I have elaborated on above, is also essentially about the emotions evoked and addressed.

29 Looking at resistance practices in the context of colonialism makes it possible not to talk *about* the colonised, but to let them become visible through their own words and deeds. An early example of using this as an exhibition practice in the German context is the exhibition *zurückgeschaut | looking back* (2017, revised and reopened in 2021) at the Museen Treptow-Köpenick (Berlin, Germany), which was produced in close cooperation with Afrodiasporic and decolonial organisations of the project *Dekoloniale Erinnerungskultur*. In keeping with the title, this exhibition attempts not to look at the participants of the *First German Colonial Exhibition* (1896), but to focus on them looking back.

30 See also the contribution »W – *weiß* sein« in »A-Z des Kuratierens« in this anthology.

In conclusion, although only a few case studies have been discussed in this article – the Koloniaal Museums Haarlem and its successor institution, the Tropenmuseum, as well as displays of former *Kolonialwarenläden* – the findings already reveal a long history of museum involvement in colonial resource extraction, trade and consumption. In the past, museums acted in the interests of colonial agriculture and exploitation and functioned as sites of remembrance of a colonial history of consumption. Today, museum strategies are attempting to create a distance from the often colonially affirmative or nostalgic representations of the past. *Curating discomfort* has been discussed in this paper as one strategy to address the emotions involved in dealing with the colonial history of consumption and resource exploitation. Although discomfort seems to be a productive concept within the museum sector, my observations during a one-year residency at the National Museum for World Cultures (Netherlands) have also shown that the practical implementation of the idea may lead to friction. In essence, this friction is fueled by the following questions: Whose (dis)comfort do curators take into account? Whose ›emotional journey‹ do they wish to accompany?