Small-scale art organizations as participatory platforms for decolonizing practices and sensibilities

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**ABSTRACT**

The debate on restitution and other decolonizing practices of museums has been getting a lot of attention both in the public debate and in cultural studies. This essay shifts the focus to small-scale institutions and art spaces and their specific decolonizing practices and sensibilities. Unlike anthropological as well as art museums, which are dealing primarily with the politics of collecting, exhibition-making, provenance research, and restitution, smaller institutions and art spaces do not start out from the need to de-centre collections and decolonize material objects. Instead, they work with artists, researchers, activists, and audiences to raise sensibilities, while discussing and experiencing how to relate to the history and current situation of a specific place in the context of a global colonial situation. Based on these practices of smaller organizations and their capacity to offer a platform for civic interests and participation, they suggest a dissent, a space of conflict, that, at a distance from the narrative of Western modernity, might reclaim futurity.

**The museum’s colonial dilemma**

The dispute over the Humboldt Forum in Berlin, which is planned to house the collections of the Ethnological Museum and the Museum of Asian Art, including objects looted by Germany during the colonial era, behind the rebuilt façade of the Prussian city palace, and Bénédicte Savoy and Felwine Sarr’s report The Restitution of African Cultural Heritage. Toward a New Relational Ethics have pushed questions of provenance research, restitution, and other decolonizing practices of anthropological museums to the forefront of public debate. In their report, which was commissioned by Emanuel Macron in 2018, Savoy and Sarr call for a new relational ethics, as they announce in the subtitle, and for objects to create new relationships between African and European countries in the frame of bilateral cooperation agreements. In light of the sheer number of looted objects in European museums, one imagines that the role these artifacts can play as diplomats in bilateral relations will take on far greater importance in the future.

These developments have elicited widely divergent responses: some have voiced the concern that art objects and other cultural assets need to be “protected” from instrumentalization in diplomatic processes, which inevitably involve compromise. Yet it is the other response—welcoming the potential of cultural assets to initiate diplomatic negotiations in the framework of decolonizing processes between two or more states and their societies—that strikes me as much more significant. Such acceptance presupposes a general understanding of artifacts and cultural assets as social actors rather than autonomous works of art.

In his recent book The Brutish Museums, Dan Hicks has made what is perhaps the most uncompromising case to date for complete restitution (Hicks 2020). He compellingly argues that the anthropological museum was used “during the 1890s as a weapon, a method and a device for the ideology of white supremacy to legitimate, extend and naturalise new extremes of violence within corporate colonialism” (ibid., 15). The so-called “universal museum”, Hicks writes, helps provide a semblance of legitimacy for the immediate perpetuation of corporate colonialism in twenty-first-century global capitalism. Yet how, he asks, can museums be “universal” when they are full of looted cultural assets from the colonized Global South that are proffered to Western visitors for their education and entertainment?

The need for decolonization is most glaring in the case of anthropological museums, whose collections are replete with looted cultural assets. As Sarr and Savoy’s report revealed, between 85 and 90% of all African cultural assets are held outside Africa; Paris’s Musée du quai Branié Jacques Chirac alone has 70,000 objects. To send a clear signal, anthropological museums have begun a rebranding campaign, from
changing the names of former “ethnological museums” into “Museum of World Cultures” or the like to a complete makeover of their collection presentations.

Still, art museums have a hardly less vital interest in decentring their collections as well as their exhibition politics and, ideally, their infrastructures. By “decentring” I mean museums’ efforts to usher in a shift of perspectives that repudiates Western, white, and male hegemony, with consequences for the presence of artists in the collection, the themes and discourses addressed in exhibitions and events, and target audience engagement, as well as staffing decisions at the exhibiting institutions.

In the following, I will first examine museums with histories of entanglement in European colonialism whose efforts at decolonization grapple with an object-centeredness and infrastructural inertia that are due to the nature of their collections. Then I will discuss the decolonizing practices and sensibilities of smaller art institutions in a comparative study of selected examples. Smaller institutions, I will argue, enjoy more immediate access to local contexts, transnational networks, and alternative infrastructures that enable them to build participatory platforms for processes of decolonization. Museums can be observed taking notice of these practices of smaller institutions and trying for their part to create openings and spaces on the edges of their rigid infrastructures for decolonizing curatorial processes with and beyond their existing collections.

Decentring museums: struggling with rigid infrastructures

One example of this last tendency is the Museum Ludwig, Cologne, which has created a fellowship position for collection research. The fellowships emphasize decentring the collection, with a focus on postcolonial, gender, and queer studies; the inaugural fellow, Janice Mitchell, was appointed for a two-year term. For the exhibition HEREm AND NOW at Museum Ludwig: Dynamic Spaces (2020), the museum cooperated with the platform Contemporary And (C&A), which sees itself as “a dynamic space for issues and information on contemporary art from Africa and its Global Diaspora.” Dynamic Spaces displayed C&A’s online and offline projects in dialogue with the art of Nkiruka Oparah, Frida Orupabo, The Nest Collective, and CUSS & Vukani Ndebele. Its centerpiece was the long-term project Ce-Center on Unfinished Business, a participatory reading room whose shelves were stocked with books on the diverse cultural production from Africa and the global diaspora as well as postcolonial theory, and supplemented depending on the particular venue. Although the museum’s coordinates (inner-city location, admission fees, opening hours, and the placement of the project amid galleries given over to other presentations) thwarted the project’s aspiration to inspire a diverse audience to make lively use of the reading room, its open invitation to the visitors clearly set it apart from other exhibitions at the museum.

Another example of a venture that probes these same questions and concerns is L’Internationale, a consortium of six European museums of modern and contemporary art that stands out for its long-standing cooperative structure and research-based practice. L’Internationale edited the publication Decolonising Museums (L’Internationale 2015), which followed up on a conference at MACBA, Barcelona, and offered pointers for the museums themselves as they began to examine their collections and exhibition policies with a view to the questions the conference had raised. The goal was to explore the specific prerequisites of the “de” in the “decolonization” of museums and develop novel concepts or experimental setups on the basis of the findings. The authors summarized the idea guiding this self-reflective process as follows: “Decolonising ourselves and our institutional practices thus involves a two-sided position: both resisting the process of reproduction of colonial taxonomies and vindicating radical multiplicity as the basis of any imagination of the social.” This insight—that it is less about exhibition-making as such than about overcoming Western art-historical epistemologies’ interpretive hegemony over collection politics and curatorial decisions, an effort that needs to begin with one’s own mindset—is pivotal to an attempt to develop models of community life beyond the museum. Within the museum’s institutional framework, however, it typically remains confined to the level of contents and programmatic choices, which is then charted through a discussion of the artists’ works, and fails to cross over to the structural level, where it might spur sustained changes.

The Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven, for instance, presented Positions (2014–), a series of thematically corresponding exhibitions featuring four or five artists each. To pick one, Position #5, titled Untold Stories, gathered Mounira al Solh, Mercedes Azpilicueta, Anna Dasovic, Em’kal Eyongakpa, and Quisy Gario, artists from migrant backgrounds living in the Netherlands whose works intertwine personal and documentary plot strands to narrate episodes from the histories of their societies of origin. The works presented in the series convey an idea of globalization based not on the imperial economic relations of global financial capitalism, which perpetuates colonial relations of power, but on experiences of decolonization and migration that can point up situation-specific options for action. Quisy Gario’s piece on the 1969 Curacao uprising, for instance, brings the historic insurrection’s demands back to life through poems, pieces of
music, and sculptures made by members of his family. The role in which this scenario casts the visitor to the Dutch museum is to listen to the stories and grapple with the challenge they pose to his or her own position—a challenge that is also a central element of the theory of epistemic decolonization proposed by Denise Ferreira da Silva, Walter D. Mignolo, and others. Yet taking on this challenge once again does not jolt the visitors out of the role that the traditional museum assigns to them: education through aesthetic experience.

Most museums are aware of this historical burden, which has also prompted the Van Abbemuseum to join a new network of museums dedicated to decolonization that was established in the Netherlands in 2020. Under the tagline Musea Bekennen Kleur (Museums Show Their Colours), the participating institutions, including the country’s biggest and most prominent museums, like the Rijksmuseum, the Tropenmuseum, and the Stedelijk in Amsterdam and the Centraal Museum in Utrecht, have committed themselves to implementing active measures to diversify their staff and audiences and make more room for (post)colonial themes in their exhibitions. The first item on the agenda is an exhibition on the history of slavery at the Rijksmuseum. Yet sustaining the momentum of such a project, which must inevitably call in question the taxonomies and values of a traditional Western art history in their entirety, will, I believe, constitute the much greater challenge for museums, one that will be difficult to achieve within the framework of the existing structures of public institutions—and difficult, too, to square with the expectations of public and private sponsors.

I could list numerous other examples; their common denominator may be that art museums can take action on shorter timelines than anthropological museums, whose collection presentations are often designed to remain in place for decades. It is easier for art museums to make flexible, targeted, and perhaps experimental cuts in their collections, also as a way to highlight desired alliances, as in the collaboration between the Museum Ludwig and Contemporary.&. By contrast, the complete reconceptualization of a collection—of the holdings and their presentation as well as the flanking pedagogical materials and outreach programmes—that anthropological museums have begun to undertake is a large-scale project that takes many years of preparation. What is more, temporary exhibitions are a prominent part of an art museum’s activities and so can signal and communicate its shift to new themes and reorientation within a relatively short timeframe and in a way that attracts public attention, as the Van Abbemuseum’s Positions series illustrates. Anthropological museums have recently sought to harness these positive effects of the exhibition format as well and increasingly programme temporary presentations and events, often with contributions from contemporary artists or curators with a background in art.

That is the approach taken, for example, by Nanette Snoep, director of the Rautenstrauch Joest Museum, Cologne, who notes that “a new generation of global scholars familiar with post-colonial theory has arrived on the scene, joined by more and more artists inspired by the ethnographic turn, as well as those from the Global South. That’s why perhaps this new wave of global anthropological critique and cross-disciplinary curatorial praxis rather takes place outside ethnographic museums, in editions of documenta, Venice Biennials, and contemporary art centres”—in other words, in those institutions that Carlos Basualdo (2003), in an apt distinction from the “stable” museums, has called “unstable.” Basualdo is primarily thinking of the flexible biennials (though one can hardly speak of “the biennials” as a unified format), which, while typically building on a founding narrative, are redefined with a new orientation and implemented afresh with each iteration and newly appointed artistic direction. Museums, by contrast, tend to wrestle with a certain degree of constitutional inertia and carry the historical baggage that comes with having long been an institutional source of collective meaning consonant with the canon of values bound up with a national narrative. Museums, moreover, typically operate on extended timeframes with long planning periods and with entrenched infrastructures, whereas most biennials are realized in the rhythm of “loop-based thinking” and are subject to ongoing revision resulting in restructurings and new thematic foci. That is a point of resemblance between biennials and smaller art institutions and organizations: they are often dependent on short-term funding commitments—though their circumstances vary considerably from region to region—and have relatively high turnover in leadership positions, with each new curator or even each new project bringing new interests into play and realigning the institution’s or organization’s operations and network.

Another key way in which “unstable” institutions sometimes differ considerably from “stable” ones is the audience they address. Part of a museum’s mandate is to appeal to a large and diverse public as well as city tourists, creating the need to persuade sceptical audiences by avoiding overly specialized presentations and discussions of certain topics. Biennials, for their part, seek to speak to a global art audience and cultural tourists as well as local demographics, which they often appeal to with targeted efforts or even try to get involved. By contrast, many smaller institutions can depend on a steadfast peer group, which often consists of a comparatively age-homogeneous local base and a transnational following among art-world professionals who feel loyal to specific (research)
topics, methods, or practices that they also share in their own work, plus interested individuals who participate in selected projects on specific themes. In such instances, education programming may take the form of collective research ventures that shape or advance discourses; a museum’s educational work, by contrast, consists in large part in building access to contents and communicating them to non-specialist audiences.

The informal infrastructures of small art institutions and organizations

But what are the premises, prerequisites, and infrastructures underlying these functions and operations of small-scale institutions and organizations that allow them to build platforms for engagement, debate, and discussion? I should note that there is no pertinent fixed definition of “small-scale”. I don’t necessarily think of it in square meters, budget volumes, or the number of staff members, although all these are part of it. What most smaller institutions have in common is that they do not have a collection, which would be an essential factor in the programming of exhibitions as well as in budgeting decisions concerning acquisitions, storage, and conservation. Not all directors, curators, and staff members would necessarily call their space an institution; some prefer other labels such as art space, discursive platform or space for conviviality. (In these pages, I try to accommodate such preferences by discussing “institutions and organizations”.)

In Agencies of Art: A Report on the Situation of Small and Medium-Sized Art Centers in Denmark, Norway and Sweden (2018, which I cowrote with Jonathan Habib Engqvist), we drew on questionnaires and interviews with leaders, curators, and other staff members at smaller art institutions to pinpoint some of the prerequisites, features, and perspectives that distinguish the particular kind of work done at such institutions and their social functions (see Engqvist and Möntmann 2018).

OCA (Office for Contemporary Art) in Oslo, for example, may have a relatively small exhibition space and staff yet pursues a far-reaching mission to create a platform to foster dialogue between art practitioners in Norway, including Sápmi, and the international arts scene. Still, it does so with the means of a small-scale institution. Smaller institutions act in more flexible, risk-taking, and experimental ways than larger ones such as museums partly because many of them are less influenced by private, corporate, and political interests than museums are, and partly because of distinct methods of collaborating with artists and diverse publics that do not aim to fill an exhibition space five times a year and produce target visitor figures. Instead, they embrace experimental approaches to education and dissemination, as well as offering the ideal conditions for in-depth and research-based artistic and critical production.

What is more, many small institutions and organizations, deliberately or out of necessity, operate with alternative and informal infrastructures. Irit Rogoff (2013) has aptly described the characteristic ambivalence of the functions of official hegemonic infrastructures: although infrastructures that are universally praised—especially in the West—such as “functioning institutions, systems of classification and categorization, archives and traditions and professional training for these, funding and educational pathways, excellence criteria, impartial juries and properly air conditioned auditoria with good acoustics, etc.” are achievements that organize community life and facilitate day-to-day operations, they have also “become protocols that bind and confine us in their demand to be conserved or in their demand to be resisted”. In times of political upheaval such as ours, one objective must be to preserve important functioning infrastructures; but it would seem essential to go beyond merely co-opting these existing infrastructures and supplying them with new content by dismantling their hierarchical top-down functions and creating free spaces that allow for community involvement in decolonizing processes and other social changes. Projects anchored at the local level are most likely to boast this kind of access.

Rogoff has spoken of efforts to “re-occupy infrastructure,” which she discerns, for instance, in activist projects, including in the art world, or in the work of NGOs. Such re-occupation also implies a challenge to the dominant infrastructures that reproduce Western values. Alternative infrastructures instead respond flexibly to specific local contexts and accommodate informal modes of engagement and processes of organization that allow for maximum participation. And it is only in participative structures—within the institutions’ teams, but also involving diverse public audiences—that decolonized relationships and epistememes can emerge. While the re-occupation of existing infrastructures may be a more appropriate strategy either for larger museums—the “stable” institutions, in Basualdo’s parlance—or for individual actors in the art field, the work of many small “unstable” art institutions, as I see it, becomes effective at this precise juncture, where novel alternative and informal infrastructures are deployed in the service of a future decolonization.

The presence of such an alternative infrastructure also allows for management tasks to be integrated into the programmatic processes: the team’s work is then organized in non-hierarchical fashion; or services may be sourced in the neighbourhood whenever possible to tie in with and support the local economy.
In this respect, the situatedness of the organization as a node can serve to activate an expanding multilayered informal infrastructure and a network with transnational extensions.

As for the situated work that organizations do, differences of location and context—at the heart of a national or regional capital, in a suburb, in the countryside—matter as well: “since institutions outside of larger cities are often the only cultural or artistic institutions in their towns or regions, they tend to take over a lot of functions that would be distributed between several different institutions within the context of a regional capital” (Engqvist and Möntmann 2018, 27). Although our focus in Agencies of Art was on the situation in Scandinavia, some of our conclusions arguably hold true beyond this particular geographical setting: “The most frequently mentioned criteria were that they had to operate on a local level and be experimental. Institutions often have a very strong focus on local work, combined with an international perspective” plus “a shared interest in experimental, even risky, curatorial and artistic approaches, as well as their clear understanding of their local publics and the ability to listen to those publics’ needs” (ibid., 27–29). Risk-taking moreover appears to be a central prerequisite for flexible smaller organizations to realize their full potential for innovation by exemplifying alternative models of the effectiveness of institutions (of art) in society: they are “taking risks not just with what art to show, but also with how to work and how to behave as an institution, [how to] articulate a new ethic of behaviour and a new code of conduct” by which they are “outlining a context for what it means to propose an alternative today.” Also conducive to such ventures is “the strength of smaller institutions”, which lies in “the fact that they are often specialized in a smaller field … [with] more experimental curatorial freedom” (Engqvist and Möntmann, 28–29).

Small-scale platforms for decolonizing practices and sensibilities

Many smaller organizations in fact have a specific work or research emphasis or pursue a defined set of thematic concerns. In the past decade, in particular, numerous new smaller institutions have been established in both colonizing and colonized societies that put a focus on decolonization, in what Nanette Snoep has identified, as quoted above, as a “new wave of global anthropological critique and cross-disciplinary curatorial practice.” These institutions—including Savvy, Berlin, and, La Colonie, Paris, which I will discuss below, plus Espace Khiasma, Les Lilas near Paris; Hangar, Lisbon; Academy of the Arts of the World, Cologne; RAW Material Company, Dakar; ANO, Accra; OCA, Oslo; as well as biennials such as the 10th and 11th Berlin Biennales, the 9th Contour Biennale, and the 21st and 22nd Sydney Biennales—often start out from a reflective examination of their own standpoints, taking it as a given that we are still living in, and complicit with, colonial structures. This work also implies an interest in decentring knowledge. As Elena Agudio, who has been codirector of Savvy, Berlin, since 2013, puts it: “We don’t need to decolonize our agenda nor even our collection, but our mentality and to be very aware of the very invisible forms of coloniality.”

In their self-descriptions, some of these small-scale institutions, spaces, and initiatives engage with the “histories, presents and futures of Indigenous cultural practices and world-views” (OCA, Oslo); operate as an “organization of artists, researchers and cultural workers” to expose “romantic notions of multiculturalism, globalism and identity politics” (Academy of the Arts of the World, Cologne); or develop an “extra-disciplinary” approach (Savvy, Berlin) departing from the assumption that “another knowledge is possible,” as De Sousa (2008) put it in the title of a reader. Their practice emphasizes living together and pondering “questions surrounding the decolonization of peoples as well as that of knowledge, attitudes and practices” (La Colonie, Paris); or developing “speculative narratives […] based on a specific and situated point of view, based on forms of life” (Khiasma, Les Lilas/Paris).

Savvy Contemporary and La Colonie

Savvy Contemporary, one of two examples I want to discuss more closely in the following, was founded in 2009 by the curator and biotechnologist Bonaventure Soh Bejeng Ndikur. Before moving to a new space with a huge storefront window and a larger exhibition area in Berlin-Wedding in the fall of 2020, Savvy was located in a nearby old crematorium. The latter has been converted into the cultural centre “silent green,” which also houses the Harun Farocki Institute, the Arsenal film archive, the music label K7!, and other creative projects as well as a restaurant. Savvy’s programming follows an “extra-disciplinary” research-based approach. Its conceptual blueprint states that its “efforts are thus to produce antidotes to the epistemicidal activities that have been practiced all over the globe, by accommodating and celebrating knowledges and epistemic systems from Africa and the African diaspora, Asia-Pacific, Latin America, but also Europe and North America. In so doing, we have chosen to explore other mediums that embody and disseminate knowledges. The body, music, storytelling, food/eating and performativity of different kinds, as for instance dance, theatre, performing and performance art, etc. […] are our chosen means to swim against the Enlightenment
conception of reason [...] With team members from twelve countries and five continents trained as biotechnologists, art historians, cultural theorists, anthropologists, designers and artists, we think inter-disciplinary work is not enough, one must be able to liberate one's self from the tight corset of one's own discipline” (Ndikung 2017). Savvy’s programme includes exhibitions, performances, screenings, and social events, an archive and reading groups, as well as residencies for artists and international institutional collaborations—all circulating around the ideas of a polyphonic decolonizing approach. Colonial Neighbours, for example, is a participatory archive and research project investigating Germany’s colonial history from a situated perspective in its capital Berlin, including its ongoing impacts on the present. In contrast to a museum’s archive, Colonial Neighbors is arranged as an open and fluid constellation, which consists of the contributions brought in by neighbours, artists, or researchers. They are invited to share the stories of the objects, memorabilia, commercial products, or even songs that, for them, relate to contemporary forms of colonialism with a local focus on Germany and Berlin. In this way, Savvy’s archive functions as a collective research project and platform for sharing experiences, thoughts, and memories. As Elena Agudio puts it, the archive’s purpose is “addressing the amnesia of German colonialism among people, and especially addressing also politicians.” This indicates the social scope Savvy aspires to: not content to remain inside the art field, it starts with a platform that instantiates Savvy’s “extra-disciplinarity” and reaches out for dialogues with the immediate neighbourhood as well as real politics. The same ideas are reflected in the themes of Savvy’s exhibitions and exhibition series, which are always embedded in the context of a larger research project on different aspects of coloniality and decolonization. The group exhibition Soil Is an Inscribed Body. On Sovereignty and Agropoetics, for instance, gave space to art projects as well as agro-cological initiatives and links to broader research conducted at Savvy in a range of different formats and constellations into soil extractivism and the extractivism of knowledge as well as entanglements of colonialism and capitalism. The household language at Savvy is English, while in workshops and special events different languages are used; conversely, Savvy’s exhibitions and discursive events are attended by an audience that the organization produces around the more targeted events and workshops for neighbours or activists, artists and researchers of diasporic descent, mixed with members of the international art community in Berlin.

Where Savvy’s structures might be configured to establish the place as a growing art and community organisation for the longer term, La Colonie in Paris started out seeing itself as a social place that existed in the moment and made a determined effort to bring in audiences and visitors from outside the art field. Founded in 2017 by the artist Kader Attia with the restaurateur Zico Selloum and closed down due to the lack of income during the corona-related lockdown in the spring of 2020, La Colonie was a cross-disciplinary space situated between Gare du Nord and Gare de l’Est in Paris, where diasporic populations from all over Africa, India, and other parts of Asia live. La Colonie focused on lectures, concerts, readings, and screenings and was also a bar. The events were mainly attended by artists, activists, and researchers interested in decolonial discourses, students, and migrant communities from all parts of Paris, while the bar hosted a mix of those publics and people from the neighbourhood—groups which often overlapped. Depending on whom you talked to, La Colonie was either mainly a bar with occasional events or a discursive art space that conveniently let you continue the conversation after an event in a more relaxed setting without having to move to another place. But the bar not only offered a casual space to hang out in, it also served as the project’s main source of income, guaranteeing its independence from the influence of sponsors, patrons, and the public purse. This economic concept was one possible implementation of critical management, which I argue is one of the central tasks for emerging curatorial and institutional models, letting it achieve the greatest possible independence from funders’ requests concerning, say, the exhibition frequency and visitor numbers.

Besides the events, which took place in the grand atrium of the building, La Colonie had infrequent small exhibitions in an intimate space on the first floor that was dedicated to different kinds and formats of art-related events, workshops, exhibitions, and an archive. One major item on the agenda was the series of conferences The White West, organized by Attia and the cultural theorist Ana Teixeira Pinto in cooperation with Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin, and Kunsthalle Wien, Vienna. Taking its cue from Aimé Césaire’s observation, in his Discourse on Colonialism (Césaire 1972, originally published in 1950), that fascism in Europe was colonial violence returning to its origin, the project analysed conceptions of neo-fascism in Europe, recolonization, extractivism (the “greed for lithium”), and the “afterlife of fascism” (Nikhil Pal Singh). La Colonie moreover hosted readings, workshops, concerts, and events held by political action groups such as the “Collectif Adama Traoré”, formed in response to the death of Traoré, a young Black man, during his arrest by police in Paris in 19 July 2016.

Like Savvy, La Colonie underscored the interest in contributing to a decolonization of knowledge,
attitudes, and practices. These negotiations of epistemic reorganizations made possible by the platform of a small art institution can be connected to concepts in the critique of the genealogy of the Enlightenment and Western modernity in Denise Ferreira da Silva’s (2007) or Walter D. Mignolo’s (2010) “epistemic disobedience”. In this connection, Attia characterized the specific potentials of an independent platform as follows: “Far from a museum or institutional context, the artistic proposals have been as much conceptual as they have been formal, a-formal or performed. The projects have also been an opportunity to develop non-academic critical thinking, in constant relationship to the issues of our present.”

Only the specific informal infrastructures of an independent small art organization, that is to say, allow for the development of artistic and curatorial formats that position themselves in an immediate and critical relation to the problems of the day. This conversely implies that the institutional context as it is currently constituted—and the museum in particular—is an obstacle rather than a catalyst of cultural practices that are adequate to the present moment, just as the rigid structures in academia impede a collective and decolonizing contemporary knowledge production.

Both institutions, La Colonie as well as Savvy, exemplify places for conviviality and exchange that acknowledge unheard and silenced voices and foster the production of knowledge that “decanonicalizes the canon”, as Bonaventure Ndikung puts it. Starting from the assumption that people are still living under and complicit with colonial structures, they host participatory programmes and shared activities dedicated to praxeological research and a diversity of performative formats that are designed to actively contribute to constituting and debating models for future politics.

Back to the museum?

Lynhan Balbatat-Helcock, who joined Savvy as artistic co-director in 2020, draws a clear distinction between her organization’s activities and the work of decolonization that has (or should have) priority for museums: “we try to take the fetish off the object. It’s always about the story behind the object and so actually we’re glad we’re not a museum so we don’t have to exhibit things the way they are exhibited in a museum. So we take the freedom of also not exhibiting violent objects in order not to perpetuate the violent nature of them.” The same point—not perpetuating the violent nature of colonial objects—is also in the interest of museums, and especially of anthropological museums. One strategy they employ in pursuit of this interest is to cast the objects in the role with which I began: as diplomats in bilateral relations. Here objects can serve as arguments, as carriers of memories, of local and communal narratives, and as references to create situated knowledge.

Yet there is another aspect that appears to be as crucial to a decolonization or decentring of the museums, whether anthropological or art museums, and that is allowing people’s everyday lives in their manifold facets to filter into the museum so as to decolonize not only objects but also gestures, attitudes, beliefs, and practices, starting with the museum’s own. The question, then, is how the large museums, despite their rigid (infra)structures, “can catch up to their smaller, more nimble peers, and take a more active role in building and strengthening communities” (Petrovich and White 2018, 3).

Those smaller and more flexible institutions with alternative infrastructures are raising sensibilities together with artists, researchers, activists, and audiences, while discussing and experiencing how to relate to the history and current situation of a specific place in the context of a global colonial situation. They can more easily offer participatory epistemological platforms for research-based political processes as well as places for conviviality and exchange.

In contrast to centralized approaches to decolonization, which often do not manage to change existing power relations and inflexible institutional structures, especially in the current moment defined by a new upwelling of right-wing populism in Europe, smaller and more flexible alternative spaces, being sheltered from instrumentalization and capitalization, can more easily develop what Olivier Marboeuf (2019) describes as the “political decolonial gesture”. They are more likely equipped to comply with Walter Mignolo’s demand to also liberate, through intervention, knowledge and everyday practices from colonial occupation.

Museums, too, have increasingly come to recognize the need for such alertness to the invisible forms of colonial hegemony, of colonial thinking, attitudes, and everyday practices. One central part of their mission, then, is to bring everyday life into their halls, a challenge that is made more difficult for many of them by their inner-city locations yet can be taken on with a sustained effort to make their ossified structures more porous from the bottom up. Another, and enormous, task they confront is filling infrastructures with different content—“re-occupying” them, as Rogoff puts it—foundational work that poses many obstacles. One way many museums would like to begin addressing this problem is by going beyond just talking about colonialism and the Global South and hiring, say, curators from the Global South and the global diaspora, and not merely for project-specific or temporary assignments, but for permanent staff positions. For this strategy to succeed, museum leaders must be acutely aware that any top-down decision, any reference to (Western)
canonized knowledge, any definition of centre and periphery, is also a colonial act; that even multilingualism is a legacy of colonial and neo-colonial developments. Destabilizing these relations and the hegemonic infrastructures is a mammoth task, which also has to include the boards of museums, but one that is inseparable from an effective decolonization of the museums.

With their capacity to offer a platform for civic interests and participation, the practices of small-scale organizations suggest a dissent, a space of conflict, that, at a distance from the narrative of Western modernity, might reclaim futurity—a futurity that offers a perspective for post-national, post-migrant societies. It is most desirable that museums join them in this endeavour.

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**Notes**

1. The Humboldt Forum, which has partly opened in late 2020, has been clouded since construction began in 2013 by several scandals arising from wilful blindness to Germany’s colonial history, a severe budget overrun (at € 700 million, it is the most expensive cultural centre in post-war Germany), and an insufficient commitment to provenance research and restitution. The latter prompted Bénédicte Savoy’s resignation from the Humboldt Forum’s advisory board in the summer of 2017, which caused a spike in the media debate on the Humboldt Forum; see Sarr and Savoy (2018); https://www.humboldtforum.org/de. And see also Sob Ndikung (2019).

2. Most European museums have only now gotten serious about provenance research, with an initial focus on relatively few objects, and so it remains impossible to estimate the number of objects looted during the historic phase of colonization. Among those who call for restitution, meanwhile, two positions must be distinguished: one that demands “merely” the return of objects that were illegally brought to Europe to their societies of origin; and one that argues that the societies of origin have a right to all their cultural assets. Sarr and Savoy sketch the ethical and legal arguments that have been offered in the debate; see Sarr and Savoy (2018), pp. 8.

3. The term “decentring”, I believe, more aptly characterizes what is needed at (contemporary) art institutions: art museums often approach the interest in decolonization in intersectional fashion, i. e., with concurrent foci on forms of marginalization for gender- or class-specific reasons or on the conjunction of these marginalization profiles. Decentering efforts accordingly set in motion the shift of perspectives described in these pages.

4. I am currently working on a larger study in which I also consider institutions in colonized regions of the Global South.

5. https://www.museum-ludwig.de/de/ausstellungen/rueckblick/2020/hier-und-jetzt-im-museum-ludwig-dynamische-raeume.html. The project was curated by Romina Dümler (Museum Ludwig) and Julia Grosse and Yvette Mutumba (C&K). Contributing artists: Contemporary And (C&K), The Nest Collective, CUSS & Vukani Ndebele, Nkiruka Oparah, Frida Orupabo.

6. https://www.internationaleonline.org/research/decolonising-practices. L’internationale is a confederation of seven major European modern and contemporary art institutions: Museum van Hedendaagse Kunst Antwerpen; Moderna galerija (MG+msm), Ljubljana; Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven; MACBA, Museu d’Art Contemporani de Barcelona; Muzeum Sztuki Nowoczesnej w Warszawie, Warsaw; SALT Research and Programmes, Istanbul and Ankara; and Museo Reina Sofia, Madrid, plus the partner institutions National College of Art and Design (NCAD), Dublin, and Valand Academy (Gothenburg University).

7. https://vanabbemuseum.nl/en/programme/programme/positions

8. Ibid.

9. https://vanabbemuseum.nl/en/programme/programme/positions-5. Curator: Nick Aikens, assistant curator: Evelien Scheltinga.

10. https://www.theartnewspaper.com/news/dutch-museums-begin-journey-to-decolonisation.

11. For an example of the museum’s agile and progressive approach to novel exhibition formats and forms of participation involving both diasporic individuals and groups and actors from the Global South, see the project RESIST! The Art of Resistance (originally scheduled for January 29 to July 112,021; Covid-19 related postponements have been announced, but not yet been specified at the time of the conclusion of this text): “It will be the first time that a museum with an ethnographic collection in Germany will make so much room for activists and artists from the Global South.” https://rjm-baustelle.de/#resist.

12. “Suggestions for a Post-Museum. A conversation with Nanette Snoep”, in Margareta von Tinning, (2020), 328.

13. It was “the Museum—which from its origins has had a fundamentally ideological character—that sanctioned the value of the work as an exchange value, but not without first disguising it, hiding it in the folds of a particular historical narrative that the Museum was supposedly responsible for preserving and intensifying.” See Basualdo (2003), 140–41. On the role that early museums played in creating national narratives, see also Anderson (1983).

14. Anthony Huberman, “Take Care”, in ElDahab (2011), 10.

15. Elena Agudio in a Zoom conference with the author and Lynhan Balatbat-Helbock, 8 October 2020.
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