

The Practice of Academic Iconoclasm in the Metabolic Museum-University

Clémentine Deliss

Museums can be read as metaphorical spaces when we imagine them in relation to other architectures of consumption, enjoyment, edification, and sociability. Concept work on museum spaces, and on their historical collections, can benefit from operational metaphors. These provide a set of alternative referentialities and introduce a choreography into both critique and procedures of remediation. However, whether they evoke the transactional nature of a casino, a department store's shopping mall, organic metabolisms or rhetorical structures, these metaphors alone cannot transform the museum. Rather, they are chisels with which to begin the slow decolonial process of a disciplinary and an institutional redesign that is centered around collections.

The museum as *casino*:

touting economic risk, but a guaranteed win for the institution.

The museum as *department store*:

a mausoleum of commodities and the central matrix of the colonial museum.

The museum as *lazaret*:

a location for the remediation of colonialism, as a rehabilitation for Covid-19 patients, and as a refuge for the stateless.

The museum as *rhetorical structure*:

as a site in which the choreography of thinking, argumentation, and memory work can be performed with diverse tropes and pathways.

The museum as *private home*:

a constellation of spaces that are intimate, potentially erotic, transgressive, yet domestic and manageable in scale.

The museum as *metabolism*:

a venue that relies on conditions of interdependency between epistemologies, ergonomics, and ecologies.

The museum as *nefandum*:

a crypt intended to hide and hoard that which is deemed unspeakable, obscene, non-redemptive, and impious, from the Latin “nefandum”.

The museum as *greenhouse*:

a wide arena that supports curatorial agronomy in polycultural, horizontal circulation, and multiplicity; a hothouse of ideas.

The *museum-university*:

a flow of transdisciplinary, university-level seminars, research projects, and debates performed directly within an existing exhibition space through engagement with collections.

The operational metaphors that I suggest here can be applied to the university’s institutional structure as easily as they can to the museum. The university is an educational casino touting courses and certification, a supermarket of learning with different strata of access depending on class, race, and capital. Similarly, the university can be imagined as a site of flourishing¹ or the opposite, as a venue subject to the law of *nefandum*,² and a return to repression and censorship. Adherence to museological traditions and institutional protocols directly affects the way in which we both inhabit these spaces and even the degree to which we can work with collections from university galleries in the US to municipal museums in Europe and to new mega museums around the world. To change this approach implies performing deep alterations to what is, ultimately, a colonial matrix with engrained ideologies of authenticity, apparently inalterable conservation policies, and architectural planning that promotes the normative rules of social and cultural behavior. Both the museum and the university are increasingly under scrutiny, are monitored according to behavioural management, economic prioritisation, and a craft-based rather than conceptually or artist-led, middle-of-the-road curatorial stance. In this mercantile rather than educational context, the interface with the visitor as a consumer is paramount. The proposal of the museum-university involves clashing the two venues into one another and seeing what this process of decon-

1 See Jacques Derrida: The future of the profession or the university without condition.

2 *Nefandum* is the nominal form of *nefandus* (also *infandus*), which is derived from the Latin *ne* (“not”) and *fari* (“to speak”). It is understood in the literal sense as “not to be mentioned” or “unmentionable”, hence the phrase *vitium nefandum*, “the unmentionable vice”. In classical usage, *nefandus* has the more figurative meaning of impious, lawless, or abominable. (encyclopedia.com, 24/06/2022).

struction and redesign reveals, rather than concocting a new institution with a new name. In the words of Crébillon fils: “it’s much harder to know where to stop, than to invent.”³

Since 2020, and the recognition of a decolonial imperative, museums in the Global North have been urged to negotiate disparities in employment equity, to enrol diversity officers to monitor inclusivity, and to respond to demands for the returns of significant, and oftentimes looted, cultural heritage in their possession. One need think only of all of the reports and assessments written today, the narratives and complaints, but equally, the hopes held for the museum of the future. And yet, legal complexity, contention, ambiguity, and speculation underlie the relationship between museums in Europe and their collections from the past. In parallel, renegotiating historical collections in museums in Bangkok, Phnom Penh, or Kampala can reveal (often painful) conflicting memories that extend to Europe.

However, the situation is not so simple for the younger generation: there can be little in-depth, decolonial history of the arts without greater access to the collections held in museums all over Europe. Here is where quantity counts! European museums hold a vast amount of artefacts that signify and transport the ingenuity and aesthetic codes of cultures from the so-called Global South. This cultural heritage has been extricated, not without controversy, from an original environment, specific understanding of authorship, and from binding forms of ownership. Reassessing these so-called “ethnographic” collections requires the elaboration of a legal language through which to re-distribute intellectual rights and future patents. How does this condition translate into both a commoning process and a plethora of legitimate claims to proprietorship? In the end, nothing is open-source and even less so if it is embargoed within the universal museum. Who has the right to manufacture derivatives based on objects in collections? When museums, such as the Quai Branly-Jacques Chirac in Paris, subjects ritual statues to CT scanning, they can choose what to do with the data. If they wish to make a 10-meter-high reproduction of a Benin bronze to place at the entrance of the museum, then there is no legal parameter to prevent them. This type of data capitalism is rife in ethnographic, archaeological, and increasingly, art historical museums.

It is in the framework of these reservoirs that the museum-university can provide a model for the productive colliding of specialisms, a procedure that

3 Crébillon fils: “Le Sofa”.

brings with it a redefinition of the architectonic concept of the museum. Divisions between storage and exhibit, the curatorial structure of permanent and temporary exhibitions, no longer make sense and does not support the formulation of a transversal history of art. Contentiously acquired, most of these artefacts remain sequestered in European museums and are inaccessible for study purposes until their provenance is established and they are sent down the long and winding road of restitution. Restitution politics relates to iconic regalia and ritual objects, but not to the 95% of other artefacts that were collected by European colonial states to elucidate ways of living, and that are now relevant to 21st century ecological concerns. Fish traps, for example, are live wires of ingenuity with significant potential for future engineering, be this as structural conduits of irrigation and flow or formally astute design that can be translated across different fields and functions. Still subject to taxonomies derived from 19th-century area studies and anthropology, such ideational code, both material and immaterial, remains difficult to reach unless one belongs to a museum or has made a formal application for the precisely pre-defined purpose of study. However, many museums promote digital renditions; online data cannot dispel or substitute the need to work directly with assemblages built from the artefacts themselves. To open the caskets of colonial museums is to deal with the complex ramifications of a new social responsibility founded on the ethos of accessibility to this considerable polycultural heritage. To this end, the museum-university brings in the need to prioritize physical space for interdisciplinary analysis and education. Collections from different disciplines can be rethought of as interdependent and located at the crossroads of multiple narratologies and identities when placed in adjacency to one another. By setting up interdisciplinary and transcultural assemblages, nothing is seen in isolation. Instead, these assemblages reflect diasporic relationships between people and artworks, media, equipment, histories, laws, economies, and complex expressions of affect. Here the museum proposes a moving, growing, flourishing, and transitional exhibition space with artworks and artefacts in all media arriving, leaving, being placed into momentary constellations, taken down new routes of inquiry, and being documented in different ways.

In his final publication, the anthropologist Paul Rabinow searched for methods and terms to convey venues in which: “thinking and invention” can take place collaboratively.⁴ He states: “the challenge – and this could be pedagogic

4 Trine Mygind Korsby and Anthony Stavrianakis in “A Case of a Crucible of Flourishing”, p. 95.

too – is what to do with multiplicity? How do you assemble multiplicity into an assemblage that’s dynamic, preserves the heterogeneous character of the parts, but brings them into some relationship with each other that’s unexpected and good for everybody?”⁵ At the University of Berkeley, he set up the “colabinar”, a workspace for sharing materials, talking about “empirical instances”, and for noting how different groupings can provide alternative terms of analysis and synthesis. “The aim”, he writes, is: “to avoid the reduction of the seminar space to a proxy zone for merely advancing in one’s thesis research. Simply put, we wished to try and think together about things that we had not yet thought about.”⁶ At one point, in a meeting at the University of Berkeley, Paul Rabinow’s collaborators noticed an increasingly repetitive tone in their seminars. They decided to introduce a fresh animal liver into the situation, surprising their colleagues who passed it around and noted its tactile quality and the incongruity of such an organ within the university setting.⁷ This intervention creates an unexpected moment of collectivity. Referring to the work of Pedersen and Nielson, the liver is described as a: “trans-temporal hinge”,⁸ a divinatory tool for understanding situations or phenomena in which different temporalities (certain past, present, and future events) are momentarily assembled.⁹

Museum collections can take on a liver’s divinatory agency. However, like this organ, they need to be excised from their existing disciplinary and historical corpus to acquire new transversal meanings. The liver – one of the earliest predictive transmitters – is a vector of interpretation. Everything passes through the liver; it is like an imprint of experience. A symptomatic analysis and placement within a set of circumstances needs to take place in order for meanings to emerge. A city goes to war, a person battles with another, a family seeks solace from death, and all look for a route into the future. The liver, re-

5 Paul Rabinow interviewed on 10/11/2014, <https://vimeo.com/115589641>, (09/01/2022).

6 Op. cit., p. 82.

7 A sheep or lamb’s liver, when freshly removed, is an ancient medium for strategic divination. Recognized as the key metabolic point in the body, the liver offers the imprint of a life once lived while signaling a future yet to be enacted.

8 Morton Axel Pedersen and Morton Nielson: *Trans-temporal Hinges*.

9 To quote Korsby and Stavrianakis, “What we take from these collaborative moments, and what we hope to pass on to others with this account, is to offer an alternative perspective on what scholarly work in the university might look like”, p. 84.

moved yet still operational, becomes the metabolic testimonial that will lead to the enactment of human agency outside of the body.

Remediation – healing through alternative modes of transmission – corresponds to the intersectional reconfiguration of collections and practices of display that expose, transfer, and propagate interpretations and agency, while slowly addressing the violence inherent in the museum as an ideological structure of holding. From the archival and literary approach of “critical fabulation” (Saidiya Hartman), we move to the “quietism” examined by Hamja Ahsan, whose position promotes corporeal adjustment within the spatial configuration of the museum. For his contribution to *documenta fifteen*, Ahsan introduced ‘quiet rooms’ throughout the venues of the event, a clear call to recognize the urgency of reconsidering our sentient presence in the context of public art displays. In his manifesto for *Aspergistan*, entitled “Shy Radicals. The antisystemic politics of the militant introvert”, he describes “culture” in a set of articles of which the following ring particularly true: “The state shall guarantee twenty-four-hour access to all public libraries, museums, laboratories, book shops, tea and coffee houses, archives and cathedrals within its sovereign territory [...] The state guarantees twenty-four access to all objects of artistic, historical and cultural value.”¹⁰

Imagine, if you would, an educational dispositive that changes the status of the public from consumer to student. Such a museum-university could provide research and professional opportunities for students in the arts and humanities, in particular for those who have studied hybrid post-colonial subjects all over the world from South Africa to Oslo, from Singapore to London. Moreover, no one requires an exam to study in the museum. Given today’s complex demographics and the economics of university education, museums can become spaces for democratic inquiry and learning. It is within this context that the Metabolic Museum-University (MM-U) has been setting up student and faculty-led situations, which like rehearsals and exercises aim to encourage the public to engage with exhibits differently.

The MM-U’s first exercise took place in 2015 in Kyiv at the National Museum of History of Ukraine. It involved a self-elected group of citizens who chose to accompany me to the flea market. There we searched for artefacts that evoked personal understandings of *contention*. Each participant identified and purchased items for the session. Once back at the Museum of History, we found a table and chairs in the cellar and set these up in the entrance where we held an open

10 Hamja Ahsan: *Shy Radicals*, Chapter 5.

seminar, which lasted for nearly three hours. Visitors could not avoid noticing these incongruous objects and listening to the discussion. They were offered a chair and invited to take part in the elucidation process. A debate on contentions and collections would have remained conjectural and discursive without the diverse objects on the table that triggered different responses and interpretations. Indeed, through the assemblage and the conversations it led to, it became possible to defuse connotations or references that might misfire and injure individual experiences. At this point in 2015, the invasion by Russian forces of the Crimean and Donbas regions was still fresh. At the time, the artist Nikita Kadan, who also took part in this first MM-U session, was engaged in collecting shrapnel and other fragments from the war for the museum's collection.

The MM-U's second exercise developed with my students from the University of Art and Design in Karlsruhe between 2018–2019.¹¹ In 2019, the MM-U was invited to the 33rd Biennial of Graphic Art in Ljubljana that had been curated by Slavs and Tatars. The objective was to inhabit the spaces of the biennale and other exhibitions in Ljubljana and the museums of natural history and contemporary art in particular. Directors' chairs made from wood and canvas were customized with tongue-shaped tables, storage bags, lights, and small projectors. Visitors – now students, rather than consumers – could beam their own images in between the artworks, and *spam the hang*, a method of transgressive adjacency that could empower the public to actively participate in an auto-curatorial production of meaning. Each day the MM-U would move to a new location, setting up its Metabolic Chairs and effectively squatting the free space in between exhibits. During these sessions, a young faculty presented a wide range of lectures and talks that were attended by unsuspecting members of the public, who as in Kyiv a few years earlier, sat down and took part in the museum-university's temporary take-over.

More recently, at KW Institute for Contemporary Art in Berlin, the MM-U focused on setting up semi-private debating chambers based on assemblages of artefacts and artworks from Berlin's heterogeneous landscape of collections. Once again, the objective was to develop a transversal methodology between us through this exercise in remediation. As a pluridisciplinary gathering, the MM-U included four artists, three designers, three curators, an art historian, a

11 This took place while I held an Interim Professorship in Curatorial Theory and Dramaturgical Practice at the University of Art and Design in Karlsruhe. I am grateful to the group of students who invested so much thought and energy in developing metabolic furniture and running the seminars in Ljubljana.

composer, a novelist, and a lawyer.¹² However, although we began researching depots in Berlin, the project fell victim to the pandemic and visiting collections or setting up meetings in different museums became impossible. The faculty of 2020–2021, therefore, turned its attention to the personal research collection and to the generative materials or prototypes that inform and fuel individual methodologies. We ran an online *Bureau d'Esprit* every three weeks, which provided us with a platform to speak together about vulnerable, unresolved issues, suggest methodologies, and through which we could question the parameters of the law in relation to future collections. The results were published as the “Proceedings of the Metabolic Museum-University”, a set of four pamphlets, which in turn led to the relaunch of *Metronome*, an independent organ for writers and artists that I had initiated in Dakar in 1996 but that ceased producing in 2007. Printed in an edition of 750, the *Proceedings* are not available online but were passed from hand to hand or were sent by post.¹³ This form of distribution reflects the closed nature of our online meetings. It also suggests that art institutions, such as KW, need to provide space, time, and funding for practitioners and their collaborators to meet, negotiate, exchange, and forge ideas behind closed doors. It signifies the cultural producer’s right to moments of non-disclosure, to withholding information, and even to confidentiality. The backstage character is essential.

The museum in a post-pandemic condition provides expanded social medicine, but it also requires protection backstage in order for it to survive and shelter artists and cultural workers in their experimentation. This involves working on situations that smuggle in complexity through channels and interfaces that cannot be made visible or marketed easily stimulates turbulence. Not responding to the command of public visibility and institutional accountability is potentially perilous when it comes to grant applications and funding. Nonetheless, refusing to respond to normative public transmission through pre-packaged exhibitions as required today can prove to be conceptual and form-giving, not to mention political. Disquieting moments are there to question the mirage of curatorial authority and push organization,

12 The MM-U faculty of 2020–21 was Bless, Matthias Bruhn, Krist Gruijthuisen, Iman Issa, Augustin Maurs, Tom McCarthy, Henrike Naumann, Azu Nwagbogu, Margareta von Oswald, Manuel Raeder, Elhadj Abdoulaye Sène, Krista Belle Stewart, Luke Willis Thompson, and myself.

13 To receive a set, please contact the bookshop at KW Institute for Contemporary Art. <http://www.kw-berlin.de>, (12/01/2023).

reception and documentation into a subjective, reflexive mode. These exercises and rehearsals lead to *syncopathological* moments of falling and retrieval, clashing bodies and borders – , our own with that of collections – as well as the hermeneutic and legal barriers entrenched within universities and museums. Just like the metabolism, the institution corresponds to the intersectional and interdependent contributions of each of its organ members. “A body must be at stake for an exhibition to become legitimate”, argues Abbas Zahedi, whose work as an artist is closely linked to the practice of healing and care. Both counter-conduct and the decolonial are performed through pressure exercised on the body. Both are time-bound and contingent upon place. Both ignite emergent meanings and growth.

If the museum-university advocates a methodology of academic iconoclasm, then it aims to consciously fracture the archive and refute disciplinary divisions inherited from 19th-century European scholasticism. Transgressive adjacency places artefacts, methods, cultural formations, languages, and roles next to one another in order to confront the validity of *contexts* that are defined by specialisms and in order to create a transversal approach. To adopt Wole Soyinka’s words, academic iconoclasm defies: “species narcissism”; it involves: “finding illegitimate ways of knowing”, as suggested by the British-Nigerian artist Onyeka Igwe, and it aligns with Fred Moten and Stephano Harney’s notion of the “undercommons” and the critique of academia by the indigenous scholar Linda Tuhawi Smith, who regards the parameters of *research* as deeply entwined with those of colonial discourse.

Today, art voices controversies beyond walls and across disparate worlds, yet with very palpable consequences. The falling of monuments, the defamation of board members and patrons, disputes over divisive appointments, petitioning, the wrangling around the new ICOM definition of the museum, the competition in Europe to be the fastest driver on the track of restitution politics, and the rise of censorship as evidenced by the documenta fifteen, all situate critique within the broader public realm. As an act of counter-conduct, academic iconoclasm critiques curatorial models whose underpinnings rely on the colonial construction of disciplines and divisions between art history, ethnology, design, and curatorial practice. It incorporates a diagnostic, an ergonomic, and agonistic stance. The diagnostic stance is the institution’s alertness to changing conditions; the ergonomic speaks of the awareness of the subject’s body; and the agonistic refers to the general mood of engagement. It also reflects the subjective, unfinished, diffuse, or opaque by locating blind spots and articulating the desire to stimulate an alternative perspective. In our case, aca-

democratic iconoclasm addresses historical collections and how they may impact people's lives, becoming both triggers and agents of inclusive, transdisciplinary knowledge production for future generations.









Figures

- 1) MM-U Debating Chamber at KW Institute for Contemporary Art, Berlin 2021. Photo: Eva Stenram.
- 2) MM-U Debating Chamber at KW Institute for Contemporary Art, Berlin 2021. Photo: Eva Stenram.
- 3) MM-U Debating Chamber at KW Institute for Contemporary Art, Berlin 2021. Photo: Eva Stenram.
- 4) School of Remediation, first iteration of MM-U at the National Museum of the History of Ukraine, Kyiv Biennial 2015. Photo: Clémentine Deliss.
- 5) Spamming the Hang MM-U at Kunsthalle Karlsruhe, 2019. Photo: Clémentine Deliss.
- 6) MM-U Ljubljana, Biennale of Graphic Arts, 2019. Photo: Urska Boljkovac.