

“Nonrestitution Is Not a Neutral Act’ Is Actually, in Our Formulation, What Has Been Contracted as the Public Task”

Discussion between
Brigitta Kuster,
Regina Sarreiter,
and Dierk Schmidt

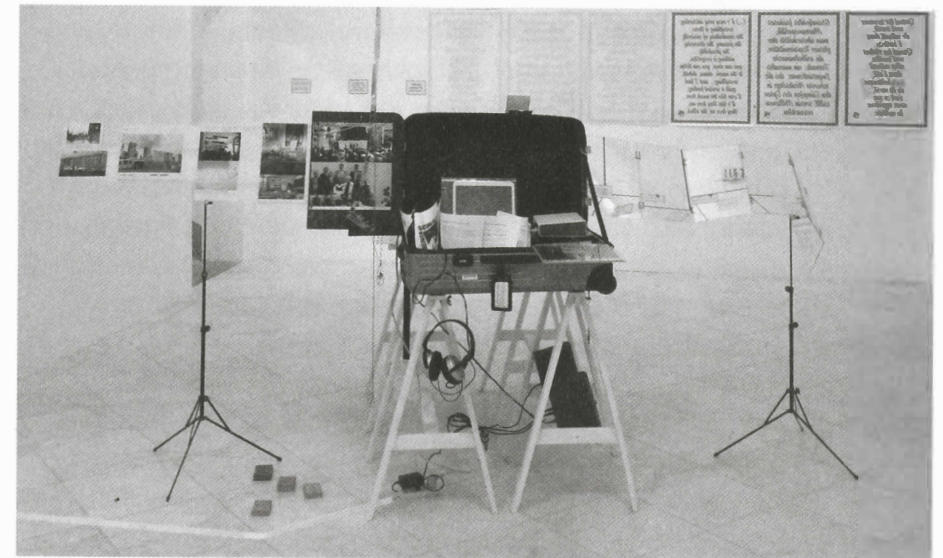
In 2002, the German parliament approved a proposal to demolish Berlin’s Palast der Republik, a German Democratic Republic (GDR)–era culture house and seat of the Volkskammer, the East German parliament. In its place, Germany constructed the Stadtschloss, or Berlin City Castle, a copy of an eighteenth-century palace that was built for Brandenburg princes and Prussian kings and later served as a residence for German emperors. The site—on Schlossplatz, next to Alexanderplatz and the Museumsinsel (Museum Island)—has been used for palaces since the fifteenth century.

During World War II, Allied bombs damaged the original Stadtschloss, and in 1950 it was razed because the Communist Party of the GDR considered it a symbol of Prussian imperialism. When it opens at the end of 2019, the rebuilt Stadtschloss will be the seat of the Humboldt Forum, the declared successor museum to the sixteenth-century Wunderkammer (cabinet of curiosities). The Humboldt Forum—“A palace for all,” according to its website—will be the new home of Berlin’s ethnographical collections, which have been closed down with a view to their merger into the Stadtschloss. Together with five other museums on the Museumsinsel, the Humboldt Forum will be part of the Universal Museum of the 21st Century for “world culture.”

The rebuilding of the Stadtschloss has invited harsh criticism for its unmistakable historicist and regressive implications, including its erasure of public counterimages to the existing order, in this case the recent history of the GDR. Based in a political decision to reenact feudal architecture, it will make for a kind of undead and phantasmagoric entity in the city, in contrast to the dense sedimentation of historic events in Berlin’s visibly scarred urban space.

In response to the plans for reconstructing the Stadtschloss, the group Artefakte//anti-humboldt formed in Berlin in 2008. In addition to Dierk Schmidt, it consisted of the anthropologists Regina Sarreiter and Brigitta Kuster and was cofounded by the scholars Elsa de Seynes and Lotte Arndt. In the following pages, Artefakte look back on their—now discontinued—activities, which were realized in the form of workshops, exhibitions, film lectures, group travels, and publishing.

Central to Artefakte’s activities was their investigation into German ethnographic collections and processes of restitution of human remains. They have particularly focused on objects in Berlin museums with a past troubled by violent or criminal acquisition, racist science, or colonial provenance, and the ways in which such power relations are counteracted or continue to be enacted in the present.



Artefakte//anti-humboldt
The Anti-Humboldt Box, Villa Romana, Firenze, 2015

Lars Bang Larsen: Why have you been engaged in museum politics and specifically the Berlin Humboldt Forum since 2009, both individually and jointly?¹

Brigitta Kuster: The immediate reason was the announcement that the former Ethnologisches Museum in Berlin-Dahlem would be moving to the center of the city—implying a spatial-political change in the configuration of the Berlin museum landscape—as part of the plans for the Humboldt Forum. By “spatial-political change,” I mean that a change in the social context of ethnographic collections—on an urban, national, but also international level—was imminent.

Regina Sarreiter: That was the moment when we realized the project would become reality and visible in the cityscape. At the same time, the decision was made to demolish the Palast der Republik (Palace of the Republic) and thus the former GDR Volkskammer (People’s Chamber)—the so-called selective deconstruction.

Brigitta Kuster: We quickly turned our attention to the question of the envisaged Universal Museum—the partition, interpretation, and assignment of different cultural objects, artifacts, and testimonies to different disciplines—as well as museum configurations that fall under the umbrella of a great cultural-historical narrative. With the decision to move the ethnological collections to the Museumsinsel (Museum Island) and into the newly emerging Humboldt Forum, together with the historical reference to the Universal Museum of the nineteenth century, a completely new discursive museum context emerged.

Dierk Schmidt: In 2008, the group Alexandertechnik was founded. The group discussed its activities for months and concluded with *Der Anti-Humboldt: Eine Veranstaltung Zum Selektiven Rückbau des Humboldt-Forums* (The Anti-Humboldt: An Event on the Selective Deconstruction of the Humboldt Forum).² This group had various

motivations for dealing with the Humboldt Forum. There was an architectural perspective to the question, “How is such a ‘victorious gesture’ of demolishing a ‘palace’ of state representation and replacing it with a reconstruction of a feudal Prussian building, on a spot declared the ‘center of Germany,’ even conceivable in the twenty-first century?” There was also an ethnological question concerning the fate of the collections and the fact of their colonial origin.

Regina Sarreiter: In addition to that, there was the role of the Museumsinsel; namely, its virtual extension with the Stadtschloss (Berlin City Palace) or Humboldt Forum and, with that, the difference that was introduced between the two parts of the Museumsinsel complex, the one focused on European cultural history and the other, the Humboldt Forum, focused on the rest of the world. On the one hand, there was the renovation of the Museumsinsel, the reopening of the Alte Nationalgalerie in 2001 and the Neues Museum in 2009, and the current renovation of the Pergamonmuseum. On the other hand, there was the Humboldt Forum as a counterweight, or maybe better, as a supplement to the museums on the Museumsinsel, toward the idea of a Universal Museum.

Lars Bang Larsen: What did the institution’s claim to be a Universal Museum consist in? Was it based on the geopolitical distinction you mentioned?

Brigitta Kuster: No, it was rather that the return of the ethnological collections to the center of Berlin would be accompanied by a kind of retrojection, which became manifest in the desire to complete *ex post* a project planned in the nineteenth century.

Dierk Schmidt: The *Wunderkammer* of the baroque Hohenzollern Castle was cited as a bridge that, as an early form of ethnological collection, opened the door to such collections and legitimized the reconstruction of the castle.³

Brigitta Kuster: *Wunderkammer* and/or ethnography—the question about framing remains: What will this become—scientific collections, cultural artifacts, or art? These differentiations are made not least by the assignment to different museums. In the Universal Museum as a whole, however, all these aspects and perspectives would be brought together in the stronghold of the Western narrative about the cultures of the world. For me, what was most important about the Alexandertechnik group at the time (not least in the light of my previous preoccupation with German colonial history) was the examination of the history of colonial collecting and restitution and the assignment of objects to national institutions or even to a national cultural heritage—in short, the museum policies in a postcolonial/colonial context.

Dierk Schmidt: This topic was also new at the time. The situation was completely different from the one I faced in 2002–2004, when I painted the series *Berliner Schlossgeister* (Berlin Castle Ghosts) on the occasion of the Third Berlin Biennale. At that time, the debate was about architecture and representation—which history and whose history should be represented here? The series was to be placed opposite the Museumsinsel, where the war-ruined Hohenzollern Castle had been demolished by the GDR, and where, in 1990, immediately after reunification, the 1972 building for the GDR Ministry for Foreign Affairs was demolished. There was a lot of pressure to completely remove the already gutted Palast der Republik. Architecture-wise, the GDR was doomed to become invisible. Some people wanted “their” Prussia to return with that castle. For me, these lobbyists were the actual “Castle Ghosts.” They are still here, financing the façade through fund-raisers.

Lars Bang Larsen: Founded in the wake of the Alexandertechnik initiative to discuss the specific objects constituting the ethnographic collections, your group Artefakte has addressed the fact that a collective social relationship

to colonialism has yet to emerge in Germany. In one of your texts, you observe that the colonial era is not a site of remembrance; it is not an *Erinnerungsort* (memorial) in the manner of sites from the National Socialist era.⁴ By contrast, the World War II sites are coessential tropes of German historicity that dominate the national politics of memory. Could you to expand on the question of German colonial history in this context?

Brigitta Kuster: Yes, I think this dispute concerns us all. Where should I start? If you live in Berlin and are involved in cultural production, all these historical layers are always present, superimposed upon and reshaping one another. Therefore, I would also argue against memorial sites, or against this ultimately merely additive, even accumulative form of a national culture of remembrance. I find political, aesthetic, and social disputes about memory *practices* more interesting. In “The Anti-Humboldt” event, the Alexandertechnik group had been trying exactly that when it used language and photographs to provide a 360-degree panning shot, starting at the planned site of construction of the Humboldt Forum.⁵ From today’s perspective, it could perhaps be said that our pan across the site followed an intersectional access point found at this location in Berlin-Mitte. If you drill a hole in such a spot, you come across multiple historical layers, which are not separated from one another but folded into one another, linked to one another. It seemed promising to me at the time that we were trying to interlink different aspects and approaches—and to focus on the question of futurity. In confronting violent colonial history, the question is not only how to “come to terms with” or determine historical guilt/debt but how to also bring about new imaginaries.

Regina Sarreiter: The question of places of remembrance has become particularly topical and tangible. After long battles fought by antiracist initiatives, some of which are also part of the No Humboldt 21! alliance, three streets in Berlin-

Wedding named after colonial figures will be renamed after anticolonial fighters.⁶

Brigitta Kuster: There has been a lot of discussion as to whether it is a matter of amnesia, of forgetting. There is undoubtedly a strong presence of the colonial past in street names, in buildings, in traces of colonial “commodity racism.” Often, all references to the meaning and conflicts entailed have been lost. The renaming of the streets promotes awareness of such conflicts, and I think that is very important.

Dierk Schmidt: Françoise Vergès criticized this when we met her in Paris in 2009—this renaming of streets in Paris. She thinks it renders invisible a conflict that still persists in everyday life.

Brigitta Kuster: Making a conflict visible probably always means making other possible conflicts invisible. This seems interesting to me especially in relation to museums, which provide a kind of fixity. An exhibition is always a framing that suggests a certain understanding of things, while other possible understandings go into hiding. Museums produce a framework; indeed, they dictate how objects appear. They regulate, for example, whether and how they may be touched. In a situation such as we had in the early 2000s, new openings could happen and new visibilities could emerge. I think this characterized the politically and aesthetically interesting momentum in the first years of our work.

Dierk Schmidt: I think so too. I perceived that momentum in relation to the Humboldt Forum as fundamentally more visible in content, more international, than was the case in the debate on street renaming. Not only on the symbolic level of naming but in the severity of the fundamental question of possession and property raised therein, manifested in the artifact generally and in the context of museums and science. Regarding the museum, it was

downright foundational: first, as Alexandertechnik, then our work as Artefakte//anti-humboldt and the cofounding of the No Humboldt 21! alliance, and, at the same time, in the environment of the No Amnesty for Genocide alliance.⁷ Where are we now?

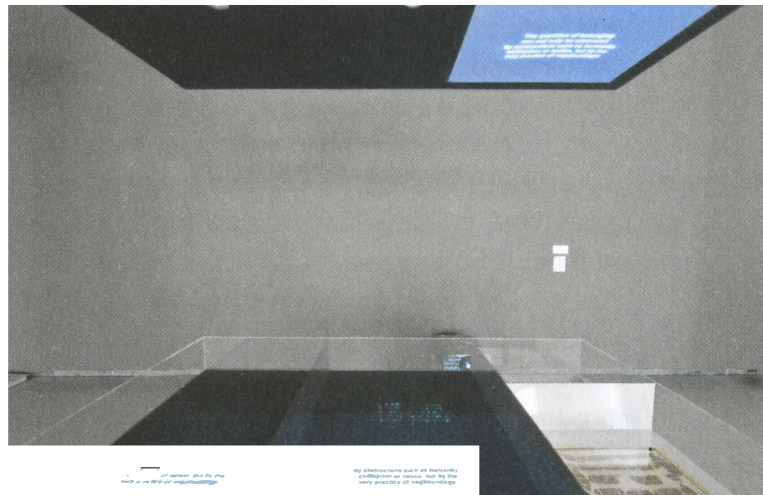
Brigitta Kuster: I would consider the current situation almost a reversal of the situation around 2009, which, in my view was—at least at an imaginary level—relatively open, not least regarding the arguments and ways of thinking we developed. Today, I see the problem of the Humboldt Forum as closely related to the fact that this is a “national” project, structurally unsuitable to address the conflicts that the search for a contemporary approach to collections from the time of colonial occupation in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries should be all about. I see two possible tendencies for museums in this regard: Either they become provincial in the sense of locality (i.e., they focus on street names, neighborhood histories, things like that), or they radically transnationalize themselves. In the Humboldt Forum, however, the continuation of the nineteenth-century national museum is so strong that it seems to me one cannot save such a project from the inevitable continuities it entails—and certainly not with a critical display as a symptomatic treatment at the surface.

Regina Sarreiter: In the face of the challenges you have just described, the appointment of the director of the Humboldt Forum and the director of the collection is tantamount to solidification.⁸ Two people have been appointed who clearly stand for a national, conservative, backward-looking project and who perceive themselves more as administrators than as creators. Now there is no room left to make anything negotiable.

Brigitta Kuster: I mean this even more fundamentally, in the sense of museum history. If you consider what museums are and which museums are trying interesting things

today, then, to me, these seem to be museums of local history (*Heimatmuseen*) that place great emphasis on their responsibility to reflect what happens in their communities. I am thinking of the District Six Museum in Cape Town, for example, or the Maison des Civilisation et de l'Unité Réunionnaise designed by Françoise Vergès, or the Maison de la Négritude et des Droits de l'Homme in Champagny. Or the museums that do not exist yet, which we do not know yet: The coming museums.

Dierk Schmidt: These are good examples, and yet I am left with the suspicion that many of the experiments would not be sufficient, not structural enough. Besides, they don't carry the collections of artifacts we focus on. Do "we" really want to *rebuild* museums? One of the conceptual decisions in our examination of museums was to work with rather antagonistic gestures that reflect existing structures and allow for a utopian view. In our research of feature films in, with, and around museums, these were gestures like theft. Or the autonomous actions of the artificial film character



Artefakte//anti-humboldt
"Rise For You Will Not Perish" (on mummymania),
 2012–2013, 40 min. Installation view from
Animism, Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin, 2012

of the mummy (or the museumized artifact) in relation to the new place, the museum, that has been imposed on it: the "furnishing," the "destroying," and the "leaving" of the museum, which we have called "self-restitution."

Regina Sarreiter: We said right from the start: we don't want this project to happen; we don't care for this. We are working to prevent it from happening in the first place. That was the starting point, that was the idea of the internal discussions in the group that eventually lead to the Anti-Humboldt event: to fan it all out for the first time and say this, this, and that are all problematic about it, on all levels. Then, with the No Humboldt 21! alliance, founded in 2012, we called for a moratorium on the construction.⁹ The construction of the castle had already begun, and our first public appearance with the campaign was at the laying of the foundation stone, the materialization of the Humboldt Forum project.

Brigitta Kuster: That's true, but Dierk's question was precisely about whether our refusal to think or work on a better museum, a museum of the future, did nevertheless merge into an apparatus of appropriation.

Dierk Schmidt: To put it in a nutshell, in alliance with the No Humboldt 21! we had laid down a fundamental critique that generally excluded any cooperation with the Humboldt Forum. You now ask whether this fundamentally critical counterpart is already subject to appropriation? Why do you think that is the case?

Brigitta Kuster: I don't think you can escape the apparatuses of appropriation at all, but I don't mind that. It is only exhausting because you always have to think in terms of relocation and movement and cannot commit yourself to a "good position" that has already been worked out. Everything we might say now, including in terms of the moratorium, has actually already become a critical collaboration, a contribution to the project itself. The

positions are known: one calculates with the other. Whether we wanted it or not. I guess, in a David versus Goliath fight, one must work with the surprise effect in a way. In this way, it seems better to me to keep quiet or change the subject today—that is, to opt for exit.

Dierk Schmidt: Then there was the widely noticed criticism offered by art historian Bénédicte Savoy, who was a member of the advisory board to the Humboldt Forum. In an interview, she said, “The Humboldt Forum is like Chernobyl” (July 27, 2017).¹⁰ The image is unmistakable, since a large part of the collection is “contaminated” by its colonial provenance. However, she actually demanded little more than what is a matter of course in her scientific discipline. Her demand—also made in view of the many boxes in the depot that have never been opened—was that the museum finally confront this “contamination,” sift it, take stock, carry out the absolutely necessary provenance research, digitize the inventory, and make the collection publicly accessible. She made this demand with the intention of making visible what it would trigger internationally and publicly, what kinds of processes it would set in motion. Basically, it was a demand for a moratorium on the business-as-usual of museums, as is still common today.

Regina Sarreiter: Savoy’s criticism begins with the open questions of provenance research and restitution. These are tasks that the institution, and I mean more specifically the Stiftung Preussischer Kulturbesitz (SPK, Prussian Cultural Heritage Foundation), has to deal with. But Savoy’s criticism is not so fundamental, because she doesn’t say, “We simply won’t open the Humboldt Forum!” It’s kind of too late for that now anyway. This precisely marks the difference from what we did in 2009 with the Alexandertechnik event “Der Anti-Humboldt” and in 2012 with the call for a moratorium. It’s exactly as Brigitta said: You are addressed and are allowed to say something about it, but then it’s ultimately a criticism you add, which is read not as an objection but as a task that the institution is to deal with.

Dierk Schmidt: True, an ambivalence remains. Savoy resigned from the advisory board of the Humboldt Forum, criticized the lack of scientific transparency, and at the same time implemented her own demands in research programs—that, although external to the Humboldt Forum, are also extremely close to it. What I am trying to do now is think of different modes of criticism, of resistance, and their respective consequences. What position could not be (mis)appropriated? If the request for a moratorium on construction concerned any form of cooperation with the Humboldt Forum, would this rejection today concern the general possibility of a critical statement? The question of “cooperation” arose early on. I remember the No Humboldt 21! alliance’s meeting with the SPK in 2014. Its president, Hermann Parzinger, told the alliance that the Humboldt Forum would be complete only when “we” all worked together and everyone became part of the Humboldt Forum. The negative response to the simple question asked by members of AFROTAK TV cyberNomads about remuneration made the lack of seriousness of this cooperation offer obvious.¹¹ For me, our uneasiness with continued criticism of the Humboldt Forum stems from the unpleasant feeling of passivity. Continuing to criticize as before now feels too harmless. Not because the needle of criticism is no longer sharp, but because the Humboldt Forum responds so softly and flexibly to the needle. My feeling of doing my own work gives way to a feeling of passive processing. It’s not the Humboldt Forum that is reflected; instead, one reflects oneself. I do not want to give that power to the Humboldt Forum. A possible way out is to grasp some of the questions affecting the Humboldt Forum in a more abstract way, which would also be an internationalization of the critique . . .

Brigitta Kuster: . . . in order to get away from this depressing result of years of work. Perhaps, however, the new “Macron wave” means the debate is beginning to develop in interesting ways outside Germany.¹² We will still have to

see whether the French start a more radical solo effort and, if implemented, whether it is able to interfere with the European Museum assemblage. Will this indeed lead to a more fundamental change of museum paradigms valid since the nineteenth century and shift them in their institutional histories so that they will start to falter in postcolonially productive ways—toward a *useful past*, so to say. Well, given that the Humboldt Forum is based on a parliamentary decision, perhaps this is an important reason why its destabilization during the planning phase was hardly ever possible—and maybe we have always known this in some way. One could feel relatively confident in one's criticism, insofar as it became apparent that nothing would be set in motion anyway. It seems to me today, however, that the problem arises exactly the other way around: things have indeed changed. Only, we have not proven to be the actors who could work with this movement. If we were to make an NGO-like policy now, then of course we could very well work with it, but I believe that the matter of art—which is important to us as a scene of confrontation with the world—makes such a policy impossible. Art is hardly an actor in what now follows, because it can no longer invent anything but should instead implement things. For me, the ideal moment of intersection between art and politics has always been when the momentum of invention coincides with social relations and conditions that are not yet there. By this I mean the poetry that breaks new ground by destabilizing the traditional social divisions of labor and truths. In my view, in temporal and conceptual terms, this moment in the debate about the Humboldt Forum is completely over.

Regina Sarreiter: To return to Emmanuel Macron: He gave his speech shortly after the SPK announced the creation of one-and-a-half positions for provenance research. And then Macron comes along and takes a step that increases this tenfold by declaring that the question of how to deal with ethnological collections is a government matter.

In the context of the SPK, however, the question of provenance research and restitution is dealt with rather as an institutional matter.

Brigitta Kuster: “Nonrestitution is not a neutral act” is actually, in our formulation, what has been contracted as the public task given to Bénédicte Savoy and Felwine Sarr to design a project.¹³ Would we be able to see a perspective in collaborating or affirming such a project if they were working with artists and we were asked by them? Or has art, by definition, no place in such questions in our opinion? If we were not able to participate or support at this point, institutionally, or somehow within, against, or otherwise—in other words, in a transformative way—then we would have totally lost, not taken ourselves seriously, and not understood anything. In Berlin, however, the situation is quite different: the field is closed and has lost any dynamic. This is why I would say our goal for 2018 is to fantasize about going somewhere else, in the sense of opening up another constellation, another force field. It is interesting to see how similar actors, such as us in France or in Benin, interact with Macron's initiative or the Savoy/Sarr project. Because the provenance approach, which is ultimately strongly committed to Enlightenment thinking and also seeks to find connections to a liberal, European bourgeoisie, does not seem so unproblematic to me—not even geopolitically. If we want to know where the goat we eat comes from, and what it ate, so that we are sure that it is good for us, while . . .—I am polemicizing here, of course. But this discourse is not really compatible with what I would describe as *Heimatmuseen*, new local history museums that would understand their historical positionality as transnationally and globally interwoven.

Regina Sarreiter: I also think that in local museums there can be another (his)story, perhaps a confrontation with their respective contexts and (his)stories in miniature. People are beginning to look at the translocal history of these localities. The cooperation with groups or initiatives that

have been dealing with these stories for a long time is implicit. And I don't want to say that these cooperations always go smoothly and integratively. It can certainly be helpful to not be an institution that is supposed to develop and represent a national narrative, but rather to work at a more regional level. Of course, this does not mean that they are not perceived nationwide. For example, I think the Museum Treptow, with its exhibition on the 1886 Colonial Exhibition, is a successful example of how the cooperation with Berlin actors and initiatives can work.¹⁴

Brigitta Kuster: May I ask something heretical? Isn't what we are interested in as art often tied to imperial contexts? Isn't art often a majoritarian phenomenon?

Dierk Schmidt: Majoritarian in relationship to what?

Brigitta Kuster: Insofar as it is very close to power, hegemony, and capital.

Dierk Schmidt: I haven't seen the exhibition at the Museum Treptow, but I suspect that the "art" question does not arise there. I am also not so sure I can share the enthusiasm toward the museum of local history or that I can recognize a real potential for movement therein. I usually find local museums interesting when they are completely self-organized by a movement (or as an art project) and are not simply committed to mirroring the local diversity of opinion by means of modifying the existing structure of this type of museum. The question you ask about art is complex, often double-edged, and therefore not so easy to answer. I believe the art we have produced so far has been relatively far from majoritarian and institutional power; in fact, we have asked for clear and transparent contracts in the places we worked. We said "No," a "No" on our part that was simply ignored by the majority. Like you, I lead a second art life alongside our group work. In terms of content, there

are many overlaps that are reflected in the exhibition and the exhibition catalogue here in Madrid, such as *Die Teilung der Erde* (The Division of the Earth) or the *Broken Windows* series. But the fields are different. In the art field, I appreciate the radically reflective moment in confronting a work, being thrown back existentially onto oneself at that moment.

Regina Sarreiter: This immediately became our role within the alliance: It didn't come out of nowhere that we, along with others such as AFROTAK TV cyberNomads, were seen as bringing an artistic aspect, as always looking for other forms and new languages of confrontation and attack.¹⁵ Our attempt was to bring this whole discussion into a field that is close to us. I think this is also what made it possible for *Die Anti-Humboldt Box* to be invited to places such as the Haus der Kulturen der Welt in Berlin, the Villa Romana in Florence, and the Herbstsalon of the Gorki-Theater in Berlin.¹⁶

Dierk Schmidt: In our group, the question of the role of art has rarely arisen for me. Instead there are questions of content, questions of knowledge acquisition, cooperation, and distribution, of "movement." For me, *Die Anti-Humboldt Box* was a moment of practice that shared the question of art, insofar as we invited other colleagues who were active in the art field to participate. This may not be about art but about a field we deal with in which art happens and in which we as artists situate our life practice. And the Humboldt Forum will massively change this field.

Brigitta Kuster: I think our practices have tried—sociologically speaking—to intervene in the field of art.

Lars Bang Larsen: Where is the Anti-Humboldt practice moving now?

Brigitta Kuster: I think we went underground. We are hiding.

Regina Sarreiter: We are in hibernation.

Brigitta Kuster: We don't know. I just have no answer to that. So, we observe the processes from below.

Lars Bang Larsen: Let's go on to the mummies. Let's see where that takes us. In the course of your various activities, you have encountered the character of the mummy—fictionally in film and in the concrete case of actual human remains. In dealing with the first case, you developed the concept of “self-restitution.” How did you come up with this concept, and what is its relationship to the complex question of the restitution of the object of the ethnological collection, the subject of the human remains?

Brigitta Kuster: We noticed that there is a cinematic motif, a cinematic way of articulation: the mummy oscillates between body, embodied subjectivity, and object, thing, *chosification*, and thus also race. The mummy stories always had to do with a kind of upside-down transcendence, starting with the equipment and staging of the burial chambers with the aim of helping someone make the journey to the afterlife, where he or she then lives on. But in the context of the history of the museum, a closure is taking place: the museum is, on the one hand, a burial chamber, but it requires, on the other hand, the opening of a literal burial chamber, which represents a sacrilege that literally becomes a condition of museum history and is accompanied in the cinematic representations by an activation of those objects associated with sleep, death, and isolation.¹⁷

Dierk Schmidt: The “curse” of the mummy hits those who open the burial chamber. The mummy, removed from its context by violence, revolts. It becomes an active figure with knowledge of both worlds; namely the Ancient and the Now, Egypt and Europe. It acts within, with, or against the museum. From this, we have derived the concept of “self-restitution,” an archaeological object transferred to a subject, in some plots remotely controlled, in others acting independently.



Handover ceremony of Nama and Ovaherero skulls at the Charité, Berlin, September 30, 2011 (see also pp. 138–142)

Brigitta Kuster: In addition, “he”—the mummy—has a medium. His medium is always a woman . . . and not a white woman but a racialized woman. This seems to me to be quite decisive, also, for the time in which the films take place and for what interested us in terms of the ability for self-referentiality in the mummy's self-restitution. The agent is never self and other but rather this strange mediation figure, who is, not coincidentally, also a media figure and a figure of difference in relation to race and gender. It is she who acts in relation to the museum and enables “him” to do what “he” does as a mummy.

Lars Bang Larsen: Yeah, human remains like the mummy undergo a process of scientific objectification, of becoming an object. In the Berlin context, the release or appearance of the Charité skull collection introduced a sense of insecurity that affected the object and its appropriation, and perhaps also the institution of the Humboldt Forum. What happened there? How did you use the term *activation* there?

Dierk Schmidt: This touches on a debate that has occupied me for years: the genocide of the Herero and Nama societies

committed by the German Reich at the beginning of the twentieth century in what was then German Southwest Africa (now Namibia). In addition to the Holocaust and the genocide of the Armenians, this event was considered a blueprint by the authors of the 1948 Genocide Convention. In the 2000s, a tough, conflictual debate began both in Namibia and in Germany as to whether this event should be assessed as genocide. The conflict continues to this day, and the German government is working on its assessment with indifference. In this conflict, the human remains you mentioned became present. In 2011, the Charité in Berlin returned twenty skulls to Namibia that had been stored in various Berlin institutions since their violent appropriation in 1907. Through historical and anthropological research, including into the preserved files, the Charité Human Remains Project, established in 2010, was able to identify the population groups of the Herero and Nama, whose members had become objects of racially motivated research in Germany. At the moment of handover, Berlin failed to make an official bilateral act of state, and, to date, the Federal Republic of Germany has not made an official apology for the genocide and its context, an apology that was demanded by a large part of the audience. One particular circumstance—given the spatial situation with the “heads of contention” in the center—led to a scandal and the hasty departure of then-State Secretary Cornelia Pieper, who was invited as a guest to the Charité. Shortly before, a large part of the audience and the NGOs present had demanded an “Apology Now”—verbally and with printed flyers. Two of the twenty skulls were presented in specially produced cases during the handover. The two skulls, “looking” at the audience, seemed to witness and communicate the crimes that had been committed against them. The violence of this objectification was visible for all to see. Marked as a “skull preparation,” with inventory number and collection name, the two skulls appeared as evidence, as “witnesses” of the genocide. The scene reminded me of the “activation”: sequences we know from

the plots of the mummy films. Here I tried to identify an operative form/method for our work that would consist of thinking through ways of triggering concerns—or at least offer ways of testing our work in experimental arrangements. The Charité’s other collections of human remains went to the SPK, where they now lie, literally and figuratively, in the foundations of the Humboldt Forum. This fact also had an impact on the genocide debate mentioned above. The return of the skulls—in contrast to other objects in the museum’s collection—was met with social consensus in Germany. This was evident in the press’s reaction at the time. For the SPK, as the current owner of these collections and from an *Unrechtskontext* (a “context of injustice”), this created a danger that the public’s assessment of the restitution might transfer to other artifacts of, in legal terms, precarious provenance, including ones that were not human remains.

Brigitta Kuster: Our concept of “activation,” and what we sought in artistic, research, and discursive practices about this concept, was aimed precisely at the moment of potentiality, opening up, confusion, perhaps also disappearance, theft, and self-restitution—at subversive acts, acts that are resistant to the im/possibility of ethical and political object restabilization/refixation.¹⁸ I mean, they actually got rid of the skulls here. Activation, on the other hand, is nothing more than a kind of strategy of extending the uncanny—viewed from different angles. And in this context *uncanny* always also means irreconcilable or unreconciled. It is interesting to me to consider the extent to which such a relationship to a past that does not pass by (*un passé qui ne passe pas*), that has probably always shaped Black cultures, is currently entering the global pop mainstream—for example, when Janelle Monáe suggests in her latest “emotion picture” an identification with “dirty computers,” that, despite all reboots and data deletions, show traces of memory. And it is no coincidence that the attempted data erasure processes take place in a setting that shows clear aesthetic allusions to ancient Egyptian mummifications.

1. A good overview of the chronology from the parliamentary decision through the planning phase of the Humboldt Forum can be found in Friedrich von Bose, "The Making of Berlin's Humboldt Forum: Negotiating History and the Cultural Politics of Place," *darkmatter*, November 18, 2013, <http://www.darkmatter101.org/site/2013/11/18/the-making-of-berlins-humboldt-forum-negotiating-history-and-the-cultural-politics-of-place/> (accessed June 16, 2018); and Bundesministerium für Verkehr-, Bau- und Wohnungswesen und Senatsverwaltung für Stadtentwicklung, eds., *Internationale Expertenkommission "Historische Mitte Berlin": Abschlussbericht* (Berlin, 2002).

2. Alexandertechnik was a group of artists, activists, and scientists. The event took place on July 11, 2009, in the Sophiensäle in Berlin. See "Der Anti-Humboldt: Eine Veranstaltung Zum Selektiven Rückbau des Humboldt-Forums," <https://www.sophiensaele.com/archiv.php?IDstueck=668> (accessed June 16, 2018); and "Eine Veranstaltung zum selektiven Rückbau des Humboldt-Forums," <http://johannespaulraether.net/antihumboldt/humboldtforum/> (accessed June 16, 2018).

3. The late Renaissance and baroque cabinets of curiosities or art chambers (*Wunderkammer*) emerged from the earlier cabinets of rarities or curiosities and are characteristic of a collection concept from the early phase of museum history that presented objects of different origins and destinies together. See Horst Bredekamp, *Antikensehnsucht und Maschinenglauben: Die Geschichte der Kunstkammer und die Zukunft der Kunstgeschichte* (Berlin: Wagenbach, 1993). The author was one of the founding directors of the Humboldt Forum from 2015 to 2018.

4. See Brigitta Kuster, Dierk Schmidt, and Regina Sarreiter, "Fait Accompli? In Search of Actions for Postcolonial Injunctions," introduction to "Afterlives," ed. Artefakte//anti-humboldt, special issue, *darkmatter*, November 18, 2013, <http://www.darkmatter101.org/site/2013/11/18/fait-accomplis-in-search-of-actions-for-postcolonial-injunctions-an-introduction/> (accessed June 11, 2018).

5. See "Teil II, Schwenk: Einkreisung des Humboldt-Forums als Leerstelle—ein Abriss der Geschichte in 15 Stationen," in "Der Anti-Humboldt: Eine Veranstaltung zum selektiven Rückbau des Humboldt-Forums," July 12, 2009, Sophiensäle, Berlin, http://johannespaulraether.net/antihumboldt/humboldtforum/anti_humboldt_12_07_09.pdf (accessed August 23, 2018).

6. See Femi Awoniyi, "Berlin Streets to Be Named after African Heroes," *African Courier*, April 16, 2018, <http://www.theafricancourier.de/europe/berlin-streets-to-be-renamed-after-african-heroes/> (accessed June 16, 2018).

7. See No Humboldt 21!, <http://www.no-humboldt21.de> (accessed June 16, 2018); and "Alliance," Genocide-Namibia.net, <http://genocide-namibia.net/alliance/> (accessed June 16, 2018).

8. In March 2018, Hartmut Dorgerloh, director of the Stiftung Preußische Schlösser und Gärten Berlin-Brandenburg, was appointed director of the Humboldt Forum, and Lars-Christian Koch, director of the Phonogrammarchiv and acting director of the Ethnologisches Museum of Berlin, was appointed director of collections of the Humboldt Forum. See "Hartmut Dorgerloh Nominated to Lead Berlin's Humboldt Forum, Lars-Christian Koch Named Director of Collections," *Artforum*, March 22, 2018, <https://www.artforum.com/news/hartmut-dorgerloh-nominated-to-lead-berlin-s-humboldt-forum-lars-christian-koch-named-director-of-collections-74743> (accessed June 16, 2018).

9. See No Humboldt 21!, "Stop the Planned Construction of the Humboldt Forum in the Berlin Palace," June 3, 2013, <http://www.no-humboldt21.de/resolution/english/> and, in Spanish, <http://www.no-humboldt21.de/espanol/> (accessed June 16, 2018).

10. See Jörg Häntzschel, "Bénédicte Savoy über das Humboldt-Forum: 'Das Humboldt-Forum ist wie Tschernobyl,'" *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, July 20, 2017, <http://www.sueddeutsche.de/kultur/benedicte-savoy-ueber-das-humboldt-forum-das-humboldt-forum-ist-wie-tschernobyl-1.3596423?reduced=true> (accessed June 16, 2018); and Gero Schliess, "Is Berlin's Humboldt Forum Shying Away from Colonial History?" *Deutsche Welle*, August 14, 2017, <http://www.dw.com/en/is-berlins-humboldt-forum-shying-away-from-colonialhistory/a-40082234> (accessed June 16, 2018).

11. See AFROTAK TV cyberNomads, <https://afrotak.com/> (accessed June 16, 2018).

12. On November 28, 2018, during a state visit to Burkina Faso, the French president addressed students at the University of Ouagadougou, launching a new debate on restitution with the sentence, "I cannot accept that a large part of cultural heritage from several African countries is in France." For more, see Annalisa Quinn, "After a Promise to Return African Artifacts, France Moves toward a Plan Image," *New York Times*, March 6, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/06/arts/design/france-restitution-african-artifacts.html> (accessed June 11, 2018).

13. See Katy Lee and Marie Wolfrom, "France Weighs How to Return Africa's Plundered Art," *Modern Ghana*, May 27, 2018, <https://www.modernghana.com/news/856799/france-weighs-how-to-return-africas-plundered-art.html> (accessed June 16, 2018).

14. "Zurückgeschaut"—Erste Deutsche Kolonialausstellung 1896 | Treptower Park: Ein Projekt des Museums Treptow-Köpenick in Kooperation mit der Initiative Schwarze Menschen in Deutschland und Berlin Postkolonial," <http://zurueckgeschaut.de/> (accessed June 16, 2018).

15. See AFROTAK TV cyberNomads, <https://afrotak.com/> (accessed June 16, 2018).

16. "Die Anti-Humboldt Box," 3. Berliner Herbstsalon, <http://www.berliner-herbstsalon.de/en/dritter-berliner-herbstsalon/kuenstlerinnen/die-anti-humboldt-box16>; "The Anti-Humboldt Box: Exhibition in a Suitcase (Campaign Suitcase)," Haus der Kulturen der Welt, https://www.hkw.de/en/programm/projekte/veranstaltung/p_97267.php (accessed August 13, 2018); and "Symposium: UNMAPPING the RENAISSANCE," Villa Romana, http://www.villaromana.org/front_content.php?idart=724 (accessed August 13, 2018), 2,8 mm

17. See, for instance, "Art & Jack-in-the-Box: An Activation in the Framework of the Project Artificial Facts / Künstliche Tatsachen," Artificial Facts, June 20, 2015, <http://artificialfacts.de/activations/69/> (accessed August 24, 2018).

18. See the transnational research and exhibition project initiated in this context: "Artificial Facts," <http://artificialfacts.de/about/>.