



UNIVERSIDADE
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PORTUGUESA

THE (DE)CONSTRUCTIVE MUSEUM

HOW TO TRANSFORM THE CONTEMPORARY ART MUSEUM
FROM A PLACE OF HARMING PERFORMED NEUTRALITY TO A
PLACE OF HONEST CARE

Dissertation to Universidade Católica Portuguesa to obtain a
Master's Degree in Cultural Studies – Management of the Arts
and Culture

By

Valerie Rath

Faculty of Human Sciences of the Catholic University of Portugal

October 2023



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Abstract

The (De)Constructive Museum engages in a critical examination of the contemporary art museum's role in the West and its potential for transformation. It attempts a deconstruction of the existing museum paradigm, particularly its colonial legacy, and envisions a reconstruction based on transparency, honesty, and care. Museums, often perceived as *neutral*, significantly influence the nature of encounters within their spaces and are inextricably tied to colonial power dynamics. This dissertation investigates how contemporary art museums navigate their relational structures and position themselves concerning their institutional, national, and global identities. It explores the transition from a singular, Western-centric perspective to embracing pluralistic knowledges, histories, and identities. To confront the legacy of colonization, the dissertation examines the historical interplay between colonization and museums, emphasizing their role in shaping European superiority over 'the Other'. It reveals how museums contributed to knowledge hegemony, presenting the museum as a neutral entity while concealing the constructed nature of presented narratives. Even without looted objects, the coloniality of power endures within these spaces, necessitating a deep confrontation. Through the examination of case studies mirroring crucial moments in recent institutional art history, such as the *Primitivism* exhibition at the MoMA, the *Magiciens de la Terre* exhibition at the Centre Pompidou, and furthermore the formation of the Guggenheim-complex into a global entity, reveals the inherent bias of art museum spaces as well as their imperative authority to determine the location of culture. These case studies serve as a gateway to capturing the current western cultural landscape. In this context, Documenta15 as a contemporary example offers valuable insights into the complexity of decolonial perspectives and highlights the need to think of decolonial endeavors not as straightforward but as emerging from various centers with varied needs. Within this framework, this dissertation recognizes that the museum is a site of relations and thus an inherently political platform that, by virtue of its practice, always positions itself in relation to global problems such as the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, whether active or passive. The concluding chapter outlines guiding principles for envisioning the reconstruction of art museums that starts from and with themselves, into places of transparency, vulnerability and care. This transformative process extends beyond the human realm and fosters an environment that actively listens and thinks with care. In this way, the museum of contemporary art could transform itself into a place of fluid decoloniality and pluralism, returning choice to all who engage with it, while becoming a catalyst for social transformation.

Keywords: Decoloniality, contemporary art museum, transformational care, institutional vulnerability, honest positioning.

Resumo

The (De)Constructive Museum analisa de forma crítica o papel do museu de arte contemporânea no Ocidente e o seu potencial de transformação. Faz um ensaio sobre a desconstrução do paradigma museológico existente, particularmente do seu legado colonial, e prevê uma reconstrução baseada na transparência, honestidade e cuidado. Os museus, muitas vezes vistos como neutros, influenciam significativamente a natureza dos encontros nos seus espaços e estão inextricavelmente ligados à dinâmica do poder colonial. Esta dissertação investiga a forma como os museus de arte contemporânea navegam nas suas estruturas relacionais e se posicionam relativamente às suas identidades institucionais, nacionais e globais. Explora a transição de uma perspetiva singular, centrada no Ocidente, para adotar saberes, histórias e identidades pluralistas. Para confrontar o legado da colonização, a dissertação examina a interação histórica entre a colonização e os museus, enfatizando o seu papel na formação da superioridade europeia sobre ‘o Outro’. Revela como os museus contribuíram para a hegemonia do conhecimento, apresentando o museu como uma entidade neutra e ocultando a natureza construída a partir das narrativas apresentadas. Mesmo sem objetos saqueados, a colonialidade do poder perdura nestes espaços, exigindo um confronto profundo. Através da análise de estudos de caso que espelham momentos cruciais da história da arte institucional recente, como a exposição *Primitivism* no MoMA, a exposição *Magiciens de la Terre* no Centre Pompidou e, além disso, a formação do complexo Guggenheim numa entidade global, revela-se a parcialidade inerente aos espaços dos museus de arte, bem como a sua autoridade imperativa para determinar a localização da cultura. Estes estudos de caso servem de porta de entrada para uma compreensão da atual paisagem cultural ocidental. Neste contexto, a Documenta15, enquanto exemplo contemporâneo, oferece uma visão valiosa sobre a complexidade das perspetivas descoloniais e realça a necessidade de não pensar nos esforços de descolonização de forma simples, mas antes compreender que estes são emergentes de vários centros com necessidades variadas. Neste contexto, esta dissertação reconhece que o museu é um local de relações e, por conseguinte, uma plataforma inerentemente política que, em virtude da sua prática, se posiciona sempre em relação a problemas globais como o conflito russo-ucraniano, seja de forma ativa ou passiva. O capítulo final delinea princípios orientadores para a reconstrução dos museus de arte com e a partir de si próprios, transformando-se em lugares de transparência, vulnerabilidade e cuidado. Este processo transformador estende-se para além do domínio humano e promove um ambiente que ouve ativamente e que pensa com cuidado. Ao fazê-lo, os museus de arte contemporânea poderão transformar-se num lugar de descolonialidade e pluralismo fluídos, devolvendo a escolha a todos os que se envolvem, ao mesmo tempo que se tornam num catalisador de transformações sociais.

Palavras-chave: Decolonialidade, museu de arte contemporânea, cuidado decolonial, vulnerabilidade institucional, posicionamento honesto.

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1 INTRODUCTION: The (De)Constructive Museum and its Purpose

The dissertation “The (De)Constructive Museum: How To Transform The Contemporary Art Museum From A Place Of Harming Performed Neutrality To A Place Of Honest Care” is a critical examination of what it means to be a contemporary art museum in the West and what it might could or even should mean. This dissertation undertakes a comprehensive analysis of contemporary art museums and similar institutions, their identity, role, and influence *in and on* society, examining their historical origins and future possibilities. It therefore critically deconstructs the existing museum paradigm, particularly its colonial legacy and continuing influence. The commitment is to envision, based on this deconstruction, a transformative reconstruction of these institutions rooted in transparency, honesty, and care. Such an examination is vital, as museums in general are places of encounter, but they are in no way neutral in this encounter but strongly shape the nature of the exchange through their representative authority as well as through means of visual and narrative representations. The way a museum generates these encounters is still tied to forces of coloniality and power inherently operating in these spaces, for as Lynn Maranda astutely observes, “the existence of the museum is, itself, a colonizing fact” (Maranda 2021, 181). Hence, “the museum practice is not an innocent practice” (Prianti and Suyadnya 2022, 229). Neither can a contemporary art museum of the present day enter into such innocence, for all the decisions made in and for such spaces in regard to intersecting representations are interwoven in a web of relations – to the colonial past, to the political present, to the locality and its nuances, and to global flows and their complexities. The aim of this thesis is to investigate how contemporary museums deal with all these relational structures and even more how they position themselves to them in order to explore how museums of the presence manage to connect their own institutional identity/history, with their national identity/history with the identity/history of the individual global visitor. The inquiry delves into the multifaceted dimensions of this confrontation within the context of their relationship with the discourse of Western art history, moving from a singular universal way of *knowing* (history and culture) established by the West to the acknowledgment of a plurality of knowledges, histories, and cultural identities that have been suppressed. In practice, these tasks are too often pushed onto ‘marked’ artists, who must postulate themselves through their ethnic identity, gender, or other ‘markers’ against the constructed ideal image of the white male artistic genius. This repeatedly diminishes the recognition of their artistic achievements, as they are always seen in the context of opposition to the ‘norm’(Spivak 1986, 225). Through a reflection that each institution initiates from within itself, the museum of contemporary art is to be transformed into an honest place of sustainable

and fluid care, based on a transparent humanization, so that it no longer exercises an imperative authority but becomes a tangible space that offers a positional choice to everyone who enters and engages with it and, more so, to everyone who is represented in it. “The (De)Constructive Museum” aims to question the social, structural, societal, historical, and political conditions that are necessary for such a development. Importantly, those conditions should not only be questioned from a Western viewpoint but also from the plurality of global views within specific localities.

Such an investigation is important because museums are generally in a state of transition. They have to face a more global audience and keep up with the fast pace of technological advances while being confronted with the greatest burden of all: their own past. “To decolonize means to admit what colonization meant for museums” (Sahidi 2019, 74). Originally, these institutions were designed to strengthen the identity of European nations while establishing European superiority over ‘the Other’ as something natural, which ultimately legitimized the colonial enterprise (Roque 2020, 54). In the eyes of the general public, however, museums remain repositories of history, places of conservation, and, above all, centers of knowledge and education. It is often overlooked that this knowledge is anything but neutral and does not come from an impartial point of view. Yet, how do contemporary art museums confront this past and the coloniality of power, which, even without the possession of stolen objects from the colonial period in the collections, still shows its far-reaching effect on these premises? Do they evade a plausible confrontation with them, masking a performative neutrality by positioning themselves as the educating and witnessing ‘third person’ and thus maintaining the status quo of normative authority and the coloniality of power, or embrace an engagement with them by actively and visibly positioning themselves in relation to them and thus confronting and deconstructing them (Bhabha 1994, 24; O’Reilly 2015, 179; Ortiz 2015, 99; Peters 2020, 16-17; Tolia-Kelly 2016, 897)? What would such a confrontation encompass within the context of its situatedness within Western art history? How do contemporary art museums mediate their positioning vis-à-vis the historical legacy of museums as a colonial fact? Under what circumstances is the imperative of decoloniality applicable in the present, and how do contemporary art museums situate themselves within this imperative? To what extent do present-day institutions embrace the inclusion of artists whose narratives and identities have long suffered from misrepresentation, exclusion, and relegation to the margins throughout the evolution of Western museums and art historical discourse? Are these institutions actively engaged in a robust process of becoming decolonial, or do their efforts tend toward symbolic gestures, thereby placing the responsibility for decolonization disproportionately on artists, activists, and experts ‘marked’ by their

difference to the western, white, male norm, often relegating them to the peripheries of influence (Modest 2020, 69; Ndikung 2023)? All of these questions are here to explore how the contemporary western art museum can transform *itself from within* from a place of performed and harming neutrality, into a place of caring honesty.

To explore the innumerable pathways potentially available for such transformation, this research seeks to examine the current state of Western institutions by first looking at their origins, as well as defining moments of recent art history, in order to grasp where efforts for an alternate future might have to start in the present. Thus, by understanding the colonial past, it is attempted not to separate it from the future practice of contemporary art institutions, but to include it in such a way that it cannot be forgotten but rather that its effects of power are acknowledged, thematized, and ultimately transformed in favor of decolonial endeavors.

While the responsibility for implementing this change lies primarily with the Western epicenter that maintains the colonial power structure of which the contemporary art museum is a part, it is crucial that the perspectives and aspirations that drive this change emanate from the constructed periphery of ‘the Other’ to autonomously pose their own representative expressions that are not intended for Western consumption but for the subjective self. Thus, it is up to the Western position itself to recognize that it is not *the* center of culture in which the peripheries want to locate themselves, but that culture is located in countless centers that the West, in its hegemonic view, has merely constructed as its peripheries (Bhabha 1994, 31, 45; D’Aprile 2018, 350; Vázquez 2022). I have endeavored to apply this perspective in the preparation of this study through constant self-reflection of my own Western-influenced stance but, moreover, conscientiously exercised it above all in the selection of sources this dissertation is founded on. This dissertation, like the museum, also constructs an encounter between the existing knowledges, which are selected, filtered, reinterpreted, complemented, and transformed by my own perception and therefore repositioned by me as the author to ultimately meet you as the reader. In order to achieve a similar transformation within the text, that it imagines for the Western museum space, I have used sources that criticize the Western constructed center from the inside, but even more so from scholars, experts, artists, cultural workers, and other voices that derive from the construed ‘outside’. The concept of coloniality of power by Anibal Quijano underlies the entire dissertation, as well as the efforts of cognizant decolonialization stirring in the praxis of decoloniality as pursued by Walter D. Mignolo (Quijano 2000; Mignolo 2011b). Moreover, Rolando Vázquez's text “Translation as Erasure: Thoughts on Modernity's Epistemic Violence,” published in 2011 has been vital for a comprehension of the epistemic ramifications of western decontextualization and recontextualization of matters of thought, knowledge, and

culture in the Global South. In order to transfer these concepts to the position of museums in general and to think of a deconstruction of contemporary situatedness, I deliberately refer in this dissertation to sources that are as current as possible. Especially important here were the works of Desi Dwi Prianti and Wayan Suyadnya. “Decolonizing Museum Practice in a Postcolonial Nation: Museum's Visual Order as the Work of Representation in Constructing Colonial Memory” published in 2021 as well as Shahid Vawda's “Museums and the Epistemology of Injustice: From Colonialism to Decoloniality” from 2019, and Wayne Modest's essay “Museums Are Investments in Critical Discomfort” from 2020. These texts notably underscore the museum's status as a product of the colonial era and how this characteristic serves as an implicit barrier to recognizing the plurality of complex narratives that exist beyond the confines of the normative Western, white, and male-dominated perspective that has historically defined how the world is to be known. With a particular emphasis on the prevalent practices within Western contemporary art institutions, Bonaventure Soh Bejeng Ndikung's recent work from 2023, titled “Every Straw Is a Straw Too Much: On The Psychological Burden Of Being Racialized While Doing Art,” has wielded significant influence. This text not only highlights the profound (psychological) impact of the coloniality of power on artists of color within art institutions situated in these spaces but also underscores how these institutions actively contribute to perpetuating these dynamics while pretending to do ‘diversity’. It exposes the fact that every person of color participating in these institutions runs at risk of being confronted with structural and societal racism. This occurs specifically when institutions endeavor to embark on decolonial efforts without commencing the transformative process within their own structures. For the final part of the dissertation, which is a potential future reconstruction under the virtues of transparency and honesty, as well as human vulnerability, I drew primarily on the 2022 publication *Practicing Decoloniality in Museums: A Guide with Global Examples*, by Csilla E. Ariese and Magdalena Wróblewska, among others. Moreover, in the pursuit of incorporating the principles of care into this framework, the contributions of Maria Puig de la Bellacasa in *Matters of Care: Speculative Ethics in More Than Human Worlds* from 2017 and Ndikung's *The Delusions of Care* from 2021 proved highly influential. These works not only helped illuminate the potential for decolonial care but also explored the prospect of extending these principles to encompass environmental concerns within museum spaces while also addressing the challenges and gaps inherent in such an undertaking.

To attempt such transformational de- and reconstructions, the dissertation begins with a consideration of the historical interconnectedness of colonization and museums. This first

chapter lays the groundwork by exploring the deep connection between these two elements. It contextualizes museums within the broader framework of Western, particularly Eurocentric, hegemony and emphasizes their enduring influence on contemporary institutions and society at large. The chapter traces the historical development of museums from the ‘Age of Discovery’ through the Enlightenment to the modern era. In doing so, it highlights how museums played a central role in shaping and sustaining the European identity of colonial powers as cultured and superior, which was contrasted with the portrayal of colonized nations and peoples as inferior, savage, and ‘the Other’ (Appadurai 2020, 46; Lask 2005, 10; Roque 2020, 54; Vázquez 2011, 32). Museums, this chapter argues, solidified this dichotomy through various mechanisms of oppression such as language use, textual narratives, and the presentation of a seemingly detached and neutral stance that disguised their constructed character (Mignolo 2000, 3; Modest 2020, 67; Vázquez 2011, 27-28). Moreover, they preserved this singular knowledge by exhibiting looted objects from colonized regions, often forcibly decontextualizing and recontextualizing them within Western collections (Prianti and Suyadnya 2022, 233). This in-depth analysis is essential as it allows for a comprehensive assessment of the ways of working that continue to maintain colonial power dynamics and knowledge hegemony, even in contemporary art museums that no longer hold looted objects (Roque 2020, 57).

The theoretical framework established in this section serves as a basis for understanding the scope of deconstruction and reconstruction required. The following chapter, *From the Museum towards the Art Museum: Understanding the Position of ‘The Other’ against the ‘Norm’ in Art History and Art Institutions* moves from museums to specifically art museums and from theoretical abstraction to concrete investigation through a series of case studies. These studies begin with key moments in recent art history and explore the influence of cultural institutions and the architectural spaces they occupy. The goal is to provide a comprehensive understanding of the current state of art museums and institutions up to the present. The second chapter focuses on the influential role of the Museum of Modern Art New York (MoMA) and its contribution to the establishment of the white cube model in the design of Western museums of modern art, linked to the development of art history. This section addresses the evolving global context and the efforts of modern art museums to represent social realities. It also examines the exhibitions ‘Primitivism’ 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern (1984) at MoMA and *Magiciens de la Terre* (1989) at the Centre Pompidou in Paris. Since they represent one of the first moments in the history of art in which ‘the Other’ was consciously taken out of ethnological consideration into that of contemporary art, they are therefore two of the key moments that show how the sudden inclusion of those artistic identities that have been

objectified and othered in these spaces for so long as they stood in opposition to the Western artistic subject drives and even reinforces these conditions of oppressive opposition. Thus, these are two key exhibitions that have exposed, retrospectively in particular, that the art museum space is not neutral. The debates and critiques that accompanied these exhibitions underscore the profound challenges of addressing cultural diversity and equality in the Western art context (Appadurai 2020, 46; Araeen 2007 [1989], 150-152; Lafuente 2013; Mukherji 2014, 151; O'Doherty 1999 [1976], 14-15; Pollock 2007, 10-11). The following study focuses even more on the global positioning of art in local contexts and the cultural authoritarian power that institutions can exert. Using the Guggenheim-complex, and in particular the case of the Guggenheim Bilbao, it examines the possible tensions that arise when a cultural institution does *not* position itself in a caring and indulgent way towards its actual locality, and even more so, the effects of positioning a museum as a global entity that prioritizes commercial success over local cultural needs. This highlights the power of large art museums to determine the location of culture and thus risk engaging in a modern form of cultural imperialism-even in a purely Western dynamic without direct colonial implications (Bhabha 1994; Guasch and Zulaika 2005; Guasch 2005; Guilbaut 2005; Eser 2013; Moxey 2005; Zulaika 2005). After the analysis of these case studies and the consequences drawn from them, we will now look into the present in order to analyze not only how art institutions position themselves today but also from which situation a potential future transformation can emerge.

The following chapter *The Contemporary Art Museum of the recent Years and in which Contexts it exists* steps into the present and examines the current attempts of the Western cultural landscape to undergo decolonial processes that have gained momentum, especially since 2020 with the killing of George Floyd and the subsequent worldwide protests. The engagement of such processes is analyzed through the inclusion of sources of activists, experts, cultural practitioners, and artists from Black, Indigenous, and People of Color communities, as well as individuals from formerly colonized countries and the diaspora who are in contact with art institutions and their diversification measures. The impact on exhibiting artists, staff, and visitors is considered, with a particular focus on examining the way institutions reach out to a more diverse public, as discussed by Ndikung in the outreach-complex (Ashioti and Khenkin 2021; Modest 2020; Ndikung 2023; Oswald 2020; Snoep 2020; Vawda 2019).

The argument follows that the museum of contemporary art must actively suspend its neutrality. This suspension of neutrality goes beyond the internal dynamics of the museum to include its relationship with the external environment, which significantly shapes the museum's representations and perceptions-and vice versa, as studied in the chapter *Contextualizing*

decolonial Endeavors: In which Situations does Decoloniality have to Happen?. This chapter emphasizes the need to establish a true positionality within museums in relation to the colonial past as well as in relation to the current political and social situation, as exemplified through the “Decolonial Scandal in Art” at documenta15 (Smirnov 2023). It is therefore concerned with contemporary circumstances in which Europe in particular finds itself at the moment and in which the art museum positions itself through its reaction to them, whether it ignores them or incorporates them. Therefore, the following underlines the importance of broadening the discourse on decolonialism and extending it beyond the boundaries of the artistic and aesthetic realm into decoloniality. This is because the contemporary art museum is a political site. The investigation thus addresses current events, such as the Russian war of aggression in Ukraine and the sometimes abusive colonial rhetoric used in that conflict. The chapter also explores the potential of contemporary art institutions to respond to such events. It affirms the need for nuanced decolonial approaches that recognize its specific demands in different contexts, acknowledge the complexity of engaging with multiple perspectives, and that consequential misunderstandings on the side of the West may still stem from the deeply Eurocentric way of knowing established as the normative right way of perceiving the world (De Baere 2022; Heiser 2022; Ivakhiv 2023; Kassim 2017; Smirnov 2023; Steyerl 2022; You 2022). Through this structured framework, the dissertation aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of the interplay between colonization, museums, and contemporary art institutions and ultimately advocate for meaningful decolonial practices within the art world.

Hereby, the critical deconstruction process reaches its zenith, setting the stage for the subsequent concluding chapter *Concluding, a Glance towards a Future: The reconstructive Potential of prospective Transformations of Museums of Contemporary Art*, which delves into the envisioned reconstruction. This phase doesn't provide a definitive roadmap but instead offers guiding principles that, if put into practice, could potentially metamorphose contemporary art museums into more transparent and empathetic institutions. It emphasizes the need to take into account the distinctive attributes of each institution, as well as its local and global positioning, with regard to the unique requirements of the staff, the artists the visitors, and everyone else involved. The art museum can be imagined as a place of care – while also being aware of the delusions of care (Bonaventure Soh Bejeng Ndikung) – that no longer clings to its colonial power but instead makes itself vulnerable. Vulnerable in the sense that it becomes a place that can be questioned and criticized, not only from the outside but within its spaces. A place that is not neutral, but honest in how it deals with its own past. A place that does not present the world as fixed and given, but where *matters of fact* become *matters of care*, because

then we are interested in their becoming as inspired by Maria Puig de la Bellacasa. Furthermore, it explores the possibilities of extending care beyond the human realm, envisioning a museum that transforms itself from a bystander of decolonial matters to a proactive agent at the forefront of change, fostering an environment of trial and error that is founded on a conversational mode favoring active listening over speaking (Ariese and Wróblewska 2022; Bellacasa 2017; Krasny, Lingg and Fritsch 2021; Ndikung 2021; Vázquez 2022).

Such a museum becomes a space of encounter that opens up countless avenues for future transformation, avoiding stagnation and embracing dynamic evolution, thus transcending the limitations imposed by its colonial history.

2 Understanding the Power behind: Reflecting on the (Western) Museum as a Product of Colonialization

In order to deconstruct museums and the power that they hold, one cannot avoid having to fully comprehend how they were construed in the first place. The museum is very much a western construct; moreover, it is a product of colonialization (Maranda 2021, 181). The way in which we perceive these institutions today, with their aura of authority, the importance and pride nations take in them, and the respect they demand from their visitors, is based on still-prevailing political power dynamics – which Anibal Quijano defined as “coloniality of power” (Quijano 2000) – that were shaped by colonial empires and hegemonic thinking (Roque 2020, 53). The much more severe fact in this context is that the practices of these institutions were and are still being used “[...] as an instrumental means of knowing and possessing the ‘culture of others’ (Prianti and Suyadnya 2022, 231-32). Although there are thousands of museums that represent extremely differentiated agendas and each of which certainly has an individual history, and although this research will be focusing on the (de)construction of contemporary western art museums, I am intentionally speaking in a very generalizing way, as it is important to get a grasp of the implications of what it means to be a museum of *any* kind. As Prianti and Suyadnya put it: “museum practice is not an innocent practice” (2022, 229), regardless of whether it is a young, forward-looking institution or a long, traditionally established one. It is so heavily charged that each of these sites should deal transparently with the implications of this designation, as “In a postcolonial nation, decolonizing museums requires challenging the status quo by acknowledging that their entire museum practices are embedded with colonial legacy” (Prianti and Suyadnya 2022, 228). But first, one must realize the magnitude of this legacy.

2.1 The Establishment of a Eurocentric epistemic Hegemony

2.1.1 From the ‘Age Of Discovery’, to the Enlightenment and Modernity

To really understand colonialism and its effects in its entirety seems almost impossible, not only because education so ignorantly lags behind in this context and keeps on telling the story of the ‘Age of Discovery’, but also because the structural dichotomies created then of the superior West and the inferior ‘Other’ still shape and drive a global worldview. This can be partly attributed to the fact that the rise of Europe and the West was beheld as a natural progression – a discourse that was particularly consolidated in the time of the Enlightenment and which was ultimately elevated to a universally valid one (Conrad 2012, 1005). The Age of Enlightenment – based on a narrative of European uniqueness and diffusionism – wired these

ways of thinking so strongly in society, that their questioning remained absent for a long time (Conrad 2012, 999). Ever since this epoch, a longing for the uncovering of the ‘real world’ has been established (Bruner 1991, 1). As the period of Enlightenment and its ‘great thinkers’ is undeniable crucial for the construction of the so-called modernity, Walter Mignolo sees here a decisive misconception in the resulting perception of the humanities. The knowledge produced during the period of the Enlightenment does not come out of a blank void. The modern world did not start with the Enlightenment as the latter itself is anchored in the colonial developments of the 16th century (Mignolo 2000, 18-19). The uncovering of this false assumption is subsequently substantial since out of the Enlightenment a narrative arose to which universal properties were attributed, which are still strongly lingering on in today’s perception of the world and what we come to understand as its truth (Mignolo 2000, 19). Moreover, in the course of the Enlightenment, the first museums were established in Europe in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, with the aim of preserving the ‘true’ heritage of mankind and its culture, allowing their visitors a glimpse into a world beyond their own everyday existence (Vawda 2019, 74). To this day museums are still regarded as spaces of conservation, preservation and education as illustrated by the 2022 updated definition of a museum by the International Council of Museums (ICOM): “A museum is a not-for-profit, permanent institution in the service of society that researches, collects, conserves, interprets and exhibits tangible and intangible heritage. Open to the public, accessible and inclusive, museums foster diversity and sustainability. They operate and communicate ethically, professionally and with the participation of communities, offering varied experiences for education, enjoyment, reflection and knowledge sharing” (ICOM 2022). This definition, however, presents a museum and its workings in a kind of ideal vacuum that does not address the colonialist genesis of these sites and the charged operational methods resulting from thus, nor does it address their systematic and political capacity to affect and be effected which is still strongly intertwined with Eurocentrism and the western epistemological hegemony.¹

¹ In addition, on a more profound level, stands the question about who was - and subsequently who was not - involved in the decision-making process that led to this definition. The previous 2019 proposal, which emphasized the role of museums in promoting democracy and addressing social issues, was criticized for lack of consultation, unclear language, and unrealistic goals, and a decision was postponed. The debate polarized between supporters of the new definition and opponents, who were accused of perpetuating colonialism and resisting change. Media portrayals reinforced the perception of ICOM as an organization dominated by traditional, elitist museums. This division shed light on potential shortcomings in the decision-making process and raised concerns about inclusivity and balanced representation within ICOM. For the definition that has been in effect since 2022, ICOM expanded the consultation process more and made it more transparent: Members of ICOM's 126 national committees, representing more than 50,000 members, were consulted over an 18-month period, indicating an effort to capture diverse perspectives. However, it is still questionable how much the definition represents a compromise that satisfies the conservative side of museum representatives and thus holds museums accountable for the necessary work of restitution regarding in light of their colonial participation (Etges and Dean 2022; Seymour 2022).

Hence, the production of history and heritage is not neutral but was made through a selection by those in power, resulting in the construction of a deeply colonial canon. Furthermore, museums were instrumentalized to not only strengthen the national European identities, but moreover to enforce the Western dominance of power and to legitimize colonialism (Roque 2020, 54). Museums were (and still are) perceived as places of education and knowledge, but they did not simply teach us about what is displayed,; they taught us *how* to see these objects by violently re-inscribing them from their original into a manufactured narrative (Lask 2005,10). The critical aspect here is that this organization and decontextualization happened within the fabricated Eurocentric hegemony as the way of knowing (Roque 2020, 54). The significance of such an understanding is that this way of knowing was fabricated from a certain *point of view*, existing within the domain of a specific set of knowledge. A crucial fallacy is to believe that subjects who emerge at the end of an educational process are wiser, when in fact they are just formed in a very specific way. In museums, one does not only learn about art, history, and culture, but we are also subtly habituated to what is presented to us, as our intended right position in this society. For some – especially those constructed as ‘the Other’ – this means accepting subjugation and social inequalities as ‘naturally’ given (Castro Varela 2017). This one-sidedly accredited knowledge production and validation created an ever-widening spiral that further and further self-legitimized the power of the West, thus making a singular and universal claim to *how the world is to be known*. The recognition of diverse knowledge systems by different social groups in the global space is still far from equal. This is because the epistemic privilege of the West, which was further extended from the seventeenth century onwards, also led to the suppression of non-scientific knowledges and, retroactively, of the social groups that produced those and informed themselves through them. “In the case of the indigenous peoples of the Americas and of the African slaves, this suppression of knowledge, a form of epistemicide, was the other side of genocide. There is thus an epistemological foundation to the capitalist and imperial order that the global North has been imposing on the global South” (de Sousa Santos, Nunes and Meneses 2008, 19). While the material crimes of the colonialist nations are being dealt with in public dialogue and attempts are being made to come to terms with them, albeit far too slowly and to a small extent, the immaterial and ideological consequences of this ‘epistemicide’ are not only not being dealt with as a problem but are also still being latently fostered. “Colonialism has come to an end as a political relationship but not as a social relationship, persisting in the shape of the colonality of power” (de Sousa Santos, Nunes and Meneses 2008, 49). This “colonality of power” (Quijano 2000) is subsequently inherent to every social , as “all social practices involve knowledge”, and

moreover, “the production of knowledge is, in itself, a social practice [...]” (de Sousa Santos, Nunes and Meneses 2008, 21). In this context, the practices of museums, which James Clifford described as “contact zones” (Clifford 1997, 188), are deeply biased as they were established to facilitate the social encounter of differing cultures. These institutions, which grew out of cabinets of wonders, were an essential vehicle of representation and for anchoring the identity of the West as the colonizer, seer, and knower in opposition to ‘the Other’, the colonized, the seen, and known (Maranda 2021, 181; Lidchi 2013, 199). Identification only works in relation, as no identity is predetermined and can only be constructed towards someone or something else. “The demand of identification – that is, to be for an Other – entails the representation of the subject in the differentiating order of otherness. Identification, as we inferred from the preceding illustrations, is always the return of an image of identity that bears the mark of splitting in the Other place from which it comes” (Bhabha 1994, 45). And while the museum exhibits objects, it is in its nature a place of representation (Lidchi 2013, 159). By means of looted objects, the complex and nuanced plural identities of colonized people were conveyed to the (Western) visitor as a singular reality to be specifically understood, which fixed them as ‘the Other’ in distinction to the Western self, and at the same time the museum posed as a mere mediator of this perception. They convey diversely nuanced and plural cultural identities to their visitors as specific realities to be comprehended in a finite and fixed manner, while often fading into the background as mere mediators. Yet museums are much more involved than they habitually make transparent, for they do not simply display what was already there, but rather generate representations and, moreover, ascribe a certain meaning that originates from the powerful perspective of epistemic Eurocentrism. “They do not so much reflect the world through objects as use them to mobilize representations of the world past and present” (Lidchi 2013, 160). The most important tools in this process of mobilization inside museums are, on the one hand, the power of visibility and its organization and, on the other hand, the positioning of knowledge as context, which is conveyed through language, text, and translation.

2.1.2 The Positioning of Knowledge through Language, Text, and Translation within the Idea of Fixity

The cultural text plays a big role in the mediation processes of museums. Often it is the text that guides one through an exhibition and provides the necessary context to grasp what is shown. These texts are repeatedly written with an authoritarian absoluteness that does not let the individual reader in but keeps a distance in order to protect itself from criticism. This distance not only makes the text impenetrable, but also obscures the fact that it was constructed

from a certain position of knowledge and meaning. Every text is positioned and so is every knowledge, but: knowledge does not only exist through text. The one-sided recognition of scientific knowledge solely through text has contributed decisively to the aforementioned ‘epistemicide’ of indigenous knowledges and histories. As Walter Mignolo so clearly put it: “People with history could write the history of those people without” (Mignolo 2000, 3). Here, the emphasis is evidently on the act of writing, since the oral form of knowledge transmission was, and often still is, violently excluded by the Western system of knowledge, which was initiated in the colonial period and further entrenched with the Enlightenment and the idea of modernity (Vázquez 2011, 30). The West, however, not only excluded indigenous knowledge and narratives but also utilized them to produce its hegemony of knowledge, since for the creation of a position of superiority, it requires the relation to ‘the Other’, which at the same time is made into the inferior. Through the colonial invention of the ‘savage’, who again could only be created in relation to the ‘civilized’, the former was progressively denied the capacity for knowledge and culture. The savage was put into the category of natural objects who required to be dominated and who were unable to produce ‘true civilized’, textual knowledge. (de Sousa Santos, Nunes and Meneses 2008, 35-36). The effects of this division are still clearly noticeable, as a monoculture of knowledge has been created that can only criticize itself through its own theories and thus cannot break through the borders it has drawn upon its own, as it often does not even see them. Homi Bhabha therefore calls out critical theory as being ‘Western’. “What is at stake in the naming of critical theory as ‘Western’? It is, obviously, a designation of institutional power and ideological Eurocentricity. Critical theory often engages with texts within the familiar traditions and conditions of colonial anthropology either to universalize their meaning within its own cultural and academic discourse or to sharpen its internal critique of the Western logocentric sign, the idealist subject, or indeed the illusions and delusions of civil society” (Bhabha 1994, 31). Since even the critique and the theory that attempts to question the initial knowledge comes from the West, the cultural difference to ‘the Other’ is further accentuated, and as Eurocentric knowledge seems to withstand even skeptical criticism, it is ultimately attributed to a universal claim (Bhabha 1994, 31). Criticism from the outside is not allowed in, or if it is, then only in a passive form, when texts from ‘the Other’ are in turn quoted and contextualized by white, Western, and predominantly male authors instead of letting them articulate themselves. “[...] the Other text is forever the exegetical horizon of difference, never the active agent of articulation. The Other is cited, quoted, framed, illuminated, encased in the shot/ reverse-shot strategy of a serial enlightenment. Narrative and the cultural politics of difference become in the close circle of interpretation. The Other loses its power to signify, to

negate, to initiate its historic desire, to establish its own institutional and oppositional discourse” (Bhabha 1994, 31). Naturally, this did not happen overnight, but these are centuries-long processes that are difficult to recognize, let alone break through, due to their subtle and untransparent character. In this context, an important feature of colonial discourse and the ideological construction of otherness is its dependence on the concept of ‘fixity’. “Fixity as the sign of cultural/ historical/ racial difference an unchanging order as well as disorder, degeneracy and daemonic repetition” (Bhabha 1994, 66). Through this fixity, still prevalent destructive stereotypes became a fixed part of identification and categorization into prefabricated places of the ‘already known’. To therefore approach the colonial as a moment in time that has already passed, can prevent the necessary work being done for resisting and deconstructing the power structures that still systematically persist within society as well as institutions (Modest 2020, 67). Specifically, the museum as an institution has not only relied on stereotypical categories to classify other cultures but has reinforced or even helped to construct them. The epistemic framework in which western museums operate is one of violence, and “[...], the violence here is the near imperceptible ways in which theories, methodologies, institutions, social, economic and political practices combine and create, in multiple uneven ways, the dissemination, consumption and application, within a nexus of asymmetric power relations, the normalcy of how to think about any subject, topic, event or actions of individuals or groups of people” (Modest 2020, 77).

The violence is especially performed through the act of translation. Although translation of language also plays an important role here, it is the translation of narratives and knowledges produced by the global South into the Western context with its system of knowing that causes the most harm. The western epistemic system has the desire, or even the demand, to understand and explain everything in a way that makes sense to it, which often leads to the pluralism of existing knowledges of the global South and indigenous narratives being translated and incorporated into the singular western position of thinking. Rolando Vázquez defines this as “translation as erasure” and the “coloniality of translation; that is, the way in which translation performs a border-keeping role and expands the epistemic territory of modernity” (Vázquez 2011, 27). Again, the text and its existence, which becomes more and more solidified within networks of power relations, plays a crucial role in this expansion, as it is a tool of border-making and keeping (Bassnett 1998, 135). According to Vázquez, the integration of that which is *outside* these territorial boundaries easily leads to the erasure of a plurality in favor of a one-sided view of the world, such as that which takes place between the boundaries of coloniality and modernity.

When looking at translation as erasure, translation is seen initially as a mechanism through which the scriptural machine of modernity expands and demarcates its proper place, its territory. This operation of translation renders invisible everything that does not fit in the “parameters of legibility” of its epistemic territory. Modernity’s epistemic territory designates both the realm where the discourses of modernity thrive and their very horizon of intelligibility. [...] The borders of the epistemic territory signal the rift between modernity and coloniality. [...] They are the burgeoning hiatus, the swirling borders in the liminal tension between incorporation and exclusion, between visibility and erasure, between validity and disdain. [...] The epistemic territory of modernity establishes its field of certainty, its reality, by a movement of incorporation that subdues the multiple, the discontinuous, difference into the realm of presence. Incorporation is the reduction of difference into sameness, of contingency into continuity (Vázquez 2011, 28).

In this regard, museums were not only involved in these processes of translation as erasure but also played a key role (along with universities, churches, and schools) in their dissemination and consolidation (Lehrer 2020, 293). Museums were and still are perceived as witnesses to humanity and its ‘true’ heritage and history. In particular, it is the single economy of truth that leads to translation in the persistent structures of coloniality, leading to erasure, not least in museums (Vázquez 2011, 39). Within the museums, these structures are kept alive by two methods of operation in particular: by working with collections and through the power of visibility.

2.1.3 The Politics of Visibility operating within the Coloniality of Power

The politics of visibility start outside the museum with the recognition, acquisition, and selection of objects to be included in the collection. All these processes are based on the decisions of those people who are in a position of power to take them; all these processes are not natural. Neither are the procedures for how those objects are organized and contextualized in the specific setting of an exhibition. “Visibility is inimical to power and involves perception and sensibility. It is linked to what power/knowledge – [...] – the museum’s visual order guides on to see” (Prianti and Suyadnya 2022, 233). To highlight the constructed character of visibility and its relation to knowledge and power Brian Creech defined the term of “politics of visibility”, stating that “This term describes the conflation of a seemingly natural phenomenon (what is visible, and thus perceptible and intelligible) with the dynamically shifting power relations of political representation, deliberation, and even social unrest. In order to understand the political consequentiality of visibility, it is necessary for media and cultural studies to reinvestigate the means by which events become settled objects of public knowledge, especially in a world where the visibility of these events is linked to their ability to be perceived, understood, and articulated as consequential” (Creech 2020, 124). Desi Dwi Prianti and I Wayan Suyadnya approached this definition of Creech through the lens of museal practice, arguing that through the visual order of the museum, a politics of visibility works to mobilize perception and representation and,

moreover, is used to produce an impression out of a specific reality (Prianti and Suyadnya 2022, 233). “In museums, visual representation is aggregated, archived, and produced by trained technicians, and it provides an epistemic basis on which contemporary power relations legitimize (Creech). Here, visibility becomes productive in packaging reality. This research argues that a museum’s visual order has the power to construct knowledge because it presents the opportunity to witness using diorama, artefacts, wall texts, and the architecture of the building itself. In this case, visibility turns into a technique of seeing that is fundamental to the working of power” (Prianti and Suyadnya 2022, 233). To grasp the effects of the politics of visibility is especially significant if one considers that in Europe, the museum arose together with the nation-state (Prianti and Suyadnya 2022, 237). Looted objects from colonized peoples of the global South were not only translated into a European context and its way of knowing, but moreover, they were juxtaposed against European objects of ‘art’, in order to make the cultural identity of their creators seem ‘primitive’. Such an incorporation in these specific politics of visibility, which were manufactured through the coloniality of power, not only leads to a translation operating as erasure but a translation operating as suppression. The translocation of objects and artworks played a central role in solidifying the idea of a ‘national heritage’ and in the associated formation of ‘national museums’ across Europe. To fill these new houses of treasures, objects and artworks were hunted and looted around the globe, justifying these criminal acts under the name of preservation (Gaudenzi and Swenson 2017, 503). The act of erasure took place not only through the violent translation in the museums but also in the colonized peoples, who were painfully deprived of a large part of their material possessions and thus also of their immaterial identity. The system behind visibility is the collection; it determines how an exhibition, a museum, and the knowledge behind it are positioned and organized, and therefore how these objects, narratives, and representations are dealt with within these contexts.

2.1.4 The Collection as a Tool of Erasure and Suppression

The collection is what makes a museum, what defines it, and what gives the museum its substance. Furthermore, it is one of the most important sources within museum structures for upholding the coloniality of power. The historic genealogy of a museum database is often characterized by a highly discriminatory bias. The database of the museum reflects a way of organization as a means to comprehend and, more importantly, to know the world (Oswald 2020, 111). This organization is maintained through categories and names, whereby naming and categorizing is one of the most explicit processes of colonial appropriation, especially in

the early context of museums as cabinets of curiosities and ethnological museums. “Generally speaking, those who produced the objects remain anonymous in ethnological collections. Implicit in the lack of contemporary documenting of producers and individuals more generally speaking was a denial of individual creativity in societies considered localized, collective, and isolated as cultural entities” (Oswald 2020, 120). Behind every collection lies a political and ideological reasoning that fostered the demands and purposes of the museum and the people who keep forming it (Mkhonza 2021,30). Therefore, working with a museum database and its collection, even for the purpose of restitution, always runs the risk of “[...] reproducing asymmetries of access, knowledge, and thus, of the interpretative sovereignty between former colonisers and colonised” (Oswald 2020, 107). The colonial way of categorizing cultural artefacts has been one of the most important tools to entrench the ideology of Eurocentrism as the norm and everything outside of it as a distortion of that standard (Simmons 1988, 1). By removing and renaming objects and narratives of people and their culture from their original context and placing them in a new context of a collection, they are repositioned – a practice that underlies every exhibition and can in principle have a positive end result for everyone involved. However, a recontextualization of identities and narratives can be exceptionally problematic when the newly constructed context does not match the original one, or worse, when, as in colonialism, the original context is partly violently erased and partly used for cultural devaluation (Mkhonza 2021,32). Mary Nooter Roberts describes the politics of naming as “[...] both an appropriation of identity and an imposition of it. To withhold a person’s identity may be a form of protection or of subjugation. To impose a name may be a form of repression or of elevation” (Roberts 1998, 56). The way that in Western art a specific artist was so clearly named as an individual, while in the case of the stolen objects from the colonies, the creative individual was erased and, even more so, the collector, the scholar, the ‘discoverer’ or the museum occupied this place, meant that once again the presence of the Western, active individual was placed above the absence of the passive, ‘Other’ (Oswald 2020, 121-122). The narratives of representation and identification outside the West, which were extracted from their origin through colonialism, were never intended for the West, but the West wanted to own them and has therefore appropriated them in such a way that their translation into a system that is supposed to create sameness makes their otherness stand out all the more. They are not translated into a neutral system but into a system of opposition, and this system works with a network of political relations that are sustained by the colonality of power. The collections of museums are part of this system. Not only the mode of collecting and how these collections are dealt with, but also how they are perceived in a historical versus an art historical context, shows

the far-reaching effects of the persistent power of coloniality and the politics of visibility. Until recently, European art history and European art museums focused primarily on the history of European art. Non-European art was mostly collected by and professionally associated with anthropology and its institutions (Modest 2020, 104). This has led to a number of misunderstandings of and in Western museums throughout the 20th century, according to Arjun Appadurai. “One such misunderstanding is about the difference and the similarity between the museum of fine art and the ethnological museum. Since fine art in the modern world is a product of the canonical discipline of art history (in alliance with archaeology in some cases), the distaste for ethnological museums among fine art curators and patrons reveals, in fact, both a distaste for the objects of the Savage Sublime and a distaste for anthropology, whether ethnographic or ethnological. This distaste has gradually become mutual, and the Savage Sublime is hostage to this misunderstanding” (Appadurai 2020, 45-46). Once again, it is what I will call politics of opposition that create a rift between art and culture in such a way that what Appadurai calls the Savage Sublime has been appropriated by Western institutions (Oswald 2020, 109-110). In museums with their colonial history, these are very specific power structures that live from the politics of opposition. It is not the mere existence of the difference between the West and the South that brings with it all these complex issues. It is their placement in opposition within a system of values that leads to a problem in particular, because the power of coloniality still reigns in this system of values. In order to disarm this politics of opposition, it must first be recognized and called out, as it is currently hidden behind a veil of supposed neutrality. Another persistent misunderstanding Appadurai identifies is that of the categorization of the objects of the Savage Sublime as divided into functional, ritual, artistic, craft, shamanic, decorative, and other categories that were invented. However, it was not clear where to draw the line between human and non-human objects, and conventional objects were suddenly imagined in a misunderstood social context of non-modernity that was at opposite ends of European modernity (Appadurai 2020, 46). This ambiguous naming and categorization of objects of ‘the Other’ within the Western canon of collecting history and art history meant that even today, artists outside the Eurocentric, white male norm often have to justify their art through their identity in terms of their norm-defying ‘markers’ and vice versa.

Even these elaborations only scratch the surface of the complexity of the charged museum praxis. However, it is important to look into the past to understand why museums are the way they are and why the museum in general is not a neutral place. The trap lies in ignoring and obscuring this fact, because it does not disappear but is pushed onto the objects, individuals,

artists and their narratives that are represented by and through the museum. So, it is important to understand how the hegemonic positioning of Western knowledge, the handling of the power of visibility, the translation of objects and narratives to a new *context*, and the construction of collections take place within the colonality of power and thus permanently change the perception of visitors. Given the hurdles of their genesis, museums have changed over the past decades, and many museums are in a phase of transition. With regard to the characteristics of their origin, I will now look at the present in order to examine and question the status quo of current museum practice. Here, I will focus more on Western art museums in the context of Western art history.

3 From the Museum towards the Art Museum

3.1 Understanding the Position of ‘the Other’ against the ‘Norm’ in Art History and Art Institutions

Art history is mostly presented and perceived as an absolute and universal history that just captured the most important contributions of artistic creation worthy of entering into this canon. But art history is not innocent and beyond it is inextricably linked to the museum and its colonialist practices (Grant and Price 2020, 12). Just as the museum does not take a neutral inventory of the past and cultural heritage, art history is a narrative shaped by selection by people in positions of power. Western art history is just that: a story of a one-sided narrative perspective that has emerged since the 18th century and has a misogynist, racialized, and colonialist concept at its core (Grant and Price 2020, 11). The coloniality of power is also here prevailing, as there is still a positioning of western art inside the canon or archive of art history and a positioning of 'non-European art' not only outside this canon but also outside the collective perception and recognition of art. Objects of ‘the Other’ were anthropologically examined and ethnographically classified, thus denying them entry into the realm of artistic freedom as experienced by Western objects (Modest 2020,73). The art historical canon produces a structure in which the positions of ‘Self’ and ‘Other’ are allocated to specific groups: the ‘Self’ as the unmarked, standard, the natural artist – “privileged male of white race” – (Spivak 1986, 225); ‘the Other’ is marked by deviating from this norm – women, Black, Indigenous, and People of Color, Queer People, Disabled People and other marginalized groups. This still has an impact on today's perception of art, where the art of white, male, and cis-hetero people is perceived as just that: art. They form the norm that makes all other people who do not fit into this norm highlight their deviations from it. Thus, art by women, by Black, Indigenous, and People of Color, by homosexuals, by trans- people, by disabled persons, and by persons with other ‘markers’ is not simply art but art bound to these ‘markers’. But it also goes so far that these norm-defying artists are completely denied the potential to create art in the first place. In his text titled “Every Straw Is a Straw Too Much: On the Psychological Burden of Being Racialized While Doing Art” published in 2023, curator, writer, and director of the Haus der Kulturen der Welt [House of the Cultures of the World] in Berlin, Bonaventure Soh Bejeng Ndikung addresses the reality of artists of color in the Western art world as such:

Already in art school, Black and brown students are faced with racism when professors make derogatory comments about their looks, hair, or skin color, or when they question whether the kind of art these students are interested in is really art. Black students are confronted with pinkish paints that are labelled “skin color,” while black and brown tones are not labelled as such. When you leave art school and enter the “real” art world, or when you don’t have the privilege of attending a Western art school at all, the question of whether your artworks are

really art becomes a refrain. [...] It is alarmingly obvious that the number of Black artists in museum collections is dramatically lower than white artists, while in too many art collections one finds depictions of racist stereotypes, which racialized people are confronted with when they visit these institutions (Ndikung 2023).

The underrepresentation of art created by People of Color described by Ndikung and the overexposure of misrepresentations of their lived realities are based on the coloniality of power, which denies People of Color the potential for art and also for modernity. Moreover, this excerpt shows that the construction of the white, western norm is universal and pervades the definition of colors as skin colors in art school. What is even more critical, however, is the fact that the colors designated as skin tones, tailored to white people, would not even strike them as exclusionary because western, white people have learned to think in terms of these constructed norms of being 'unmarked'. Hence, contextualizing the art of non-Western artists, particularly artists of color, within Western institutions and their inherent colonial position is a complex matter. Although it is important to see and recognize the social and systemic discriminations associated with these 'markers', it can also be a problem, especially in terms of artistic creation, to always reduce artists or people in general to their societal disadvantages and oppression. This is furthermore a very fine line in the positioning of artworks within the western museum: on the one hand, not ignoring the problems of discriminated groups of people and addressing them in order to bring them into the consciousness of society and politics and thus try to confront them, and on the other hand, there is the danger here of pushing people deeper and deeper into these categories through the constant emphasis on their underprivilegedness and oppression. This happens precisely when the reason for discrimination is sought in the *identity* of the discriminated groups of people and not in society and the systems that perpetrate this discrimination. In the case of discrimination in the form of racism, Imani Perry put it succinctly in the title of her 2020 published article in *The Atlantic*: "Racism is terrible. Blackness is not" (Perry 2020). Moreover, Black, Indigenous and People of Color, Queer People, Disabled People, and People with other 'markers' are rarely allowed by the white, Western heteronormative society to display a more complex image of their individuality, which, of course, is to some extent defined by these 'markers' but also can entail so much more complexities. Also, the celebration of their identity through their art is frequently denied, and 'marked' artists are instead met with misplaced pity instead of empathic solidarity. In an interview published in 2022, the Portuguese artist Grada Kilomba addressed precisely this tendency of reduction towards 'marked' artists of intersectional identities to a too universal point of view from the West's desire to comprehend everything for itself while at the same time exercising an ignorance towards the complex and singular realities of life outside this understanding.

The work being made by Black female artists is incredibly complex and varied, but it is often reduced to just a few words: colonialism, post-colonialism, racism. I don't know whether that's down to laziness or ignorance – maybe both. Certainly, there is a lack of vocabulary with which to describe the complexity and the multiple layers that appear in the work. I think this is one of the greatest challenges for the new generation of Black female artists: to emphasize the complexity of our artistic practice, that it takes time to read, that neither the work nor the artist can be reduced to a single moment (Kilomba 2022).

Such artists are integrated into systemic narratives and into a museal context that was never made for them and was never intended for them, but through the 'decolonial trend' of Western institutions, an integration of them is now demanded. This all too often leads to a representative reduction of the artworks, and thus of the artists, to those themes that are relevant to the institution and its agenda in a social context, and thus all too often erases the singular life complexes and backgrounds of the artistic individual while keeping them fixed in their 'marked' categories. Nav Haq explains how the demand for cultural and artistic inclusion of marginalized groups grew in the 1980s, but that they were only included in this system and thus in the recent art historical canon under conditions of demarcation. "Much of the key practice and debate around the subject of cultural marginalization attributed to the 1980s occurred as part of a broad drive by groups marginalized from the art sphere demanding to be included but also to be able to insist on their own identity. For artists, there was a deep desire to be made visible – identifiable – exactly for who they were. Subsequently, it could be said that they were offered the conditions to position the defining factor of their marginalization – i.e. their race, gender, and sexuality – as being something intrinsic to their art" (Haq 2015, 10). Therefore, while it is up to the white, male, and heteronormative artist to decide how much he wants to bring his own identity into his artistic creation, this decision is not given to the 'marked' artists, as they always have to fight against the prevailing norm by their very existence. Quoting the 1990 published book *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures* by theorist Russell Ferguson, Haq goes on:

He observes that the 'unquestionable, invisible, universal', that is the bourgeois, heterosexual, white male, has ultimately been the legitimizing force for both the discourse of art and those able to practice within it. Ferguson suggests that this power to legitimize extends towards those considered marginalized in society, with the mode of acceptance happening through a process of recasting them via predetermined criteria of identification. All the while, the invisibility of the dominant group has meant some-one's perceived difference (as manifested in their art) could only be meaningful in terms of a system of oppression. What in effect was formed was a subservient relation between the invisible and the visible. It is something we have known for a long time as the discourse of identity politics is well established (Haq 2015, 10-12).

What is so significant to understand about the latter is the discrepancy between immaterial and material visibility and invisibility, as described by Haq and Ferguson. In Western art museums, the white, male norm-artist and his works are visible everywhere and all the time. But this overdimensional and unequal presence is presented as a natural given within Western art

museums as well as art history and made invisible through the veil of a performed neutrality. In contrast, in this system, the material visibility of the art of artists outside this norm appears so unnatural that their inclusion can only be justified by linking their identity and their urge to create art to their oppression. Although numerous curators around the world have adopted principles of inclusivity, colonial frameworks persist in institutions. The intentional inclusion of marginalized historical narratives in museums has proven insufficient. In some cases, it has resulted in mere symbolic gestures that actually reinforce imperial power dynamics. These institutional circumstances, combined with the problematic application of divisive terms such as ‘folk’ or ‘outsider’ art, stem from the historical colonization of artistic perception. These factors significantly influence and limit curatorial approaches (Muñiz-Reed 2020). Therefore, the narrative built around these artists and their art through institutional mediation remains being told by the West through its one-sided point of view, leaving the immaterial voice of ‘the Other’ still invisible and unheard. Through this justification, the art system, the museum, and art history manage to remain ‘neutral’. But this tacit neutrality does not make them neutral, but rather positions them in a way that not only sustains but perpetuates the coloniality of power.

3.1.1 The harmful and performed Neutrality within Western and European Art Museums

The effects of this colonialist position, disguised as neutrality, are made even more devastating by the fact that museums are authorities of knowledge, education, and even more so of objective truth. (Prianti and Suyadnya 2022, 231). Through the crimes it committed through colonialism, the West has grabbed power in order to make the rules about how itself and the rest of the world is perceived. Whoever makes the rules has the power to determine their own position and to create the positions of ‘the Other’ in relation to it. Furthermore, the one in power can determine what is defined as neutral and the norm. These are creeping and lengthy processes that only work when they feel natural to the dominant society, and they eventually have the effect that consensus towards this (constructed) neutrality is ultimately handled as objectivity. Western museums and art museums not only participated in the establishment of this fake neutrality, which finally led to the establishment of an unreal ‘objective truth’, but also promoted it. They have been used as what Homi Bhabha called “[...] the unreal neutral space of the Third Person as the representative of the ‘people’, who witnesses the debate from an ‘epistemological distance’ and draws a reasonable conclusion” (Bhabha 1994, 24). In this context, art museums in particular are not only seen as neutral third spaces but also as non-political places. “So, there was an idea of the museum as a kind of cultural space, abstracted from the politics of daily life, as a space that did culture” (Modest 2020, 67). But museums and also art museums are political

spaces because they have been constructed and still exist in a political system and are, moreover, sustained by it. This system in the West is more of an inherited colonial one. There is a resistance to discussing the political within the museum, and while I agree that addressing the political especially in the spheres of art, is not an easy undertaking, not addressing it leads to a silent and passive consensus with the just elaborated colonial power operating as neutrality. However, this colonial power operating as neutrality is maintained by the Western, white dominant society, which, by continuing it, does not have to become aware of its own colonialist position and can thus preserve the privileges it has created for itself. As Wayne Modest put it: “Much of the narrative of the constitution of Europeanness is that taken-for-granted-ness: ‘This is who we are. This is what we are. This is what we should be.’” (Modest 2020,73). For so long, Europe saw itself only through its own eyes and placed all that occurred from outside, all that was different, into the politics of opposition described in the previous chapter, whereby, through the unequal power dynamics of colonialism, Europe perceived its own position as naturally given and therefore never questioned it. But now that voices from the outside are being heard more and more and the perspectives of ‘the Other’ are being considered, the West is slowly (very slowly) beginning to reflect on its own position. However, this development is still happening on the West's and Europe's terms, and under their interpretive sovereignty. This is also the case in institutions and museums, where efforts to decolonize are often measured by the material handling of objects but not by the contextualization and narratives that the West builds around these.

It is widely known that Western museums have both validated and profited from structures of colonial domination and imperialism for at least the last two hundred years (Haas 1996; Ames 1992; Clifford 2004). Besides playing important roles in the structures of ideas, concepts and interpretations that reinforced the hegemony of the Western world (for example Fanon 1963 [1961], 210–11; Said 2003 [1978], 6; Chakrabarty 1998; Spivak 2011 [1995]), many of these institutions also benefited from colonial structures to form their formidable collections. Even after such structures had been dismantled, many Western museums continued colonial strategies by retaining all the power to decide how to interpret and use these collections, without attempting to include the views or voices of the people they were trying to interpret and/or represent (Peters 2020, 6).

Therefore (art) museums and art history of Europe have to find a way to operate in a mode of critical positionality, especially towards themselves (Modest 2020, 74). “It is no longer enough to assume neutrality when confronted with a changing global landscape – particularly in terms of social identities, political, and cultural values in contemporary circumstances. As proposed by Freire, in order to transform something, one has to be transformed as well” (Peters 2020, 24).

What Renate Peters describes here through Freire can be transferred directly to museums and art history. If they really want to engage in a sustainable de-colonialist practice, they must also

become effectively de-colonialist themselves. But prior to the achievement of such a transformation, which according to my thesis should eventually lead to an honest and transparent positioning of museums and art history against colonialism, they must first become aware of what they are positioning themselves against, also in relation to themselves and their (local) history. Therefore, after this brief elaboration of the desolate state of coloniality of power operating as neutrality in museums and art history, I will now turn to the state of a more contemporary art history and its genesis in relation to important institutions of recent history. In this way, I hope to create an insight into what needs to be transformed in the first place.

3.1.2 Attempting wither Art-History within a colonial Framework of Western Institutions

So what is the current state of art history? As mentioned earlier, (classic) art history is just that: a story constructed and written from the perspective of the West and its position. In recent decades, this one-sided narrative has been increasingly challenged by voices outside the West, and this has led to attempts at critical reimagination in the form of “whither art history” or “global art history”. But, as Parul Dave Mukherji argues in his 2014 published essay in *The Art Bulletin* titled “Whither Art History in a Globalizing World.” these developments have not been truthfully de-colonial (Mukherji 2014). He enters the discussion through the term ‘postethnic’ which, as he argues, is a way of attempting a kind of aforementioned transformation of recognizing the artistic potential of ‘the Other’ by relocating it from the ethnographic to the spheres of (contemporary) art. However, the recurring problem here is that the West, and especially the western art museum, does not transform its own colonial power position in this context.

My point of entry into the debate will be through one of the salient terms used to theorize contemporaneity: postethnic. I aim to problematize developments leading up to the notion of a global art history, which, however well-meaning, is caught in an insidious ethnocentrism. In the abundance of terms that get yoked with ‘post-,’ ‘postethnic’ posits itself as a new term to capture the contemporary dynamics of the art world and seems to pose key questions about the future of art history as it reflects on its past. Bereft of its ‘post-,’ ethnic art history would signify the period in art history in the West when a clear distinction was believed to have existed between the art museums devoted to modern and contemporary art trends as opposed to the ethnographic museums that primarily housed artifacts from non-Western cultures, more as objects of curiosity than of aesthetic significance. The distinction was created by the West for the West, for its consumption (Mukherji 2014, 151).

Art that has been excluded before from the western-centric canon suddenly gets included, but since the art history itself is not transformed, nor are the spaces where this art is visibly displayed, this inclusion leads to a western form of aesthetic and conceptual understanding of it. The aesthetic understanding and consumption, which has long been seen as universal, is also a Western and colonialist construct, which, coupled with the Western and colonialist setting of

the museum, produces a misrepresentation and therefore a misunderstanding of this newly included art. Griselda Pollock, in her 2007 text “Un-framing the Modern: Critical Space/Public Possibility”, quotes Suzanne Oberhardt, who developed a four-frame model to particularly capture the potential of museums (and their ignorance towards this potential) to create meaning and that they are not only influenced by representations in culture and society but also have a profound impact on these representations themselves: “Suzanne Oberhardt argues that, from the inside, the museum effaces itself to become an invisible frame for the art or artifacts it appears merely to house, conserve, and exhibit. To recognize that the institution itself produces meaning, we need to widen our focus to see its active framing of its contents and our experience” (Pollock 2007, 1). Especially in the 80s and 90s, there was a paradigm shift already mentioned briefly, in which attempts were made to reformulate postcolonial identities as voices from the periphery (perceived from a Western perspective) came forward and demanded inclusion and visibility (Haq 2015, 10). This shift moved the focus from the unreflective model of a self-involved western art historical model that sustained itself through colonial power structures towards a postmodernist critique of institutions and representations (Pollock 2007, 1). In this four-frame model described by Oberhardt through Pollock, the author implies a concept that can be seen as a more meta-reflective theory of art museums and their role in a (changing) society.

Oberhardt identifies the first, close-in Frame 1 as the adoring art-historical model, in which the museum positions art both on the side of the sacred, set apart from ordinary life, and as a source of moral authority. Its direct counter-frame is New Museology, a political critique of the museum as institution and ideology, situated in the colonial and imperial histories of modernity’s constructions of nations, races, and genders. Emerging in the early 1980s, this new discipline (often called Museum Studies) shifted the focus from the canonizing model of arthistorical adoration of the painting (Oberhardt’s term for all valued objects of the art-historical paradigm) to a postmodernist critique of institutions and representations in which the programming of display and the disciplining of the spectator create a pedagogic text: what Tony Bennett calls ‘the exhibitionary complex’ (Pollock 2007, 1-2).

Whereas the third frame “[...] scrutinizes the discourses of the art museum not through texts displayed by the art museum but rather through how the museum itself is represented and talked about in contemporary society” (Oberhardt 2001, 6). The fourth frame is not a concluded substance but dissolves into itself in a way and becomes a space in which no frame has any dominance any more. Thus, this space offers the potential to reinvent and deconstruct existing frames again and again in a never-ending cycle in which no dominant world view can gain a foothold and the definition of identities and meanings is not fixed but changeable alongside the needs of each specific generation (Oberhardt 2001, 2). In this regard, I am going to focus on the transition from the first to the second frame and its implications and effects within the museum and exhibition practices of the time. Some of the largest and most influential Western

contemporary art institutions have tried to keep up with the timeliness of this period and addressed these paradigmatic shifts with targeted exhibitions. I would like to discuss some of the most influential Western exhibitions of this period and the institutions behind them, as they have had reverberating effects not only on Western museum culture but also on the way art history is dealt with.

3.2 Reflecting on important Western Institutions and their Influence

3.2.1 The MoMA and the White-Cube Model

One of the most formative institutions for Western modern and contemporary art museums was the Museum of Modern Art New York (MoMA). It was founded in 1929, with the first director, Alfred H. Barr, proclaiming its mission as a museum with an international approach to the visual arts of the time, while in reality it was a very Eurocentric institution located in the West outside Europe (Soby 1947, 1). At a time when globalism, driven by a new kind of media reality, was being felt more and more in the daily life of the individual, those art institutions dedicated to reflecting the actualities of society were also keen to make their mark upon the cultural zeitgeist. While there were new ambitions to invite the world into the museum, new forms of architectural exhibition spaces were formed to simultaneously transform the art museum into a sublime place (Pollock 2007, 8).

We think of a museum with walls on which to hang works of art. But if we pursue the medieval model, we realize that the art is placed in a building, with its already designated function to spread and sustain the larger belief system the building itself already embodies. The building, as it were, commissions and solicits art to support as iconographic supplement and illustration an underlying ideology. Without attributing any conscious intentions, these authors draw our attention to what visitors imaginatively experience as they are drawn into a museum by its particular architectural devices for marking the separation of its special space from that of the street and the everyday (Pollock 2007, 7-8).

The MoMA is additionally such a crucial reference in this context of the display of art, as it was instrumental in establishing the white-cube model that still exists in a lot of modern and contemporary art institutions up to today. The spatial separation between the sublime inside and the banal outside, as described by Pollock, is reinforced by the creation of the white cube paradoxically through a reduction of the inside, and the exhibition space becomes something extremely abstracted from everyday life. This new spatial model was also extremely important for modernism and our perception of modern and contemporary art, as Brian O'Doherty stated in his current publication, *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space*: "The history of modernism is intimately framed by the space; or rather, the history of modern art can be correlated with changes in that space and in the way we see it. We have now reached a point

where we see not the art but the *space* first” (O’Doherty 1999 [1976], 14). According to O’Doherty, this new space adhered to the rules necessary to convey an aura similar to that of sacred churches. The windows were to be covered, the walls painted white, and the only source of light was to come from the ceiling. Referring to O’Doherty’s text, Anna Maria Guasch described the effect of this space on the works shown within it as follows:

“Only then could art, free of everything external, take on its own life (...). Works of art like religious truths would thus appear ‘untouched by time and its vicissitudes.’ Moreover, this condition of appearing ‘outside’ or beyond time implied that the work would subsequently pass over into posterity. Art would therefore exist in a kind of eternal display, and this perpetuity would in truth safeguard in these exhibition spaces a symbolic status, an artistic posterity, an eternal or inaccessible beauty, and the qualities of a masterpiece” (Guasch 2005, 187).

What Guasch describes here on the basis of O’Doherty demonstrates the power that museums and exhibition spaces have on what is shown in them, together with the arrogance and the will to elevate art and the artist (and at the same time the museum in which it is shown) to a status equivalent to that of a god, out of touch with ordinary people. This is a drastic development, as it has not only meant that the museum no longer just holds authority and interpretative sovereignty over the contents presented in it, as before, but that mundane realities are neutralized even more in this new space. The visitor is confronted with a white, neutral space in which art alone dominates, or so it seems.

The ideal gallery subtracts from the artwork all cues that interfere with the fact that it is ‘art.’ The work is isolated from everything that would detract from its own evaluation of itself. This gives the space a presence possessed by other spaces where conventions preserved through the repetition of a closed system of values. Some of sanctity of the church, the formality of the courtroom, the mystique of the experimental laboratory joins with chic design to produce a unique chamber of esthetics. So powerful are the perpetual fields of force within this chamber that, once outside it, art can lapse into secular status. Conversely, things become art in a space where powerful ideas about art focus on them. [...] The sacramental nature of the space becomes clear, and so does one of the great projective laws of modernism: As modernism gets older, context becomes content (O’Doherty 1999 [1976], 14-15).

What is often conveyed by the aura of these sublime spaces of modernism, however, is as if everything the visitor gets to see in them has always been destined for them, as they are the most magnificent works of art. But the space itself has the power to transform something into art; except that it is people in positions of power in museums who decide what may enter this space. The context that became the content had devastating consequences, especially for art that came from outside the West. The power of the museum and modernism became so great within art that the context of the museum determined what was understood as art and, moreover, how it had to be understood. Since the museum (regardless of which one) is a colonial fact, in which, if this fact is not actively acted against, a colonialist practice is carried out, this power affects

the content and thus the art shown in a colonialist manner. The white, western male norm artist is positively influenced by this aura, and his works are elevated to untouchable spheres, surviving all criticism of time, since the art here must be that of a true genius. All other artists may also be negatively influenced by this aura, since this environment was never intended for them in its entirety, and thus their otherness from the norm is bound to stand out. 'Marked' artists cannot simply unfold as geniuses in these spaces because this potential is not just naturally granted to them. Their representation in these spaces must always be based on justification. The principle of this distinction being the 'natural' state of affairs in museums, existing by default without any intervention, shows that every museum practice is inherently a colonial practice.

I would like to discuss two exhibitions in more detail, which represent decisive moments of transformation for the modern and contemporary understanding of art, as they signified for the first time an integration of 'the Other' into the contemporary Western art context, but also revealed how much this context still operates in the colonialist structures inside institutions along with the previously discussed modalities (Eurocentric hegemonic epistemology, translation and collecting as erasure, the power of visibility within the politics of opposition).

3.2.2 Primitivism and *Magiciens de la Terre*: an Encounter on non-neutral Ground

The much-discussed exhibitions '*Primitivism*' in *20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern*, organized by William Rubin in 1984 at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, as well as the 1989 exhibition *Magiciens de la Terre*, curated by Jean-Hubert Martin at the Centre Pompidou in Paris, can be considered examples of a rather controversial or even unsuccessful attempt at such a transformation. But what these two exhibitions have in common is that they have brought about a reverberating shift in art history and how it is dealt with through the great debates and critiques they have provoked (Mukherji 2014, 151).

In *Primitivism*, 150 works by modern Western artists such as Picasso, Matisse, Gauguin, Braque, and other famous names were exhibited alongside over 200 tribal objects by indigenous peoples from Africa, Oceania, and North America (McEvelley 1984, 55). It was not only the juxtaposition of individual artists so celebrated in Western art history against the collective nameless 'Other', but also the fact that the exhibition was described by the MoMA in its press release by itself as "the first ever to juxtapose modern and tribal objects in the light of informed art history" (Museum of Modern Art New York 1984, 1). One of the main problems here is the proclamation that this new contextualization and re-interpretation of objects and artworks takes place under the vantage points of 'informed art history'.



Figure 1: Installation view of the exhibition *Primitivism in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern*, Museum of Modern Art, New York, September 19, 1984 – January 15, 1985.

This Western positioning of the exhibition within ‘informed art history’ implies on the one hand that there must be an uninformed standpoint, which is unspokenly attributed to the position of ‘the Other’, and at the same time, this positioning is in turn seen as neutral and assigned to the ‘third space’ of the museum as the witness and knower. Hereby, the art museum (the MoMA in this case) becomes a translation machine that, through the power of visibility and the politics of opposition exercised on the exhibited western artworks and the tribal objects, translates everything into the language and understanding of the West and thus sublimely justifies its colonialist position of power. Even more, the tribal objects and the Western artworks were equated, whereby the tribal objects were deprived of their creative context in relation to their social, religious, and other components and were placed in the external Western museum context, while the Western artworks were placed in the same context, with the difference that they were created and intended for the latter, and thus the West emerged as ‘the developed’ in comparison (Lafuente 2013). This approach can be seen as Rolando Vázquez’s previously described theory of translation as erasure, though I would go a step further to argue that through the politics of opposition between Western art and the objects foreign to the West opposed within the unaddressed colonialist context of the museum, translation acts as suppression,

further abstracting ‘the Other’ as the fundamentally inferior. Furthermore, the MoMA situated itself in a position of power through its appropriation of the rest of the world into a modernist universalism constructed through the Western ‘discovery’ of non-Western objects: ‘Suddenly we discover the world, and we discover it through the MoMA’. The MoMA shaped the way modern and contemporary art institutions positioned themselves like no other place, and so the exhibition *Primitivism* has to be investigated in consideration of this framework. Especially the creation of an education department within a modern art museum, which was supposed to make the often intangible art understandable for everyone, was considered a great innovation and trend-setting. However, the MoMA itself has an often problematic position in this regard, which is built on unquestioned colonialist frameworks, as Griselda Pollock clearly states:

Yet this museum became the paradigm for most modern art museums, and its exhibitionary and discursive framing of modern art became the doctrinaire model for the teaching of the subject throughout most art history institutions. MoMA created the terms of intelligibility and dissemination of the new, while having to consolidate art as always already known within its fixing definitions, preferred narratives, and ultimately selective canon. The museum installed a racist, sexist, and Eurocentric conception of the modern against which we are now obliged to agitate from the disqualified margins of race, class, gender, and sexuality, i.e. what was placed categorically outside what the museum defines alone as art worthy of being part of the canon. (Pollock 2007, 10-11)

It is precisely these conceptions that are made evident in the exhibition *Primitivism*. Additionally, the exhibition *Primitivism* can be cited as an example of the already-mentioned misunderstanding of the Savage Sublime (Appadurai 2020, 46). What remains particularly interesting is the fact that this exhibition was situated by MoMA itself as within ‘informed art history’, while the criticism of it from outside triggered a change in art history and the way it is dealt with. This exhibition ultimately “[...] provoked what we would today call a postcolonial critique, as it reduced non-Western art to a primitive source for the metropolitan West's fashioning of the modern” (Mukherji 2014, 151).

Likewise, the 1989 exhibition *Magiciens de la Terre*, curated by Jean-Hubert Martin at the Centre Pompidou and the Grande Halle de La Villette in Paris, had far-reaching consequences for the Western conception of art, both from the outside and the inside. “To complicate the East-West binary, Jean-Hubert Martin's pathbreaking exhibition *Magiciens de la Terre* [...], counteracted the representation of the non-Western artist as a silent other. Considering that this exhibition drew a wide range of responses, from acute dismissal to ardent admiration for such an unprecedented move, it was apparent that the curator had touched the pulse of the art world“ (Mukherji 2014, 151).



Figure 2: Installation view of the exhibition *Magiciens de la Terre*, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris, May 18, 1989 - August 14, 1989.

The exhibition proclaimed itself as the “first worldwide exhibition of contemporary art” but while it tried to avoid the same mistakes that were so heavily criticized in *Primitivism*, it was set in an equivalent framework of western institutionalism while attempting to present Western and non-Western art on an alleged equal foundation (Lafuente 2013). The exhibition brought together 100 artists, half from the West and half from the non-West. All the participants of the exhibition were not described as artists but as magicians; moreover, all of the invited participants were still alive and (in most cases) asked to produce new work on site (Lafuente 2013). Unlike in *Primitivism*, the names of all artists, or rather 'magicians', were mentioned here, and thus the non-Western individual was also made visible. Nevertheless, the exhibition also entailed a number of inherent issues, the root of which was once again the unreflected translation of non-Western narratives into the Western understanding of modernity and humanism with its universal claims.

At the exhibition's base, there was a humanist, universalist conception of the act of artistic creation – one that attempted to relativise the centrality of the Western perspective by defending the equality of the practice of those included – and, by extension, the equality of artistic practice globally. But, perhaps in reaction to the polemics surrounding 'Primitivism' and in an attempt to address its hegemonic perspective, it abandoned from the start some key modernist tropes (for example, by substituting the term 'magicien' for the term 'artist') while embracing others (adopting a notion of the subject's creativity that translated in the exhibition to the presentation of artists as agents). This equality was denounced as fictitious, as oblivious to the socio-cultural

and historical context in which the different selected practices emerged, and therefore as exoticising, and 'Magiciens de la Terre' became, especially in the Anglo- Saxon context, the embodiment of a neocolonialist attitude that allowed the contemporary art system to colonise, commercially and intellectually, new areas that were previously out of bounds (Lafuente 2013).

The attempt to equate the works, even if it was based on good intentions, had negative consequences for the (future) consumption of art by non-Western artists, as Lafuente describes. A crucial point for that is the unspoken categorization of Western art as progressive and modern, while the art of 'the Other' is always allocated to the static and traditional by the West. The curator Jean-Hubert Martin's attempt to integrate 'the Other' into the Western art context of modernism clashes with the long-standing, unchanging problematic that Rashid Araeen summarizes in his in 1989 published Text "Our Bauhaus Other's Mudhouse" as such:

The central concern remains the same old-fashioned debate about the relationship between modernism and the traditions of others. It is not perhaps generally known that the 'other' has already entered into the citadel of modernism and has challenged it on its own ground. The question is no longer only what the 'other' is but also how the 'other' has subverted the very assumption on which 'otherness' is constructed by dominant culture. The lack of knowledge of, or a reluctance to recognize, what has actually occurred, historically and epistemologically, has led to the perpetuation of the very same assumptions that the exhibition claims to question (Araeen 2007 [1989], 150-151) .

Magiciens de la Terre was a grand exhibition, or rather a grand spectacle, with a lot of fascination for 'the Other' as the exotic, which is only constructed into the exotic in the first place through decontextualization and juxtaposition through comparison to the Western, ordinary, familiar (Araeen 2007 [1989], 152). The unspoken denial of the potential for modernity of 'the Other' is one of the most instrumental tools in this juxtaposition but also one of the most critiqued matters of both the exhibitions *Magiciens de la Terre* and *Primitivism*. The West not only refuses to accept 'the Other' into its modernity but also does not allow any claim of 'the Other' to its own form of modernity, as this has been connoted since the Enlightenment as a purely Western, and even more so European, phenomenon, in order to further distinguish the West from 'the Other' as the naturally superior (D'Aprile 2018, 347).

"In the beginning it was modernism, modernism for everybody all over the world irrespective of different cultures. When the others began to demand their share of the modern pie, modernism became postmodernism: now there is 'Western' culture and 'other,' cultures, located within the same contemporary' space. The continuing monopolization of modernism by Western culture (particularly in the visual arts) is to deny the global influences of modernism, and to mask its function as a dominant force of history to which peoples all over the world are increasingly subjected" (Araeen 2007 [1989], 153-154). The effects of modernity are felt everywhere and are also retroactively influenced from everywhere, but while the West sees itself as destined for constant further development, 'the Other' is accused of harming its

own traditional cultures with any progress. In this Western context, it seems that ‘the Other’ is not allowed to be influenced by the economic system and its global effects, especially in the production of contemporary art. However, according to Araeen, there is another trap: “[...] the concept of ‘others’ are mere victims of dominant culture will be to deny other cultures their ability to question their domination and to liberate themselves from it. Why is the aspiration of other cultures for secularism and materialism seen as antiethical to their own traditions?” (Araeen 2007 [1989], 153). The capability for a plurality of cultures that have the potential to partly practice a continuation of past traditions as well as produce objects of high cultures is denied to ‘the Other’ by modernism.

The exhibition *Magiciens de la Terre* has surfaced some of these issues, even if unintentionally (Araeen 2007 [1989], 154). Having visited the exhibition himself, Rashid Araeen notes that while the exhibition looked very attractive and beautiful works have been shown within it, his “[...] main criticism concerns the lack of any radical theoretical or conceptual framework that can justify the togetherness of works that represent different historical formations” (Araeen 2007 [1989], 155). The claim that all presented to the visitors ‘on equal terms’ is delusional and actually ignores the differences between European artists and artists outside the West, while also ignoring their different perceptions within a context like the Centre Pompidou and the Grande Halle de La Villette in Paris. While the Centre Pompidou followed a different institutional model than the MoMA with its white-cube model, it is still operating under western frameworks. Once again, a false neutrality of the exhibition sites is conveyed here through their positioning inside equality, which denies important differences through the power of visibility and thus displaces “[...] the question of the unequal power of different works from the domain of ideology to cultural aesthetics” (Araeen 2007 [1989], 155), while these cultural aesthetics are also a colonial construct. However, *Magiciens de la Terre* is a significant exhibition, as the West and the Eurocentric exhibitional canon did open themselves up towards the global scale. In retrospective, this exhibition showed like no other before that even the good intentions for inclusion of ‘the Other’ by organizers and curators do not bear fruit if the powerful framework conditions underlying the context are not addressed and can thus continue to exist in a coloniality of power. Lafuente highlights that bringing together artworks by Western artists and non-Western artists with equal visibility in a space does not mean that they will be seen in equal ways (the equality here is related to the recognition of their artistic value without denying the works their differentiated individuality). It can only mean that the space, with its implicit histories and narratives and its oblique modes of display, does not allow for equality.

The relationships of opposition are then not binary, in the form of an acting subject versus a passive subject or an absent subject, present through his or her ‘silent’ work. ‘Magiciens de la

Terre' is also an exhibition of makers that sets itself against both an exhibition of cultures and an exhibition of silent objects. This set of oppositions, if developed into a system of relations with two variables, results in a diagram with four nodes: exhibitions of contextualised objects; exhibitions of contextualised subjects; exhibitions of decontextualised subjects; and exhibitions of decontextualised objects. Such a diagram might allow us to move from an understanding of the history of inclusion of non-Western art as a negotiation of voices and identities to a consideration of how this history, through a study of modes of display, might actually expose the workings of the system of art (Lafuente 2013).

The museum, with its systems operating behind it, is therefore, as already mentioned, a place that not only creates meaning but also changes already existing meanings. As a result of the fact that in the art spaces of modernism, the space itself is increasingly withdrawn through new exhibition models, the selection and, above all, the presentation of the exhibited works simultaneously gain a more intensive expressiveness, which is not, however, made visible or spoken out loud, but which becomes established as the so-damaging performative neutrality. The Western visitor is brought into a space in which they themselves do not experience any resistance, but the same space conveys a resistance to the inclusion of 'the Other' in the artistic consciousness. The power of display and in which setting this display is positioned play a crucial role, as Pablo Lafuente elaborates:

But this history of representation only tells a fraction of the story. Partly due to political urgencies in the motivation for (at least a large percentage of) these exhibitions, and also as an effect of the discourse of identity politics that was constructed around them (both by those organising the exhibitions and by their critics), what was often forgotten was a consideration of what arguably constitutes the essential aspect of the medium of exhibitions: display. By this I refer not to the exercise of selection, nor to the matter of who made the decisions about that selection and authored the conceptual framework, but the actual articulation of a specific set of relations between objects, people, ideas and structures within the exhibition form. Display, and the principles that rule its articulation, proposes a discourse that is sometimes at odds with the discourse that surrounds the exhibition. Only by addressing the two together does a comprehensive picture of the actual position of the exhibition in relation to this history of identity struggle emerge. And not just this. By considering display rather than identity and representation, and the way in which display enacts this movement of inclusion and exclusion, we can attempt to look at this 'partial' history of identity struggle as more than that: as a means to understand something about the nature and the mechanisms of 'art' and 'exhibition' (Lafuente 2013).

Western museums and these mechanisms of display have not only contributed to and perpetuated the construction of the colonialist view of 'the Other', but also continue to hold the arrogant assumption that only the West, too, can liberate 'the Other' from what it sees as their 'misery'. Rashid Araeen poses a question that all institutions, and especially art museums, should ask themselves even today before they embark on a representation of diverse narratives and identities, especially within the prevailing coloniality of power: "If the relationship between the 'center' and the 'periphery' is of inequality, is it possible for an equal exchange to take place within a framework which does not challenge this relationship?" (Araeen 2007 [1989], 151). I would like to use this dissertation to argue that (art) museums should not only ask themselves

this question but ultimately answer it with a clear ‘no’. What could follow such a ‘no’ might be, at first, an active positioning against performed neutrality, which could also begin with an examination of the national identity and history of the country in which the respective museum is located. The extent to which a globally conceived context can clash with local structures is what I would like to discuss in the following, using the example of another major Western art institution: the Guggenheim, in particular the Guggenheim Bilbao.

3.2.3 The Global Museum entering Local Structures – Examining the ‘Guggenheim Franchise’

The reason why the growth of the ‘Guggenheim franchise’ seems so important is that several phenomena can be observed at once that have been significant for the development of the contemporary art museum and its consumption (Camara 2005, 201). The Guggenheim is an example like no other of the transformation of the art museum from an individual institution to the construction of a global industry, marking new paradigms of contemporary culture (Guasch and Zulaika 2005, 8). In the case of the Guggenheim, the contemporary art museum can be considered particularly from the aspect of the architectural challenges such a building poses for the public realm in connection to the ideas and concepts contained within it. In the introduction to their book titled *Learning from the Bilbao Guggenheim: The Museum as a Cultural Tool*, Anna Maria Guasch and Joseba Zulaika use the Guggenheim as an example for analyzing the following: “And although the museum is principally studied as regards its use, aesthetic demands, and urban design and function, it can also be analyzed as an example of the institutional system of art. From this perspective, one can speak both about the museum as a cultural instrument and about the ‘museification’ of culture itself, all this in a circular network where museums constantly reinvent their discursive strategies through their core functions: collection, conservation, exhibition, and education“ (Guasch and Zulaika 2005, 8). As described in the previous chapter, these core functions are rooted in colonialist thinking and practices. This, in conjunction with what Guasch and Zulaika describe here as the ‘museification’ of culture, is particularly interesting in terms of the global movement of the Guggenheim and the consequent intersection with local structures and needs. But before I delve deeper into these topics, a brief introduction to the Guggenheim-complex and its expansion. After actively collecting works of art for several years, Solomon R. Guggenheim founded a same-named foundation in 1937 through which he wanted to make this collection available for the public. Following a showing of his collection in a Museum in New York, Frank Lloyd Wright was approached to design its own museum for it. Due to a delay in construction caused

by the Second World War, the building was finally opened in 1959 on 5th Avenue in New York (Quinan 1993, 466). The post-war period saw a liberation of Western Museum buildings from their static and antiquated architectural structures to a freer form suited to the identity the institution conveyed (Guasch and Zulaika 2005, 11). The Guggenheim New York is one of the most prominent examples for such a novel and more organic architectural style.² While the museum faced an increasing financial crisis in the following years, Thomas Krens, appointed as the new director in 1988, brought a completely new vision to transform the museum into a brand (Guasch and Zulaika 2005, 16). Holding a master in business administration, he pursued a new strategy that, unlike the MoMA, which concentrated all its resources in one place, and unlike the Tate Gallery in London, which targeted several locations in the same city, Krens envisioned a radically new museum: the first global museum. His ambition was to create based on the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York a kind of “[...] international chain of satellite institutions operating in semiautonomous fashion, in what might be considered one of the boldest plans to reactivate the postmodern museum from the basis of a new economy emerging out of nascent globalization” (Guasch and Zulaika 2005, 16). What followed was the building of a brand identity through strategies that came from consumer product marketing. The first expansion of this brand was the Peggy Guggenheim Collection in Venice, followed by the German Guggenheim Berlin and the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao all of which were only possible through the leveraging of the name and art collections that are part of the Guggenheim Foundation, operating now under the umbrella of a global brand identity (Caldwell 2000, 28). In addition, the construction of another museum in Abu Dhabi was announced in 2006, which would even overshadow the imposing building in Bilbao, both of which are the designs of the architect Frank Gehry (Pes 2007, 39). The building in Abu Dhabi is still under construction, however, and has come under negative scrutiny in the meantime when the poor conditions of the workers on site became known, prompting a group of artists and activists to gather at the Guggenheim New York in May 2021 to protest these (Gashi 2021, 198). But what this further construction illustrates above all is the continuing drive towards the global establishment of the Guggenheim Model, following the necessary components for a great 21st century museum, which Thomas Krens summarized in a *New York Times* interview as such:

² The unique building introduces to a new era of mobility inside a museum and consequently also a new kind of consumption of art. “As Wright had imagined, the horizontally curved and vertically slanted walls would present paintings as if on an easel, a privileged perspective, illuminating the crafts skills, or genius, of each work and the individual talent of the artist” (Smith 2002, 88). However, the distinctive architectural features of the Guggenheim New York also brought with it certain limitations that were particularly noticeable in the exhibition of larger scale works of art, which, due to the round shape of the walls, revealed certain dysfunctions in this contemporary art center (Smith 2002, 88).

“A great location, with urban interaction. Great collection. Great architecture. A great special exhibition. A great second special exhibition. Two shopping opportunities. Two eating opportunities. A high-tech interface via the Internet. Economies of scale via a global network” (Dobrzynski 2000).



Figure 3: Frank Owen Gehry. *Guggenheim Museum Bilbao*. 1993-1997.

From this definition, Krens wanted to turn the simple visit to an art museum into an experience that operates within capitalist parameters. The first realization of this model may be found in Bilbao. This new museum certainly marks a shift towards what James Cuno calls an “exciting museum” (Cuno 2001, 45). “Frank Gehry’s Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, a museum that has become a ‘catalyst for new art, And while previously museums were identified by their collections, now this is by their architecture: In other words, the dominant image is the container rather than the content. In this sense, the Guggenheim Bilbao is a brilliant museum that demonstrates that now museums don’t vie with one another on the basis of their collections, but rather that they have come to represent their cities and indeed may form the basis of urban regeneration in these urban conurbations” (Guasch and Zulaika 2005, 16). What is most striking about the Guggenheim Bilbao at first sight is the building itself. This institution no longer functions merely as a museum but as an icon (Lippard 2005, 66). Erected in Bilbao’s industrial

port, it is impossible to miss Frank Gehry's gleaming construction with its titanium shell, which stands in great contrast to its surroundings and, as Keith Moxey describes, evokes a world of popular entertainment (Moxey 2005, 174). Moreover, "With the Bilbao Guggenheim, the 'white box' museum as a container came to an end, yet so, too, did the idea of museums linked to great centers of power or major art capitals: New York (MoMA), Paris (the Pompidou) and London (the Tate), all museums dominated by 'international' mainstream languages a highly hierarchical and elitist vision, and a monoculture centered around an ethnocentric Western axis" (Guasch 2005, 184-185). With the selection of Bilbao as a location, Krens showed that it does not take a large metropolis to attract visitors to a museum, but rather the right marketing. Within a very short time, the building has become the prime symbol of the region and has attracted more than a million annual visitors since its first year (MacCannel 2005, 24). In Bilbao, it is not the city that promotes the museum, but the museum that made the city more attractive for tourism, yet the effect caused by the confluence between the Guggenheim franchise presenting itself as global and the locality of Bilbao and the Basque Country is extremely complex (Guasch and Zulaika 2005, 17). The Guggenheim's expansion into Europe, and especially into the Basque Country, a region that has been partially neglected by Spain in terms of national politics, is, in a sense, the installation of US cultural production expanding beyond the own borders of the US (Guilbaut 2005, 142). The Guggenheim Bilbao is a tourist magnet, and while I immediately want to delve into the motivation for the construction of the museum on the part of the Guggenheim, there were also incentives on the part of the Basque Region to agree to the construction. This does not mean that the Basque region has not also benefited from the 'Guggenheim-Effect'. "Gehry's building, together with the museum idea dreamed up by Krens to make the Guggenheim an international corporation interested in questions of growth and expansion, as well as stimulating business in the visual arts, have, without doubt, put Bilbao on the map. Indeed, they have probably also contributed to improving the city and to its clear economic recovery" (Guasch and Zulaika 2005, 17). Above all, the hope of the regional and municipal governments for the revitalization of tourism and the associated fight against unemployment through newly created jobs in hotels, restaurants, and other service places was considered decisive for Bilbao (Moxey 2005, 172). Although Bilbao agreed to build the Guggenheim primarily for profit-oriented reasons, the Guggenheim itself was also impelled by capitalist motives. Keith Moxey describes the Guggenheim Museum in New York as the first institution of its kind "[...] to recognize the 'logic of capital' in all aspects of its operations" (Moxey 2005, 172). He goes on to say:

Discarding earlier models of the institution that revolved around ideas of preservation and education, this museum consciously modeled its policies on those of a corporation. At various

times the Guggenheim has been prepared to deaccession some of its most highly valued works of art to raise funds, organize exhibitions dealing with design and fashion that are not generally associated with the commitment to 'art' with which museums of its kind are usually associated in order to attract a larger 'box office,' and finally to open franchised branches in the United States and abroad in the hope of merchandizing its identity (Moxey 2005, 172-173).

In this context, Moxey describes the Guggenheim Bilbao as "the first fully 'capitalized' museum" (Moxey. 2005, 172). One of the main controversies around the Gehry building and the Guggenheim collections on display in Bilbao revolves around the question of whether the local authorities have been successful in using capitalism for the good of the city or whether the capitalized museum has outplayed them by using the city and its government for its own larger profit (Moxey 2005, 173). Going beyond the financial aspects, it was above all the Guggenheim franchise itself, and thus the US-American cultural identity underpinning it, that emerged as the (monetary and discursive) victor from this alliance, even over other institutions of similar standing, as Serge Guilbaut elaborates:

The Guggenheim Museum, despite outcries, has succeeded in making its passage into the twenty-first century with a clearer understanding of the logic of hypercapitalism in a world where the United States, despite its many weaknesses, has become the unopposed world power. In this context, the Guggenheim has understood something that MoMA has not been able to grasp: Today, brashness is not only acceptable, it is actually demanded. It is understood that it pays auratic dividends to build a franchise in other lands, to show not only that your own culture is universal and hegemonic, but also that your foreign implantation helps the economy of other, weaker countries through cultural tourism: a kind of new royal and international charity, to give 'culture' on a titanium platter, [...]. To expand abroad, in a kind of ironic outsourcing (presenting the Guggenheim's American art collections) is the contemporary way of using culture as a complement of international policy (Guilbaut 2005, 140).

In this regard the Basque scholar Joseba Zulaika sees this novel and very capitalist approach of the Guggenheim, as a decline of the museum as we know it and an example of a contemporary form of cultural imperialism, and in the case of Bilbao, with devastating consequences for local structures and traditions as well as the (cultural) autonomy of the Basque people as a result of favoring globalization and universal dependence (Zulaika 2005, 161). The proliferation of (Western) hegemonic thinking claimed to be universal and, moreover, often sold as 'neutral', can also be observed here between two Western nations. Power imbalances are complex as the example of the Guggenheim Bilbao shows, while it is important to note that these meta structures³ influence everything and everyone represented by and through this museum. Therefore, there are many questions that need to be addressed through this global spread of one (national) culture into another regional (and national) culture, as Anna Maria Guasch and Joseba Zulaika verbalize them: "Is cultural colonialism less disagreeable than its economic or political

³ I use the term meta-structures here to refer to the mostly invisible yet powerful forces of those social-historical structures that have been constituted by educational systems, knowledge systems, and value systems, and through which Western society categorizes, divides, and makes sense of the world.

equivalent? Is it legitimate to promote a museum model that encourages universal cloning, as opposed to supporting more potentially distinctive dimensions? Or how does a branch museum interact with its local artistic community? Does such a museum's general program support artistic activity in its local community, that is, in Bilbao and, by extension, the Basque Country?" (Guasch and Zulaika 2005, 17). All these questions can be considered especially with regard to the coincidence of different positionality. These positionalities each hold their own individual narratives and also their own interpretations and points of view on the narratives of 'the Other'. Taking the Guggenheim Bilbao as an example, I would like to examine the effects of the encounter of a (more or less) global system with local structures, and subsequently the question of how museums connect their own identity and history with the identity and history of the nation/locality in which they are located, while representing individual artists and their identities and mediating them to an international and yet individual audience.

3.2.3.1 The Guggenheim Bilbao: the Local vs. the Global

The question of how a museum relates to its specific locality is generally interesting, as a positioning about the history of the nation and regarding the local (artistic) communities in which the museum is situated could be a first step towards deconstructing the often prevailing performed and harming neutrality. In the case of the Guggenheim Bilbao, this issue is even more complex, as it is a global branch museum built and run from the *outside*. The question of how this institution can relate to the local (artistic) landscape with its qualities is also especially relevant here, since within the fundamental dimensions encompassing the museum, its content (artists) and its visitors, a special focus is placed on achieving the highest possible monetary profit and thus attempting to transform the visitor into a *mass-visitor*. In terms of temporal circumstances, the Guggenheim-model, advanced by Thomas Krens, with all its extensions, has triggered a general shift in museum culture departing from the white-cube model, which the Spanish scholar Anna Maria Guasch describes as a transformation from the museum of modernity to the non-museum of postmodernity driven by the emergence of an (allegedly) depoliticized global market (Guasch 2005, 185-186).

Everyone was confronted with the necessity of recoding the concept of internationalism, although not only as a mere change of codes or with the addition of the prefix 'new,' but by transforming the object itself, beyond what would be merely a new façade or outer wall, as was the case with postmodernity understood as semblance or spectacle. [...]. In a situation where, at least theoretically, there were no fixed frontiers, limits, or boundaries in a new 'nonplace' cartography, Thomas Krens's idea of 'theoretically' creating a museum model as a 'lingua franca' was very clear. At the same time that the 'geopolitical' regime might now replace the terms 'geography' and 'identity' with 'style,' the 'local' might now live equally together with the 'international.' This was a museum in the form of an 'empty setting,' an ensemble of abstract and atemporal forms that would be put into practice by narratives (roots) of place, by its

particular metaphors and symbolisms. Finally, nothing would be surrendered to: The local would live on an equal footing with the international or global (Guasch 2005, 186).

According to Guasch, this attempt of Krens to turn the Guggenheim Bilbao into a ‘nonplace’⁴ through the use of highly stylized means of dazzle, so symbolic in itself that it rises above the boundaries of its territorial existence and can thus connect the immediate surroundings with the rest of the world as a kind of neutral vessel, has failed. Guasch identifies Kren's ignorance of the recognition of Bilbao as a place with its own discursive nature as one of the main reasons for such a failure. Citing Lucy Lippard and her publication *The Lure of the Local: Sense of Place in a Multicentered Society* (Lippard 1997), Guasch clarifies, “Bilbao was neither a neutral container nor an emptiness at the margins of social interaction, but rather, as Lippard points out, a ‘geographical component of the psychological need to belong somewhere, one antidote to a prevailing alienation.’ Bilbao and the Basque Country were and are, have been and will be, idiosyncratic and vernacular city, community and society” (Guasch 2005, 187). This implies that the museum, existing in this context, can never be a neutral space. Moreover, no museum site is a neutral location, so the discussed alternatives of Bilbao, such as Venice or Salzburg, would have been cities with their own specific characteristics and narratives, influencing this new exhibition space (Guasch 2005, 187). In addition to the unincorporated identity of Bilbao as a location, the institution of the Guggenheim itself possessed a pre-existing and specific identity that was imported from the US to Bilbao. Same applies to the nature of the collection, which did not have to be newly formed for the Bilbao site but could draw on the collection of the entire Guggenheim complex. But as Joseba Zulaika argues in the text “Desiring Bilbao: The Krensification of the Museum and Its Discontents”, the director Thomas Krens wanted to achieve one thing above all: a high number of visitors and thus a high revenue generated through so-called *blockbuster* exhibitions, meaning that any temporary exhibition attracting less than half a million visitors is to be considered a flop. In order to achieve such visitor successes, the simple exhibition of the permanent collections was no longer sufficient, but a new approach that resisted any stagnation by always adapting to contemporary trends while presenting itself attractively was indispensable.

With Krens, these collections are still part of the museum, but no longer the real thing. Let the New York critics sound the alarm at the prospect of their beloved art collections globetrotting amid the museum galaxy’s many franchise venues. For Krens, they became essentially a backup for what is truly ‘sexy’: the blockbuster exhibit. Krens in no way wanted his art’s aura of timeless universal work to evaporate, for how else could he make his case in Sotheby’s or in Bilbao, but his museum would certainly not handle it with kid gloves as untouchable sacred

4 A ‘nonplace,’ according to Marc Augé, is a concept associated with supermodernity, describing spaces like airport terminals, service stations, supermarkets, malls, and hotel chains where individuals often experience anonymity and a lack of historical significance or events. Nonplaces contrast with traditional notions of constructed spaces and places that emphasize identity, relationships, and history (Bosteels 2003, 119; [Augé 1992]).

merchandise. He needed the collections as his company's stock so that he could put a monetary number on their value and make things happen. The permanent collections were on the back burner, providing a brand name and a complimentary asset to what was truly important: spectacular architecture, the blockbuster exhibit, and flashy media reportage. Fixed values and permanent collections were somehow the antithesis of a truly postmodern, globalized, Krensified museum (Zulaika 2005, 156-157).

This urge for commercialization and attention seemingly exceeds the possibilities of art, and so the Guggenheim also brought other exhibitions into its halls, such as a motorbike exhibition sponsored by BMW (*The Art of Motorcycle*, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum New York, 1998), or a retrospective of the designer Giorgio Armani (Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum New York, 2000), which are among the major public successes of the Guggenheim as a business. The Guggenheim Bilbao therefore had to keep up with this spectacularism, a task for which Gehry's imposing architecture was to serve above all. The building alone imitates the global flow that transcends borders: the visitor enters the global space, not the local.

In this seemingly boundless constructed place that no longer *reduces* itself as a space like the white cube but situates itself in the global limelight as a symbol, the exhibited contents must not disappoint. But what art and what artist can compete with such charisma? Apparently not the local artist (Zulaika 2005, 157). While the 'Guggenheim-Effect' has had positive merits for Bilbao, the implantation of this global museum machinery has also had negative ramifications, particularly for local artists' discursive self-determination and (inter-)national reception. The internationally renowned Basque artist and sculptor Jorge Oteiza was considered one of the key figures in the 'anti-Guggenheim discourse', criticizing the institution above all for its urge to construct the spectacle and the consequent sell-out of art as a profitable commodity (Eser 2013, 411). Using the relationship between the Guggenheim Bilbao and the local artist Jorge Oteiza, whose artistic work drew heavily on the soul and essence of the Basque, Joseba Zulaika formulated what he called the "Oteiza paradox" (Zulaika 2005, 158). With the 'Oteiza paradox' Zulaika discusses the problematic contextualization and, to a certain extent, the degradation of the position of a local artist through the museum's formative power, which concerns the validity and invalidity of the internationally recognized art canon of contemporary art. "Oteiza's paradox consists in that while New York's world-class artists will consider him as their equal (Serra conceded to a reporter that he thought Oteiza was the greatest living sculptor, and Gehry called him one of the three or four fundamental artists of the century), the Krensified franchise museum will reduce him to a local artist whose value is seen as quite negligible" (Zulaika 2005, 158). Serra refers to Richard Serra, one of the most celebrated sculptors and artists in the US, whose sculpture *Snake* is one of the prominent works that is displayed permanently in the Guggenheim Bilbao and belongs to its collection (Welchman 2005, 252). So while Jorge Oteiza

was well known and enjoyed great recognition far beyond Basque borders and was highly appreciated by those ‘big players’ Gehry and Serra that were so deeply valued by the Guggenheim Bilbao and therefore by Thomas Krens, the cultural imperialism exercised by him thus reduced him from the outside, within the internal context of his own native country, to *just* a local artist whose appeal was not strong enough for the attraction of a global mass audience. A similar act was committed against the artist Eduardo Chillida, who is another internationally renowned artist from the Basque country. His art was even exhibited at the Solomon R. Guggenheim in New York in 1981 and subsequently bought by it for its collection, but when the Guggenheim opened its doors in the artist's home country, Krens wanted to devote one gallery to his works but refused to buy them. For Zulaika, this meant that Thomas Krens decided Chillida’s art was suddenly unworthy of being collected in the context of the Guggenheim Bilbao.

But the key lesson for local artists to be learned from Chillida’s case is something else. It has something to do with the repositioning of the artist as deserving a global or local audience. [...] The plight of local artists is therefore one more crucial aspect we learn from the Bilbao Guggenheim. What essentially happens in a Krensified museum is that local representatives lose the intellectual control to decide what is valuable art, the financial control of their own resources, and the institutional control to promote a given art by purchasing or exhibiting it. Local artists become far removed from the centers that directly decide on the fate of their careers (Zulaika 2005, 159).

What Zulaika describes so vividly here in the case of the Guggenheim Bilbao’s treatment of the artists Eduardo Chillida and Jorge Orteiza is the power of the (art) museum, through its constructed authority exerted on society and the effects of the power of visibility, to position artists within the art historical canon and thereby attribute value to them or deprive them of value by not doing so. The consequence is that artists depend on museums (or also on smaller exhibitory spaces) and their representation, as it is these institutions that ultimately mediate art – moreover, make it accessible to the public, and simultaneously, these institutions are granted such representational sovereignty that the mere appearance of an artist in these ‘sacred halls’ confirms their talents and abilities and makes them a ‘great’ artist. The general public and the visitor blindly trust the museum to display only the greatest and most important works of art. What this case illustrates even more, however, is that this blind trust of visitors is grounded on individual decisions taken by people in positions of power that have not been made transparent. Like all human actions, these decisions are not neutral but rather taken in pursuit of certain agendas, and these agendas in turn stem from the particular positions in which the person making the decision is situated. In the case of Thomas Krens, this was a Western position taken out of a motivation to make the Guggenheim complex a global force of constant growth and as much of a visitor magnet as possible, as he points out in the aforementioned *New York Times*

interview when asked about the benefits of a global museum: “It's access to audience. In New York we have about a million visitors a year. In Bilbao there are now about 1.3 to 1.4 million. In Venice, it's about 300,000. And then in Berlin, our limit's a little less than 200,000. So you have almost 3 million visitors, which makes it a fairly substantial cultural force. And it's still a fairly small space. Now, you can argue that maybe we shouldn't be programming as aggressively as we are, but the growth of the collection is related to programming. Donors are drawn to more challenging institutions” (Dobrzynski 2000). This desire for global growth is driven, in the case of Bilbao, at the expense of the local artistic community and the representation of Basque narratives. All the decisions and mechanisms that led to the installation of the Guggenheim franchise in Bilbao and ultimately to the local-global dilemma are shaped above all by two interrelated factors: money and the resulting control of power/power of control.

3.2.3.2 The Money behind dictating local artistic Narratives

The criticism of the project of the Guggenheim in Bilbao was not only voiced by these two artists but by a much larger local (artistic) community. In the run-up to the construction, a local forum was founded that articulated the critical perspective of the Basque cultural community towards this project, rebelling above all against the spending of Basque tax money on the Guggenheim project. About 80% of the funds available for art promotion were intended to support the Guggenheim. The rebellion was exacerbated by the fact that a few months before the Guggenheim project was announced, the Basque regional government had refused to fund a major Basque cultural center and had furthermore cut the funds available to support regional artists. For the local cultural community, this was a clear sign to abandon the promotion of regional art productions in favor of sponsoring prestigious projects imported from the US (Eser 2013, 411). By providing monetary support for this external project, the local government thus gave the potential for cultural (self-)determination out of its own hands. Moreover, Bilbao was not Kren's first choice, meaning that Bilbao had to (financially) compete to a certain extent for Kren's patronage, further complicating the relationship of dependency.

‘Bilbao? Are you crazy?’ This was Krens’s reply when he was first told about the city’s interest in a Guggenheim. He was at the time looking for a European capital for his museum’s modernist collections. After several failed attempts in Europe and later in Spain, Krens was told of Bilbao as a possibility. He laid down a precondition that took by surprise his own advisors: There should be \$20 million on the table as a prepayment before he considered Bilbao. The initial fee was a minor part in the overall scheme, but one whose symbolism nobody could miss. It was the franchise fee. It was a first in museum history. Krens himself had not brought up such a demand in previous negotiations with other European cities. The franchise fee signaled the complete programmatic and conceptual dependence of Bilbao on New York. The very name of the new museum, ‘Guggenheim Bilbao,’ was a recognition of the artistic identity and the location of the new transnational hybrid (Zulaika 2005, 147 – 148).

The use of the name, and ultimately the brand, cost Bilbao. However, the fact that Krens did not demand this ‘franchise fee’ from other, more popular European tourist cities illustrates the existing unequal power dynamics. It seems that from his point of view, Thomas Krens ‘took mercy’ on the city of Bilbao, creating an unequal relationship of dependency that shifted discursive power to New York rather than Bilbao. Critically, one could therefore say that this ‘transnational hybrid’ embodied by the Guggenheim Bilbao is not a symbiotic cultural ecosystem but a parasite.

Thus, at the outset, the most salient feature of Krens's Bilbao model was the systematic way in which he exercised strategic and intellectual control of the entire operation. The premise that the host city pays all the bills while the Guggenheim runs the show is but one aspect of the asymmetrical relationship. One only has to read the secret ‘Constitution’ to get a sense of the agreed-upon imbalance: Bilbao’s obligations include the reimbursement to the New York Guggenheim ‘for all internal and external costs and expenses incurred by SRGF [Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation] in connection with the preparation of this Agreement and the performance of its obligations hereunder.’ Regarding the Guggenheim, it states: ‘As operator of the Museum, SRGF shall have the exclusive right to determine the planning, development and operating policy, standards of operation, content and art programming and all other matters affecting the management and operation of the Museum.’ It is simply the ‘one hand up and the other hand down’ logic of Krensification described by de Michelis. ‘The Basques are coming to eat from my hand. I can’t believe it!’ Krens bragged to his staff. It summed up his total control of the situation. Welcome to the global politics of culture (Zulaika 2005, 149).

This kind of speech shows the unequal power dynamics between cultural authority and the museum's modes of operation, which director Thomas Krens seems not only to be conscious of but also to celebrate. Since Bilbao was not Kren's first choice as a location, nor did he pay special attention to the (traditional) particularities and cultural requirements inherent in the region for the benefit of a global structure, he established the most profitable possible innovations according to the following principle: “taking high culture down-market by making art accessible to the masses” (Friedman 2002, 52). Krens seemed to incorporate the potential of Bilbao and the Basque region mostly in terms of global marketability, placing the Guggenheim brand in the spotlight. “By expanding the curatorial style outside the museum walls, he realized that the scenography of broken cities could be the art and stage sets for disseminating the thrill of gentrification to the masses. You could stretch the museum’s current collection to keep the branches filled, make up the difference with high-concept traveling displays of borrowed art and consumer gadgets, keep operating costs low by running the show from New York, and win cover charges from tourists on the global circuit two, three, and four times” (Friedman 2002, 53). Although included in the name, the Guggenheim Bilbao was about the *Guggenheim* as a global institution and, more so, a global brand taking advantage of this new European location. The Basques were promised the shimmering glamour of the New York art world and the profitable consequences assured through visitors and tourists. In return, however, they were

denied a programmatic say, a condition Krens set from the very beginning, resulting in secretiveness towards the Basque public throughout the course of the negotiations.

But absolute secrecy was the one condition imposed by the Guggenheim in that first meeting. The Basque public was there to pay the bill. But nothing more. They were not to be informed about the project, let alone consulted. They might not understand. One shouldn't forget that this entire operation was ostensibly aimed at 'opening up' the Basques to the universality of art. The Basque world tends to be small, provincial, parochial; in a word, 'closed.' Art purports to be something 'universal.' Such historic opening of the Basques to the world was well worth a short period of informative control. Besides, this was all 'democratic' (Zulaika 2001 108).

All of this led to the aforementioned revival of neo-imperialism, exercised through cultural sites, that placed the USA above Spain, New York above Bilbao, and Krens above the local artistic community. These practices show arrogance on the part of the Guggenheim, which presumes to bring art and culture to the Basque region, which can only make its way into the global art world with the help of this US institution. Moreover, Krens would probably not have proceeded in this way in a city that had, so to speak, a higher discursive and already established self-presentation to the external global public. It is hard to imagine that this kind of cultural overwriting would have been possible in one of the cultural metropolises of Europe envisaged by Krens. It could be argued that due to the financially vulnerable situation Bilbao was in at the time of the project's development, as well as its rather inconspicuous cultural presence within Europe, it was easy for Krens to retain agency over the program and direction of the institution and not share it with local decision-makers.

However, Basque art and culture have certainly been included in the Guggenheim, but the local has never really been a permanent focus but rather a marginal one, which has not made the Guggenheim Basque, nor has Basque culture had any influence on the international Guggenheim program (Guasch 2005, 191). The Guggenheim Bilbao raises the question of how far a global museum is desirable or can function at all, or rather, for whom it functions. Still, the Guggenheim Bilbao is considered a (financial) success, both for the Guggenheim franchise and for the city of Bilbao, as it has been one of the reasons for the economic upswing of the region.

The Bilbao Guggenheim is the first potlatch-cum-museum, a museum that functions like a momentous gift, but a gift so huge that it can never be repaid in similar terms. The gift here functions as a paternalistic universalism that becomes, for this simple reason, an important factor in the subjugation of local cultures and their 'processing'—in the sense of processed cheese—into a bland global cultural production. The payback comes, of course, not only in cash, but also through admiration of the donor's way of life and its capacity to gather such a large amount of symbolic power. To be on the tourist map is now enough to bring smiles to the faces of city administrators with short memories (Guilbaut 2005, 141).

However, this success has also had a cost, especially for the local artistic identity and discursive self-determination of the region in terms of its cultural image. A universal, external template has been placed above the local and individual. Nonetheless, it was not only the validation of

the needs of local artists that was put on the back burner, but also those of local visitors. Thus, the percentage of international visitors rose steadily, while the percentage of Spanish and, more specifically, Basque visitors continued to decline (Guasch 2005, 191).

We have seen that in the case of Bilbao, globalization breaks down in the face of the density of the local Bilbao. Here, paradoxically, the opposite has occurred: the global has not tolerated, but rather has suffocated the local (which is also international). As the Swiss architect Jacques Herzog argues, the Guggenheim in Bilbao is a cynical example of a global company's global behavior. And although it may be one of the best, or indeed the best, examples of Gehry's work, as a museum, it demonstrates a basic lack of interest, principally in the way that the work is displayed in those vast, empty spaces, without any kind of regard to the city or its people (Guasch 2005, 192).

Without a doubt, the Guggenheim Bilbao has brought (cultural) attention to the city. But for whom was this museum actually built? Although it has undeniably provided an economic and financial boost to the region, especially through the increasing influx of tourists, this development, which has had a very positive impact on the region's residents, is, from the Guggenheim's point of view, more of an incidental effect, but certainly not the actual focus. Thomas Krens did not choose Bilbao as a location out of care for the region but out of an intrinsic motivation of discursive impartiality based on an attitude of superiority and cultural authority (Guasch 2005, 192; Guilbault 2005, 141; Zulaika 2001, 107-108). So the Guggenheim Bilbao was certainly not built for the Basque public or for Basque artists – it was built for the global, not the local.

3.2.3.3 Learning from the Guggenheim Bilbao: Determining the Location of Culture through cultural Differentiation and Positionality

The Guggenheim has thus stationed itself spatially in Bilbao, but with a US and global positionality. The positionality of the Basque region and the discursive needs and narratives that come with it were either disregarded or told from the position and perspective of the Guggenheim as a global brand. If we go back to the already quoted work *The Location of Culture* by Homi Bhabha (1994), the authoritarian power of the Guggenheim is greater than that of Bilbao, so that the localization of culture takes place in the Guggenheim as an institution, and Bilbao, the actual locality, is pushed to the limits of this localization. Bhabha writes in his text: “Each objective is constructed on the trace of that perspective that it puts under erasure; each political object is determined in relation to the other, and displaced in that critical act” (Bhabha 1994, 26). This is where the misunderstanding arises: the Guggenheim Bilbao is a cultural and political object, which, as the name itself indicates, can only be understood in relation to Bilbao. However, the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao understands itself in a global context rather than a local one, and thus, to a certain extent, erases the Basque traces. We return

here to the point of translation operating as erasure or, even more, as suppression, as it takes place in unequal power relations. The Guggenheim Bilbao must be seen in terms of a cultural difference between Spain, more specifically the Basque Country, and the USA, specifically New York, and not in terms of cultural diversity. According to Bhabha, cultural diversity makes culture the object of empirical knowledge, while cultural difference can contribute to the construction of authoritarian power relations that are used in a system of cultural identification processes.

The concept of cultural difference focuses on the problem of the ambivalence of cultural authority: the attempt to dominate in the name of a cultural supremacy which is itself produced only in the moment of differentiation. And it is the very authority of culture as knowledge of referential truth which is at issue in the concept and moment of enunciation. The enunciative process introduces a split in the performative present of cultural identification; a split between the traditional culturalist demand for a model, a tradition, a community, a stable system of reference, and the necessary negation of the certitude in the articulation of new cultural demands, meanings, strategies in the political present, as a practice of domination, or resistance (Bhabha 1994, 34-35).

The division explained by Bhabha through the proclamation of cultural difference only becomes comprehensible at the moment of cultural exaltation. The institution of the Guggenheim in its entirety and Bilbao as a location are culturally different from the outset. But only the authoritarian proclamation of the Guggenheim with its new strategies, demands and policies regarding the global cultural space leads to a splitting off of the cultural possibility of identification with this space on the part of Basque identity. Entering the space of eventualities opened up by the phrase 'What if...', one can wonder what if the Guggenheim had not entered Bilbao from a position of the superior and the enunciative, but in a position of mutual caring and listening. The case of the Guggenheim Bilbao shows how complex the discussion of cultural institutions and art museums can be in relation to their locality. Even if each case and each locality and each institution brings its own peculiarities, it can be summarized that on the narrative and discursive level, a confluence of cultural differences through the art museum and its setting can be destructive of the museum if local nuances and voices are not taken into the equation. Even when, unlike in the case of Bilbao's Guggenheim, the institution is not externally governed, a lack of interest in and ignorance of the local often leads to damaging misrepresentations of local artists, identities and histories. An honest and continuous involvement of the local structures, and even more so of the local communities, can, on the other hand, lead to an enormous enrichment for all positions involved and does not have to take place at the expense of a global compartmentalization, as can be grasped by the example of the praxis of the Tensta Konsthall in Sweden. Founded in 1988 as a private foundation by a local artist and social worker, the institution now receives public financial support from the municipality, the National Arts Council and the region, and operates in a way that relates

contemporary international art in a continuous response and interaction with the public, local life of the suburb Tensta (Voorhies 2019; Lind 2021). In the interaction with the locals of Tensta, where 90 percent of them have a translocal background and the average income is quite below the national one, Tensta Konsthall positions itself not as an authoritarian locality of culture, but as a generous contact zone with art at its core (Lind 2021). However, this contact zone is ready to constantly adapt to the needs of local residents, since the organization of the facility involves their participation and active implementation in the long term. Two examples of this are the Women's Café⁵ and the Language Café⁶, the latter run by Fahyma Alnablsi, who is originally from Damascus and has been living in Tensta for over 25 years. Alnablsi has been working with the local community as a teacher of Swedish, among other activities, since before she was employed at Tensta Konsthall, and since 2012 continues her work as an educator and moreover works as a kind of ambassador at the institution, acting as a vanguard to unite the interstices between the institution, the exhibited art and the people living in Tensta and their lived realities (Voorhies 2019). Due to such practices Tensta Konsthall is a place of togetherness and plurality that does not rise singularly above its locality but feeds on it in a careful reciprocity and without presuppositions of how people have to understand contemporary art and thus becomes a place where art, life, belonging, diversity and so much more can be experienced without excluding the local from the global and vice versa (Voorhies 2019, Lind 2021). Comparing the example of the Guggenheim Bilbao with the Tensta Konsthall, it is evident that the art institution cannot and should not be neutral towards its location, as such neutrality does not truly exist. Especially on the backdrop of the context of colonialism, which has not been the focus in terms of this discussion on the Guggenheim Bilbao as both sides are holding a Western position, the potential of an honest positioning towards the history and identity of the site may be more troublesome at first glance, but it could lead to a major shift towards decoloniality within (art) museums. The study of the Guggenheim Bilbao, specifically its approaches in the early days of the institution, shows that the representation of narratives through the power of meaning-making in the hands of museums, even outside of the purely

5 The Women's Café serves as a safe space for women to engage in textile handicrafts and discussions about adapting to life in a foreign country (Voorhies 2019).

6 The Language Café at Tensta Konsthall is an initiative that builds upon Alnablsi's previous work teaching Swedish. Her weekly classes at the Konsthall are now integrated into *The Silent University*, an ongoing project led by artist Ahmet Ögüt. The Silent University serves as an educational platform that connects a network of teachers, researchers, and fellows who are involved in educational models supporting refugees. Originally established in collaboration with Delfina, The Showroom, and the Tate Modern in 2012, *The Silent University* took the form of a language café at Tensta Konsthall in 2013. Here, individuals without legal documentation could practice their language skills. This initiative aims to activate the 'silenced knowledge' of migrant populations, many of whom possess significant education and expertise from their home countries but have limited academic opportunities in their new homeland (Voorhies 2019; Lind 2021).

colonialist position, is not a neutral endeavor and therefore should not be presented to the visitor as such. Especially not when the institution postulates itself as subject, as the knowing self, and understands its environment as object and passive other as was the case with the Guggenheim and Bilbao.

4 The Contemporary Art Museum of the recent Years and in which Contexts it exists

But what about the art museums of the present day? Much has shifted in recent years, with discussions around decolonization reaching into decoloniality, the restitution of objects, and the responsibility of museums in this context gaining momentum, particularly through the Sarr and Savoy Report 2018. This French Restitution report not only highlighted the extent of the situation for Western, and especially European, cultural practitioners but also demonstrated the ongoing after-effects of colonialism on wider society (Oswald 2020, 108). In addition, activist movements such as Black Lives Matter, which received an enormous outpouring of support in the wake of George Floyd's death in 2020, and organizations from gender- or race-marginalized communities have advocated for a norm-critical, anti-racist, and anti-discriminatory transformation within institutional forms of action (Ndikung 2023). Coupled with other intersectional acting social movements such as the #metoo but also the moment of the COVID-19 pandemic, which hit the world in a global sameness and thereby made visible the enormous social inequalities in a world of capitalist flow, existing hierarchies are further questioned both locally and globally. Especially in view of the environmental crisis that is becoming tangible even for Western affluent society, the demand for systemic, structural change is growing louder (Bringle and Pleyers 2022, 2).

In this context, it is helpful to recall the differentiated concepts of decolonization and decoloniality, as they operate at different spheres. Decoloniality, distinct from decolonization, encompasses more than political change. It addresses the enduring race/gender classification system beyond colonialism's legal aspects. While colonialism is often seen as a past reality, coloniality persists in the present through racial, gender, and class dynamics. Decoloniality aims to transform this present, challenging perceptions, sensibilities, and desires. It recognizes not all colonized individuals share the same hierarchy. It demands a deep attitudinal shift and restoration of humanity at all levels. Unlike decolonization, which may rely on inclusion, decoloniality questions structures that might perpetuate dehumanization. In essence, decoloniality surpasses decolonization, seeking a comprehensive transformation – especially regarding wester-centric knowledge systems and paradigms and their enactment within and through institutions (Mignolo 2011b, 183; Zambrana 2021, 146). But how exactly have art museums and other art institutions not only accepted this intensifying criticism but also implemented it in practice transforming from decolonization into decoloniality? How have they responded to advancing internationalism in terms of their own (national) identity and past? How do museums cooperate with this a kind of globalized 'cosmopolitanism', especially in light of

the decolonial turn that has spread throughout the art world (Allain Bonilla 2019, 59)? The example of the Guggenheim Bilbao shows that it is not exactly desirable or even possible to create a global museum. Through colonialism, western museums have to deal with their own (national) position, especially in relation to the position of the objects they own and the (identity) positions of the artists they represent. The global museum seems to miss the mark, as there is neither global art nor global artists, and as a producer of meaning, institutions need to engage much more with the specificities of singular locality rather than universal globalism. But how has museum practice and curatorial approach changed, if it has at all? How are museums, and art museums in particular, currently dealing with the exposure of these ongoing structures of coloniality of power also within their own halls? How have they conducted themselves vis-à-vis their own responsibility towards the condition of the ‘museum as colonial fact’? Or have contemporary European art museums in the 21st century really fallen into a crisis as so many claim (Snoep 2020, 329). In this chapter, I would like to examine the present-day state of Western and specifically European art museums to see what position they are currently situated in or rather in which position they have situated themselves. In the following part, I will therefore refer to references and sources that are as up-to-date as possible in order to form a contemporary inventory. Furthermore, it is important to understand the global and local political situation in which we find ourselves if we want to use the present as a starting point for change.⁷ Only after the contemporary presence has been explored can future transformations be envisaged.

4.1 Decolonial Efforts in Western Contemporary Art Museums: An Examination of Diversification and its Pitfalls

While the majority of Western art museums began to deal more and more with colonialism and its impact within art history, more so in the last decade, the criticism of these practices by voices from the global South and formerly colonized people is often great. Most of the interventions that take place in the context of exhibitions within Western institutions are just that: short and temporarily limited interventions that are meant to diversify, but mostly only objectively thematized colonialism instead of actively and sustainably counteracting it, not least by acknowledging the museums' own responsibility towards their inherent colonialist structures.

More than two decades ago, EuroAmerican museums began to adjust to the critique of museums as Eurocentric by adopting a Janusface approach, by leaving their permanent exhibits more or

⁷ Of course, the examples given in the following provide only a minimal and selected extract of the current political context in which Western contemporary art institutions operate.

less intact, but holding a number of new exhibitions. The new displays responded to demands from those that had been historically silenced, not seen or heard and least of all consulted by the dominant rulers, insisting that their historic multicultural origins, sensitivities and polycentric views, with responses to colonialism ranging from mimesis to alterity, be reflected. Yet the effect was to retain the dominant view and privilege in the permanent exhibition of the museum, while the people without history are relegated to temporary displays. Museums, whatever their origins and multiple diversely applied purposes, are deeply entangled with colonialism (Vawda 2019, 75).

Criticism of these ‘Janusface’ quasi-two-faced processes, as Shahid Vawda calls them, has been loud. They could be compared to the prevalent tactic of ‘greenwashing’ in the fashion industry, where large fashion labels launch small and temporary environmentally conscious collections and advertise them excessively in order to convey a climate conscience on the part of the company to the consumer, while the overwhelming majority of the clothing is neither produced in a fair nor climate-conscious way. The image on the outside is whitewashed, while the practices at the core remain untouched and harmful (Markham, Khare, and Beckman 2014, 2). In the case of contemporary art museums, they advertise the temporary inclusion of marginalized artists and cultural workers, while the permanent practices still follow a Eurocentric system of epistemological hegemony and the matrix of coloniality of power. “Institutions tend to respond by claiming to value diversity; however, they proceed to superficially engage with sociopolitical issues via shallow, ostensible methods of virtue signaling and co-option. Projecting an image of cultural diversity, the institution attempts to sustain the façade that the space is sanitised and free of wrongdoing. In doing so, they effectively flatten the social parameters of trauma” (Ashioti and Khenkin 2021). The impulses as well as the actual decolonial work and awareness-raising are often carried out by activists or, as already mentioned in a previous chapter, pushed onto ‘marked’ artists. However, these are invited temporarily and usually only for isolated intervening exhibitions. Marina Ashioti and Irini Khenkin also point out that this superficial approach on the side of museums leads to a shallow treatment of the traumas of formerly colonized peoples and the grave effects these still have on their realities. As a result, the sensitivity of Western people from former colonizing states to these deeply rooted and harming colonial power structures remains superficial as well. An examination of these practices of more diverse representation, which now seem to be an everyday feature of many art museums that consider themselves progressive, raises the question of the true motivation of the institutions for such methods. Are these indeed honest attempts at decoloniality and the transformation of the colonial construct ‘museum’? Or are these attempts to polish up the museum's own image, and is the decolonial process seen more as a trend that an institution of the 21st century is forced to keep up with in order to remain attractive to visitors? Ashioti and Khenkin put it succinctly: “It’s generally become common practice for

institutions to appropriate power struggles, which – at their very core – are about the redistribution of equity and power, as a way to appear woke. With representation becoming a virtue that’s reduced to surface-level interaction, the only real goal in sight is to accumulate cultural capital” (Ashioti and Khenkin 2021). Cultural capital refers to a term coined by the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, which describes the tools necessary to accumulate symbolic wealth that is valued in a given culture. Cultural capital includes embodied cultural capital, i.e., education and skills necessary to understand cultural goods; institutional cultural capital, which includes educational credentials and qualifications valued by the ‘upper class’, and objectified cultural capital, which includes material goods such as paintings, books, etc. (Kisida, Greene and Bowen 2014, 282). The cultural capital of Europe and the West is historically deeply connected to colonialism and its power structures. When contemporary museums resort to a more diversified practice that still operates within colonialist systems and is motivated by enriching their own institutional cultural capital rather than the cultural capital of the artists and groups invited in the name of diversification, the museum ends up benefiting through superficial and dishonest processes. The actual work comes from within communities of activists, artists, and experts of ‘marked’ cultural workers, but it is the art museum, the institution behind it, that takes the credit. The major problem is that the museum itself does not transform itself in these processes, at least not fast enough.

Now every museum doing the decolonial in many ways works with the same groups of activists, divesting the responsibility for decolonisation to them (activists or artists). Usually, they don’t really go back and ask, ‘What does it mean for my museum to start engaging with the question of the decolonial?’ They just simply think that inviting this person in or that one – this activist in, the same one another museum invited in – will solve the problem. That is one of the things that we should be cautious about, if we are to take this moment seriously. It requires deeper work to think through how your specific museum, in your country, articulates with specific forms of colonial afterlives – even if some of the issues we deal with are larger scale structures and discourses (Modest 2020, 69).

What Wayne Modest describes here in his text “Museums Are Investments in Critical Discomfort” is the frequent ignorance on the part of museums and art institutions of the very fact that they are not neutral spaces but take place within (political) systems and structures, and that in Europe and the West, these systems and structures are based on colonialism and patriarchy and are therefore inherently racist, misogynistic, and discriminatory against minorities. If a museum wants to be truly decolonial, it has to *actively* be anti-racist and anti-discriminating in a self-reflective way. The Afro-German author and speaker Tupoka Ogette speaks in the context of Germany about racism as a structural problem that is not, as in society’s perception, often portrayed as something situational that manifests itself through individual missteps, but as something societally overarching by which we are all affected through racist socialization that is rooted in colonialism (Jahn and Ogette 2020). As a result, even if the

majority of the Western population is not actively racist, racism is systemically and structurally driven by socialization, and in order to reverse such a pattern, one has to actively work on unlearning socialized modes of thinking and behavior. Since the art museum and the art world is a world constructed by (a majority of western, white and mostly male) humans, these patterns of structural discrimination based on ethnicity and gender are also omnipresent within these institutions. In the aforementioned text titled: “Every Straw Is a Straw Too Much: On the Psychological Burden of Being Racialized While Doing Art” Bonaventure Soh Bejeng Ndikung argues that while the art world is completely infiltrated by these issues, they are far too rarely addressed.

The so-called art world is not a vacuum or an island. It is connected to the world and reflects exactly what happens in the world. But as a space where people expect progressive discourse, avant-garde politics, and liberal institutions, it comes as a surprise to some when racism is mentioned in the context of the art world. For this reason, racism is rarely thematized in the art world. In recent years, the dust of racism in the art world has been stirred up by some, while others have swept it under the rug. Because racism is never a ‘salonfähige’ (socially acceptable) topic in majority-white societies, because it’s a topic that elicits shame in both the victim and the perpetrator (who in many cases can’t accept that they’ve done something racist), because racism is anything but progressive, it is too often sidelined in the art world, even though it is omnipresent in various forms (Ndikung 2023).

What Ndikung describes here is the lack of introspection on the part of art museums and cultural institutions. The fear of being racist is so great in many parts of white European society that the discussion of racism simply does not take place and is bypassed. In this way, racism is not fought but simply avoided, which leads to its structural, systemic, and social reproduction, also within art institutions (Sternfeld 2020, 370). Here, however, racism would have to be particularly thematized in relation to a self-deconstruction of the museum coming from internal forces, which must be preceded by an acknowledgement of the museum's omnipresent colonialist legacy. “The difficulties we now have to attend to are really how colonialism continues to work in the present, its racializing logics that continue to structure humanity as differentially deserving of care, of even life itself. As museums, we do not really want to get into those issues, even though they are fundamental” (Modest 2020, 68).

However, there are museums that are already taking a self-critical approach, such as the ethnographic Pitt Rivers Museum⁸, which is actively addressing its colonial history and practices through a multi-pronged approach. For example, it is reviewing the labeling of artifacts, particularly those acquired during the colonial period, and has hired a research associate to redefine historical labels. The museum is aware of the inherent power imbalance

⁸ The Pitt Rivers Museum is located in Oxford, United Kingdom, and was founded in 1884. Its archeological and anthropological collection entails over 500 000 objects many of which were looted in course of the British Imperial Expansion and Colonialism (Pitt Rivers Museum, n.d.).

in ethnographic collecting and has adjusted its vision, accordingly, moving away from colonial narratives. Still, decolonizing the museum remains a challenge even in this case due to deeply entrenched practices and colonially trained staff. The museum is also aware of its connection to global economic injustice and racial conflict, which have their roots in the British Empire. In summary, however, the Pitt Rivers Museum is actively working to address its colonial past and create a more equitable representation of its artifacts and history (Broekhoven 2019, 3-4; Wróblewska 2022, 83).

Contrary, contemporary art museums have recognized that there is a problem with the aftermath of colonialism, but they rarely recognize that they are a significant part of this problem. This can be partly attributed to the fact that such institutions, in comparison to ethnographic museums, are much less concerned with looted objects from the colonial period and therefore must be about a confrontation of the coloniality of power in the immaterial discourses, which is less tangible and less visible but all the more palpable. They resist really digging into their past and acknowledging their own identity as a colonial fact, also in regard to their nationality. This, in turn, means that decolonial approaches within these institutions are often approached with a forward-looking view. The museum practice is being diversified, but how honest can this diversification really be if it is only superficial and in terms of external perception, without addressing the colonial roots of the past still operating in the present from within? Under the pretext of diversification, the museum is used “as an instrument for temporary inclusion” (Demart 2020, 145), which invites people outside the white-western norm but does not let them enter to stay. Sarah Demart compares this approach to a form of misappropriation of agency towards marginalized people and describes this process in more detail through Foucault's theory of extraction politics:

Extraction politics are at the core of racial capitalism and colonial regimes characterised by large-scale expropriation of natural resources, lands, as well as labour force, and bodies (Robinson 1983; Mbembe 2000; Tuck and Yang 2012). [...] That means that exploitation and expropriation are differentiated categories of work (paid/unpaid) and of political status (free/non-free), which are historically and racially located, though they are intertwined in the global system of accumulation. In other words, the global logic of accumulation renders the political statuses of free – exploitable – working citizens and dependent – expropriable – subjects interdependent. [...], I will argue that resistances to epistemic exploitation brings to light the institutional economy of extraction based on temporary inclusion devices of the racialised others (Demart 2020, 145-146).

Demart further depicts these extraction politics in the context of museum practice in the sense that People of Color, Indigenous People, Queer People or people with other or intersectional⁹ ‘markers’ are often consulted for their *opinion* without being paid or regarded as experts. The knowledge and viewpoints of those marginalized by the West are still filtered through the Western and colonialist perspective and thus never released from the position of marginalization (in the Western point of view). Through approaches of diversification, contemporary art museums pretend to acknowledge and represent a multiplicity of narratives from outside, but they perform this representation opaquely through the position of singularity and superiority of the West at the top, as the knower. Moreover, People of Color in Europe are confronted with their skin color on a daily basis, often through microaggressions that are not even perceived as racist by the white majority society because of a lack of awareness - and this is also the case in the art world. “Racial microaggressions are subtle, stunning, often automatic exchanges which are ‘put downs’ of People of Color by offenders” (Pittman 2012, 83). Bonaventure Soh Bejeng Ndikung describes these kind of racial microaggressions towards People of Color as ‘the first straw’. The first straw, which can leave deeper and deeper wounds by repeating seemingly minor violations over and over again, eventually leads to the last straw, which can manifest itself in severe psychological sufferings extending to depression and suicide. “The first straw is a seed that is planted and that initiates a violent process of destruction. Once this seed is planted, it becomes extremely difficult to uproot. [...] It is a spectrum of interconnected, domino-like falls, a violent force of gravity stronger than the gravitational pull that takes one down a rabbit hole, a too-slippery slope that doesn’t differentiate the first from the last straw” (Ndikung 2023). While western art institutions push racism aside by concealing the issue as if it did not exist within their ‘progressive mindsets’, they fail to acknowledge its inherent presence and the fact that People of Color encountering these institutions are exposed to racism very well also in the art world. “It’s about all the people who have to deal with racism on a daily basis in an art world that writes ‘EQUALITY’ and ‘DIVERSITY’ in capital letters. It’s about all those who find themselves in a dark alley with no way out. It’s about all those whose batteries are drained from both racism and the anti-racist fight. It’s about that first straw that leads to the last straw” (Ndikung 2023). Ndikung addresses

9 Intersectionality, as articulated by Kimberlé Crenshaw, provides a critical lens through which we can understand how power dynamics converge and collide, where they interlock and intersect. It challenges the simplistic notion that there are isolated issues of race, gender, class, or LGBTQ+ identity. Instead, intersectionality illuminates the complex reality in which these factors intersect and highlights how individuals who face multiple forms of discrimination (systemic and structural) experience unique and amplified challenges. This framework underscores that overlooking these intersections can erase the lived experiences of those who navigate the intersections of multiple marginalized identities (Crenshaw 1991, 1241-1250; Crenshaw 2017).

the hypocrisy of many institutions and art museums that claim to have taken meaningful steps towards diversity and tolerance, whereas only people who are actually affected by racism and other discrimination can judge how truly impactful, honest and lastingly caring these actions are. However, they are often not given the platform to voice their position or are simply not listened to. Yet the approach to diversification is not only practiced inwardly within museum halls, but also as an outreach program to diversify visitors and reach diverse communities, as Ndikung points out. He elaborates that Western museums, especially since 2020 in the wake of George Floyd's murder, have become more concerned with the demographics of their locations and are trying to integrate a more diverse public.

As a gesture of solidarity, many European and American cultural institutions invoked on their websites and in their social media feeds books and essays on racism and anti-racism. They also issued statements in solidarity with racialized people. These laudable actions were in many cases limited to the realm of rhetoric. Some institutions actually went the extra mile to recruit one or two Black or brown people as curators, but mostly to perform 'outreach,' in the professional jargon. To put it in polite terms, the person charged with doing 'outreach' is supposed to translate, transmit, and sell the institution's programs to so-called 'diverse communities,' although these programs are rarely ever formulated with these communities in mind. Historically, this position has been occupied by white middle class mediators who have friends or family in these communities. But since the murder of George Floyd, more and more young Black art professionals have been invited to fulfill this 'outreach' role (Ndikung 2023).

While some of these outreach programs carried out by Western arts institutions have indeed had a positive effect, they can nevertheless cause detrimental outcomes: On the one hand, as Ndikung explains, the focus is not on the needs of the communities to be reached but on those of the institution that wants to improve its image and enrich its own cultural capital and therefore rather perform inclusion and concern than practice it genuinely. On the other hand, the position of outreaches can actually become a trap for People of Color who are hired as such if the intents of the institution behind are not honest and caring enough and, to some extent, selfish, the complexities of which Ndikung describes through the 'outreach-complex' (Ndikung 2023).

4.1.1 The Outreach-Complex

This outreach complex is encapsulated by Ndikung in his text under five key points.

- "Many 'outreachers' have complained of being asked to promote programs they do not believe in, programs far removed from their lived realities—programs that are delusional, elitist, and in some cases white-supremacist" (Ndikung 2023).

This problem is based on the fact that these attempts at mediation and diversification often still stem from a Western, white positionality, as the decision-making positions within art museums are largely held by white, Western, and often male people. This shows that diversity cannot be

truly achieved if it is imagined from a non-diverse perspective. The outreachers who are hired to facilitate such programs often lack decision-making power, but appointing them makes the real decision-makers believe they are doing diversity right. Wrong!

- “Outreachers have been put in the position of correcting or rehabilitating the violent racist histories of institutions. As ‘representatives’ of these institutions, they are confronted with having to apologize for them – sometimes for things that the institutions did to their own forebears [...]” (Ndikung 2023).

This can be attributed mainly to the museum not being honest with itself and about the national colonial past that was instrumental in its creation. If the museum performs a neutral position here, it is likely that the burden of guilt will be placed on the outreachers, because it is clear: someone has to take the blame for the violations of the past. Through this false neutral behavior, the museum abdicates responsibility and imposes it on the outreachers; thus, the museum does not practice decoloniality but rather sustains the coloniality power. The institution lacks the necessary self-reflexivity since, as Homi Bhabha points out, it first and foremost requires an awareness of one's own position in order to practice diversity. Especially if the own position is the one in power. “Self-reflexivity, viewed as the discovery of hetero-referentiality, is the first step towards the recognition of the epistemological diversity of the world (Bhabha 1994, 21)”

- To be asked to be the face of an institution is one thing; to be asked to do this without the power or mandate to change anything is another. In many cases ‘outreachers’ become messengers between institutions and communities. But while messages are carried from the institution to the community, messages from the community to the institution often fall on deaf ears. The ‘outreachers’ find themselves misused, impotent, and exploited, as the institution's one-way communication upholds the power disparity between the institution and the community. The ‘outreachers’ is then called upon to stand in front when a photograph is taken of the museum staff, to give the impression of diversity (Ndikung 2023).

This point is founded on the basis that museums and institutions still occupy a position of authority and power, which is predominantly a position of speaking rather than listening. “To treat someone as a voice is to grant authority to that person; to affirm that one hears means that one hears what must be heard” (Lloyd 2009, 478 [Sontag 1980]). Many institutions do not listen, at least not to those they have wronged and now want to include in the spirit of diversity. But true inclusion would involve an abandonment of the position of authority and power on the part of museums. A position they have obtained and maintained through oppression of ‘the Other’. If museums were to truly listen, they would have to relinquish the authority to speak to ‘the Other’ and permit them to move from object to subject within institutional halls, letting them speak for themselves. However, if this turn is initiated from the authoritarian position of the speaker (the museum/institution), it means a much smaller use of force than if the other person has to make themselves heard by force. What Ndikung criticizes is the fact that museums

give these outreachers a role but do not allow their own voices to be raised as they are too attached to their own authority, which is strictly linked to the coloniality of power.

- “In many cases, the ‘outreacher’ is alone in the wilderness of the white institution. Without adequate support and funding, they cannot realize the ‘diversity’ or ‘integration’ that the institution claims to aspire to. Slogans about inclusion remain empty phrases that make the people in the communities doubt the institutions even more” (Ndikung 2023).

Museums exist not only in a political system but, above all, in a political system of capital. People who transmit knowledge, promote awareness, and do mediation and representation work are dependent on funding, which is in turn allocated with a certain motivation and agenda in mind. Ashioti and Khenkin describe the attachment of art institutions to their funders as fatal in the sense that the demands of capital and the market are placed above those of true diversification and decoloniality. “As these institutions adopt neoliberal value systems promising adaptation, interaction, diversity, and exchange, their entrenchment in colonial histories becomes increasingly seamless. Direct links to government donors as well as multi-millionaire and billionaire art collectors mean that they are so heavily, desperately, and inextricably tied to capital that every attempt at decolonial investigation will be inert and devoid of meaning” (Ashioti and Khenkin 2021). Many museums also receive state funding through tax revenues, but they do not represent the entire taxpaying population by a long shot, but rather an elite, Western, and white fraction (Areise 2022, 38). A reality whose effects I have already tried to illustrate using the example of the local-global dilemma in the case of Bilbao. The demands for decoloniality are often contrary to the demands of the donors, with the latter always maintaining the upper hand in this unequal struggle. This indicates that even if museum staff and cultural workers have good intentions and want to work on an actually more inclusive, decolonial, and diversified practice, they still have to be obedient to the aspirations and demands of the level above, the funders, who are mostly even more white, male, and Western. In the process, the actual needs of communities for social engagement programs are also often put on the back burner, and equitable and generous funding is left out, while institutions in turn take philanthropic credit.

- How much inclusion or integration can actually be achieved if the people who make up the institution don’t really believe in inclusion or integration, or merely believe in a whitewashed version of it? When cultural worker of color complain that artworks or films presented by their institution are racist, the institution often reacts by not only doubting the lived experience of the worker, but also questioning the historical depiction of racist violence. Colleagues in art institutions who have experienced racism and have filed complaints have usually been met with denial, not only from the perpetrator but also from the management and the board of the institution, who demand evidence and insinuate that the victim is being too sensitive. Even

worse, the victim is sometimes accused of capitalizing on their race and playing the ‘race card’ (Ndikung 2023).

The denial of the traumas and lived realities of racially discriminated people, the belittling of the grievances of People of Color and the simple lack of awareness of the effects and impact on the psychological wellbeing of these individuals is not only a problem in the art world but systematically in Western society. Nevertheless, when an art institution writes DIVERSITY in capital letters on its door, such internal actions seem even more dishonest and fatal. Furthermore, in an article published in May 2023 in the German weekly newspaper *Die Zeit* with the translated title: “Radical? We were never radical enough” [“Radikal? Wir waren nie radikal genug”], the author Celia Parbey speaks of a “Post-Black-Lives-Matter-Backlash” (Parbey 2023). Parbey, like Ndikung, describes a first wave of solidarity for the Black Lives Matter movement after the death of George Floyd and a sudden public attention, fueled by the media, for the realities of life for People of Color in the West and therefore also in Germany. They were asked to explain to the majority of society who black people are and what they want in this country. They were also asked to disclose personal traumas and experiences of racism. This was followed by declarations of solidarity from companies and institutions, anti-racist workshops, and the promise to focus on the implementation of diversity. However, the more visibility People of Color received, the more the discourse became deadlocked, according to Parbey. Racism was increasingly discussed in public debates as an isolated case rather than a structural continuity that runs through all aspects of the country. Due to the superficiality of the debate, the initial spirit of solidarity turned into a ‘Post-Black-Lives-Matter-Backlash’ in which People of Color became more and more targets. Expressions of solidarity turned into accusations. As Ndikung describes similarly, People of Color were suddenly accused of adopting an exaggerated victim mentality, and traumatic experiences of racism were either downplayed or people were even accused of using them as an exploit to play the ‘race card’ (Ndikung 2023, Parbey 2023). What remains, inter alia, of Black Lives Matter three years later, according to Parbey, is the fact that ‘Blackness’ is used by corporations and institutions as a trend to make money, and People of Color are used as tokens of representation without actually having a say. Nevertheless, the attention of the movement has also helped to articulate the European and Western problem of racism on a more public and political level. Above all, it has shown how much work still needs to be done and how far away equality is in Western society.

4.2 Contextualizing decolonial Endeavors: In which Situations does Decoloniality have to happen?

In light of the recent riots in France, it is clear that the Europe in which People of Color and people with migrant backgrounds live, especially those from former colonial states, is a different Europe than that of the white, privileged majority society. Racism against People of Color and discrimination against citizens with a migrant background is ignored by the white, western upper class, while it leaves those affected by it with a lack of perspective, frustration, and grief, which has now, at the end of June 2023 been discharged with immense potential for anger. The fury has been triggered by the incident that happened on Tuesday, June 27th, 2023, in the Paris suburb of Nanterre, where 17-year-old Nahel was shot dead by a police officer during a vehicle stop. Soon after, the media, politicians, and experts paralleled it to 2020, calling it a ‘George-Floyd-moment’, as this killing was likewise captured on video and made the often invisible, permanently ongoing violent actions of the French police, the deadliest police of Europe, towards People of Color and immigrants, especially in the poorer suburbs, visible to the outside world (Joeres 2023). William Keo, a 26-year-old French photographer with an immigrant background living in a suburb north of Paris, documents the life in those areas and thus also the uprisings and protests that took place in the days after Nahel's death. In an interview with the German newspaper *Die Zeit*, he reports on the daily violence and discrimination by French officials against people in the poorer outskirts of Paris, especially against young men; the darker their skin color, the more often they are targeted. The rebellions that took place after the crime did not come about because of this single event but were the result of the political neglect and structural oppression of the people in such neighborhoods. According to Keo, especially for the young people living there, the suburbs are a ‘mental prison’ that drives them into hopelessness through the lack of any perspective for a different life (Joeres and Keo 2023). Moreover, he calls these suburbs a mirror image of French colonial history. A large number of people from the formerly colonized areas of France, such as Indochina, Algeria, Tunisia, or Senegal, live here. But the traumatic reality of the lives of these people who come to France from one of its former colonies and then experience a violent police force and a general system still anchored in colonial power is not acknowledged by the government and, moreover, not cared for by institutions (Joeres and Keo 2023). Museums in general and, moreover, contemporary art museums could be an important medium in this shift of consciousness through a self-reflective and honest practice that does not ignore its own national colonial history through neutral progressiveness but addresses it in favor of the needs of the formerly colonized and not its own.

But such a positionality toward nationalism on the part of institutions should not come from a position of authority and imposture that holds on to colonial power structures, nor from a position of exclusion and demarcation. Otherwise, museums and also those of contemporary art can be experienced as a ‘theater of pain’ by former colonized peoples that have been robbed of their cultural goods and intangibly violated by Western hegemony, as Divya P. Tolia-Kelly describes in her text “Feeling and Being at the (Postcolonial) Museum: Presencing the Affective Politics of ‘Race’ and Culture“.

The museum acts as a site that materialises the pain of epistemic violence, the rupture of genocide and the deadening of artefacts. Petrification (as Bennett, 2006) here, is considered as operating along racial lines. The effect is to experience an atmosphere of loss, guilt, sadness and anger concretised along geometries of imperial power. [...]The art of art practice is to move us and jolt us out of our habits of seeing, encouraging us to ‘feel’ a new interpretation. Postcolonial expressive cultures have also incorporated the project of making us feel, in empathy with the voice and body of the postcolonial subject (Tolia-Kelly 2016, 899).

Combined with the fact that European museums were created in the wake of colonialism to shape and elevate the national identity of western countries by distinguishing themselves from the global South and colonized peoples, the ongoing visual misrepresentation of stolen narratives, identities, and objects within museums may continue to entrench this painful past in the present. It is therefore important that Western museums position themselves vis-à-vis their national past and its links to colonialism and embrace it openly and honestly rather than trying to blindly look forward by ignoring history and its continuing consequences. But this positioning should always operate in a context of transparency that clearly conveys that every viewpoint always springs from a particular perspective that is neither the only one nor the correct one. As a museum, taking a position towards nationality creates a completely different context than taking or maintaining a national position. Such a shift in positionality can take a museum from being a theatre of pain to an honest place of self-reflexivity. To achieve such a transformation, the West should take more radical actions, and Parbey calls for a shedding of the complacent European helper syndrome and instead a radical recognition of the true relationship of Western countries to the states they formerly colonized, which is based primarily on exploitation and pain (Parbey 2023). Sumaya Kassim argues, examining the case of institutions in Great Britain, that the museum as we now know it as colonialist fact was (and still is) shaped by the white and Western gaze and that the decolonial processes miss the mark when they are also framed through this gaze. The decolonization procedures must therefore delve into profundity and complexity and change the way white western society gazes at others, but also, and above all, at itself. Moreover, the positionality of People of Color who are working for and in institutions has to be recognized as essential labor that is absolutely necessary for the work of reaching decoloniality.

Decolonising is deeper than just being represented. When projects and institutions proclaim a commitment to ‘diversity’, ‘inclusion’ or ‘decoloniality’ we need to attend to these claims with a critical eye. Decoloniality is a complex set of ideas – it requires complex processes, space, money, and time, otherwise it runs the risk of becoming another buzzword, like ‘diversity’. As interest in decolonial thought grows, we must beware of museums’ and other institutions’ propensity to collect and exhibit because there is a danger (some may argue an inevitability) that the museum will exhibit decoloniality in much the same way they display/ed black and brown bodies as part of Empire’s ‘collection’. [...] We raised these issues – about emotional labour, about not receiving adequate pay for the work we were doing, and about the fact certain key decisions were made without us – and explained that the co-curation process betrayed a fundamental lack of understanding of what decoloniality is and who it is for. We argued that words and systems that hide exploitative practices such as ‘volunteering’, ‘zero-hour contracts’, and ‘diversity’ have no place in a decolonial project. Too often people of colour are rolled in to provide natural resources – our bodies and our ‘decolonial’ thoughts – which are exploited, and then discarded. [...] Rather than place the onus on people of colour – either as facilitators or as an audience for the museum – we need to flip the narrative and ask how the museum can facilitate the decolonial process for its majority white audience in a way that does not continue to exploit people of colour. Key to this is accepting that the museum needs us; we do not need the museum (Kassim 2017).

To truly transform the decolonial processes of museums and move towards honest and sustainable inclusion, institutions must recognize that they need People of Color in decision-making positions and must also compensate them appropriately for the work they are doing. Art museums must really let these people enter and not only tolerate them temporarily but accept them as an essential part. Furthermore, the whole West, and so Europe, must learn to exercise this acceptance on a systemic level, questioning not the position of ‘the Other’ but their own position, which created the position of ‘the Other’ in the first place. In her book, titled *Ungerman - the construction of the Other in post-migrant society [Undeutsch - die Konstruktion des Anderen in der postmigrantischen Gesellschaft]*, Fatima El-Tayeb addresses the fact that racialized Europeans have always existed, but that the European self-image still only recognizes the white and mostly Christian citizen as truly native European, while the existence of all those who deviate from this norm is always stamped with the label of the immigrant in order to justify their otherness within this distorted self-image (El-Tayeb 2016). Furthermore, El-Tayeb defines the constant tension between the European demand that immigrants integrate as fast and as well as possible into the respective national society and, at the same time, complete integration is made impossible for them, since even people whose families have been in Germany for several generations, for example, and who see themselves as German but do not look ‘typically German’ are still asked about their actual origins. The processes of dishonest diversification as they take place in museums are taking place on a macro level throughout Europe - the origin of the problem remains the same: “An ‘integration’ into existing hegemonic structure that does not at the same time demand submission to existing structures of dominance (structures in turn that are necessarily built on exclusion) is therefore impossible, it is the structures themselves

that must be questioned”¹⁰ (El-Tayeb 2016, 26). So it is the structure behind and above that need to be deconstructed in the light of decoloniality, not just its effects. If nothing is done to counteract these structures they simply reproduce themselves over and over again like a perpetual motion machine – especially through the operational power of western institutionalism. Such an impact can be observed in the current situation in the USA with the overturning by the supreme court of the ‘affirmative action ruling’. Affirmative action was a concept in universities that allowed race to be considered when admitting students. The practice was established more than 50 years ago to counteract the centuries of discrimination against Black Americans resulting from slavery and the systemic racism it created. Conservative forces have for years opposed this concept using the argument that race should not play a role in university admissions. What this argument completely ignores, however, is that equality of opportunity in the US is inherently inequitable and that race always plays a de facto role predominantly to the advantage of white people (Schellenberg 2023). But while many of Us-Americans now fear a drastic reduction in racial diversity at universities because of the overturning of the ruling, Richard Arum and Mitchell L. Stevens argue in a *New York Times* article that, „[...] affirmative action mattered a great deal for very few and very little for most” (Arum and Stevens 2023). For while the decision will indeed reduce racial diversity for future classes at highly selective universities such as Harvard, Stanford and other elite universities, Arum and Stevens reason, that while affirmative action in these institutions increased the opportunity for racially diverse students, very few of these have applied to them in the first place

What drives this dynamic is that most students apply to and enroll at schools near their families, regardless of whether the school is a good academic fit. We live in a country full of colleges that don’t have the resources and academic quality to match their students’ talents. Social scientists describe this problem in the college selection process as ‘undermatching.’ Efforts to nudge students to broaden their horizons and consider attending selective colleges further from home have had only modest success. While the Supreme Court’s decision is a blow to Black and Hispanic students who dream of attending the most competitive universities, improving and better supporting the institutions that serve the lion’s share of students of color will do far more to advance the cause of racial equality in this country [...] (Arum and Stevens 2023).

The authors appeal for attention no longer to be focused on the elite universities but to improve education at the less prestigious universities and provide them with financial support, as these have a much higher percentage of Black, Hispanic, and Indigenous students to begin with. But it should also be noted that 40 percent of the US congressmen and women elected in 2020 were

10 Translated by the author; original: „Eine ‚Integration‘ in bestehende Hegemonialstrukturen, die nicht gleichzeitig die Unterwerfung unter bestehende Dominanzstrukturen verlangt (Strukturen wiederum, die notwendigerweise auf Ausschluss bauen), ist also unmöglich, es sind die Strukturen selbst, die hinterfragt werden müssen“ (El-Tayeb 2016, 26).

Harvard graduates, and a degree from other elite universities with a similar prestige status offers far better opportunities for high-level career paths. So if fewer Black, Hispanic, or Indigenous students are admitted to these universities, they will be retroactively and systematically excluded from spaces where impactful systemic decisions are made. The fact is that these groups of people are still structurally and economically disadvantaged and therefore have far less access to the resources necessary to increase their chances of admission to such institutions. The oppressive system, as mentioned above, continues to reproduce itself if it is not actively counteracted or deconstructed. Even though the overturning of the affirmative action rule in the US has just undermined a countermeasure against structural racism, Fatima El-Tayeb sees the US as one step ahead in this matter. According to her, the consensus on the existence of racism as a structural problem is many times greater than in Europe, where the structural level is still largely ignored and racism is mostly understood as an individual deviation (El-Tayeb 2016, 11). The presence of People of Color and migrant groups in Europe is either made into a threat or primarily perceived in connection with a crisis, as recently in France, and so Europe remains in an ideal state constructed for itself in which those perceived as migrants are either invisible because they are ‘assimilated’, or if their integration is not done quickly enough in Europe's opinion and if they even more revolt against the systematic injustices, they are visibly turned into perpetrators whereby Europe can retroactively justify their exclusion and deportation (El-Tayeb 2016, 26). Systematic racism, just like the museum itself, is a legacy of the colonial era. While Western museums have thereby been assigned their authoritarian place in society, people from former colonies and especially People of Color are (systematically) discriminated against on a daily basis, also by museums. So if contemporary art museums, in a frenzy of progressiveness, now want to exhibit the art of these people or want to win them as a new target group for their audience, then doing so must go hand in hand with a deconstruction of their own authority. Otherwise, each of these attempts will remain as such and there will never be an actual lasting involvement that flourishes on a foundation of mutual respect.

The incredible rage that is discharged in France by systematically excluded people, the weariness caused by daily racist experiences, and the fight against this situation that can lead from the first straw to the last, as described by Bonavenutre Soh Bejeng Ndikung, will not simply disappear but probably be disregarded by the privileged white majority society until the next eruption that gets temporary media attention, like the uprisings in France at the moment. Thus, a profound change in Western self-understanding is required instead of superficial and temporary diversification measures in which the constructed ‘Other’ always remains ‘the

Other'. Certainly, most of the work is in the hands of politics, but as mentioned earlier, art museums are also places that exist within political systems and can thus be used as vehicles for a necessary change in consciousness and perspective. According to Modest, „The museum is that space where a certain kind of complexity can be added to reductive thinking” (Modest 2020, 70). But beyond that, the art museum is also a place where complexities can be broken down through an artistic approach, and individual narratives can lead to a collective and nuanced understanding. While this chapter was intended to clearly show how much the effects of colonialism still exert their power in our society and therefore also in art institutions, the following one is intended to show that coloniality and the associated decoloniality is not a discourse that only takes place in concluded actions and their impacts, but is an ongoing process that can always continue to unfold and therefore requires continuous involvement that does not fix the necessary decolonial parameters to just one moment or one place but allows for infinite plural approaches to understanding.

4.2.1 Decolonial Complexities beyond the artistic Sphere: Navigating contradictory Narratives of the Present using the Example of the War in Ukraine

Europe is in an extremely complex situation right now. I have used Europe to describe the current debate around museums and their decolonial processes in a very broad way. This discussion tended to imply Western, central, and southern Europe with the countries France, Spain, Portugal, the Netherlands, Belgium, Germany, and the UK. I want to now extend the conversation towards Eastern Europe with a focus on the ongoing war in Ukraine, as it is a (de)colonial moment in the present that tests the potential of cultural institutions to act in terms of a future rather than retrospectively arguing against the past. Moreover, it is a moment that shows that decolonial motifs always exist in an ambiguous and complex context, which on the one hand can be distorted and misused and, on the other hand, can lead to misunderstandings if it is only thought from the rigidity of a position.

Adrian Ivakhiv argues in a March 23, 2023 published article titled “Decolonialism and the Invasion of Ukraine” that the debate around decolonization often foregrounds the contrapositions of the West versus the non-West (as I have done in my argument thus far). However, the decolonial debate can be a nuanced historical analysis that extends into the present and future and that clearly distinguishes between the specificities of the colonizer and the colonized. To cognize these nuances, it is crucial to widen awareness for a wider decolonial debate that comes with distinctiveness in every location it is set in – shifting from decolonization into decoloniality. Thus, British colonialism in Cameroon is different from

British colonialism in Canada, which in turn is clearly different from Spanish colonialism in Peru, and so on. However, generically speaking, Europe has indeed colonized the world, but a too generic view can lead to a disregard of other forms of colonialism beyond this West and global South dichotomy, such as in the case of Russia and Ukraine, or even when considering persistent imperialist formations such as China, Russia, or India (Ivakhiv 2023). Therefore, especially with regard to the current situation in Ukraine, an utterly different debate about colonialism and decolonialism can be conducted. While Western Europe is mainly engaged in restitution debates, struggling with a more inclusive and diversified museum practice as discussed in the section above, Ukraine has been at war since February 24, 2022 due to a war of aggression originating from Russia (De Baere 2022). The Ukraine-Russia relationship allows us to experience and understand colonial and decolonial aspects in a different local and temporal context than the global south-versus-west dynamic considered so far. Adrian Ivakhiv sifts through the global (de)colonial movement in a different light in his May 18, 2023, published essay titled “Russia, Decolonization and the Capitalism-Democracy Mess” by examining the example of what he calls mega-states, more specifically present-day Russia.

My starting assumption is that the global decolonization movement, which exploded across the Global South in the middle decades of the twentieth century, has hardly fulfilled its mission in these remaining mega-states. In this, Russia and China are little different from the colonial settler-states of the Americas and Oceania (the US, Canada, Australia, et al.); in some respects, they are worse. To think through what decolonizing Russia (or China) may involve requires thinking through the similarities and differences between these remaining mega-states and the Euro-colonized states around the world that have been decolonized to various degrees, including external colonies like those that made up much of Africa and parts of Asia for centuries, as well as the mentioned settler-colonial states. But it also, crucially, requires thinking through the forms of economic neocolonialism that global capitalism has enabled to continue around the world to this day. These processes are related and cannot be thought apart from each other today (Ivakhiv 2023).

A (de)colonial debate around Russia and other mega-states, as Ivakhiv calls them, must therefore be conducted on a different level in both a global and local framework. Moreover, in light of the current war, this debate is an extremely perplexing and politically convoluted one, as it is highly influenced by capitalism and differing ideas of democracy. What is clear is that Russia violently attacked Ukraine, but both the ideas of decolonizing Ukraine as well as the idea of decolonizing Russia are put forward by the opposite sites in that matter, although these are of course completely different ideas, as Ivakhiv notes. For Ukrainian scholars, decolonizing Ukraine means securing national self-determination at a political level, accompanied by a cultural revival. Important means are autonomy in language, education, and law-making, but also the consolidation of Ukraine's own cultural identity, which can be of essential help in anchoring the political changes. However, the history of the state of Ukraine, like that of no other state in the past, is so easy to summarize. Thus, many Ukrainian intellectuals are also not

in agreement with simply recognizing Ukraine's colonial status in regard to Russia, as Ukraine can be seen more as a nucleus than a colony in the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union. Nevertheless, since 2014, with Russia's annexation of Crimea, the discussion has shifted in the direction of the current assertions of decolonization, also in comparison to other sub-states or neo-national people such as the Catalans in relation to Spain, the Irish in relation to the British United Kingdom, or the Québécois in relation to Canada. In all these cases, self-determination over language and culture is at the forefront of the discourse (Ivakhiv 2023). So the call for decolonizing Ukraine is fairly clear, but what would decolonizing Russia mean, and what implications within expressions of solidarity on behalf of such a project would this entail on a global scale? Ivakhiv argues here that arguments for decolonization can also be instrumentalized in an inverted manner: “If decolonization, by definition, is a collective self-liberation, a freeing from the perverse effects of colonization, it’s important to note that there can be ‘perverse decolonization,’ in which reactions against alleged colonial harm are replaced by new harms, or old harms in new guises” (Ivakhiv 2023). These oppositional claims of decolonization do not allow us to avoid the question of which decolonization is the ‘true’ one. Is it the one propagated by the Russian side, which portrays Russia as a decolonizer and de-imperializer that decolonizes Russia from the liberal West? Or that of Ukraine, which wants to decolonize and de-imperialize itself from Imperial Russia. Or perhaps that of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions, which in turn want to decolonize themselves from Ukraine? And although without any doubt, Russia's war of aggression on Ukraine is to be disregarded as a violent act of war and is in no way justifiable, the situation is a bit of a puzzle in terms of the question of decolonization, with the role of capitalism and democracy as its key features at its core (Ivakhiv 2023). Ivakhiv goes on to discuss the relationship between capitalism, democracy, and the ongoing conflict between Russia and Ukraine. He highlights that capitalism, when unchecked, benefits the wealthy and leads to the commodification of people, land, and behavior. Therefore, to control capitalism's negative effects, a democratic state is needed. However, while what he calls mega-states, such as Russia, China, and other non-Western states, are also capitalist states, they often lack democratic accountability. Democracy is crucial for limiting capitalism, but within different forms of democracy, including socialist, anarcho-communalist, traditionalist, and liberal-democratic models. But while Europe and the USA are also motivated by capitalism, in contrast, according to Ivakhiv, Russia, or more precisely, Putin, lacks the democracy to keep such motivation in line (Ivakhiv 2023). Moreover, the concept of democracy can in turn be linked to that of colonialism, and so democracy too must be decolonized at times. The dominant notion of democracy as developed in ancient Greece dates from the time of the European

Enlightenment, a time that, as discussed in a previous chapter, placed Europe's point of view as that of the 'knower' universally above everything and everyone else, thus solidifying an epistemic hegemony in favor of the European colonial states. Democracy is based on the idea that our humanity is defined by language, rationality, and the ability to deliberate. It emphasizes the importance of individuals expressing their reasoned opinions and participating in the selection of their system of government through active 'voice'. However, it is important to note that this form of democracy was historically limited to those who had the privilege and permission to express their opinions. These were primarily the voices of the white, male West. Over time, the boundaries between the included and excluded groups have shifted, or rather are still shifting, on a political level of the state as well as on an institutional level, as can be seen in the previous chapter discussing the more or less successful efforts of inclusion and diversification of museums. Ivakhiv goes on to explain the emergence of a new model of democracy.

Embodied in intellectual movements such as the affective, material, ontological, decolonial, and nonhuman 'turns,' this emergent model takes 'ruling' to mean the governance, including the self-governance, of how we live – which means how we eat, love, breathe, organize ourselves, and relate to the world around us. Democracy in this sense is social, affective, ecological, and intergenerational; it involves relations with many others – humans and nonhumans, living and no-longer- or not-yet-living, who may or may not be able to participate in our deliberations, but whose interests can and should be accounted for. 'The people,' then, are never just those who vote, and the 'rule' is not restricted to those whose voices are represented. This democracy – [...] is physically embodied, socially and materially embedded, extended in time and in space, enacted in practices, and affectively primed and shaped – is decolonial democracy, or at least decolonizing democracy, in at least two senses. The first is that it is not bestowed 'from above' by those who bring it from outside (from Europe to the colony, from the core to the periphery, from civilization to the wilderness). Rather, it emerges from within the body of society. This makes it somewhat inchoate and unpredictable, with effects that may not always be laudatory, but which – and this is the second sense – revive something that is essential to the experience of democratic agency. It is decolonial because it revives the 'memory' of agency that has existed before: in traditions of commoning, of resistance, of place-based inhabitation, and of self-determination (Ivakhiv 2023).

The decolonization of democracy, then, has to do first and foremost with self-determination – more specifically self-determination from within. To be decolonial means to allow choice (Kalama 2021, 53). This admission of selection should also take place in art museums and institutions if they want to operate in a truly decolonial way. In this case, it is primarily about the self-determination of the representation and contextualization of artists, identities and narratives of formerly colonized people or people with other 'markers' that are exhibited in (Western) art museums. The fact that this discussion takes place in art museums is extremely important, since museums have always been contact zones where different cultural narratives encounter each other (often in unequal power relations) and thus represent at the same time a place of danger for misrepresentation but also a place of opportunity to empathize. Yet the

debates ought not to take place exclusively in the spheres of art, artefacts and the theory around those. On the basis of the current situation between Ukraine and Russia and the both-sided demands of decolonization – which are seemingly stemming from a differing interpretation of this process – in this context, which on the part of Russia and Putin respectively is expressed in the desire to ‘decolonize’ Russia from the West, while Ukraine wants to decolonize itself from Russia - the artist, geographer and researcher Nikolay Smirnov argues in his essay “Crisis of Decoloniality and Inevitability of Decolonization” for a broadening of the understanding of colonialism and decolonization beyond the incomplete argumentation of the coloniality of knowledge purely in the field of theoretical and artistic spectrum.

Why are there so many different and conflicting interpretations of decolonization today? One reason is that since the 1970s, decolonization has increasingly been understood as a discursive struggle against the coloniality of knowledge by means of theoretical and artistic speculation. Seen through this lens, any particular decolonial process is characterized by its own unique model, which is the sole condition for genuine emancipation from colonial knowledge. It is no coincidence, then, that critical theory and contemporary art, which problematize decoloniality precisely as a property of knowledge and a representation of the world, become the most important arena of decolonial struggle (Smirnov 2023).

Smirnov appeals to a more ambivalent understanding of decolonization, including a more complex reality alongside contradictions outside the spectrum of a purely epistemic and artistic field. Especially the way Putin uses the argument of decolonization to justify the attack on Ukraine in order to push a counter-hegemonic agenda against the West shows that a broader view is needed within a broader context. In the case of Russia and Putin's ‘decolonial’ rhetoric, it is argued that Putin appropriates progressive discourses for reactionary purposes. This misuse of decolonial ideas can lead to reformist concerns and demands for emancipation and justice taking a back seat and being used instead for authoritarian goals. Using an incident in 2022 within documenta15 in Kassel, which Smirnov calls a ‘Decolonial Scandal in Art’, he illustrates the limits and possible contradictions of contemporary decolonial thinking in this regard and points to the danger of disguising reactionary arguments as progressive struggles. The example raises the question of where the line between them might lie and how to distinguish them (Smirnov 2023). Furthermore, this case also opens up the discourse on the exhibition of contemporary art from the global South in the global North, as well as the related debate around the (forced) binding or unbinding of art with utilitarianism, transcendentalism, and politics (You 2022). So what happened at documenta15 and why can what happened be expended as a reference in the discourse regarding the misappropriation of decolonial ideas, as in the case of Russian propaganda?

4.2.2 Documenta15: Decolonial artistic Propositions, anti-Semitism and the Clash of Positionalities

The documenta is an exhibition series, held every five years, with the referred edition taking place in Kassel, Germany in 2022. It is often regarded as one of the most important exhibitions of contemporary art, and while the focus of this dissertation lies on contemporary western art museums, the documenta and further biennials, triennials or similar exhibitions are essential for the contemporary western art world, and moreover have a potential for a different kind of exhibition format that could be less stagnant than classic museums, as the location, the theme and the curatorial team can be easier adjusted to fit the current zeitgeist. The edition of the documenta15 in discussion here lasted 100 days and included 1500 participating artists who took part in the exhibitions as well as public programs and welcomed over 730,000 visitors. The artistic direction for this documenta was given to the Jakarta, Indonesia-based art collective called *ruangrupa*¹¹, who chose ‘lumbung’ as its curatorial concept (You 2022). ‘Lumbung’ refers to the Indonesian term for *rice barn* and extends to the behaviors and physical infrastructure that this place promotes: the sharing of surplus resources and labor for the benefit of the common good (Brazil 2022). This concept was transferred to the artistic practices and modes of exhibition that would manifest themselves in collaborative community-building processes to bring together art, activism, and the public. In the perception of the media, however, the positive coverage of *ruangrupa's* inclusive exhibition concept was overshadowed by extremely negative reports of anti-Semitism incidents in the context of the art exhibition (You 2022). The debate surrounding the anti-Semitic accusations took place over several months and played out on numerous levels that became more and more acute. It started when a very questionable Kassel-based alliance called *Alliance Against Anti-Semitism*, which boasts anti-Muslim racism among other matters, published a blog post in January 2022 calling members of the Indonesian collective *ruangrupa*, as well as members of the exhibition's selection committee and artistic team, anti-Semites. These accusations were based on their support of a letter against apartheid in May 2021 (Against Apartheid 2021)¹². A historian named

11 Ruangrupa is a Jakarta-based non-profit organization founded by artists in 2000. It aims to provide space for artists to focus on analysis rather than just production. They promote visual art forms like public art, performance art, and video art, with a critical sensibility. Over the years, ruangrupa has evolved its programs and organization structure, emphasizing flexibility and collaboration. They engage with diverse individuals, fostering a rich cultural and historical exchange. Their space in the south of Jakarta serves as a studio, library, research lab, and party venue, encouraging an open and dynamic artistic community (ruangrupa 2022).

12 The letter was at the time signed by over 16,000 other co-signer and condemns Israeli violence against Palestinians and points to their plight under apartheid-like conditions. It calls for global support to eliminate the system, urges governments to impose sanctions, and opposes confusing criticism of Israel with anti-Semitism. The signatories call for solidarity in the struggle to liberate the Palestinians and emphasize that true freedom requires an end to oppression for all (Against Apartheid 2021).

Ulrich Schneider criticized the alliance as a group that combats criticism of Israel's occupation policies with blanket accusations of anti-Semitism. However, some German media adopted this narrative- strategy of the Alliance and reported accordingly. The debate further on escalated in April when the Central Council of Jews in Germany complained that planned panels on the issue of anti-Semitism at documenta were to include a panel on anti-Muslim and anti-Palestinian racism. These panels were later canceled, and *ruangrupa* denied the accusations against them. In May, the exhibition venue of the Palestinian collective *The Question of Funding*¹³, who were also targeted by the alliance, was smeared with graffiti, perceived as threatening. Despite all this controversy, many hoped that the actual exhibition would provide a space for meaningful debate. The opening days were celebrated by curators and artists on social media, but then there was another incident described as an ‘epic clusterfuck’. In a large banner by the Indonesian artist collective *Taring Padi*¹⁴, which addressed the political violence of the *Suharto* regime¹⁵ and can be seen as an anti-imperialistic work, the public recognized two clearly anti-Semitic figures, leading to outrage (Heiser 2022, You 2022).

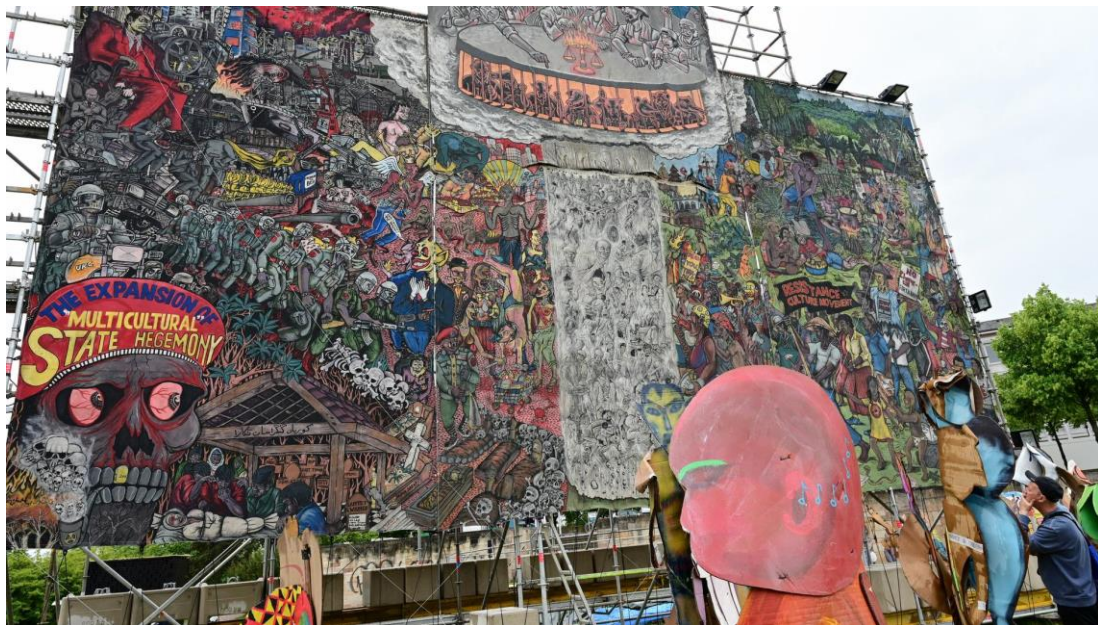


Figure 4: Banner of *Taring Padi* at documenta15, Friedrichsplatz, Kassel 2022.

13 The Question of Funding is a collective of cultural producers and community organizers from Palestine. They aim to revolutionize the funding economy's impact on cultural production by producing, documenting, and sharing resources and knowledge with their community and beyond. Formed in 2019, the collective comprises individuals from various aspects of the cultural sector, including NGOs reliant on international funding (like Khalil Sakakini Cultural Center, Grassroots Al-Quds, and the Popular Art Center), foundations, cultural centers (such as Al-Basta Theatre, Dalia Association, and Rawa Fund), and independent practitioners (documenta-fifteen, n.d.).

14 „Taring Padi is an art collective based in Yogyakarta Indonesia that uses art as a tool for political expression and education for all“ (Taring Padi, n.d.).

15 In 1965, a coup attempt in Indonesia led to mass killings of Communists and Chinese citizens, orchestrated by General Suharto. He seized power and established an authoritarian regime known as the "New Order," leading the country away from socialism towards capitalism. Despite later becoming a democracy, the atrocities of that time remain unaddressed, with no accountability for the perpetrators (Suryadinata 1987).

The curators then publicly apologized but noted that anti-Semitic stereotypes within the Global South occurred as a byproduct of its colonization by Western countries.

Indonesian artists wanted to share with the world their history of resistance, claiming that they have some right over its politically incorrect imagery because the activist artifacts were produced in the heat of the struggle against the authoritarian Suharto regime and its allies, which included Western intelligence services and Israel. The most problematic exhibits were eventually removed from the exhibition, but the organizers refused to engage in serious reflection on the problem beyond the abovementioned arguments. Moreover, the curators, in turn, were offended by German and, more broadly, European audience reactions, describing it as ‘censorship, vandalism, hostility, and racism.’ At the exhibition’s close, they declared that the voices of ‘others’ seemed to be perceived as dangerous to the ‘excessively colonized’ institutions of the West, so from then on, they would focus on building their own communities outside of it. However, the disappointment was mutual (Smirnov 2023).

So both sides were disappointed, and both sides felt aggrieved and unheard. The media-reporting came to a boil, and in 2022 *der Spiegel* – a weekly published newspaper that is extremely well known in Germany – published an article called “Welcome to Antisemita15” [“Willkommen zur Antisemita15”]. The case of *documenta15* shows that the clash of different positionalities within such a complex debate – which, especially in Germany and its charged historical background, is taking place on very emotional ground – culminates in an unsatisfactory failure to engage in dialogue if there is a lack of understanding and a refusal to listen to the subtle nuances of these different positionalities. According to Smirnov and also Heiser, one of the reasons for the lack of a grasp of the respective other positionality is the already mentioned insufficient localization of the (de)colonial debate overwhelmingly in the spheres of knowledge and art and the accompanying rigidity of the debate vis-à-vis current events and more complex approaches (Heiser 2022, Smirnov 2023). There is no question that anti-Semitism is to be rejected in the clearest terms, but there was a lack of understanding on the part of the German discourse that anti-Semitism also exists in the context of German colonialism and is thus situated in a different nexus in these former colonized localities (Heiser 2022). This is not to say that anti-Semitism should be condoned as a result, but the debate around it must be conducted in a larger and more nuanced format. An unreflective and hysterical rejection of these more finely tuned interrelationships leads, as the case of *documenta15* illustrates, to a compartmentalization of the debate at the expense of the decolonial movement and, above all, at the expense of the positionality and reality of the former colonized countries and their lived realities.

German debates around questions of anti-Semitism, especially in relation to questions of decolonization, have gone haywire in recent years. There is a kind of populist-hysterical tendency in parts of the political spectrum – going all the way from hard-left ‘Anti-Deutsche’ to center-right neoliberals to, absurdly, radical right-wing trolls – to wield the accusation of anti-Semitism as a blanket smear whenever someone doesn’t fit a fixed worldview. The accusation happily ignores international voices and nuances, including Jewish and Jewish-Israeli ones, effectively

devaluing the allegation where it is appropriate. Significantly, it can also be used to ward off German responsibility for German colonialism. To shoot oneself in the foot, in an environment such as this, does a tragic disservice to the decolonial struggle for acknowledgement and commemoration, and reveals a certain negligence to probe one's own blank spots when it becomes ideologically or politically difficult to do so. One could say that German arrogance about its supposed superiority in *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* ('coming to terms with the past') becomes a distorted mirror, in Kassel, to a kind of globalist embrace—endorsed by the institution—that tends to palliatively romanticize the ideological pitfalls of the global anti-imperialist left of the twentieth century (Heiser 2022).

Documenta15, especially the curatorial direction under *ruangrupa*, has tried to give more space to the perspective of the Global South within the art exhibition through a collective-promoting approach, but the debate around the anti-Semitism accusations has shown that the Global North always consumes these perspectives first and foremost from its own 'overruling' position as well as projecting its own political views onto what is shown (You 2022). In principle, a classification of subject matter into one's own worldview is not fundamentally objectionable; moreover, it is human, but the perspective of the Global North must still be viewed in the context of its colonial power and constructed superiority and never as a neutral perspective. In the case of documenta15, the response from both sides was inadequate, according to many critics, especially in the larger setting of the debate. Smirnov argues that the conflict cited here within and around documenta15, which he describes as a central site for decolonial sensibility in art institutions, that the dialogue between German memory politics and ambiguous artifacts of formerly colonized nations will not be an easy one in the tangible future. The fatal thing, however, is that the mutual insensitivity led to no constructive discussion, and instead both sides rigidly adhered to their positions, which also congealed the discourse. According to Smirnov, this has particularly fatal consequences, since a more nuanced and sensitive debate around decolonial actions in connection to anti-Semitism and the instrumentalization of these concepts in favor of certain reactionary ideologies would be of great importance to raise (western) awareness, especially with regard to Putin's Russian rhetoric's in the Ukraine war. "Against the backdrop of war in Ukraine, the argument over the partial acceptability of 'decolonial anti-Semitism' in the anti-imperialist struggle may seem structurally similar to Putin's 'decolonial' rhetoric on the need to fight alien influences both within his country and along its borders in the liberation from Western hegemony. Moreover, while Putin's 'decolonization' appears to be an appropriation of progressive discourse by reactionary forces, the documenta curators' indignation points to the possibility that a reactionary argument might be framed as a progressive struggle" (Smirnov 2023). The example of documenta15 in comparison with Russia's war in Ukraine brings to light two arguments in particular: the argument of 'decolonial anti-Semitism' in the context of the anti-imperialist movement and the argument of Putin's 'decolonial' rhetoric in response to the war in Ukraine. When Putin's

supporters advocate the liberation of Russia from what they perceive as Western Jewish liberalism, the concept of decolonization becomes distorted and reminiscent of previous cases of manipulation. Criticism of colonialism sometimes degenerates into idealization of a romanticized, fictionalized representation of indigenous peoples, often leading to a commercialization of identity for voyeuristic purposes (Steyerl 2022). The complexities of colonialism and its influence on different local realities are often overlooked, even by those who advocate decolonialism from the Western side.

Smirnov contends, first, that the debate revolves around the partial recognition of ‘decolonial anti-Semitism’ in the struggle against imperialism and decolonialism. In the case of documenta¹⁵, this implies that some people may choose to argue that certain anti-imperialist actions or statements may inadvertently perpetuate anti-Semitic sentiments or attitudes. The comparison with Putin's ‘decolonial’ rhetoric highlights the similarity in the structure in which he advocates fighting foreign influences to free his country from Western domination. The instrumentalization in the case of Putin's ‘decolonial’ strategy, which seems to hijack progressive ideas in favor of reactionary forces, is particularly essential here. That is, he may be using progressive language or concepts to justify actions that in fact promote conservative or regressive goals. On the other hand, in the case of the anti-Semitism accusations regarding documenta¹⁵, the response of the documenta curators suggests that a reactionary argument (a point of view that opposes progressive change) might be presented or framed as a progressive struggle (a movement that seeks positive change). Overall, attention lies in the complexity of decolonial discourse and the potential manipulation of progressive ideas to serve various ideological purposes.

4.2.3 The contemporary Need for a self-reflective institutional Responsibility

But since in this dissertation I mainly consider the current position and situation of Western European art institutions, I would like to bring back the argumentation to the classification of the Global North from the perspective of the Global South in particular in relation to the connection of art with (anti-)aesthetics and (anti)politics which was also discussed within the case of documenta¹⁵. On the one hand, the Western art world has a tendency to over-theorize and over-categorize works of art from the global South, and on the other hand, it often generalizes the actual singularity of certain works, which sometimes refer to the complexity of an artist's individual life and do not represent their entire culture as the West is used to comprehend. Mi You explores therefore a common tendency in these institutions to oversimplify and misinterpret the relationship between art and culture in the Global South.

Western institutions often assume that art and culture in the Global South are inseparable, neglecting the nuanced distinctions between the two. According to You, they project their own solutions onto the Global South, as if it represents a fundamentally different realm of artistic discourse. In doing so, they don't fully grasp the complexities of art's social function in various Global South contexts (You 2022).

When institutions in the Global North showcase contemporary art from the Global South – sometimes mediated by Global South curators – there is a tendency to abide too readily by the idea that the separation of art and (everyday) culture is completely irrelevant to artistic discourses in the Global South. Projecting the solution to the problem of art's social function on an absolute 'other' creates a convenient shortcut to bypass the issue. Typically, institutional programs take the form of proposing either an immanent synthesis, in which art is defined either in utilitarian terms within a given society, or as a transcendental medium, if not to say a spiritual force that possesses agency within everyday life (see the oversupply of rituals at documenta). Regardless of the form that is emphasized in individual cases, such artworks are presented as fully incommensurable within the logic of autonomous art associated with the Global North, thereby foreclosing any political or even aesthetic critique based on distinctions between art and nonart. At the same time, art from the Global South is not necessarily framed as an intentional and radical counterpoint to depoliticized global art, but rather as integrated social practice, with individual artists and collectives supposedly representing the tenets of 'their culture' (You 2022).

Many Western art institutions are now trying very hard not only to represent the perspective of the global South, but even more to integrate it. However, as You vividly describes, there still seems to be a strong need in the global North to put art and the specific content and narratives associated with it into certain categories. The fatal thing about this is that these categories are based on a Western understanding that is normatively applied to the newly included content of 'the Other' and once again disguised as neutrality, especially within art institutions. Whether the art of the global South is politicized, utilized, ritualized, or transcended in the context of the global North still depends more on how it can best be consumed within the consciousness of the West. Allowing the art, and therefore the artist of 'the Other' its autonomy, for the sake of pure art, hardly ever happens. This is a result of the fact, discussed in a previous chapter, that the potential of 'pure' art is usually only fully attributed to Western, male cis-hetero white (genius) artists, and the art of everyone else is always associated with their deviant markers from this norm. But also the fact that in western art institutions now the perspective of the Global South, the formerly colonized 'the Other', is now integrated, but this perspective is in certain respects never accepted as different and at the same time equal to the Western one. The perspective of 'the Other' is understood and consumed through the Western perspective, whereby 'the Other' still remains 'the Other'. The actual consequences of such a hegemonic meta-perspective, which still disguises the Western understanding as neutral and normal, became tangible in the case of documenta15 and the anti-Semitism debate conducted in Germany:

The German/Western-European attitude of cultural relativization – encountering the mirror of your own history in the form of globally exported German anti-Semitic caricature tropes, for example, and then describing them as non-European quirks – is deeply linked to an impulse of exoticization, and exculpation. Uncritically embracing non-western cultural practices, especially collective, spiritual ones, can easily become the uncanny sibling to German desires of reconstituting the forever discredited notion of a German national ethnic identity, but in disguise. Those engaged in non-western cultural practices need to be keenly aware of this trap (and I do think many are, but such awareness can easily slip). A further complicating factor is German cultural institutions' tendency to present themselves as neutral platforms for global dialogue: [...] (Heiser 2022).

What Jörg Heiser describes here as an attitude of cultural relativization shows how unreflective the Western self-image and perception of others can be. In the debate around anti-Semitism at documenta15, the German narrative has understood the works of the Indonesian artist through German positionality. The latter of course clearly rejects anti-Semitism because of its own charged history. While this reaction is understandable and is not to be judged as wrong per se, it denies on the one hand the artist collective *Taring Padi* politicization of the work within its own Indonesian context which is strongly connected to (German) colonialism and therefore anti-Semitism as an import-product, and on the other hand ignores and relativizes the German colonialist guilt and thereby shifts the entire genesis of anti-Semitism to the foreign 'Other', as it politicizes the artwork only within the German gaze, while one's own responsibility is thus flattened and the liability is exoticized and thus shifted away from oneself to the outside. This unequal meeting of two positionalities, however, is not reprehensible but basically something positively desirable, because only through the contact of different contexts and perspectives, an understanding for a position outside one's own can be formed. But why does this often not succeed? Because as mentioned by Heiser, (Western) art institutions often present themselves as a neutral platform in such global dialogues, even though they usually occupy a certain position simply by virtue of their specific locality and the resulting fact that the employees who shape the discourses within such institutions also inhabit this locally situated position. By presenting themselves as neutral, however, they also allow the Western situated narrative to exist as neutral, as the norm within them.

On the basis of documenta15, the blind spot within postcolonial theory on the part of the global North and such a positionality can be established. In his article in *Die Zeit* "Context is king, except the German one" ["Kontext ist König, außer der deutsche"] from 2022, German artist Hito Steyerl describes, that while postcolonial theory states that everything in the world must be locally situated and historically contextualized, Western institutions often turn a blind eye to such a situating themselves (Steyerl 2022). Heiser and Steyerl both criticize the exoticization of postcolonial theories and the West consuming them as theory imports. This is shown by the fact that anti-Semitism around the artworks in question in the case of documenta15 was clearly

situated outside of German-colonial responsibility. At the same time, both authors object the lack of public contextualization of the founding history of documenta itself, as one of the co-founders Werner Haftmann was a Nazi war criminal (Heiser 2022, Steyerl 2022). Heiser quotes Steyerl in his text in regard to documenta's contested history as she, “[...] discusses the blind spots of a German institution that has yet to come to terms with the fact that it was co-founded by a Nazi. Steyerl thus described the spectrum of German projections and blind spots, but also those spots of a postcolonial theory in which ‘everything needs to be situated and contextualized, unless it takes place in Germany’” (Heiser 2022, [Steyerl 2022]). This lack of reflection on one's own past runs through many Western art institutions and museums. Still to this day the West, and especially Europe and its former colonial powers, portray themselves as the locus of the contemporary global and ‘world art’ while their own present and past are skillfully ignored: what remains is a performed neutral ground on which the rest of the world can be negotiated – a process through which Western soft-power¹⁶ continues to profit from (Steyerl 2022). The art, which thematizes topics such as migration, racism or anti-Semitism, is exhibited in a context abstracted from the Western world, whereby the realities are either only recognized on the level of art or are always located in a foreign realpolitik. The institutions of the West, so also documenta, remain neutral and untouched by these realities. Having a blind spot to one's own identity shaping history (in the position of the western colonial sphere), including its implications and privileges, conversely also means a resulting blind spot to the effects of this ignorance on the reality of the lives of people who are discriminated against by this position. Here I would like to refer again to the tremendous exhaustion explained in the previous chapter by Bonaventure Soh Bejeng Ndikung, which results from the struggle with such daily experienced ignorance and discrimination, also in the allegedly ‘diversified museum life’. Superiority can only come at the price of the inferior, and (deliberately) overlooking this promotes the coloniality of power in every sphere. Moreover, the appointment of the *ruangrupa* curatorial group shifted the curatorial and discursive power of one of the most important contemporary art exhibitions from the constructed center to the periphery. Gregory Sholette thus describes the harsh reaction of anti-Semitism as a hidden pretext to deny future attempts of such peripheral inclusions. “Which is to say that in light of *ruangrupa*'s ethno-political and collectivist curatorial methodology, it feels important to entertain the possibility that the shadow

16 “A country's soft power rests on its resources of culture, values and politics. Soft power is the ability to affect others to obtain the outcomes one want through attraction rather than to coercion or payment. [...] A country may obtain the outcomes it wants in world politics because other countries want to follow it, admiring its values, emulating its example, and/or aspiring to its level of prosperity and openness. In this sense, it is important to set the agenda and attract others in world politics, ad not only to force them to change through threat or use of military or economic weapons [=hard power]” (Nye 2008, 94-95).

of antisemitism is really serving a hostile art world, the German liberal press, and far-right racist ideologues as a default justification for condemning this experiment in total” (Sholette 2022). The artist Hito Steyerl already criticized this lack of self-thematization in the course of the documenta11 which also took place in Kassel in 2002. She was asked in advance to send in a work for viewing, which she did. Her work addressed a case of severe anti-Semitism within Germany, in which a Jewish family was subjected to decades of threats and harassment by German neo-Nazis and an arson attack. Her work was rejected by the exhibition without any comment, and although Steyerl still praised the documenta11 curated by Okwui Enwezor¹⁷ for its nuanced and fascinating discussions, she criticized the exhibition's somewhat hypocritical minority rhetoric. The reason for her criticism was the absence of those artists who specifically addressed *German* racism and migration in their work. “Germany did not appear as a setting for the manifold global conflicts that were at the center of documenta11”¹⁸ (Steyerl 2022). The fact that racism, anti-Semitism, and all other forms of discrimination are part of the daily reality of life for many people in Germany was not in focus. An appeal to the global that was as abstracted as possible largely replaced an examination of Germany's present and past. The postcolonial was extracted from Germany and vice versa, and thus the postcolonial debate within the documenta11 took place without an overall social confrontation with the real-life situation of German minorities (Steyerl 2022). The lack of recognition of own grievances of Western countries and the recognition of responsibility towards them also in relation to colonialism and its existing effects is all too often also reflected in the institutes of these countries. Thus, it was not the documenta itself that made its own founding history the subject of publicity, but the German Historical Museum (DHM) which dedicated an exhibition to this subject. Thus it was the Nazi Werner Haftmann who decisively shaped the academic branding of the documenta, which was to stand for the West, modernity, and ‘world art’. In the discourse surrounding documenta, Haftmann's original concept of the world art was increasingly replaced over the decades by postmodern discourses on globalization and themes of liberal diversity and inclusion. However, observing these processes, Steyerl suggests that only through the DHM exhibition a shift in the perception of documenta has taken place, both from the outside and the inside.

17 Okwui Enwezor curated documenta11 (2002), widely regarded as a significant exhibition due to its postcolonial approach and global dispersion of art. Enwezor challenged the idea of an exclusive North Atlantic avant-garde, embracing a diffused curatorship by collaborating with a team of contributors, a departure from the traditional model. His appointment also broke from the convention of exclusively West European directors for documenta (Gardner and Green 2017).

18 Translation by the author, original: „Deutschland kam als Schauplatz der mannigfaltigen globalen Konflikte, die im Zentrum der documenta11 standen, nicht vor (Steyerl 2022)“.

There is also a turning point in relation to documenta: before the DHM exhibition and after. Perhaps curator teams could claim beforehand not to have to deal with the documenta's past: Their job, after all, is to define contemporary art, not to study history. It may also still be true that documenta represents the world as such and can therefore safely ignore the local situation. But since the DHM exhibition, it is also true that if the exhibition itself ignores its history, then it is historicized by others. And that means that the documenta is the object of this investigation, just as "the world" has been the object of a (West) German documenta gaze up to now. If it wants to continue to be relevant, it would be well advised to reevaluate its naive claim to world standing through the prism of its own history. However, this would require a team that is at all capable of or interested in taking on this challenge. Otherwise, instead of making history, it will become history itself¹⁹ (Steyerl 2022).

Steyerl addresses a situation in which many Western, and thus also European, art museums and institutions currently find themselves and at the same time offers part of a possible solution. We are in a time where larger parts of society are recognizing and addressing the blind spots of Western institutions, especially those regarding their own genesis. This recognition is largely based on the educational work that experts, activists, artists, and other representatives of Black Lives Matter, LGBTQIA+, feminist, indigenous, migrant, and other communities are doing in society. As Steyerl describes, we are at a point where, in escaping one's own contested institutional history, it is addressed, historicized, contextualized, and classified from the outside. Due to their lethargy regarding their own self-reflection, museums are more and more in a crisis driven by the justified criticism of these procedures. The crisis arises from the fact that purely moving forward in the direction of diversification without truly engaging with the historical foundations of Western institutions is being unmasked as hypocritical. Engaging with one's past as a Western art museum does not have to be a stagnant practice or a self-defeating one. Such an approach can be one of the most progressive and sustainable of all, as a disclosure and awareness of the colonialist or discriminatory past of an institution and/or its founders is much more likely to allow for a forward movement into an actual decolonial future than the ignorance of it that remains lingering like a dark cloud over the entire institutional practice. Museums, therefore, could use this moment as an opportunity to move from an authoritarian and dishonestly performatively neutral position to an honest and caring one if, as, for example, suggested by Hito Steyerl, money, personnel, and resources would be invested in the reappraisal

19 Translation by the author, original: „Auch in Bezug auf die documenta gibt es eine Zeitenwende: vor der DHM-Ausstellung und danach. Vielleicht konnten Kurator:innenteams vorher in Anspruch nehmen, sich nicht mit der Vergangenheit der documenta auseinandersetzen zu müssen: Ihre Aufgabe ist schließlich die Definition von Gegenwartskunst, nicht die Geschichtswissenschaft. Möglicherweise gilt auch weiterhin, dass die documenta die Welt als solche darstellt und die lokale Situation daher getrost ignorieren kann. Aber seit der DHM-Ausstellung gilt auch: Wenn die Ausstellung selbst ihre Geschichte ignoriert, dann wird sie von anderen historisiert. Und das bedeutet, dass die documenta der Gegenstand dieser Untersuchung ist, so wie bislang "die Welt" das Objekt eines (west-)deutschen documenta-Blicks war. Wenn sie weiterhin Relevanz haben will, wäre sie gut beraten, den naiven Anspruch auf Weltgeltung durch das Prisma ihrer eigenen Geschichte neu zu bewerten. Dazu bräuhete es jedoch ein Team, das überhaupt in der Lage wäre oder Interesse daran hat, diese Herausforderung anzunehmen. Anstatt Geschichte zu schreiben, wird sie sonst selbst Geschichte“ (Steyerl 2022).

and deconstruction of their own institutional (historical) meaning with all its implications. Money is particularly significant here, because whether the institution is funded publicly, privately, or both, any financial resources are always granted based on an ulterior agenda. Like Ivakhiv's focus on capitalism in conjunction with democracy in the question surrounding Ukraine's and Russia's claims to decolonization, this argument can be transferred from the state level to the institutional level as well. If institutions want to move into a self-reflexive practice, they must change from an authoritarian to a democratic position, whereby democracy also has to be decolonized at certain points. Democracy, as already explained by Ivakhiv, can keep capitalism in check, yet the voices heard by democracy have to get more inclusive towards positions outside the white, male Western one. This means that in museums and art institutions, there must be a change not only within the structures of these spaces but also at the level above, which determines the financial resources. This level should be democratized and diversified first and foremost, as well as the level of the museum staff and curators and that of the artists (Ivakhiv 2022). While these high, powerful political positions can achieve the most radical changes in terms of democratization and decoloniality in the form of funding and policies, the reality is that they are often far beyond the reach of cultural creators' capacity for actual empowerment.

Mi You therefore claims that: "Emancipatory politics could be possible even under compromised funding conditions if one is articulate about one's own politics" (You 2022). By declaring this, You puts the responsibility back in the hands of the respective institutions. Furthermore, moving away from the purely institutional, she speaks of a progressively recognizable 'ecosystemic turn' within organizational and curatorial practices. The term 'ecosystemic turn' refers to a shift or transformation within the art world in which the focus moves from individual artists and traditional art objects to a more networked and collaborative approach that resembles an ecosystem. "There is a recognizable ecosystemic turn in organizational and curatorial practices today. Ecosystems strive to structurally integrate different 'stakeholders' including artists, audiences, and their wider communities, administrators, and curators, as well as infrastructures. [...] By enumerating the different actors within the field of art, ecosystem thinking is supposed to help adjust and improve the system. Concretely, however, it is often aimed at a more or less comfortable form of artistic survival in places lacking the appropriate infrastructure" (You 2022). In the context of documenta15, the 'ecosystemic turn' is exemplified through the curatorial approach of *ruangrupa* and by highlighting collectives from the global South. These collectives, born out of necessity and responding to political and social alienation within Western institutionalism, operate at the

intersection of activism, art, and social work. They engage in collaborative ventures, such as raising funds, supporting their members' living expenses, and building infrastructure.

At the heart of documenta fifteen was a curatorial concept striving for the construction of collectivities and new forms of self-organization. Such experiments and reconfigurations do not occur in a vacuum. They have blossomed, admittedly on a smaller scale, under such monikers as 'infrastructure critique,' 'para-institutions,' 'translocal organizations,' 'alter-institutional and para-institutional organizations,' and 'instituent practices.' Yet the flourishing of these concepts raises an intriguing question: Does the organizational become an end in itself, a kind of institutional self-actualization of the artists, curators, and community organizers? Are we entering an era in which artistic curatorial practices are merged into organizational development, or even entrepreneurship (You2022)?

The self-organization of cultural collectives can thus, in a sense, also be seen as an institutional critique, which can network in a translocal way in order to operate in its own system through the creation of new networks, thereby simultaneously protesting against the existing systems at the same time. However, even these ecosystemic collectives do not exist in a vacuum but within a world of business and entrepreneurship based on capital. The relationship that contemporary art, artists, and institutions have with the economy has long been an ambiguous and elusive one. In a 2020 text by Gary Zhexi Zhang titled "The Artist of the Future", the author questions the emergence of new models of artistic agency that blur the boundaries between art, business, and consulting. Zhang raises the question of the extent to which artists can challenge the status quo without being appropriated by existing power structures. "It's no secret that the utopian impulse of contemporary art has long found itself alternatively seduced and repelled by the efficacy of business" (Zhang 2020). Contemporary art has been both attracted to and repelled by the influence of business and capitalism. Business plays a significant role in organizing society and determining values, something art has struggled to achieve. Western contemporary art, unable to effectively challenge or acknowledge power structures, finds itself dependent on wealthy patrons while simultaneously engaging in critiques of them. The autonomy and political identification cherished by art have become a refuge that paradoxically legitimizes its co-option by the same powers it criticizes (Zhang 2020).

At documenta15, where the collective *ruangrupa* initiated an ecosystemic turn based on the sustainable involvement of many local (Indonesian) initiatives, funding was widely distributed to those participating collectives. In reality, however, it was still the institution of documenta behind it that imposed certain rules and conditions on the distribution of funds. This sustainable approach therefore partly failed because, although the money was available for the collectives and individual invited by *ruangrupa*, it also had to be spent within the framework of documenta.

Most importantly, it needed to be spent within the documenta framework, which meant that artists ended up inviting their friends and colleagues to put on 'something' at documenta. By spreading the money too thin, what was heralded as collective self-empowerment was reduced to an assemblage of small gestures. The contacts between the invited artists, their peers, and the

audience often did not amount to anything resembling a learning experience worthy of the name. The back end of a biennial is still the back end of a biennial, and those in the South should know that the resources of this back end run downstream.²⁰ While attempts to rethink the economy of biennials and to reconfigure their organizational structure are not only welcome but overdue, at the end of the day, redistributing downstream from a fixed-use pot will not affect, let alone threaten, the status quo in the art world (You 2022).

What You highlights here is the fact that the endeavors of *ruangrupa* might go beyond the spheres of what is considered the art world, yet they are still influenced by its pull. The contemporary western art sphere tends to collapse serious societal endeavors into speculative narratives that need to be presentable for a short-term audience. This example shows again that an institutional critique can only really work sustainably if the systems of the institution behind it are also willing to transform along with it. When funding is used to build new infrastructure and promote external political agendas, collectivity is perceived and portrayed as a symbol of difference. As collectives become institutionalized, their ability to create infrastructure despite limited resources is seen as valuable, serving as examples to be studied, pathways to escape Western alienation, and proxies for political activism. However, the specific contexts in which collectives originate play a crucial role, adding pressure to this paradigm. *Ruangrupa's* model openly acknowledges the political motives behind institutional funding structures and how they influence the reception of supported work, aiming to challenge them (Thomas 2022). The ecosystemic turn that *ruangrupa* initiated still had to operate within the existing system with all its rules of documenta, whereby neither the new approaches of the curatorial collective could really be implemented effectively nor did it bring the audience a sustainable connection to the artists' content. You also goes on to argue that making the political struggles of the art the sole focus can lead to complacency, especially when the real politics are happening somewhere else entirely. However, such matters are by no means unique to the structures of documenta but are also generally found in Western art institutions in connection with the capitalist side of the cultural world.

What this decolonial argumentation shows in relation to documenta15 and the 'Decolonial Scandal in Art' and also in connection with the situation of Russia's war in Ukraine is that (Western) decolonial thinking on the one hand needs to be expanded and nuanced within the

20 In the context of the art world, downstream operations refer to the stages of the art market and distribution process that occur after the creation of an artwork by the artist. These downstream operations involve various activities that aim to promote, sell, and distribute the artwork to collectors, galleries, art fairs, museums, and ultimately to art enthusiasts and buyers. Downstream operations in the art world play a critical role in determining the commercial success and visibility of an artist's work. The successful management of downstream operations is crucial for artists to gain recognition, establish a market presence, and achieve financial success in the art world. However, it's essential to balance the commercial aspects with maintaining the integrity of the art and the artist's creative vision (Prinz 2022).

art world in order to understand local complexities outside the Western decolonial gaze, and on the other hand, it also must not remain stuck only in the spheres of art, theory, and knowledge but be brought into the multifaceted present. Moreover, decolonization can be thought of from various positions in a distinctive way; what is important here is that different power dynamics also clash within these positions. Therefore, “Contemporary decolonization necessarily includes the consciousness of the decolonized” (Sminrov 2022).

In the example of the anti-Semitism outrage at documenta15, the consciousness of the decolonized was brought into the presence of the exhibition but not fully accepted as soon as the position of the German cultural landscape turned its eyes only to the anti-Semitic elements of specific works. And although the reaction of rejecting any anti-Semitic reproductions is understandable and not wrong by any means, the contextualization of the works through the absolute dismissal within the German-positioned discourse has led to the denial of the more complex lived realities related to German colonialism and the anti-imperialist struggle of peoples from Indonesia, and in this regard, anti-Semitism must be understood as an imported product of the German colonial past in this specific situation. Against the backdrop of the war in Ukraine, the argument about the partial accommodation of ‘decolonial anti-Semitism’ in the anti-imperialist struggle arguably might seem structurally similar to Putin's ‘decolonial’ rhetoric about the need to fight foreign influences both within his country and along its borders in order to free himself from Western hegemony (Smirnov 2023). This illustrates that arguments of decolonialism may be instrumentalized and actually used for reactionary forces under the pretext of progressiveness. Generally speaking, the revolt against hegemonic structures can be observed in so many states and at so many levels within societies and consciousnesses, all depending on different positionalities and originating from different causes. In the case of contemporary Russia, “[...], the regime is instrumentalizing the “voice of decoloniality” as part of a military campaign of imperial conquest. Ukraine is seen as an external hegemon’s “internal” locus, from whose power Russia has obsessively wanted to free itself for so long. Elements of imperial and decolonial ideologies are woven together into an irrational combination of geocultural neurosis that turns into military-political psychosis” (Smirnov 2023). Putin and his supporters perceive Ukraine as influenced by Western ideas, promoting ‘decolonization’ as a way to cleanse both Ukraine and Russia from external influences. In order to deal with such ambiguities, Smirnov appeals to take the discourse around decolonization not only out of the past but also to question whether it is really an objective historical process as we so often treat it – therefore moving from decolonization into decoloniality. Such a shift in

the treatment of the topic could have also helped in the discourse around documenta15 to generate a more nuanced debate around this sensitive topic, in which both sides could have learned from each other's positionality through mutual listening. But what would it mean to no longer see the process of decolonization as an objective historical process? Here, one can ask to what extent decolonization is a 'natural process'. Colonization is not a natural but a man-made phenomenon; does the same apply retroactively to decolonization? In the entangled world of globalization, decolonization does not simply happen as a naturally historical process but must be actively driven by people, which in turn means that behind every decolonial action there is still a human agency, and therefore it can be instrumentalized and radicalized in a potentially negative way, as in Putin's case. Therefore, to see decolonization as a straightforward process of progression can lead to overlooking and misinterpreting its complexities and paradoxes. This thesis holds that decolonization, while not a purely natural process, does not simultaneously mean that decolonization cannot and must not, in some sense, be an inevitable process at the same time. Because in reality, these processes can come up against different choices and possibilities that often make them seem confusing but should not make them any less necessary. Moreover, taking decolonization out of the static past and out of the pure Global South versus Global North can lead to a more comprehensive approach to progressing *decoloniality* also within Western art museums.

Therefore, the discussion about the Ukraine war is not just about decolonial aspirations and its ambiguities; it's a moment of defining agency in the present. This moment in which Russia and Ukraine are situated right now, and with them especially Europe but even more the whole world, is a moment of drifting apart, of displacement, of loss and withdrawal. Russia wants to deprive Ukraine of its own nationhood and thus of its culture. However, Russia, and particularly those inhabitants of the country who do not agree with the war of aggression, also experiences a deprivation of (cultural) freedom through the applied sanctions. Though, while it is important to take the debate around colonialism and decolonial approaches beyond the artistic spheres, it is also precisely this moment of presentness in which art institutions can enter into a capacity for active (political) agency with regard to cultural responsibilities and can foster closeness or emphasize a necessary resistance enacted through separation. Researcher Ewa Sulek, in a conversation organized by *post presents*²¹, titled: "Art, Resistance, and New Narratives in Response to the War in Ukraine", mentioned her emerging understanding of the war as colonial,

21 "post presents is a series of talks devoted to the cross-geographical consideration of modern and contemporary art. The sessions are an extension of post, MoMA's online platform devoted to art from a global perspective. *post presents: Art, Resistance, and New Narratives in Response to the War in Ukraine* was co-organized with the Polish Cultural Institute New York and co-sponsored by the James Gallery at CUNY. Promotional support was provided by the Ukrainian Research Institute at Harvard University" (The Museum of Modern Art New York 2023) .

as all imperialist and colonial powers aim to deny the subject its subjectivity. Such a denial exercised by Russia has in reality influenced Ukrainian history and culture for centuries, but has now come into the global field of vision pivoting in the violent act of war but can now be used as a tool of subversion. Yet, for such a transformation it needs a clear demarcation of the artistic and academic work of Ukrainian studies in separation to the Russian (Sulek 2023 [2022]). So the reaction of contemporary western art institutions to what Bart De Baere describes in his 2022 published text “Whatever the Future Will Be, It Is Made Now” as “[...] not only a humanitarian, geopolitical and economic earthquake of the greatest magnitude, it is also a cultural catastrophe” is one that can strongly influence the cultural perceptions of the actors both internally and externally, through the choices of representations (De Baere 2022). The situation thus requires a positioning of Western art institutions which, through the allocation of their representation spaces, either intend to nourish the Ukrainian demarcation and re-subjectification or to try to nurture a wished for closeness through the construction of cultural bridges between Russia and Ukraine - or to position themselves by containing a reaction in ignorance. However, Western art institutions must also be cautious of their own point of view, which includes Ukraine as "other" and a colonial gaze perpetrated by both Russia and the West. It is a moment in which the reaction of contemporary Western art institutions should be observed as it is able to shift the discourse in multiple directions and therefore a moment of decolonial potential. Exhibiting Ukrainian artists who describe their country's history and identity in opposition to the Russian perspective is essential right now and is a decolonial act (Sulek 2023 [2022]). Here again, it is necessary to note whether the inclusion of Ukrainian artists is a temporary tokenistic one, or a persistent and nuanced one that co-positions itself with the transferring situatedness. Art has an inherently political potential, and artists must address their role in a world marked by real wars and a commitment to humanity. So do the institutions that give these artists a space. The representation of Ukrainian and Russian artists is a balancing act of presence that not only reacts but acts between the nourishment of Ukrainian identity and the differentiation between the Russia that attacks Ukraine and the Russia that abhors this attack and too experiences a massive cultural loss through the war (De Baere 2022). Moreover, it is important not only to consider how the Western institutional cultural landscape is reacting to the war in Ukraine, but also to put this reaction in relation to reactions to other humanitarian crises, such as those in the Middle East.

A consideration of the decolonial process in terms of its humanity might generate within Western art institutions an understanding of more local nuances and individual as well as

collective complexities that take place outside of their own consciousness and therefore open up their blind spots. Also, towards one's own humanly constructed pasts within Western nations and their institutions means having an awareness of history, not ignoring it for fear of guilt, but honestly addressing it for what it was and thus coming to a greater realism in their own practice. The gap between what institutions think they are doing with their practices and the actual impact they have on their audiences and on society is often wide this is partly due to the lack of self-transparency with regard to monetary dependencies.

5 Summary of current Positionalities and how we got there

On the basis of the examples given in the last chapters, I wanted to try not only to draw a picture of the approximate status quo of Western and especially European art institutions and museums, but also to depict the current contemporary historical situation in which they are situated right now and how they got there eventually. Of course, this picture is not complete, since both on the part of the individual art institutions as well as the specific societal, historical, and political circumstances in which they find themselves, there are countless other aspects and factors that are not discussed here, whose complete investigation is far beyond my possibilities within the framework of this thesis. What hopefully became clear, however, is that museums, as an original product of colonialism, are not neutral witnesses of time independent of political and social influences, and art history is not a neutral representation of the best art and most talented artists, but both are constructed matters infused with power and influenced by specific positions. Initially, laying the groundwork for the subsequent deconstruction of the museum as a colonial fact involves examining the historical connections between colonization and the genesis of museums, with a specific emphasis on Western hegemonic influences. Through the analysis of how museums, from their origins during the so-called 'Age of Discovery' Enlightenment and modernity, have played a pivotal role in constructing and perpetuating the Eurocentric narrative of colonial powers as cultured and superior, while portraying colonized nations as the inferior 'Other'. Museums achieved this through various mechanisms, including the use of language, textual narratives, and the presentation of an apparently neutral standpoint that obscured their constructed nature. They also preserved this narrative by displaying looted objects from colonized regions, often stripping these artifacts of their original contexts and recontextualizing them within Western collections. The growing critique of Western institutionalism in recent years, driven primarily by activists and experts of decolonial practice, often finds its essence in the fact that more and more people recognize that these sites are not neutral sites but continue to operate as if they were, thus creating the notion of a dishonest and often damaging practice of misrepresentation based on the coloniality of power and an imposed authority.

Two of the first moments in recent Western art history in which the effects of these unequal power effects became clear within exhibitions produced in Western institutions were *Primitivism* and *Magiciens de la Terre*. These exhibitions are still considered monumental for a first shift towards a rethinking within and around Western art history and the ongoing making of it, as they mainly revealed its shortcomings. The reason for this was that in both exhibitions, for one of the first times, the works of Western, largely European artists were exhibited alongside the works of artists from the global South, and through this encounter, it became

clearly visible that, on the one hand, the contextualization of the works within the politics of the opposition was clearly formed in favor of the hegemonic position of the West. This was particularly evident in the exhibition *Primitivism*, in which the art of artists celebrated as geniuses in the West, such as Gauguin, Picasso, or Matisse, was juxtaposed with the tribal objects of nameless indigenous creators from Africa, Oceania, and North America, which were often not even intended as works of art and especially not for western consumption, thus reinforcing the positioning of Europe as the cradle of culture in contrast to the position of the global South as primitive savages within the Western narrative. *Magiciens de la Terre*, on the other hand, intended to avoid these mistakes of primitivizing those artists coming from outside Europe and putting them on an equal footing with those coming from the West, but here, too, an awareness was lacking that the Western position with its conditionalities (founded in colonialism) can never constitute a neutral ground on which such an equalization can function. Nevertheless, this exhibition was an important moment because it made precisely these blind spots of Western consciousness, and even more so of the contemporary art world, visible and made their effects tangible. The denial of the potential for modernity of the global South coupled with the fact that Western artists found themselves in a context created for them while the artists of the global South found themselves in a context working against them, showed the pervasive imbalance of power of these constructed frameworks within the Western art institution. For centuries, the West has postulated itself as the center of its self-image and, by implication, made everything and everyone outside of it the periphery. An exchange between these two spheres is not balanced as long as this fundamental relationship is not actively and tangibly deconstructed. A deconstruction, in turn, requires much less force if the center deconstructs itself as such. This is exactly where art museums and institutions could start. The first step should be recognizing and accepting one's own positionality, which can be achieved by incorporating the actual locality and its implications that are present by default as a first step. Art museums want to keep up with the zeitgeist, which nowadays means incorporating globalized structures into their practice, but the effects of ignoring the actual specificities of the locality of an institution in favor of a desired globality can be seen in the example of the Guggenheim Bilbao.

The Guggenheim-complex and its construction into a global brand with its basis in the US under Thomas Krens have oriented themselves more than many other Western art institutions to the globalized market and have therefore partly put the needs of the market before the needs of the local structures; this has resulted in (at least) monetary success. The Guggenheim Bilbao, more specifically Krens, has impressively demonstrated that an art museum, if only designed attractively enough, has the power to enhance an entire region and turn it into a tourist magnet.

However, it has also shown that such a revaluation has a price: it has been paid above all by the local art community of the Basque through the loss of artistic and cultural self-determination. The example of the Guggenheim Bilbao also shows that museums have such authority that operates beyond the limits of coloniality and power, and that even within a purely Western power dynamic, through the means of visibility and representativeness, they can determine and shape artistic relevance in a lasting way. Moreover, every art museum, and even more so its director and funder, has an agenda. In the case of the Guggenheim Bilbao, Thomas Krens' agenda was to make the museum a success among the audience, preferring spectacular exhibitions to a more sustainable practice that would be profitable for local artists. This was demonstrated by the fact that Basque artists Eduardo Chillida and Jorge Orteiza, who were both internationally celebrated artists in the global space, were suddenly relegated to the status of 'merely' local artists in their own home region through the Guggenheim Bilbao's foreign affiliation as a US institution. Thus, they were promptly repositioned within the Western art context through the authority of the Guggenheim, thereby deciding whether or not they were 'worthy' of a global audience. Hence, the Guggenheim brand suddenly had the power to decide where art and culture should be located, which artists could be positioned in this location, and how. The actual spatiotemporal location in the Basque city of Bilbao was placed behind the discursive cultural locus of the Guggenheim, placing the visitor not in a local but in a global museum. The study of the Guggenheim complex, with its modern cultural imperialism and its impact on local structures, reveals not only the discursive cultural authority such a site can have but also brings to the surface the commercial aspects based on the need for spectacle that permeate the entire art world but are often skillfully ignored. In capitalist Western society, art is no longer produced and exhibited just for the sake of art but also for the sake of money. Thomas Krens understood this notion and used it for himself and the Guggenheim brand; the region and the people of Bilbao also benefited financially from this marketing. The Guggenheim Bilbao is by no means a failure, yet its indifference to local cultural nuances is something that, in its practice, also makes this institution an authoritarian power that confronts its location with a kind of superiority, creating an unequal power dynamic. The recognition, or rather the lack of it, of art museums and institutions towards their locality is a dynamic that the Guggenheim, which represents a rather particular case of the satellite institution that came to Bilbao from outside and is also governed from this position, but also institutions that originated within a region and nation, should deal with. The context of the locality constitutes the fundamental position in which an institution is located and therefore also positions all the contents that are mediated to the visitor through the art site. This positionality of the locality

interacts with the positionality of the artists and their art and with the positionality of the visitors. When a museum in France exhibits the art of an artist from Algeria (a former French colony), two charged positionalities meet and require the positioning of the mediator, as there are still power dynamics that are not simply neutralized within a museum. If the mediator does not comply with this positioning, it does not simply dissolve but unwillingly falls on the artist, whose art is then forcibly positioned in contrast and often even more in protest to its locality, and other aspects of the individual artistic work fall into the background.

Above all, if a museum is to implement a decolonial practice, it must first of all decolonize itself. Otherwise, not only the artists but also all other staff members who are hired or invited for such activities are situated in a dishonest environment that can harm them, as Bonaventure Soh Bejeng Ndikung describes in his essay “Every Straw Is a Straw Too Much: On the Psychological Burden of Being Racialized While Doing Art”. He describes how, especially in the Western art world, which often perceives itself as very liberal and progressive, systematic racism is omnipresent yet often not addressed or even denied by the white majority working in art institutions precisely because of their claim to progressiveness. The fear of being racist keeps institutions from being actively anti-racist. However, structural racism must be actively combated; otherwise, it simply lives on systemically. This is evident in art institutions through the sometimes ‘unconscious’ exploitation of the labor of People of Color who are invited as experts, activists, curators, artists, or otherwise by contemporary museums to address the issues around racism, colonialism, and other discrimination, and yet most of the credit and profit go to the institution and not to the people doing the actual work. Such an approach may seem to diversify museum practice, but if the institution is more concerned with staying 'trendy' as attention to the Black Lives Matter Movement and its demands for change have increased significantly since 2020 with the murder of George Floyd, rather than sustainably addressing structural grievances and racism within society but also within their own walls, then one cannot truly speak of a decolonial practice but rather a dishonest one. But it is not only inwardly directed that such a dishonest approach can emerge, but moreover, when art institutions try to reach diverse communities while not deconstructing their own authority that is sustained by the coloniality of power. Even though People of Color are now more often hired for public program positions and these types of mediations, they are often only able to perform their role within the existing power structures of the institution, which in turn can retroactively harm the People of Color working in this function, as Ndikung describes through what he calls the ‘outreach complex’. Ndikung elaborates the ‘outreach complex’ in several points, but all of them are

based on the fact that the museum or institution demands from the outreachers an integration of those people and social groups into a place and structure that was never intended for them and even more excluded, oppressed, and degraded them through misrepresentation. Thus, it often happens that the outreachers have to promote programs that still operate within the structures of white supremacy and are far from the lived realities of the communities they are trying to reach. At the same time, outreachers are given little or no authority as well as inadequate funding to change or shape these programs, while at the same time they are often held accountable if the institution behind them is criticized for its discriminatory practices, while they are simultaneously used as figureheads and tokens for diversification by the latter. People of Color and people from former colonies and the diaspora still have to struggle to be heard and seen within these institutions while the museum continues to pretend to operate as a neutral ground and thus withdraws from its own accountability while at the same time continuously serving the racist system. Of course, combating systemic racism requires a shift in Western society that goes beyond the walls of art museums into politics, education, and the media. The recent riots in France have shown how much Europe still functions within a system of discrimination that fundamentally disadvantages people with a migrant background, especially People of Color. To combat systemic oppression, systemic countermeasures are needed, such as the affirmative action rule in the US, which has enabled college admissions to actively consider race in their decision-making, effectively pushing the admission of People of Color especially in Ivy League colleges. Certainly, such a regulation fights the symptom rather than the cause of systemic racism, but such policies can create lasting ripple effects by increasing the number of People of Color who attend reputable colleges and, in turn, have a greater chance of operating in decision-making positions that can bring about political and social change. Therefore, the recent overturning of the affirmative action ruling by the Supreme Court is seen by many liberal forces as a significant step backwards, since contrary to the conservative argument, it does not restore equal opportunity for all college applicants but instead, by supposedly being more impartial and neutral, does nothing to counteract the pervasive racist system allowing it to remain in operation. Western institutionalism, regardless of whether it is a matter of education, political administration, or the church, is permeated by white patriarchal power structures, which are largely a legacy of the colonial era. All these institutions are not neutral and therefore cannot behave in such a way when striving for decolonial and de-patriarchal practices, especially not towards themselves. They must take a stand on their own colonial structures, which are always interwoven with specific national structures, and position themselves honestly in relation to them. Otherwise, any inclusion of

individuals and groups of individuals who have been excluded and oppressed by these systems is characterized by superficiality, and they can never establish a full and autonomous and complex representation of their identity and narratives without the demotion imposed by the constructed existing Western hegemony as the universal and 'right' point of view. The impact of such a kind of overwriting through the Western gaze became tangible within the 'Decolonial Scandal in Art' described by Nikolay Smirnov within and around the documenta15 exhibition. The documenta is considered one of the most important contemporary art exhibitions, not only because it promotes a global cultural exchange on a grand scale but also due to the fact that in the course of this format, new exhibition approaches and concepts are carried out in a more fluid way, representing a strong alternative to the classical and stagnant Western institutionalism within museums. When the Indonesian collective *ruangrupa* took over the curatorial direction of the last edition of documenta15 in 2022, their exhibition principle, which was based on creating sustainable infrastructures based on collaboration and community-building that would reach beyond art through matters of activism into society, was overshadowed by discussions around anti-Semitic accusations. However, according to Smirnov, this anti-Semitism scandal should be seen on a meta-level as a decolonial scandal. Germany is undoubtedly a very sensitive area as far as anti-Semitic actions and statements are concerned. There is no question that a reproduction of such ideological content should be rejected. Nevertheless, the discursive reaction, especially in the German media, with its harsh and complete rejection, has closed its eyes to the more complex realities of those people and their artistic work outside of the German-context, where anti-Semitism was considered a product of the German colonial period around Indonesia, and thus Germany has also (one could say conveniently) dodged the discussion around its colonial responsibility. Here, two different positionalities met, which interpreted the shown contents differently. Germany saw only the anti-Semitic content in the art and rejected it with great indignation without any further discussion. The Indonesian artists' collective addressed with its content the complex effects of the colonial period and the socio-economic legacies of the colonial states on the realities of their lives, without perhaps having sufficient sensitivity for the implications surrounding the reproduction of anti-Semitic content on German ground. However, such a meeting does not have to end in a scandal, as it happened during documenta15, but can certainly lead to a promotion for the mutual understanding of the positionalities and their intricacies, provided that the exchange is based on a ground of mutual respect, listening, and emphatic mediation. Moreover, such an encounter is even desirable, as only through cultural exchange can the respective other be understood and existing structures of discrimination be deconstructed

together. But why did this not work in documenta15? On the one hand, because this meeting did not take place on neutral ground but within Germany, which therefore (and through the still existing Western hegemony of knowledge) had the discursive superiority and recognized only its own position without room for any nuance,. On the other hand, as a reaction to the accusations, *ruangrupa* and documenta defended themselves but ended up in justifications instead of trying to bring the two positions closer together through empathetic mediation. This would not have been an easy task, of course, since, as mentioned in the previous aspect, Germany was a very hard ground for the fruition of a real dialogue, but it is precisely for such difficult discussions that the realms of art can be an ideal catalyst. The sobering aftermath of the entire situation, however, is above all the fact that Germany successfully avoided a decolonialist introspection, while above all the artists invited from outside, but also the curatorial collective, suffered damage.

Once again, the West has managed to maintain its authority, avoid the recognition of colonialist ownership, and, even more, to continue to exoticize this issue and locate postcolonial theories outside the Western realm. In the course of this 'scandal', the documenta has certainly experienced criticism but will probably emerge unscathed in the long term. It is still on the side of power, even if the curatorial leadership has been handed over to outside collectives and individuals. The authority of the Western institution remains superior, which is also related to the fact that documenta also has to concede (deliberate) blind spots to its own past in connection with a National Socialist founder, which were probably not transparently addressed out of its own motivation for fear of losing precisely that authority. This brings us back to the unfair starting position of artists and cultural workers who are identified as 'marked' in the Western world if institutions do not confront their own past and pass on the resulting implications to them in order to keep a clean slate. In the case of documenta as an example for western institutions that want to stay in relevant in the zeitgeist, this also means expanding awareness around (de)colonialism and even more, as Smirnov asserts, to recognize that in a contemporary decolonization It is necessary to think about the consciousness of the decolonized as well. Even more, the case of documenta15 shows that the concept of decolonialism must be taken out of the purely artistic-aesthetic understanding also within the spheres of art in order to create space for the narrative needs outside the Western ones. The importance of such an extension can also be illustrated with regard to the Russian war of aggression on Ukraine, in which Putin makes use of 'decolonial' rhetoric to justify his actions. In his logic, he inverts the argumentation around decolonialism in such a way that the war would be necessary to liberate Russia and its territories from Western hegemony. This shows that the demand for decolonization can be

misused by reactionary and authoritarian forces under the pretext of progressiveness. Although this justification remains without any substance and can be clearly exposed from the Western point of view as a misleading justification for an imperialist quest for power, it is nevertheless important that the discursive treatment of this topic be expanded within this viewpoint as well. Although it is quite understandable to hysterically deny Putin's position, it could lead to a dead end of mutual accusation without any conflict resolution, similar to the situation at documenta15. This is especially important in that Putin's influence on the formation of opinion in Russia is extremely authoritarian and dictatorial, and above all, the citizens who find themselves more or less involuntarily in his position should be approached with a nuanced understanding of the situation as a whole. Contemporary Western art institutions have the potential to significantly impact cultural perceptions by either supporting Ukrainian demarcation and re-subjectification, or by fostering cultural bridges between Russia and Ukraine. It's important for these institutions to be aware of their own perspectives and the potential for decolonial shifts in discourse, particularly when representing Ukrainian and Russian artists in a balanced manner that addresses the complexities of the ongoing conflict and its cultural implications. The example of Russia shows that the decolonial is not to be located in the past nor in a purely global north vs. global south dynamic, nor is it immune to being instrumentalized for paradoxes and harmful agendas. Nevertheless, decoloniality is an endeavor that should be promoted as a collective society, but that also generates its own specific needs in each locality, which should be met with a nuanced understanding of one's own coherent position. Moreover, decoloniality is always a process of change that is never self-contained but rather involves the decolonizing and the decolonized in an interaction that must be transformed in the present through acknowledgment of each other's nuanced past and in anticipation of a hoped-for future.

6 Concluding, a Glance towards a Future: The reconstructive Potential of prospective Transformations of Museums of Contemporary Art

Whereas in the previous part of this thesis I have been mostly critical of western art institutions, I would like to use the last section to look into a constructive future. Art museums and similar institutions are highly charged places and also very flawed and contested places, as we have seen through the last chapters. Yet I nevertheless do not think that these places are obsolete and should be abandoned. The museum is an epicenter of the coloniality of power, and while such systematically permeates all structures of global society, I believe that a tangible transformation of these very places can accomplish more for deconstructing the coloniality of power overall than deserting them. They need to be changed, and first and foremost, they need to change themselves, be it by orienting themselves to the multitude of already existing alternative forms of art sites that represent models of post- or non-institutions or by formulating new modes themselves (Gaudenzi and Swenson 2017, 517; O'Reilly 2015, 178). Still, I strongly believe that exactly in those places of history where a lot of errors have been conducted that have produced and maintained the museum as a colonial fact in the first place, an active and visible (self-) transformation exactly in such realms can have far-reaching effects on the whole society. For such a transformation to therefore happen, the past cannot simply be ignored, erased, or a forced over-correction of it be attempted, but when it is dealt with openly, honestly, and in dialogue. The West can neither correct nor undo the deeds of its colonial past, but it has to continue to confront them in a self-critical manner as long as their aftermath continues to oppress, discriminate against, and disadvantage others through its constructed privileged position. For art museums, this means first and foremost recognizing that they cannot simply move into a progressive future without realizing that the forces of the past are still at work within them and that they themselves, as an institution, must actively work against such forces rather than merely letting the invited art, artists, curators, experts, activists, and other cultural practitioners from the outside carry out this work. The Western contemporary art museum must change the way it encounters, relates to, and includes people (in the staff, collaborators and audiences). Especially those people it has suppressed, excluded, and misrepresented through oppression and discrimination. Instead of trying to teach them that the art museum is now suddenly a place for them, cultural institutions should change themselves to the extent that they really become a place for them. Decoloniality does not mean teaching others that one is now a decolonial institution, but transforming oneself to such an extent that former colonized peoples recognize and feel that one is decolonial. This includes everyone that works within an art

institution but also everyone that visits such a place (Freire 2000 [1970], 55-59; Peters 2020, 19, 24; Snoep 2020, 335).

A museum is an imposing place that often allows no questions, no criticism, and no doubt – at least that's how it can make one feel as a visitor. If one has the opportunity to visit museums as a child, one is taught from an early age that nothing shall be touched, silence is required, and that this is a site of instruction and, above all, authoritarian respect. As a result, many who do not understand something that is shown in and conveyed by museums question themselves and their own (intellectual) inadequacies, rather than questioning the museum and its ability to represent, communicate, and mediate. The art museum and institutions in general are built on hierarchies and also impose hierarchies, on everything that is represented within them as well as on everyone that enters the building. Paired with the construction of it as a status symbol, it demands everyone and everything to obey its rules. Only then is it possible to live up to the demands of his presence and even more to internalize its testimonies. ”The museum has become a status symbol and is often perceived as a ‘temple’, an ‘elitist’ enclave, and an icon of ‘excellence’ with worldwide recognition, a place to learn about oneself or the lives of ‘others’ through viewing their material culture. In fact, the public face of museums is, first and foremost, their exhibitions and these carry powerful messages in whatever manner museums dictate and provide as experiential encounters” (Maranda 2021, 185). Such an imposing presence makes many people, who do not belong to the white, Western elite, feel uncomfortable in art museums or even excluded from them because the museum gives them the impression that it is not made *for* them as it was not made *by* them. And for most of history, it was not. So if a contemporary art museum suddenly wants to practice inclusion, both with regard to the selected artists and its visitors, it must become aware of which systematic structures it wants to accommodate them, and if such structures are not ready for such inclusion, it must transform them first. In a decolonial context, this means especially recognizing one's own national past as an institution. In an interview published in *Frieze* in 2022, Portuguese artist Grada Kilomba talks to the British-born Ghanaian poet Victoria Adukwei Bulley about the inherited traumas of colonialism and the denial of nations to deal with their contested history:

I’m Portuguese and you’re British, but we share this deeply traumatic and very violent history that reaches back 500 years across the globe. It is a collective colonial history that keeps interrupting our present with new and sophisticated politics of dehumanization. A past that repeats itself in the present, like a ghost, because it has not been told properly and therefore remains at the level of denial. Denial is followed by guilt, guilt by shame, and shame by recognition, which allows for critical reflection to take place. This has enabled me and many other artists to develop work that experiments with how to elaborate a new language that goes beyond what was originally given to us. Unfortunately, many countries – including the one I

come from – are still dominated by denial. This comes with abuse of power and authority, and does not allow new languages or narratives to emerge (Kilomba 2022).

Museums have to transform themselves in such a way that they start allowing these new languages and narratives that Kilomba talks about to emerge and, moreover, to flourish. In order to do so, they have to become realistic, or rather honest, with themselves and with their visitors. One of the loudest criticisms of contemporary practices in art museums or other institutions of similar scale is that they pretend to be something they are not or pretend to represent something they do not. This can be related to the already more detailed superficial attempts at diversification and inclusion criticized, especially by artistic practitioners from the decolonial and anti-racist fields. Art museums are dishonest to artists, to visitors, but first and foremost to themselves when they pretend to be neutral spaces. No humanly created space can ever be neutral, and it doesn't have to be, because then it would lose its humanity (Mkhonza 2021, 30; Ndikung 2023; Peters 2020, 16-17, 24; Prianti and Suyadnya 2022, 231; Vawda 2019, 198). Art and spaces for art should therefore retain their humanity, but they must acknowledge and work with its shortcomings and biases while furthermore operating in an extremely complex and nuanced system of discrimination and privilege with inherent implications all intertwined with the desires of capitalism. Institutions must therefore become more realistic within a process of transparency. So, if an art museum suddenly wants to practice inclusion with regard to the selected artists and its visitors as well as its staff, it must become aware of which systematic structures it wants to accommodate them, and if such structures are not ready for such inclusion, it must transform them first. In a decolonial context, this means especially recognizing the own national past as an institution; moreover, being aware of the resulting relations and how they genuinely affect one's own practice and the way it is perceived (Bhabha 1994, 21; Gaudenzi and Swenson 2017, 498, 509, 512; Haq 2015, 10; Prianti and Suyadnya 2022, 232).

6.1 From Theory to Action: Institutional Realism for an Honest Practice

To tackle some of these issues in 2017 the curator Victoria Ivanova and the philosopher Armen Avanessian called for 'institutional realism', exploring the gaps between what institutions think they do and what they actually do. Starting from the idea that cultural institutions possess more power than they realize, 'institutional realism' focuses on understanding and utilizing the genuine influence these institutions have on society. By directing attention towards unexplored opportunities and consequences, this practical approach aims to strengthen future institutions, enabling them to actively shape social dynamics. Currently, cultural institutions, such as museums and art academies, often find themselves stuck in a cycle of identifying with outdated

practices while also feeling victimized by a challenging system and society. This predicament is particularly evident in how they relate to ‘market forces’ according to Ivanova and Avenessian. Persistent stagnation will continue as long as the potential benefits are misunderstood as limitations or suppressed by the conventional method of cultural critique. A more practical approach to institutions proposes instead to develop strategies that reconcile the nature of institutions with their impact on society-using their inherent capacity to influence urban policy, economic organization, and geopolitics. Sociological theory supports the idea that institutions establish norms of behavior and enforce compliance. Therefore, an institutional realist perspective aims to actively utilize this mediating role between culture and society at all levels-social, economic, political, and artistic. The two authors further argue that cultural institutions are neither deficient forms of organization nor outdated apparatuses. I only partially agree with this argument because the consciousness with which some European institutions approach narratives and identities outside their own (Western, white, masculine, cis-hetero, medium upper class) realities, which is also the narrative that is the basis of most institutions and sustains them to this day, could definitely be viewed as outdated and deficient. However, according to Ivanova and Avenessian, institutions currently lack the essential capacity to critically reflect on themselves as institutions and strategically address the conflicts and complexities they embody. The opportunity for improvement lies in examining the discrepancies between their perceived and actual actions and the contrast between their formal organization and informal practices. Moreover, understanding the discrepancy between the intentions of their representatives and the social pressures that influence their behavior, as well as the differences between the values they proclaim and established norms, can lead to needed realignments (Ivanova and Avenessian 2017). An important step towards a more realistic practice is to recognize the economic influences and dependencies of an institution.

A realist approach to institutions must operate on the premise of inherent interdependence between all formal planes (art historical, financial, geopolitical, etc.) that make up the DNA of the respective institution. [...] Understanding what institutions really are as social agents and changing them are not two different processes but must hand in hand. Thus, Institutional Realism is not realistic in the modest and all too often regressive sense of “gotta be realist,” but with the speculative intuition that socially progressive institutions are both needed and are possible. Contemporary cultural institutions are junctures at which geopolitical and economic interests intersect — this gives them a critical advantage in transforming politics and economy through cultural mechanisms (Ivanova and Avenessian 2017).

The museum is and remains a contact zone and art is a catalyst that can transform individual nuances into a collective understanding while giving space to a plurality of micronarratives and adding complexity to simplicity, and vice versa. The art museum is therefore a place that can transform into so many matters because art can deal with every matter. But in order for the art museum to operate in such a multifaceted manner, it must become aware of its own current

position by actively positioning itself in relation to its ‘DNA’. It must become aware of its own context, which is influenced by its location, by its history, by its foundation, by its agenda, by its sponsors and the resulting financial resources, and by every single person who is empowered to make decisions in these spaces, as this context is influencing everything that is shown within it and everyone who is visiting it. Especially the fiscal forces and the handling of financial resources can, on the one hand, be used positively in the construction of institutional realism, but conversely, as is very often the case, they may also be the most effective adversaries in such an effort (Ndikung 2023; Prianti and Suyadnya 2022, 231; Wekke et. al 2016, 26; Zulaika 2005, 151-521). Exactly these forces of action can be identified in the case of the Kunsthalle Berlin and the accompanying boycott in 2022. In this case, one finds a very large discrepancy between the values that an institution wants to convey to the outside world and the actual intrinsic power dynamics that do not fit at all with this externally drawn image. These dissonances did not go by unnoticed. The boycott of the Kunsthalle Berlin was initiated due to several reasons. The controversy began with an exhibition titled *Diversity United* held at the historic Tempelhof Airport, which, on top of being organized by an all-white curatorial team, was (financially) supported by the political leaders of France, Germany, and moreover, Russia, specifically Vladimir Putin.



Figure 5: Opening of the exhibition *Diversity United* in Berlin, 2021.

This raised concerns over transparency, capital flows, and political influence especially within the Berlin artistic community. On top of that in 2022, the venue transformed into ‘Kunsthalle Berlin’ – a name implying it is the cities only exhibition hall – and continued with practices questioned by the local artistic surroundings, such as dedicating its first exhibition to a straight, white, male artist without ties to Berlin (Breitz and Miller 2022; Miller 2022; Timm 2022). The exhibition provoked a backlash especially against the curator Walter Smerling who was both responsible for the exhibition *Diversity United* as well as the opening of the Kunsthalle Berlin.²² The boycott, initiated by Candice Breitz and Zoë Claire Miller, aims to hold both individuals and institutions accountable. They emphasize the need to challenge politicians who make funding decisions fostering a system of endemic corruption sustained through ‘private public partnerships’ allocating money and positions of authority based on personal relationships, thus keeping the circle of power closed.²³ They also stress the importance of addressing concrete instances to effectively tackle systemic problems. The focus of the boycott extends beyond Walter Smerling, involving issues of cultural and urban development policy, criticizing the exploitation of public properties by private entities and a lack of engagement with already existing local cultural initiatives. As in the analysis of the Guggenheim Bilbao and its lack of caring towards already existing local structures, communities and networks, the case of the Kunsthalle Berlin shows that if a (new) cultural institution does not treat the existing conditions respectfully and with a certain empathy, it can lead to a local cultural alienation that excludes exactly those people it could approach most closely and sustainably.²⁴

Breitz and Miller highlight, moreover, the misuse of public funds and the lack of consultation with the broader art community. Although both still defend the German system of public funding, they aim to reform it and emphasize institutions that foster critical conversations,

22 Walter Smerling, the curator of the Kunsthalle Berlin, has faced criticism from Berlin artists and protestors. He is known for his art network, which connects influential entrepreneurs, politicians like Gerhard Schröder and Armin Laschet, and renowned artists like Georg Baselitz and Anselm Kiefer. Smerling's exhibitions have been funded by private equity and arms companies, even in China and Russia, where Vladimir Putin supported his exhibitions. Artists are questioning why the Berlin Senate, comprising SPD, Greens, and Left parties, allowed Smerling's network to occupy rent-free space in Tempelhof Airport, with the public sector covering up to 100,000 euros a month in operating costs, while affordable studio space is scarce in Berlin. The project advisory board for his exhibition, *Diversity United*, was notably lacking in diversity, consisting exclusively of men, including ex-Bild editor-in-chief Kai Diekmann and entrepreneur Lars Windhorst. Christoph Gröner, a real estate developer and Kunsthalle sponsor, enjoyed privileged access to the venue for his company's New Year's reception (Timm 2022).

23 Breitz and Miller list the case of Kunsthalle Berlin only as one example for such a corrupt behavior. Another one is the incident in 2018, when after Okwui Enwezor left Munich's Haus der Kunst, the museum canceled exhibitions by the international artists Adrian Piper and Joan Jonas, citing resource shortages. Yet, Markus Lüpertz's solo exhibition quickly replaced Piper's, due to Walter Smerling's intervention. Smerling sourced funds through his organization, the 'Foundation for Art and Culture Bonn,' which pretends to be public but is privately controlled. This situation exemplifies the lack of funding for an acclaimed woman of color like Piper, while readily supporting yet another exhibition by a well-known white German artist like Lüpertz (Breitz and Miller 2022).

24 See chapter: *The Guggenheim Bilbao: the Local vs. the Global*.

community, and experimentation. Looking forward, the boycott seeks to support demands made in an open letter and public discussions, ensuring government funds are allocated democratically for art and culture. The boycott is intended to take on greater significance in light of geopolitical issues and reiterate their commitment to opposing detrimental private interests in public institutions. As soon as private interests are treated as a priority, especially in public institutions, there is a risk that transparent communication may be abandoned and the path to dishonest practice shortened. It is then up to people from outside, such as those boycotting the Kunsthalle Berlin 2022, to hold these institutions accountable for their machinations (Breitz and Miller 2022). However, such an accusation with the help of external forces is always merely a reaction to an already-wrought effect. The funding within the Kunsthalle Berlin has already been spent, the effective positions have already been assigned, the artists have already been selected, and the exhibition has already been opened. A change from the outside can always only react to already accomplished actions in a limited way in the past, while a change from the inside can act freely and actively with regard to the future. The establishment of a *modus operandi* within an institutional realism must be an immanent transformation. Art institutions and museums could thereby initiate the prioritization of transparent action on all possible levels, within their praxis (especially linked to a decolonial praxis), towards their collection, towards their past, towards their inner power structures and their decision-making, their selection of artists, their acquisition and distribution of funds, and their communication towards artists and visitors.

6.2 Transparency: The Contemporary Art Museum as a human Construct that is positioned

First and foremost should be the disclosure of the art museum and the history of art as a human-made construct. Humanizing the art museum (and similar institutions) means deconstructing the super-authority of such a place and transforming it into a vulnerable place by not only acknowledging but also allowing the occurrence of mistakes, by no longer hiding power structures but questioning and deconstructing them in dialogue. In the book *Practicing Decoloniality in Museums: A Guide with Global Examples* by Csilla E. Ariese and Magdalena Wróblewska, published in 2022, the latter describes in two different chapters titled “Improving Transparency” and “Embracing Vulnerability” the necessary integration of transparency and vulnerability in museums in the course of an aspired decolonial practice (Ariese and Wróblewska 2022). In the colonial context – which has to concern every Western art museum, no matter

how old or new the institution, simply because of its locality and the fact that the museum is an inherent product of colonialism – Wróblewska describes in the chapter “Improving Transparency” that transparency is too often reduced to mainly the material handling of the collections and objects and discussion about restitution. While such a discourse is without a doubt of great importance, the desire for transparency should encompass much more than that. “However, transparency can also be understood more broadly as being open about colonial pasts and the current museum practices that continue to be affected by them. Among the most important aspects are: authorship (of exhibitions or texts), decision-making processes (relating to the museum program and hiring policy), and the power relations within the institution (including funding dependencies)” (Wróblewska 2022, 82). These three main demands for a transformation towards transparency in the realms of authorship, decision-making processes, and internal and external power relations are of such essence, as they finally presuppose the self-responsibility of the museum and cannot be solved by shifting the work to external and temporal influence from the outside but require a lasting process of reflection from within. Museums behave imperatively. They show the visitor what they should see and explain to them how they should understand what is shown – mostly through (con)text: “Exhibition-making inside an institution is determined by the moment of time, by space, and by the architecture framing the exhibition. In a certain way, form guides content. The same content can become completely different depending on the space” (Snoep 2020, 327). More transparency could, above all, clarify these situational factors and thus expose the museum as a construct in order to reduce its authority. Both internally, in the hierarchies of the employees, as well as externally, on the level of the artists and represented persons up to the visitor. Transparency means being open to criticism and becoming accountable: “Accountability can be enabled by conscious and reflexive work, which art institutions should be doing (and some are doing) more infrastructurally. In addition to programming, accountability should have a prominent place on the level of teamwork as well as in situations of exchange and mediation with the publics” (Petrešin-Bachelez 2018). Exactly this kind of sincere accountability, however, must first be conveyed to the visitor in order to sustainably deconstruct art institutions as authoritarian places and reconstruct them as honest and caring ones.

6.2.1 Decoding Transparency: The Role of Language and Text within Positionalities

The first point of disclosure of authorship, especially within exhibitions and texts, is particularly important for ensuring a tangible transparency to the actual visitor. The naming of an author

not only humanizes a text²⁵, but it also breaks down the façade of the universalist point of view that is all too present in art museums and even more so in art history. By giving a name to the writer, it automatically clarifies that what is written was written by an individual and is thus from a certain point of view and moreover is positioned in a certain context (Wekke et al. 2016, 8-9; 25-26). The fact that so many museums present themselves as neutral representational spaces – coupled with the fact that they are considered as places of education, knowledge, and conservation of human (art) history – often immanently elevates the curatorial or other contextualizing texts to as a perceived universal truth. Through the Western constructed economy of truth, which Rolando Vázquez attributes primarily to the mechanisms of translation operating in and through modernity as erasure, and which through the coloniality of power still locates the potential for a singular truth within the West while denying this potential to most other places, any nameless text within an art museum seems to be potentially raised to an all-embracing truth, authored by a sheer higher power of meaning (Vázquez 2011, 38-39).

The text and with it the narrative it creates does not let you enter but demands to be accepted exactly as it is. Situated in an art museum and the aura of the sublime that these places often radiate as Pollock portrayed,²⁶ the text allows not to be doubted, but shifts any uncertainty onto the readers own (in)capability. To make the authors or the viewpoint of texts, exhibitions and other kinds of contextualization visible does not mean to position these, because they already are, but rather to make this positioning transparent and visible. Through this transparency the universalistic point of view is deconstructed and the recipient, the reader or the visitor is given the chance to recognize the positioning and to compare it in connection with their own individual position, be it to reach an agreement, a rejection, an acceptance, a critique, an awareness of their differences or other rather individual insights. Moreover, revealing the contextual positioning of content within institutions, often considered knowledge inevitably rooted in socio-historical contexts, can help recipients recognize their own position as socially and historically situated individuals in interconnected relationships. “Positionality is necessary to foster difference, since it recognizes that a truthful approach to knowledge is one that is

25 *Text* in general was a powerful tool of establishing a western superiority especially regarding the hegemonic epistemology in connection to an epistemicide of the colonized and their often orally transmitted knowledges. (See chapter: *The Positioning of Knowledge through Language, Text, and Translation within the Idea of Fixity*).

26 See chapter: *The MoMA and the White-Cube Model*.

contextual and grounded in its geo-historicity²⁷ (Haraway, 1988; Mignolo, 2011). Knowledge that values difference is a knowledge that moves away from singular perspectives and that is conducive to excellence and social justice” (Wekke et al. 2016, 74). Especially in the practices of decolonizing art museums, the self-reflexive disclosure of positionalities towards the visitors is particularly important, because only then it becomes clear that the position of ‘the Other’, which is intertwined so deeply with the Museum as a construct as a whole, was only possible to be formed through the oppositional construction as the position of the West as ‘the norm’. In the 2016 published Report *Let’s do diversity*²⁸ of the University of Amsterdam Diversity Commission, the authors emphasize the importance of a recognition followed by a transparent mediation of not only the position of the ‘marked’ but especially also of the default position of the norm, the ‘unmarked’ in order to no longer disguise the constructed characteristics of knowledge especially when thus is used to form a representation that is operating within the politics of opposition.

Diversity relates to both the self-understanding of those who are in the normative unmarked position as well as those who are marked as different. [...] A pedagogy of positionality that promotes diversity is not only directed toward the recognition of marginalized positions, it also requires the recognition of the default position. It requires the unmarked positions in the practices of knowledge, in particular the intersectional positions of privilege, to be spelled out and recognized as particular historical and contextual formations. Exercises that reveal the positionality of Western-centrism, of whiteness, masculinity, cisgender and able-bodiedness have proven to be fruitful to the transition toward inclusive practices of learning in which difference can thrive (Wekke et al. 2016, 76).

Only when the unmarked position deals with itself does it become clear that it is constructed in the same way as the ‘marked’ position and thus does not emerge from a natural source of neutral knowledge and perception of the world. It is precisely this unmarked position that Western art museums have been only too comfortable to adopt, and it is precisely through the acknowledgement of this position that it can be deconstructed through a transparent self-reflection that is mediated to the (norm) visitor. What does this mediation look like in practice? It is important to highlight that art institutions have the potential for transformation. There are a multitude of practical approaches available for transparent mediation and contextual

27 Geo-historicity, as put forth by Donna Haraway and Walter Mignolo, involves the recognition that knowledge production is inextricably linked to specific geographic and historical contexts. This concept challenges the dominance of Eurocentric knowledge production and emphasizes the extent to which knowledge is influenced by local perspectives, histories, and cultures. In the context of decoloniality, geo-historicity underscores the need to decenter Eurocentric hegemony in knowledge and recognize the multiple origins and situatedness of knowledge. It promotes the idea that knowledge is intimately connected to its geographical and historical roots and urges a more inclusive and equitable approach to understanding and producing a plurality of knowledges (Haraway 1988; Mignolo 2011a).

28 From March to September 2016, the Diversity Commission conducted an examination of diversity within the University of Amsterdam. Acknowledging that advancing social justice within the University demands proactive involvement with diversity, the Commission approached the subject from two perspectives: the diversity of people and diversity within knowledge (Wekke et al. 2016, 3).

positioning. Achieving genuine decolonial change in Western art museums necessitates active and honest self-positioning. These positions should be tailored to the unique identities of each institution, accommodating their specific needs, including those of represented artists, visitors, and the local context (Wekke et al. 2016, 21, 76). In this regard, not only the transparency of the positionality of exhibitions, texts, and their authorship can be an important tool in the deconstruction of the norm and thus in the decolonization of art museums, but also the choice of language in relation to the positionality. As indicated in one of the first chapters of this thesis, language (moreover written language specifically) and interrelated translation operating as erasure were important tools in the colonial process of self-exaltation of Western and European identity towards 'the Other' through the creation of Eurocentric hegemony of a singular knowledge and the extinction of the pluralities of any knowledges outside (Vázquez 2011, 27-29). Consequently, language must also be used as a tool for decolonization. This is especially important as decolonization and its needs should not be thought of from the position of the West but from the position of the formerly colonized, who above all can articulate themselves as subjects through language, leaving the objectivity of the West behind, as Unathi Kondile describes.

This is where decolonisation has to start. In language. When you fail to articulate yourself in your own language amongst your own people you have been thoroughly colonised. There has to be a conscious attempt at ridding oneself of such captivity. [...] This further exemplifies a rejection of self and begs the question 'in what language do you see yourself as a person'. The authentic self has been eroded and the people of the colonised culture find themselves immersed in colonial structures and practice. The problem begins when these colonial structures work against such people. [...] Dominance over 'an other' is easily transmitted via language. You can hand back land, give back buildings and businesses, but if the language of operation is still that of the previous owner you will find it very hard to progress. And that is where we find ourselves. We inhabit spaces that were not created for us and we expect these to adapt to our expectations. [...] We need decolonised institutions that operate in our local languages. Decolonisation will not come from the appropriation of colonial spaces; it will come from self-reflecting and acknowledging the authentic self first. The fastest and easiest starting point is language. The temptation to be understood by the world first, without being understood in your own home, will forever undermine the self. Let us imagine ourselves in our own languages (Kondile 2021, 40-45).

Kondile brings a number of important aspects to the fore, but for Western institutions, it should be especially valuable to realize that the staff and decision-makers of these institutions, before they even formulate any representation through their language within the institution, are the premises into which they now so keenly want to diversify in the first place. The language is, above all, deeply interconnected with the locality. The use of language, especially when it is utilized to create representations, is one of the most important means of positioning oneself or the represented other, whether globally or locally, and such positioning, as Kondile implies, must be conceived in relation to the (colonial) forces active in the past.

Decoloniality requires a different approach depending on where it takes place, because each locality brings its own history and, with it, its own present needs. Art institutions must therefore always think about their locality and its nuances. Thus, language, as one of the most powerful means to anchor localities in the consciousness, has to be used consciously. According to Kondile, for formerly colonized states that are now expressing their own authentic subjectivity through spaces for art, it is necessary to use their own local language within them to formulate their narratives. Western art institutions have different needs in terms of decolonization. Here, it is necessary to position oneself in one's own locality in order to deconstruct the claim to universalistic narratives and to take oneself out of the subjectivity that is thus universally constituted. For the West has never only represented itself but also all others in opposition to itself. Rolando Vázquez articulated the following in a 2022 lecture at the *Jan van Eyck Akademie* in this regard: While the global South has been both understood and (mis)represented by the West through colonial times, the West has equally always experienced itself only through its own eyes. For decolonization, the West, and especially Europe, must see itself from the outside and understand itself through the perspective of the constructed 'Other' as a complete grasp of the own position is only possible if it is put into relation to the external perception (Vázquez 2022). Western art museums are a place where the construction of this inverted colonial and also patriarchal (self-)understanding of self and other, subject and object has probably become most tangible and therefore also where its reversal can be worked on most effectively.

This brings me to the second main point in which Wróblewska calls for more transparency: the program of art museums and their employment policies. As long as the main focus is on the inclusion of a more diverse selection of artists and this inclusion is not extended to the staff positions within these institutions, the art museum will continuously present 'the Other' through the Western point of view. The effects of such intra-institutional realpolitik are expressed not only in legitimate outside critiques, such as the exhibition *Diversity United* at the Kunsthalle Berlin organized by a white curatorial team, but also beyond that in painful reproductions of discrimination and racism, not only in the misrepresentation of contemporary artists and their works but also of employees who work within Western cultural systems and have to fight an anti-discriminatory, anti-racist battle in them daily and often alone, as Bonaventure Soh Bejeng Ndikung describes in his frequently discussed text.

6.2.2 Positions within the Art Museum: The Curator and the Curated

The position of the curator for instance, can entail selecting the works and artists for an exhibition and thus determining who is given visibility and, conversely, who is not. The job also involves subsequently integrating the works into a narrative of an exhibition (Bhagwati 2020, 360). Curators can influence not only which works visitors see, but moreover how they see them especially through the subtle politics of visibility.²⁹ Within the context of an exhibition, they create the gaze and can therefore significantly alter the perception of art, on the one hand through more subtle measures such as the arrangement of works or the design of the environment, or through more offensive manners such as describing works through text. Even more, the works are placed not only in the context of the exhibition but in the context of the institution, the temporality and the locality. Curators position the art *within* all these different positionalities that have to be considered more or less and that can work in favor or against the positionality of the artworks, depending on how they relate to each other. Despite this multifaceted working method of curation, it is often placed in the background, sometimes even hidden deliberately and, especially in the setting of prestigious art museums, obscures the fact that curation is once again first and foremost a matter of human processes and decisions. It is not a neutral process operating in a non-neutral environment. The work of a curator happens in many Western art museums in an artificially constructed world in which the effects of the colonial period still have their power, which is why the art of white, male, heteronormative norm artists still appears naturally in this artificial environment and in turn relativizes its artificial construction (Ginwala 2020, 234; Modest 2020, 70; Prianti and Suyadnya 2022, 229). Now, if the majority of curators also conform to this norm, the museum will never be exposed as a Western and colonial construct because all their positions naturally fit together and only the newly integrated diverse artist fails to conform to this positionality. The curatorial platform *le peuple qui manque* founded by Kantuta Quiros and Aliocha Imhoff describes curation in this context as a practice of translation. “More specifically, curating is an interstitial practice and a practice of translation between epistemological regimes – between different contexts, between discourses and practices, or, to use your expression, it is a ‘transversally agentive’ practice. We thus suggest our curatorial politics, our ecology of knowledge, as first and foremost a politics of translation. Translation, however, in a sense that does not adhere to a principle of fidelity, but is always a poetics, a ‘listening to the continuous’, [...]” (le peuple qui manque 2020, 212). Seeing curating as a practice of translation can help to understand that the translation of Western art into a Western context carried out by Western curators and with a Western audience in mind

²⁹ See chapter: *The Politics of Visibility*.

is a translation without resistance. A translation where merely nothing gets lost in translation. On the other hand, the translation of art outside this context into thus performed by Western curators may well function, as described by Vázquez, as a translation as erasure or, even more, suppression when it functions in the politics of opposition to the ‘norm’. Now, if transparency is cultivated regarding this process of curation as an act of translation, it would be possible to unmask this work as more erroneous on the one hand but as more human on the other. Wayne Modest, the Director of Content of the National Museum of World Cultures and the Wereldmuseum Rotterdam in the Netherlands, described curating in a way that focuses on human togetherness and sees the task of such a work as the following:

To help our visitors – and I do not mean this in a patronizing way – to think about the world we live and share with others, to imagine better ways of living together. That is how I see the curator. [...] Then the curator is also, for me, somebody who is committed to that kind of collaborative work. In a funny way, you could say that the role of the curator – [...] – is to share, but also to develop, wisdom with diverse audiences about this thing we call life, how we live it or could live it. And by that I also mean to just take a back seat sometimes and give space to others. And I don’t mean give voice to others in a pejorative patronising way, but rather to suggest that there is expertise on my side, but we can create something together, bringing our wisdom together, yours and mine. That has much more impact (Modest 2020, 71).

Curation is a practice of togetherness and care. Yet it involves not only the artwork, the artist, and the viewers, but also the curator as mediator, and with them, the situatedness in an institutional system. Unlike artists and visitors, a curator must think for others, or rather think along with them in the relevant contextualization. Especially the visitors. “When you are an artist and create a work of art, you do not necessarily think whether the spectator will entirely understand your intention. As a curator, you have to take into account all kinds of aleatory visitors [...]: visitors of all ages, education levels, political opinions, or biographical backgrounds; descendants of colonizers and colonized; people who are merely ‘urged’ to visit (like children, a friend ...), visitors who come ‘by accident’ to your exhibition because they have to cross the gallery in order to reach the exit” (Snoep 2020, 326-327).

The curator's position is thus often one of trying to reach people by speaking (in an extended sense of creating a narrative in any shape or form), but in order to establish an honest and humane practice that meets both the visitor and the artists in a non-authoritarian manner, speaking must always be preceded by listening. Honesty entails being transparent especially in a self-reflexive manner and especially if one holds the position of power as the curator working within an institution has (above the visitor and the artist). It means abandoning neutrality and revealing the forces at work in the background; it means becoming comprehensible and more so tangible and thereby allowing room for criticism. In the efforts to decolonize Western art museums and institutions, attention must be paid not only to how curators work, but also to who works in such a position. In the Western cultural landscape, this means above all re-

localizing power. In a decolonial context, this requires moving the supposed norm to the outside and the periphery to the inside in order to processually balance these power relations and finally to deconstruct them. Annette Bhagwati³⁰, who also regards to the task of a curator as one of translation, talks in her text “Representation of Culture(s): Articulations of the De/Post-Colonial at the Haus Der Kulturen Der Welt in Berlin.” about these new formative approaches in curatorial work, especially if cultures from all around the world are being represented in a western context, as is the case in the Haus der Kulturen der Welt.

Curating in this environment – at Haus der Kulturen der Welt, that is, a House of the Cultures of the World – thus meant translating the ‘outside’ to the ‘inside’ – ‘Curating Outside-In’. [...] At the beginning of the 2000s, this practice of mono-centric curating came under increasing attack from post-colonial theorists, who targeted a culture of exhibition-making in which the world was practically divided into curating and curated cultures. [...] What could be concluded for the institutional practice of the Haus der Kulturen der Welt? The transfer of conceptual responsibility to local curators had been an attempt to redress the power imbalance between curating and curated cultures. The responsibility for representation had been reassigned from ‘the outside’ to the ‘inside’, from ‘the etic’ to the ‘emic’ perspective. And here, the same criterion applied: the criterion of ‘connectivity’ and ‘translatability’. Nevertheless, on closer examination, the problem had not been solved. It had just been moved. Western curators might no longer select the art, but they still chose the curator (Bhagwati 2020, 344-349).³¹

By the last sentence, Bhagwati means the tendency that (white, western) curators, in the course of an attempted decolonial practice, increasingly invite guest curators to fulfill these tasks. However, as discussed in a previous chapter, this can have damaging consequences in which knowledge, expertise, experiences and labor are demanded from People of Color, LGBTQIA+, or other also intersectional people for a short-term and tokenistic³² inclusion that does not lead to a structural change, as described through Sarah Dermat's cited ‘extraction Politics’ (Ariese 2022, 40; Dermat 2020, 145). Who is working in an art institution determines who feels welcome in such a space as Wróblewska clarifies, “The call for transparency in museums is furthermore not only addressed to the management of objects in collections, but to people. There is an urgent need for cultural institutions to make long-term commitments to ethical and inclusive hiring policies, including at the executive leadership level, making museums more accessible to different social, ethnic, or economic groups and implementing a zero-tolerance policy towards racism, whether from staff or visitors” (Wróblewska 2022, 84). Ultimately, it is

30 Anette Bhagwati worked at the Haus der Kulturen der Welt in Berlin – whose current director and head curator Bonaventure Soh Bejeng Ndikung has been quoted several times in this thesis – from 2012 to fall 2019, where she led curatorial research and long-term projects (Museum Rietberg, n.d.).

31 In anthropology and related fields, ‘emic’ and ‘etic’ represent two contrasting research perspectives. The ‘emic’ approach is an insider's view, studying a culture from within, focusing on beliefs and values. The ‘etic’ approach is an outsider's view, examining a culture objectively, concentrating on observable behaviors (Feleppa 1986, 243-244).

32 ‘Tokenism’ is the common practice of including a few individuals from underrepresented social groups in order to create the appearance of diversity without addressing deeper issues of inequality. Often, these are merely symbolic and image driven gestures that do not lead to meaningful change or equal opportunity for these individuals (Turco 2010, 894-895).

the staff in a museum who can contribute to deconstructing the authoritarian and Western hegemonic forces in it, influencing the texts and language, the selection, categorization and contextualization of art that is still soaked in colonialist modes, and transforming it into an honest place of inclusion through a transparent and humane approach (Oswald 2020, 123). But for this to happen, the selection and resources of these employees must also be dealt with in a transparent manner. Such a shift in public mediation not just of the exhibited art itself, but of the people and structures that create these exhibitions would mean that institutions and their employment policies could be held more accountable, and even more so such a transparent humanization could also free the art museum, and thus the people who work in it, from perfectionist demands upon them and instead put the pursuit of honesty, which allows for mistakes, first. For such an honesty it is important that the museum breaks away from its performed neutrality and puts itself in a vulnerable position, which becomes penetrable for the public instead of being repulsive through authority. Such a transformation can only be possible though, if the directors and moreover the donors and funders of art institutions are made, moreover make themselves and their positionality transparent as well.

6.2.3 Positioning through Money: Rethinking Funding and Transparency

The demand for transparency includes making visible the forces that operate in the background of art institutions and shaping them into what they are. One of the most significant forces is money, and money is always embedded in politics. “We argue that museum practice is a process of how power coexists and is interrelated with museum governance. Therefore, it is important to note that museum practice is political in many cases” (Prianti and Suyadnya 2022, 231).

Financial resources play a pivotal role within art institutions, exerting a substantial influence over various aspects of their functioning. This influence encompasses the contemporary art museum's potential program, staffing decisions, artistic selections, research resources, public programs, educational initiatives, and virtually all facets of its operations (Bishop 2011). Moreover, money, or rather the distribution of it, creates hierarchies and can empower or render someone powerless within them (as exemplified, by Ndikung's described outreach-complex or the case of Walter Smerlings involvement in the Kunsthalle Berlin). Conversely, the allocation of funds to, within, and from institutions is vital, yet such money is always allocated with an agenda. Public funding for culture and thus art institutions is of paramount importance, as this preserves widespread accessibility and the right to consume art and culture for the sake of everyone. In the US, a shift to private funding of arts and culture has been more popular than in Europe, which, according to Claire Bishop, has contributed to the promotion of a blockbuster

mentality that puts the needs of funders before those of culture (2011). In the context of art museums, I have already pointed out, using the example of the Guggenheim-complex, that institutions have a tendency to be primarily interested in commercial success, and that while such ventures can bring great monetary success to the institutions and corporations behind them, they also come at a price. In the case of the Guggenheim Bilbao, for example, the local artists' community had to pay that price with a partial loss of its artistic self-determination. Yet, without monetary means, no art institution can exist, but if these means are bound to too many conditions, which are moreover usually concealed from the public and often also from staff lower within the hierarchies and the artists, it is one of the main factors that can turn an institution into one operating in dishonesty. The question of funding was also one of the primary reasons for the outcry and subsequent boycott around the Kunsthalle Berlin. In an open letter written by Jörg Heiser, Hito Steyerl, and Clemens von Wedemeyer, issued in February 2022 titled "Open Letter: Who Owns the Public?", the Kunsthalle Berlin is accused of using art as a means to convert public funds into private networking events for entrepreneurs and politicians while potentially sanitizing the reputations of questionable corporate networks. This system is criticized for relying on opaque sponsorship, potentially involving money laundering and tax fraud (Heiser, Steyerl and Wedemeyer 2022). In an article from 2022 in *Die Zeit*, titled "Art as a Backdrop to Power," ["Kunst als Kulisse der Macht"] author Tobias Timm describes the circumstances when, as in the case of the Kunsthalle Berlin, political forces are played out in the cultural ground, the main instrument thereby: money. In the discussion surrounding the Kunsthalle Berlin, the case of the curator Walter Smerling, who is the focus of criticism, shows how easy it can be to obtain opportunities and financial support beyond the question of whether one has earned them, if only one has the right connections to those in positions of political power (Timm 2022). Culture and the public need financial resources. The public subsidies granted by the state are often very limited; if they are then also awarded on the basis of private relationships, this justifiably leads to an outcry. In the case of the Kunsthalle Berlin, the awarding of the subsidies and the actors associated with them took place behind closed doors (Miller 2022).

In view of these practices, it is unacceptable that Walter Smerling's so-called 'Kunsthalle Berlin' is promoted by Berlin governmental bodies through the allocation of public resources and that Berlin Senate administrations have allowed themselves to be made part of this system. The Smerling method works something like this: By promoting the same artists over and over again, their work is valorized on the market. The exhibitions are not infrequently publicly funded, and the sales proceeds of the revalued artists benefit both them and their collectors and gallerists. Grandiose exhibition titles are invented strategically, and these exhibitions are publicly legitimized by appearances from high-ranking politicians (Heiser, Steyerl and Wedemeyer 2022).

The allocation of financial resources on the basis of personal relationships and sympathies can permanently damage a local artistic community, as it further perpetuates and promotes the existing unequal power relations, and an elitist 'inner circle' thus becomes more and more impermeable and closed. This can certainly be transferred from the local level to the global. Especially art institutions that want to practice decoloniality have to break through the comfortable power and relationship structures and hand over decision-making power and, with that, financial means to those who have been kept on the outside for so long by the coloniality of power. Such a discussion, with all its complexities and nuanced realities, can be exemplified by documenta15 and the curatorial decisions of the Indonesian collective *ruangrupa* in terms of cultural funding through a dynamic between Western institutionality and its attempt at an inclusion of the periphery constructed in opposition to foster the decolonial – a matter that unfortunately got overshadowed by the before discussed anti-Semitic allegations towards the exhibition. That is why I would like to give the curatorial model another area of attention, especially with regard to the methods of dealing with financial subsidies in a mode of communal benefit and transparency, since the western entangled spheres of art and politics could certainly learn a lot from it.

On the one hand, discursive power in documenta15 was ceded by the Western institution to a community coming from outside, from the Global South. On the other hand, documenta15 held the reins specifically through the conditions for the use and distribution of financial resources.³³ However, firstly through their presence and secondly through their curatorial approach under the 'lumbung' theme, which focused on community and emphasizes resource sharing and a relational experience over aesthetics, the curatorial collective in charge *ruangrupa* was able to challenge the Western-centric curatorial and systematic approaches, especially in the area of the distribution of funding. Their approach highlighted the significance of collectives, particularly those from the Global South, which often emerge as a response to political and social alienation in situations where public funding and institutions are lacking. Moreover, the approach opens a critique of the effects of decades of neoliberal economic policies and austerity measures, particularly in Europe and North America. These policies have arguably promoted individualism over community building and decentered the latter in favor of capitalist pursuits (Thomas 2022). This can be seen strongly reflected in the Western art scene and its conception of the artist as an individual, which is awfully firmly established, and frequently in the course of decolonial efforts this understanding of artistic individuality is transferred to the integration

33 See chapter: *The contemporary Need for a self-reflective institutional Responsibility*.

of art and artists coming from the Global South. Very well, the artistic individual from formerly colonized states must be recognized as such, but the Western artistic acceptance should also open up to other approaches apart from its own that is mainly based on the individual artistic genius, to a pluralism of artistic realization and self-determination that is different. Skye Arundhati Thomas is a writer and editor based in India and in their text “‘The double bind’: on Documenta 15” they provide in its essence, a comprehensive exploration of how funding, colonial legacies, and curatorial choices intersect within the framework of documenta15 and *ruangrupa*'s innovative approach. It highlights the potential of collectives from the Global South to challenge dominant narratives and introduces alternative models for exhibition-making in the art world. *Ruangrupa* allocated €25,000 as ‘seed money’ to 14 primary participating collectives, allowing them considerable autonomy in its use. Some collectives invested in land, others paid rent, and some created artwork or organized additional exhibitions within the exhibition itself. Having visited the exhibition themselves, Thomas shares the following perception of the exhibition.

It is clear that *ruangrupa* are sharply aware of how funding reproduces certain representational totems, and their vision for Documenta 15 was to momentarily release pressure on the participants. In an accompanying essay they describe how their own experiences with funding over the years have ‘proven to be highly competitive [...] exploitative and extractive’ and anticipate some of the pitfalls of their own project: we are still curious to see whether the 100 days of Documenta 15 will only result in pragmatic exercises—a temporary ‘time-off’ for artists and initiatives to learn from—only to swing back to the old system of doing things, relapsing to state funding/or free art-market systems (Thomas 2022).

To want to operate within decoloniality as a Western art institution means to undertake a deconstruction on a structural level, because it is precisely here that the coloniality of power has a profound and yet subtle effect that leaves its mark on society and their individuals (Maranda 2022, 185-186). But a deconstruction does not necessarily refer only to the tearing apart of the existing system but can also be realized through a construction and implementation of new arrangements that are coming from outside the realm of the purely western ideas and perceptions of how the art world should function. The curatorial approach of *ruangrupa*, which Mi You described as an ecosystemic turn, was perceived as an implicit critique of Western institutionalism, but in decolonial efforts such interventions could rather be envisioned as opportunities (You 2022). The approach of these curatorial ways of dealing introduced by *ruangrupa* seemed honest, as they did not artificially and forcedly try to perform in the context of documenta, but integrated infrastructures familiar and utilized by them in their local settings into a system external to their own, thus putting the translocal human-communal needs above

the (western) aesthetic recognition.³⁴ However, this does not diminish the artistic works, but shifts the demands on them and thus implicitly questions the status quo. *Ruangrupa* succeeded in exercising such a shift, especially with regard to Western European financing structures, not through a mode of accusation, but through the honest transformation of values that were tied to the collective treatment of financial resources and thus simply through their existence exercised a critique by showing an alternative way of operating in the contemporary art world known by the west. Thomas states:

This Documenta proposes the collective as an antidote to alienation. On display are primarily non-Western collectives that show objects made in workshops, mind maps, work-in-progress videos, and architecture with recognizable, simple aesthetic registers of their homeland: Tin huts, bricks, straw, bamboo. Productivity is linked to community experiences. [...] When funding provides both an opportunity through which new infrastructure is built and the means by which external political motivations are furthered, collectivity ends up being mediated as a token of difference. In their institutionalization, the ways in which collectives are able to conjure infrastructure from scarcity are made precious: they are held up as emblems to be learned from, means of escaping western alienation, proxies for political action. But contexts are integral to how collectives form in the first place, which makes this a pressured paradigm. *Ruangrupa*'s model makes explicit the political motivations of institutional funding structures—and how they shape the reception of the work they support—and attempts to defy them (Thomas 2022).

Thomas here again highlights the importance of context and positioning, especially when engaging and intervening in the Western art sphere with new approaches by the subjects of the Global South. The emergence, perception, and subsequent instrumentalization of such new infrastructures and collectivist methods are conditional on the existing context and structures into which they are embedded. The example of *ruangrupa*'s communal curatorial approach within the setting of the documenta15 illustrates that when funding serves both as a means to create new infrastructure and to promote external political agendas, collectivity can be reduced to a superficial symbol of diversity or difference. *Ruangrupa*'s model, as mentioned, explicitly acknowledges the political motivations behind institutional funding structures and seeks to challenge and overcome them, highlighting the need for a more nuanced and context-sensitive approach to collectivity and funding in the art world. It acknowledges that funding can reproduce norms of representation but aims to alleviate pressure on participants by promoting collaboration over individual authorship and resisting the commercialization of art (Thomas 2022; You 2022).

Art institutions in Western contexts need to recognize that their funding sources have a significant and inherent influence on their functioning and roles within the cultural milieu. This

34 Here again, the positionalities of the actors in relation to each other are important - since the curatorial approach *ruangrupa*'s implemented in a Western exhibition context may have a decolonial effect, while an inversely conceived transfer of Western infrastructures and procedures into an exhibition structure in the global South would run the risk of perpetuating the coloniality of power. This is such a clear indication that these are not neutral (imagined) territories and contexts.

dynamic appears to be deeply entrenched within a capitalist system, prompting the exploration of the extent to which institutions conform to this system (Bishop 2011). Therefore, one can question the handling of these funds, by whom they are distributed, to what they are used, and especially how transparently these flows of funds and the accompanying situatedness are communicated. Specifically when it comes to public funds, the allocation of which is extremely important because they are only available to a very limited extent for a huge cultural landscape and have a significant influence on who is enabled to get visibility and space to create and shape it sustainably (I have elaborated with the example of the Guggenheim Bilbao). The boycott of the Kunsthalle Berlin is mainly based on the non-transparent allocation of partly private and partly public funds and the related employment of certain individual decision-making positions. This lack of transparency has tainted any attempt to integrate this new institution into the existing local artistic community of Berlin and has led to its rejection, since the concealment of the string-pullers in the background makes both the practices of the curator Walter Smerling and the entire identity of the institution appear dishonest (Heiser, Steyerl and Wedemeyer 2022; Miller 2022; Timm 2022). The situation surrounding the collectivist curatorial approach of *ruangrupa* at documenta15 shows the Western art landscape as one of so many possible alternatives to its system of prioritizing the individual in the field of artistic funding. However, it also shows that the impact and reception of such new infrastructures are inevitably shaped by the existing positionalities in which they are either integrated or in which they find themselves in contradiction through an inherent differentiation. *ruangrupa* has shown that money has a grip on the contemporary art landscape but that this power dynamic can be redefined through, perhaps, collectivist approaches that place communal experience above purely aesthetic consumption.

Transparency is important both in the mediation of artistic content to reveal its positionality to the visitor and in relation to employment policies and programming, as well as the raising and distribution of funds. All these factors influence more or less subtly the artistic content and its perception through a partly active and partly passive positioning. Such transparency requires humanity, because a deconstruction of the sublime authority of art museums can be educated mainly through the construction of these places as human, fallible, and vulnerable. To expose the museum as an artificially constructed environment, it must reveal itself as human. In order to deconstruct this environment and the coloniality of power operating within it, the art museum must become vulnerable (Bellacasa 2017, 84; Casey 2005, 86; Wekke et al. 2016, 46, 49; Wróblewska 2022, 99-100).

6.3 From Transparency towards Vulnerability and Care

6.3.1 Vulnerability as a Catalyst for a Transformation of Art Institutions

Genuine transparency involves the act of opening up and becoming more tangible, a process that inherently entails embracing vulnerability. But what does vulnerability look like, especially when implemented by an institution?

Vulnerability, defined as ‘the quality or state of being exposed to the possibility of being attacked or harmed, either physically or emotionally,’ is one of the most desirable virtues of today’s museums. Criticized for their traditional forms as violent, imperial, and dominating institutions of the modern system of knowledge, some museums have already developed the capacity for self-reflection and self-critique in their regular activities. Some have created new strategies, such as inviting criticism from the outside, for instance by cooperating with an artist or curator or by establishing dialogues with engaged communities. However, vulnerability, understood as a mode of awareness and openness, requires even more – namely, a near-constant exposure and susceptibility to the risk of being attacked and harmed – as it emerges from imagining what it is to feel otherwise. Vulnerability is the capacity to imagine, feel, and see without excluding. It is the extension of work towards making the museum more accessible and more inclusive, to develop empathy for and identification with varied communities. It is also often defined as openness to an encounter with the ‘other’ as being different. Therefore, the real value of vulnerability is the possibility to transform existing perceptions of self, others, and the world (Wróblewska 2022, 97-98).

As long as Western art institutions and especially museums – which as expressed by Tolia-Kelly in her text “Feeling and Being at the (Postcolonial)Museum: Presenting the Affective Politics of ‘Race’ and Culture” are theaters of pain due to their processes of materializing epistemic violence, the rupture of genocide, and the deadening of artefacts (2016) – do not make themselves vulnerable, they resist decolonization. To *be* vulnerable and *to make oneself* vulnerable consciously holds a great difference and requires a distinct departure position. Vulnerability is based on the will to make oneself tangible, touchable, influenceable, and thus changeable through contact with others. Vulnerability ensures a process of transformation that is happening on the inside yet is initiated through interaction with the outside. Art museums should actively embrace this transformation as for so long it has been they who have hurt others, ‘the Other’. The pain of these violent colonial pasts will continue to resonate and be reproduced within these institutions until they actively confront them honestly and transparently and acknowledge them as their own responsibilities and weaknesses. As long as this recognition does not come from within the institution but through the invitation and (temporary) inclusion of artists, curators, writers, or experts from former colonial states or from the diaspora, they are blindly forced to deal with this burden, and the institution itself keeps untroubled and mostly unchanged (Wróblewska 2022, 99-100) . “European museums often invite artists and activists from Africa and the diaspora to ‘mine the museum.’ Namibian scholar and artist Nashilongweshipwe Mushaandja names this ‘practice of museuming’ as one that asks the victims of colonialism to handle its baggage” (Valley 2019). Sumaya Kassim states in this

regard the need for an operational change against this ‘practice of museuming’. “Rather than place the onus on people of colour – either as facilitators or as an audience for the museum – we need to flip the narrative and ask how the museum can facilitate the decolonial process for its majority white audience in a way that does not continue to exploit people of colour” (Kassim 2017). An openly communicated and conveyed vulnerability, both for the contributors who will be invited and integrated into museums in the future and for the visitors, could drive such a reversal. To be vulnerable, one must start with oneself. One must recognize one's own positionality, acknowledge and communicate one's own past mistakes, admit one's own still effective weaknesses, and reveal one's insecurities rather than masking them by maintaining an intangible position of authority conveying a neutrality rather than honesty (Wróblewska 2022, 100). Even if the people who are now working in these art sites were neither actively involved in colonialism nor guilty of it, demonstrating vulnerability in this context does not mean taking the blame as individuals, but collectively making the institution they help define a place that acknowledges its participation in colonialist forces by opening up and listening to critique that in turn honestly and sustainably transforms these sites. But nonetheless, it is the collective of singular persons that create an art museum or an art institution, and it's the collective of their singular decisions that can deconstruct and reconstruct these sites. The art world, in both a physical and psychological sense, has been made into an often very abstracted world, especially in the West.

The white cube model, coupled with the institutional authority of these venues and the perceived inviolability of both the physical space and the art historical narrative emphasizing artistic genius, tends to dehumanize the art museum. This dehumanization, in turn, contributes to the art museum becoming an unquestionable and untouchable space. Being untouchable can lead to becoming isolated and abstracted from the plurality of realities and stagnating in an idea of a universal singularity (Bellacasa 2017, 100; Bhabha 1994, 44; Haq 2015, 12; Pollock 2007, 7-8; Tolia-Kelly 2016, 889; Mkhonza 2021, 34; Vázquez 2022). However, the physical sites of the Western art sphere were constructed in their creation to elevate the West and Europe through the differentiation, based on exclusion and degradation of ‘the Other’ and to visually manifest these differences turned into discrimination into the western consciousness. These forces will not go away on their own, and their extent could (and still can) be felt in the exhibitions in which art is situated within the hidden and as naturally constructed politics of opposition between the West and the Rest. Exhibitions such as *Primitivis*’ or *Magiciens de la terre*, for example, have made it so evident that the Western museum context of presentation is precisely

not a neutral ground and that the forces at work within it so clearly relegate the art and identity narratives behind it to constructed positions of opposition of valorization or devaluation.³⁵ Yet, this construction is based on human decisions and so it is human decisions that can deconstruct this construct. But this does not mean to abolish the differences by forced assimilation, but to see the constructed value systems behind it. And it is precisely here that a transformation to vulnerability within art museums can initiate the necessary transformation, as to quote Wróblewska again: “Vulnerability is the capacity to imagine, feel, and see without excluding. [...] It is also often defined as openness to an encounter with the ‘other’ as being different” (2022, 97-98). Vulnerability as the acceptance of difference means becoming self-aware and recognizing one's human fallibility instead of hiding and projecting it onto others out of fear of one's own weakness. Decoloniality means to respect differences in all their being and even more to accept the choice of the individual as well as the collective to live out this difference in any form. Moreover, vulnerability could make decolonial processes a part of the ever-changing present, rather than always redefining it after past processes have been captured, theoretically dissected and comprehended, as vulnerability does not close off and exclude the past but embraces it within its relational behavior. All these steps that lead to the establishment of a tangible vulnerability within an art institution are therefore steps of self-reflection and serve above all to become conscious of the own institutional position in relation to the past and present in an interrelationship with the local situatedness. Making oneself vulnerable requires to truly get to know one's own incompleteness without judgment. This honesty, in turn, means truly recognizing what one is and what not. Any work that involves representing someone other than oneself should start with oneself. The contemporary art museum should start with itself in any process of representation. It must become aware of where it begins and where it ends, because only with such an awareness is an honest representation possible that does not project one's own identity onto that of the others, the represented. Only in this way is it possible to give the represented room to unfold itself in its own identity, and to make it become recognizable through the fact that the position of the represented is also recognizable. To decolonize a museum is to make the museum's coloniality evident. If an art museum were to begin the work of decoloniality, and inclusion with itself, and more so communicate this honestly to the public, the lengthy process of attempted decolonization would be radically accelerated. Instead of forcefully trying to ‘teach’ the constructed ‘the Other’ through superficial diversification measures, such as Ndikung's described ‘outreach-complex’, that the Western art museum is also a place for them, it should change with such a vulnerability that it really *becomes* a place

35 See chapter: ‘Primitivism’ and ‘Magiciens de la Terre’: An Encounter on non-neutral Ground.

for them that no longer turns them into ‘the Other’ but lets them remain themselves. In this way, art institutions could become a vehicle through which the Western, white visitor also undergoes such a transformation within themselves that no longer starts with the question of the identity of ‘the Other’, but instead with their *own* in relation to the world. By changing the gaze inward, both the individual and the museum as a collective construct can recognize that itself is an unfinished, ever-changing matter, and that a ultimate realization of one's concluded identity can never be articulated in an absolute and final wholeness. If one understands this about the self, that in the end one can never be understood in a definitive totality, then one can also free oneself from wanting to understand others in their totality and instead admit the freedom of truthful difference in every form of existence. Such an acceptance liberates me as an individual but also the intuitions from the (very Western and colonialist) urge to always comprehend and capture everything and everyone. It is possible to let go of harming stereotypes and prefabricated categories (one of the main *modii operandi* through which the coloniality of power is still exercised especially within museums and their collections) into which the world around oneself is consigned to stagnation and fixity, but instead to establish the acceptance of an ambigine flow of differences. In turn the individual and the institution could shift their comprehensiveness towards the multiplicity of positionalities of another in relation to one's own and therefore submit to the existence of a pluralism of knowledges deriving from different localities of the world. Such a shift begins with vulnerability communicated in honesty and could arrive in the act of care for another through the abandoning of authority.

6.3.2 A Paradigm Shift: Pathways for the Contemporary Art Museum as a Place of Care

Although the Western art museum should begin with itself, this does not mean, by reverse implication, that it no longer exhibits art and thus should no longer be a presentation space for artists and cultural discourses outside its own, but rather that such a transformation can happen hand in hand with the continuation of any sort of exhibition. Yet if an art institution would no longer try to explain ‘the Other’ and their matters in a hegemonic way of the singular knowledge, it still has to continue to encounter them, but how? One answer could be: with care. But what is care? And what does it mean to care and be cared for? María Puig De La Bellacasa starts her book titled *Matters of Care: Speculative Ethics in More Than Human Worlds* as follows:

Care, caring, carer. Burdened words, contested words. And so common in everyday life, as if care was evident, beyond particular expertise or knowledge. Most of us need care, feel care, are cared for, or encounter care, in one way or another. Care is omnipresent, even through the effects of its absence. Like a longing emanating from the troubles of neglect, it passes within, across, throughout things. Its lack undoes, allows unraveling. To care can feel good; it can also feel

awful. It can do good; it can oppress. Its essential character to humans and countless living beings makes it all the most susceptible to convey control. But what is care? Is it an affection? A moral obligation? Work? A burden? A joy? Something we can learn or practice? Something we just do? Care means all these things and different things do different people, in different situations. So while ways of caring can be identified, researched, and understood concretely and empirically, care remains ambivalent in significance and ontology (Bellacasa 2017, 1).

As Bellacasa makes clear here, care is not a matter that can be defined straightforwardly but is situation-dependent and, above all, relationship-dependent. Despite the ambiguous interpretation of care, it is clear that it can only manifest itself in the *in-between*. In between the care-giver and the care-receiver – even if one embodies both positions in the form of self-care (Groys 2022, 2). Care is always a relational action. However, the modes of care change not only in terms of the situation and relationship in which they are exercised but also, and above all, with time. What we care about, both as individuals and as a collective society, is constantly changing according to the urgency, priorities, and needs of both the caregiver and the cared-for. Care is not a matter of fixity but of permanent transformation. “Beyond the obvious point that what matters to a generation will not continue per se to matter into the future, care is so vital to the fabric of life that it remains an ongoing matter of struggle and a terrain of constant normative appropriation” (Bellacasa 2017, 8). This normative approach to care manifests itself in the fact that it is a contested terrain whose boundaries between political and private responsibility, between self-centeredness and selflessness, are constantly blurred, and that care is usually discussed in a judgmental stance. As Bellacasa puts it: “[...] care is also a commonplace topic in everyday moralizations, especially in the West, or Global North” (Bellacasa 2017, 8). This stems from the fact that care – especially in its cross-societal form – is a scarce commodity of interdependency. Therefore, a rethinking of both the position of the care-giver and the position of the care-receiver, especially in terms of expanding the possibilities of who might occupy these positions and in what forms, could provide approaches to a life that turns away from the appropriation of others and replaces it with care for those.

I will now go ahead and examine the possibilities of caring in the context of contemporary art intuitions. I will do this by exploring the positionality between the care-giver and the care-receiver and who and what can occupy those, as well as the potential for implemented power imbalances and potential delusions of care as described by Bonaventure Soh Bejeng Ndikung in his 2021 published book *The Delusions of Care*. Furthermore, I would like to examine the transformation of both positions in the decolonial art context through the implementation of humanity, vulnerability, and honesty, as well as the potential of an expansion of the matters of care towards the environment with regard to the climate crisis.

6.3.2.1 Beyond Metaphors: From Dependency to unconditional Care

Art and the places where it is exhibited are fundamentally linked to care. In the Western classical conception of art, it defies functionality and only works if we care about it. The very position of the ‘curator’ is etymologically, by virtue of its Latin derivation from ‘curare’ *to take care of*, inseparable from the western idea of art but also from the institutionalized display of it (Ndikung 2021, 45). The art museum has always cared for art with its methods of preservation, categorization, conservation, restoration, and exhibition. However, this kind of care is intertwined with systems of dependency and power, so that even contemporary artists are still subjected to the care of art institutions, as they deem them worthy of their audience. Yet this care has not been spread equally. Western art museums have been caring about Western, white, male artists for so long that they have established this care as the ‘natural’ appearing status quo. The coloniality of power, therefore, is maintained in many art institutions through the opaque maldistribution of care rather than through overt violence. Yet the impact of this kind of violence is exerted through such care, or the lack thereof, on artists, objects, identities, and narratives outside the norm, and thus cannot be unmasked as such by the Western white norm visitor. From the outside, the museum cares for all its artworks and objects equally, putting them carefully on display and behind glass, but the system of care behind it operates in unequal power structures of dependency. According to Ndikung, caring can encourage the construction of a lasting circle of dependency and be taken advantage of. “One thing about the kind of care that comes with a yawning gap of power is its ability to maintain the status quo. Which is to say that with this gradient of power, the system of care needs the receiver to stay at the receiving end and the giver to stay at the giving end. Not because any of them need to be in that position, but because the receiver becomes dependent on the care given and the giver profits enormously from the care given” (Ndikung 2021, 29). So not all care is beneficial for the receiver of it, depending on the distribution of power and who benefits from it. Therefore, the art museum can already be seen as a caregiver. However, the status quo of the coloniality of power is maintained in these institutions as long as the inclusion of artists and participants from formerly colonized countries or the diaspora is taken care of out of self-profit, and it is ultimately the institution that profits from this care dynamic and not the included. Moreover, the art museum is all too eager to mediate its position as the care-taker of the arts towards the public and its visitors, but often completely disguises the way it profits from this position, leading to an atmosphere of dishonesty.

Through what he calls the ‘curatorial complex’ Ndikung describes the occurring phenomenon when care for art, artist, subject, context, space and more are only exercised to fit the orbit of the metaphor. Therefore care is reduced to a metaphor (Ndikung 2021, 46). The presentation of

art, the exhibition becomes a metaphor, in which each individual work is less meaningful than the greater entity. Art installations create these metaphors through the most matricular selection in which the effect of the metaphor is placed above all, but at the same time the metaphor must still be grasped by the ‘worthy’ visitor as it is not made obvious. Except that decolonization cannot be a metaphor (Valley 2019). In order to bring decoloniality out of the spheres of metaphor into lived practice, it is necessary to change the way of caring within art institutions and to release them from conditions of profit. Ndikung describes this form of care as unconditional care: “Therefore, the satisfaction comes from caring for and about the other, and the others’ greatness boomerangs back to you and thus to your own greatness. [...] A care that is not affiliated to the returns of birth reduction, national identity profit, or otherwise. A care which is bound to nothing else but the act of compassion and care itself. A care that is not greedy, not jealous and not longing for requital. A care that is not just a figure of speech, not just a metaphor nor analogy, but an undertaking”³⁶ (Ndikung 2021, 58-59). This kind of unconditional care involves the caregiver in the needs of the care recipient, without turning it into a play of power, yet also without abandoning oneself in the process. “Care is not about fusion; it can be about the right distance” (Bellacasa 2017, 5). In unconditional care, the caregiver is just as vulnerable as the cared for, since both occupy different positions but are involved to the same extent, moreover there is no hidden agenda on neither side, making this an encounter based on honesty and transparency. A sincere decolonization enacted by contemporary art institutions through the notions of care, would therefore not necessarily change the positions of care-giver/ care-receiver between institution and art(ist), but rather abandoning the power dynamics operating through them and, even more so, extend the care to the visitor. Moreover, through a transformation of care and its positionalities not only a decolonial approach in art institutions could be advanced, but furthermore a correlated environmentalist one.

6.3.2.2 Decolonial Care and its Delusions

To make the contemporary art museum decolonial and to deconstruct its patriarchal authority means to make the needs of these aspirations and therefore the needs of the peoples demand those, the needs of the institution. “What is definitive about care [...] seems to be a perspective

36 By returning to birth reduction, Ndikung is referring to the measures often pushed by Western philanthropists and NGOs that are intended to advance birth control, particularly in the continent of Africa. Western countries see this as a caring measure to reduce human poverty and thus poverty in the world. However, although the right to birth control should be available to every person without question, the Western motivation to push it, especially in African countries, is often rooted in racist worldviews that not only link People of Color to poverty but moreover want to reduce the reproduction of them rather than fighting the racist systems (Ndikung 2021, 13-24).

of taking the other's needs as the starting point for what must be done" (Tronto 1994, 105). This can be seen as a needs-based approach that recognizes the nature of care in its complexity and therefore addresses the political, infrastructural, knowledge and emotional levels involved in their intersectionality and their local and temporal situatedness (Krasny, Lingg and Fritsch 2021, 14). But how does one, as a Western institution, make decolonial and anti-patriarchal needs one's own? First and foremost, they have to be perceived as such and so the western art institution has to actively listen with care. "Listening, like speaking, is not neutral. Listening with care is an active process of intervening in the count of whom and what is ratified as concerned; it affects the representation of things, adding mediation to meditations" (Bellacasa 2017, 58). Listening with care means giving space to the other position to unfold as a speaker, a process that especially with regard to the oppression, exclusion and misrepresentation of 'the Other' enables them to become a subject in these spaces. Listening with care means that these subjects and their needs are truly heard. So, if the needs have been heard by the institution, it must not only act with care, but above all, think with care. Especially with regard to the Western constructed hegemony of knowledge, a thinking with care is necessary to understand the relational situatedness of knowledge and thus to dismantle this hegemony also within art institutions. "That knowledge is situated means that knowing and thinking are unconceivable without the multitude of relations that make possible the worlds we think with. [...] relations of thinking and knowing require care and affect how we care. In tune with a nonnormative approach to care as a speculative ethics, the grounds of this premise are ontological rather than moral or epistemological: not only relations involve care, care is relational per se" (Bellacasa 2017, 69). This relation of care means that when an institution takes on the needs of decolonial claims, it must still approach them differently than activists, artists, or other experts from formerly colonized states or the diaspora approach them. For the initial situation is quite different and thus art institutions must position themselves individually to these needs, they must care for them differently, depending on the relational (knowledge) situation in which they find themselves in order to enact a care with honesty. This positioning must derive from the recognition of the national local and historical position of the institution, since the decolonial needs also originate from an individual, national, local past and interact in relation to this position. For only by honestly communicating the vulnerability of its own positionality can the Western museum avoid perpetrating care from a constructed superior vantage point, which is still all too often exercised in Western thinking in relation to the Global South, especially regarding the continent of Africa and People of Color. For one of the greatest abysses of the supposed decolonization exerted through care is what Ndikung calls the 'commodification of

care', which is closely connected to the narrative of the White Savior³⁷ that the West has constructed for itself, assuming the role of hero to save 'the Other', the poor and the uncivilized through its graciousness (Ndikung 2021, 13; 26). The commodification of care, is one of the biggest delusions of care and is related concretely to the financial support specifically from western companies, philanthropists, but also states and is mediated and perceived as an act of needful and admirable aid for the global south and more specifically for the continent of Africa. Citing a 2014 article by Mark Anderson titled "Aid for Africa: donations from West mask '\$60bn looting'", Ndikung elaborates through the mathematics of care that

[...] Western countries use the rhetoric of aid to Africa 'as a smokescreen to hide the 'sustained looting' of the continent as it loses nearly \$60bn a year through tax evasion, climate change migration, and the flight of profits earned by foreign multinational companies.' The mathematics of care, as described in the article states that while Western countries send to Africa, yearly about \$30 billion in 'development aid,' more than six times the amount leaves the continent usually to the same countries that provide that 'aid.' So while these rich countries celebrate themselves and tap each other on the shoulder for being so generous and caring towards Africa, they actually make big business on and at the expenses of Africa. In reality the situation is even more perverse, as it is even unlikely that the so-called aid that is given ever arrives at its destination. Which is to say that maybe as little as \$0 gets to the destination, while \$180 billion leaves (Ndikung 2021, 25-26).

As long as the West uses this kind of care to emotionally and morally justify its own privileges for itself, instead of putting it in relation to its crimes committed against the African continent and its people with all their enduring consequences, this care is a fiction, fabricated to cleanse the Western consciousness while maintaining the coloniality of power (Ndikung 2021, 27). Thus, if decolonial care is to be truly put into practice in a Western art institution, the position of the institution must think with care and form a diversification not through relations of dependency and internalized moral superiority but through self-reflexive vulnerability while being aware of its own relational historical-sociological position. In a transformation to decolonial care, caring becomes an unconditional act in which the institution benefits only when the decolonial movement benefits, as the needs of the decolonial become the needs of the institution. The conditions and needs for how decoloniality has to develop in the abstract as well as in the real space of art institutions can only come from people from formerly colonized states or the Diaspora. The Western art museum remains the caretaker of art, but in decolonial

37 The Narrative of the White Savior, which is part of the 'White Savior Complex', a term coined by Teju Cole, describes a phenomenon according to which white people from the Global North feel called to do development, education or aid work in countries of the Global South. In doing so, they erroneously ascribe to themselves a very great responsibility and, above all, ability, which is supported by society and the media, but is not necessarily linked to reality. As a rule, white saviors initially want to 'give something back' or 'do something good' with their commitment - in other words, they basically pursue ethical or moral motives. It is a storyline that is often perpetuated through literature and movies (e.g. *The Blind Side*). However, many are unaware of the historically rooted and complex problem of white dominance and supremacy. This illusion perpetuates global power structures, inequalities and racist worldviews that have existed for centuries and, in the end, are often reinforced rather than combated by such forms of engagement (Cole 2012; Eller 2021).

care it must surrender its authority and place itself in a flipped position of dependence towards those people. To quote Sumaya Kassim again: “Rather than place the onus on people of color – either as facilitators or as an audience for the museum – we need to flip the narrative and ask how the museum can facilitate the decolonial process for its majority white audience in a way that does not continue to exploit people of color. *Key to this is accepting that the museum needs us; we do not need the museum* [emphasis added]” (Kassim 2017). In addition, the needs must be treated in such a way as to allow them to undergo any kind of future transformation rather than anchoring them statically in the present, and even more, an awareness and acceptance of a plurality of these needs have to be actively established because every colonial situation is different, and therefore every decolonial situation has its own individual needs and demands different related positionings depending on the trans-local situatedness. Care becomes a painful power play when the caregiver does not allow the care receiver to change and even more to reverse, dissolve or redefine the care relationship. “[...] if only we would really care well with accurate knowledge of each concrete situation. Because care eschews easy categorization, because a way of caring here could kill over there, we will need to ask ‘How to care?’ in each situation, without necessarily giving to one way of caring a role ‘model’ for others. It means too that as a doing, I look into caring as a transformative ethos rather than a normative ethics” (Bellacasa 2017, 67).

Every art museum or institution, for every exhibition, for every work of art and artist, for every audience, for any means of presentation, should ask itself, ‘how to care?’ and it must be ready, every time posing this question, to find a different answer that takes into account the relation of the subject of care to its own. Caring therefore implies a continuity of involvement because it is an act of maintenance that allows transformation. This includes not only the reappraisal of the past but, above all, the active shaping of the present. With regard to the European situation, art institutions should also ask themselves again and again for whom they exercise this care, and whether this preserves the status quo of dominance or strives for a transformation towards equality. Because care can include or exclude its mere existence or absence. Particularly with regard to the way refugees and asylum seekers are dealt with in Europe, Europe is the caretaker that clearly places those to be cared for in its dependency in order to maintain its own position of power. Daniela Ortiz therefore demands a more active involvement of museums in the current context of extreme colonial violence faced by migrant and refugee populations in Europe. The idea of decolonizing a museum is important but must be contextually relevant. Simply organizing exhibitions and seminars is insufficient. To truly decolonize a museum now,

Ortiz demands that they actively take a stance against Europe's migratory control system, recognizing the normalization of detention centers, forced deportations, semi-rights, and anti-rights, as well as extreme violence in border areas where these projects are presented. "Decolonising a museum means sending letters to the Ministry of Interior, organising press conferences to condemn the use of culture in the discourse of integration, making the legal apparatus of the museum available to persecuted people; it means acknowledging the level of urgency imposed in the European context by the backbone of coloniality" (Ortiz 2021, 103). Such a commitment on the part of institutions would mean going beyond the intrinsically Western and European needs of decolonization, which is based on teaching the white-European population about them, but taking responsibility for and addressing the needs of those people whom the coloniality of power still oppresses by taking care of them through a genuine notion of decoloniality. Bellacasa articulates thus not only the way to exercise care but even more when she suggests to no longer encounter the world as matter of facts, but as a matters of care, as one becomes involved in their continuation and even more in their becomings. "But the notion of 'matters of care' is a proposition to think with: rather than indicating a method to 'unveil' what matters of fact are, it suggests that we engage with them so that they generate more caring relationalities. It is thus not so much a notion that explains the construction of things as it addresses how we participate in their possible becoming. Caring here is a speculative affective mode that encourages intervention in what things could be" (Bellacasa 2017, 66). This shift in approaching matter as matter of care rather than matter of fact is relevant not only to a future transformation but also to the transformation of (art)history. If art institutions no longer consider not only the objects but also the narratives and identities they represent as matters of fact but care for their becoming, they must also care for their pasts, as these affect the becoming. This means a deconstruction of western concluded thinking and knowledge and a reconstruction towards an opening for the pluralism of perspective, knowledges and possibilities beyond the own and singular understanding of the world. This also means saying goodbye to the performative and pain-inducing neutrality that constructed the white, male West as the norm. Approaching decoloniality with care could also help the art institution transform itself towards a place of honest vulnerability, as "[...] to engage properly with the becoming of a thing, we should strive to count and include all the concerns attached to it, all those who care for it" (Bellacasa 2017, 44). Such an inclusion of all the concerns attached and of all the people who care for it would stir away from the exploitation and extraction politics that a false diversification enacted for the profit of western institutions asserts. It could extend the necessary attention to international political, social, and humanitarian crises – such as the war in Ukraine

or the precarious situation of migrant communities in the suburbs of France, just to mention two examples – that do not fade after the initial social media uproar or be used to follow a mere tokenistic trend within institutions.

To move from matters of fact to matters of care would necessarily destabilize the Western art institution because it would take away the fixity of Western hegemony of knowledge on which the authority of these institutions is built. However, if the institution does not resist this process but accepts it with human vulnerability, the art museum could transform itself into an honest place of care. Even more, such a thinking of the world in matters of care can expand the sense of conscience and strengthen involvement, especially in relation to the environment and the climate crisis.

6.3.2.3 *Environmental Matters of Care*

The narrative around climate change is being taken out of the abstraction of theory more and more every day and is also increasingly shifting into a climate crisis in the consciousness of societies. But still the relationship to the environment, the way especially the western society lives on this earth, remains a way that is enormously detached from the earth as a matter of care. In his aforementioned lecture at the Jan Van Eyck Academy, Rolando Vázquez spoke of a system of separation created by this Western abstraction of human and earth. This is especially evident in the lost awareness that everything we consume, food, consumer goods, clothing and all the raw materials with which our entire infrastructure is created, originally come from the Earth, but are used to construct places of abstraction (supermarkets, shopping malls, airports, white cubes, etc.) that could be transplanted anywhere. We are separated from the earth that sustains us (Vázquez 2022). It is not only because of this that the climate crisis is so seemingly elusive to the West, but moreover because of the Western approach to the Earth - which is rooted in colonialism. The time of the European expansion of colonialism is the time when the climate crisis began, according to Vázquez. Because this is exactly the moment in which (Western) man has placed himself above the earth, when man has understood himself as the *owner* of the earth. For the global south, according to Vázquez, the climate urgency therefore began 500 years ago with colonialism, because the European colonial powers not only saw themselves as the owners of the (New) World, but at the same time also took the earth away from the indigenous peoples, who lived *with* the earth instead of treating it as their own. Through the violent civilization and cultivation of indigenous peoples as well as the Earth, the system of separation in favor of Western modernity has increasingly advanced. A separation of earth, separation of diversity (of knowledges, of worldviews...) and also separation of memory. This led to the dichotomies of the West as the Self and the Global South as ‘the Other’, in which

the Western individual is positioned at the top. This Western and colonial approach to the Earth was further solidified by the Enlightenment with its anthropocentric discourse, which places the human being at the center, and, according to Vázquez, led to an earthlessness - a state of loss of the earth (in human consciousness). The Western art museum is a place of extreme abstraction, where not only is the outside not allowed in, but through the aura and authority of the sublime, civilized culture is elevated above nature, above the earth. Even if museums are preservers of history and art museums are conservators of art historical memory, Vázquez further describes them as places of separation of memory, since the remembering that takes place in them is centered on the individual and not on collective history and its inseparable connection with the earth (Vázquez 2022). The Western art museum is so focused on man that any reference to nature exists only in the form of art, which in Western art history consists of idealized artistic expression whose interpretative focus is on the magnificence of the creator, the artist rather than on the nature itself, or in the form of (looted) indigenous narratives, objects or art that has been labeled primitive and savage and has to be civilized. The art museum is therefore a place that has lost the relation to the earth because a large part of the western population has lost this connection and lives in an anthropocentric body of modernity without relation.³⁸ However, this body wants more and more, in a world that it has designed for the infinity of growth on an earth that is finite, and thereby at the same time ignorantly reduces the possibilities of the future more and more. The globalized world therefore led to the absurdity that the more progress mankind makes, the more the earth is exploited (Vázquez 2022). Yet it is not only the earth that is being exploited but also the people who, in contrast to the West, do not profit from the coloniality of power but suffer from it. The climate crisis in which humanity finds itself is therefore closely related to a climate injustice that has been growing since colonialism. This climate injustice is strongly related to the Western hegemony of knowledge that has suppressed the diverse ways of knowing but also addressing not only about the earth but also about the climate crisis through separation from the earth, diversity and memory.

We share the central concern about equity in decision-making for people who have been historically the least responsible for climate change and yet continue to bear the biggest burden of the consequences. Hence, it is central for tackling climate change to ask who has access to negotiations and how participation is organized. Questions of justice become most visible in struggles over the distribution of resources and burden-sharing as well as in contention about who can participate in the creation of the rules of engagement in climate governance. We argue that in order to analyze climate justice, more light has to be shed on the normative, epistemological and ontological assumptions guiding the ways in which decision-making processes predominantly unfold in international politics. We argue that focusing on the dominant notions of climate justice, whose principles are often based on ideal theories in which

38 For example, the relation of the time of the seasons and the natural availability of foods, who makes the food that's eaten, who makes the cloth that are worn, who gets the materials for the technologies used, etc. and where are all of these matters coming from (Vázquez 2022).

the Westphalian state constitutes the central actor, tends to reproduce colonial structures, neglecting the lived experiences of people already affected by climate change (Wilkins and Datchoua-Tirvaudey 2022, 126-127).

It is precisely this injustice that colonial difference perpetuates, creating a fracture between the dominant world of modernity and constant growth and the world of coloniality, loss, and extraction. Decoloniality is thus closely linked to climate justice, as colonialism is inextricably linked to the climate crisis and climate injustice. To decolonize, however, is in no way to incorporate the rest of the world into Western thinking, into Western constructed modernity, or into Western consumption of the earth. Rather, decoloniality is a fight for emplacement (Vázquez 2022). This reinsertion refers both to people who were misplaced at the time of colonialism and the slavery connected to it, and to matter and living beings beyond the human. Likewise, the localities of modernity and contemporaneity, such as the museum, which through abstraction became placeless places, that is, places of separation without relation, must be placed again, in other words, positioned in relation to the earth and its beings again. “Liberation is not to place itself within a system of the west; liberation is not to become the subject that destroys the planet. Liberation is allowing the taking place of those worlds that care for life and care for the earth” (Vázquez 2022). Decoloniality thought from the West means not only accepting these liberated worlds in all their nuances but also taking care of their becoming. However, this care must come from a standpoint of unconditional care and not be based on power dynamics of superiority and dependence but on vulnerability. To decolonize oneself as a western art institution requires an effort of rapprochement and to place oneself again relational to the earth, which must therefore be done through an honest and open positioning. For such a positioning, the climate crisis and even more the climate injustice in art museums must be actively addressed within the institutional program, not only by climate activists who glue themselves to valuable pictures in European museums or throw soup on them to get the media attention of the public and politics. Though the activists choose the art museum for this kind of protest not only for attention but also because it is seen as a symbol of transgenerational inheritance, which, however, derives very much from anthropocentrism and abstraction, while the transgenerational inheritance of the earth itself and how this actual place is left to future generations is ignored for the sake of referencelessness (Bessette and Bessette 2022). Shifting the consideration of the objects, narratives, identities, and artworks that an art institution presents away from matters of fact to matters of care, as well as extending these matters to the earth, the environment, and nature, could be an approach in which the art institution places itself back in the world and in return lets the earth and the world enter again, while also taking an honest approach to decoloniality in relation to climate change and climate injustice. Such an

approach must be designed differently for each institution, based on the individual needs of its positionality, but should emerge through an institutional-vulnerability enacted through listening with care, thinking with care, and being implemented in structures of unconditional care free from desires of commodification, in order for the institution to be humanized and more so to reconnect this humanity to the earth. An extremely important approach to such reconnection could be the decolonial integration of indigenous approaches and knowledges into museums again. In reversing the displacement of these peoples and their knowledges that colonialism has caused, integration can lead to a replacement that offers the potential for Western populations to learn to live with the earth rather than owning it by embracing indigenous sensibilities. Indigenous communities, with their extensive ecological knowledge, offer invaluable insights into environmental protection and sustainability. An example of such integration can be found in Norway (Virtanen, Olsen and Keskitalo 2021, 8-9; 12-16) . The North Norwegian Art Museum (Nordnorsk Kunstmuseum) is located in Tromsø, Northern Norway, an area with a significant Sámi population. The Sámi are an indigenous community in the Nordic countries that has faced historical injustices and cultural erasure due to colonial policies. Although the museum's mission is to promote art from northern Norway, it has previously made little commitment to showcasing Sámi art. During his tenure as museum director, Jérémie McGowan recognized the importance of decolonizing the museum and improving the representation of Sami art and artists. In 2017, the museum underwent a temporary transformation, renaming itself 'Sámi Dáiddamusea' (Sámi Art Museum) and featuring an exhibition titled *There is no* that highlighted the lack of a permanent Sami art museum in Norway. This curatorial strategy aimed to foreground the Sámi community in a cultural center of northern Norway and contribute to a broader international trend of recognizing indigenous artists (Gullickson 2023,4-5; Ringstad 2021). Furthermore, Indigenous communities, including the Sámi people, often possess deep ecological knowledge about their environments. This knowledge is rooted in centuries of living in harmony with nature and understanding local ecosystems, and thus, by integrating Sámi knowledge into institutional practices, it becomes possible to tap into this valuable resource for environmental conservation and sustainable practices while fostering decoloniality and transforming the art museum into a place of care beyond human matters (Virtanen, Olsen and Keskitalo 2021, 8-9).

Admittedly, such a change is not free of pitfalls and deceptions, but especially an institutional approach based on collectivism could be a way to avoid some of these pitfalls. McGowan's efforts to decolonize the museum and prioritize Sámi art were met with skepticism and

resistance, particularly from parts of the museum board. Some board members questioned the inclusion of Sámi voices and representation, raising concerns about accommodating other minority groups if Sámi representation were emphasized. This resistance illustrates the difficulties of addressing colonial legacies that persist in contemporary societies and the need to confront the ongoing racializing logics that underlie them. A contemporary art museum that operates with care could be an essential platform. The case of the Nordnorsk Art Museum illustrates the need for a dedicated Sámi art museum in Norway. Such an institution would provide a permanent platform for Sámi artists, ongoing support, and representation in the national art arenas. It would do more to secure freedom of expression for the Sámi community and ensure that their voices are heard and respected in the art world, which in turn would lead to a rethinking of both the treatment of indigenous knowledge and its replacement in the dispossessed territory (Gullickson 2023, 20; Ringstad 2021). And even in such a notion, it is important for the art museum to first transform itself before such inclusion, so that it does not encounter such narratives and representations from a hegemonic coloniality of power and through western-centric categories of high art, but from a vulnerable position, aware of its past damaging authoritativeness towards Indigenous positions and encountering them with unconditional care (Gullickson 2023, 19). Otherwise, the inclusion of new approaches can again stagnate in superficiality that is bound to the desire of western consumption and its way of knowing. Approaches such as that of the curatorial collective *ruangrupa* at documenta15 2022, in which the creation and exhibition of art are not isolated but placed in the context of a translocal and transcultural ecosystem, are approaches that relate the local to the global and, even more, incorporate human access to the earth. Even more, such references bring an art institution not only into relation to its environment but also to itself. They make art mediation tangible and touchable. The western art museum has made itself untouchable in the literal and figurative sense and has thus isolated itself from the earth and its wholeness through abstraction. Precisely for this reason, the work of reclaiming people from formerly colonized states and the diaspora from these institutions is such an energy-sapping undertaking, since the art museum wants to include them but at the same time wants to remain untouchable. Reclaiming as political work within existing structures without accepting them as given would be made so much easier if the given structures changed first (Bellacasa 2017, 100). It is precisely through this untouchability that the art museum has distanced itself not only from the plurality of indigenous knowledge but also from the earth itself, because by focusing on visual mediation, the viewer's agency is taken away. The art museum may even touch the visitor, but conversely, this is strictly forbidden; moreover, it never lets the visitor directly experience nature; instead, the knowledge

of it is shaped by the mediated social and cultural context and teaches the visitor how to know nature – which is often in opposition to culture (Bellacasa 2017, 114). Therefore, by considering the earth and nature as matter of care, the art museum could succeed not only in getting back in touch with them but even more in establishing colonial relations with regard to themselves instead of only with ‘the Other’.

In conclusion, this dissertation underscores that museums are inherently positioned entities that shape encounters and narratives rather than neutral spaces. The colonial legacy of Western museums perpetuated Eurocentrism, establishing a normative discourse that marginalized and objectified ‘the Other’. While contemporary art museums are making efforts toward a decolonial process through diverse artist representation and visitor engagement, they must first examine their own positions within the larger discourse – fostering a transformation from the inside out rather than from the outside in. Thus, instead of trying to forcibly teach the constructed ‘Other’ through shallow and momentary diversification measures that the Western art museum is now suddenly a place for them – while ‘the Other’ is intrinsically pushed to remain ‘the Other’ – institutions should take sustained action to truly become a place where ‘the Other’ can transform into the *self*. Decoloniality, at its core, is about leaving choice—allowing artists and visitors to self-position rather than prescribing a singular and imperative stance. To achieve a truly decolonial transformation, art institutions should start by acknowledging their relational positionality and embracing their local context as a vital aspect of their identity. This process requires transparency, vulnerability, and a willingness to relinquish the authority that maintains colonial power dynamics. The art museum can transform into a site of unconditional care, engaging with the shifting present and addressing climate injustice by extending care to the Earth, environment, and nature. Such an approach fosters a reconnection with humanity and challenges the entrenched performed neutrality of Western art institutions. Ultimately, the art museum can become a place that prioritizes matters of care over matters of fact, encompassing works, artists, visitors, the environment, and its own personnel in a collective pursuit of transformative and decolonial practice.

However, as the political theorist Ariella Aïsha Azoulay underscores in a 2020 interview, decolonizing the museum is inseparable from decolonizing the world. While engaging in this important work, it is crucial to recognize that decoloniality cannot be confined to discrete objects, museums, or archives, and it cannot be genuinely substantial unless the individuals from whom all this wealth was expropriated are allowed to lead the process (Azoulay 2020). Yet if the contemporary art museum would be a place that undergoes such a transformation, it

could be a place that dismantles imperial borders by welcoming people to rebuild their worlds in proximity to their identities and that expresses to everyone engaging with it how to equally care about those worlds.

7 Bibliography

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