

What is a Metabolic Museum?

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1.

The year 2020 saw the publication of *The Metabolic Museum*, a work in which Clémentine Deliss ponders her vision for a museum – or university-museum – defined by the property suggested in the title. The present article seeks to explore this concept (concept pair) and to analyse it with a critical eye.

2.

The word *metabolism* is used to signify the flow of material, energy, and information through a living organism, such that the materials the body takes in from its environment are transformed from extrinsic to intrinsic, while the various parts of the body work together to maintain this process at an appropriate level. If the word *museum* is appended to this strongly body-oriented concept, the initial image is perhaps one of a positivist institution: the information and energy flowing into the museum, in close concert with the physical materials it acquires, become intrinsic to it, eliciting a reaction from the entire institutional organism. Of course, this positivist image comes with a number of immediate questions: how can something become entirely ‘of the museum’? Must it? Can one point to an actual museum where all elements work together in a shared metabolism? What can a museum do with various bits of matter, energy, and information that have lost connection with one another? Is it possible that the entire metaphor, in fact, oversimplifies the matter?

3.

In her book of the same title, Deliss discusses the lessons learned from five years as head of the Frankfurt Weltkulturen Museum, a post she left in 2015. The approach she had taken as a museum director and in general, as a scholar and curator, was a deeply radical one, and it is this radicality that the metabolic university-museum pipedream, a vision borne with a specific view to European ethnography museums, reflects. When in her book, Deliss discusses preparing for her work with an extensive tour of Europe’s various ethnology museums, the picture she paints is one of intense pessimism – of institutions in which the above-defined metabolic processes fail to function in any way at all. She writes: ‘I began to recognize the museum as a complex body with a severely ailing metabolism, afflicted organs, and blocked channels of circulation. To transform this condition would require careful nurturing, but also radical operations’ (Deliss 2020: 18). Her book – as with her work with the Weltkulturen Museum – attempts to shift this disease. The most important concept in this endeavour Deliss identifies as *remediation*: ‘To reconsider the metabolic functions of the museum is to think about each of the organs that contributes to its overall institutional operations, subjecting collections to contemporary scrutiny and remediation’ (Deliss 2020: 106). Just as the metabolism of the body is holistic in nature, so, too, must the diseased ethnology museum be subjected to lifestyle changes that both extend to the entire organisa-

tion, and take its metabolic character into account. Precisely as one would impart wellbeing to the human body.

4. Deliss's book begins with a manifesto of the post-ethnographic museum originally written in 2013. The key elements addressed are: the anomalies and anachronisms associated with work on collections belonging to other peoples, times, and histories; the need for a rethinking of how museum research is conducted; remediation, dialogue-based research, and openness to change; possible non-museum-based curators; and a museum-university vision that ties all of this together: a democratic interpretation and use of intellect on behalf of a museum that thinks about its discipline and collections in a new way (Deliss 2020: 12–13). It is as if this manifesto were Deliss's own institutional mission statement, one that at the same time precisely establishes what she means by 'remediation'. In literal English translation – and also according to Paul Rabinow, whom Deliss cites (Rabinow 2012) – remediation means to repair or correct damage, but in Deliss's usage, it comes rather closer to meaning to embrace radicality, to change a collection's anthropological classification system so as to eradicate such systematising principles as region, religion, ethnicity, culture, society, or function – to employ dialogue-based research methods, to change the medium, to enable interpretation, and in doing so, to rid the museum of its 'diseases' (Deliss 2020: 12–13).
5. Deliss sees ethnography museums as institutions brought about and sustained into the modern era by the desire to accumulate. Their collections in this light are but *idiosyncratic composites*, reflecting both the egos of scholars, historians, curators, and artists, and the competition between them for special, rare, or exotic status (Deliss 2020: 63). Objects, for their part, are like fly traps, whose patina and curious origins capture our imaginations, but at the same time, produce only short-term, selective enthusiasm. In reality, these collection pieces have been brutally excised from their original domains of reference, and we humans take these injured specimens and use them to try and justify – to say something real about – ideologies, identities, and social problems. In Deliss's view, no matter how many times we invest an object with new authenticity (i.e. no matter how many times we assign to an object a meaning said to be authentic), what we are always, in fact, expressing is that we own both it, and the knowledge it brings (Deliss 2020: 96). It is this type of false appropriation that Deliss criticises so heavily, in particular because, in her view, it perpetuates within museum-ethnographic word usage master-slave terminologies 'that concur with the language of seclusion and control, such as the *keeper*, *custodian*, and *conservator*'. Further: 'This reservoir of world heritage [the museum and its collection of artefacts] is maintained in the implicit belief that therein lies an ambivalent energy yet to be converted and exploited by its current owners. Why else would Europe's museums wish to retain so many millions of artifacts pitilessly extracted from their countries of origin' (Deliss 2020: 97)? This form of exploitation Deliss sees as so grievous as to compare it to the illegal safaris of human organ dealers. Just like the traders in body parts, she says, the 'necropolitical colonial museum' will get away with it, despite the toxic effect it has on sensitive artefacts and the way it poisons institutional 'metabolism,' necessitating the application of entirely new mechanisms of healing (Deliss 2020: 99).
6. Despite her insistence that world culture / ethnography museums no longer exist – or, at least, are no longer viable in their current form – Deliss nevertheless sees

a solution to the use of their institutions and collections. In one discussion, she is quoted as having said: ‘I cannot accept that today, an ethnography museum has any significance. What I can accept is that an ethnographic *collection* has value.’ (1) This theme is repeated in her book, where she asserts that ethnology museums may not proceed into the future along the course taken over the past one and a half centuries. In her opinion, the social function of the entire institution must be altered at the roots, because if not, it will serve again and again as fertile ground for the repeated resurfacing of racism (Deliss 2020: 101). As a solution to this problem, Deliss holds forth remediation, a concept constructed over two others: Bruno Latour’s ‘performative definition’ and Paul Rabinow’s dialogic methodology. Latour’s performativity assumes that collection artefacts can generate new and unexpected interpretations that can be either engaged or suppressed – or that are optionally incommensurable – but that are never so immutable as to be carved in stone. Deliss, rounding this out with Rabinow’s dialogic methodology, reaches the solution that, by including new, external voices, understandings, and approaches, new interpretations – and thereby, new understandings – can be brought into being. Her suggestion is that collections need not be further expanded; rather, researchers, artists, students, experts, various craftspersons, etc. must be invited to view them, then left to create meanings and understandings in dialogue both with the collection, and each other (Deliss 2020: 64). It was, in fact, precisely this that Deliss attempted at the Frankfurt Weltkulturen Museum with the creation of the Weltkulturen Labor (cf.: Deliss 2012), and this that she means by the term ‘university-museum’. For the remediation of ethno-colonial museums in particular, Deliss thought it necessary to engage not only with conditions of institutional blindness but also with the architectonic structures the collection inhabited – although such experiment has not been conducted before in Frankfurt (Deliss 2020: 104).

7.

The idea of the museum-university Deliss constructs upon the observation that museum collections are, in fact, repositories of mementoes awaiting emancipation, or, alternately, databanks of stored code, and as such, are suited to university-level, multidisciplinary study (Deliss 2020: 106). The remediation of the university-like, inclusive museum she envisions as a self-reflexive, critical, co-operative process, one in which authority is shared. In *Manifesto for Rights of Access to the Colonial Collections Sequestered in Western Europe*, the 2018 writing with which Deliss concludes her book, the author dedicates significant space to the university-museum concept, calling not only for the creation of such institutions, but also – so that we might dare to radically rethink the condition of museums – that we treat the deepest of injuries; that we not grant curators redemption; that we generate physical and conceptual remedial spaces via architectures designed to heal and reinterpret; that we deal with the materiality of their agent-objects and build from them incongruous and problematic assemblages; that we construct museum-universities in which researchers and students may welcome a new, ever more diasporic generation; that we invite into them artists, writers, curators, filmmakers, lawyers, architects, ecologists, brothers, sisters – in practice, anyone and everyone. Deliss rings the alarm bells, advertising radicalism, practicing activist museology (Deliss 2020: 114–119), yearning for museum-universities where the objective is no longer the accumulation of artefacts or knowledge, but processing, connecting, remedying the blight caused by ethnographic science and its museums, and, ultimately, healing.

8.

It is interesting to note, however, that just as the wave of museum foundings of the 18th and 19th centuries (to say nothing of the collecting fervour that followed) was motivated, beyond mere accumulation, by the earnest desire to preserve and record, to capture phenomena on the very brink of extinction, so are Deliss's manifesto-framed, activist-toned writing and praxis themselves marked by the compulsion to act "there is no time to lose". Deliss even closes her book with this admonition (Deliss 2020: 119). Although the urgency in the former case is framed entirely differently than is the positivist yearning to amass collections, it is nevertheless the same basic phenomenon: the museum becomes the place – and museum activities the tools – of what is fundamentally a rescue operation. In the older positivist conception of the endeavour, the museum was saving artefacts, heritage, and value from the decay that awaited them, while in Deliss's activist conception, the museum is saving accumulated heritage and, at the same time, the world from itself, that is, from the destruction it is ripe for.

9.

Deliss's conviction that ethnography and its museums brutally extract information and materials from their original context, then attempt to build new identities from the injured content, merely condemns, without addressing the complexities of cultural exchange and, in particular, the phenomenon of transculturation. In Clifford's study of contact zones (much in vogue in museum circles in the late 1990s), the author plays with the idea that all people, regardless of origins or culture, absorb and assimilate from their environments precisely the cultural elements they need to build and nurture their own identities. It is this same phenomenon that Mary Louise Pratt terms *transculturation* (after Cuban sociologist Fernando Ortiz): 'Transculturation is a process whereby members of subordinated or marginal groups select and invent from materials transmitted by a dominant or metropolitan culture' (Pratt 1991: 35; citing Boast 2011). Clifford, for his part, attempts to shed light on the complexities of transculturation via the case of Tamessir Dia. Dia was a Senegalese native, born in Mali, raised in the Ivory Coast, and educated in France. Regarding European 'high art' that drew on the 'tribal art' of Africa, Dia noted that, just as Picasso had gone to Africa to create his own heritage from Dia's, now he was going to France to enrich his own identity with the heritage of Picasso. One need not imagine this, however, as a reappropriation of things formerly commandeered by Europeans, that suggests the searching for some idyllic African culture within that homogenised by Europeans, but rather as the construction out of mosaic pieces of an identity all his own – one that fed from his own personality and (*contact*)*history*. And in this identity was room for both everything he had learned in Africa, and everything he had learned in Europe – be that a European adaptation of some long-taken African thing or not. Through this example – and by the observation that Africa and Europe had each constructed their own tradition by way of the other's – Clifford explains exactly what transculturation is, noting that, in contrast to previous views, it is not hierarchical, but *mutual* (Clifford 1997: 201–202). According to Clifford, if the above observations are projected onto museums, then we must think about the effects of various cultural elements in terms of transculturation at the local, regional, and global levels. In his view, connections derived from contact are far more complex than they might seem at first glance, having to do with considerably more than just helpless individuals trying to get ahead under the thumbs of oppressive colonial powers. The transcultural relationship is not necessarily a hierarchical one, where one party utilises the other's culture for the enrichment of its own identity, such that

the other gains nothing from the transaction: though the situations in question are shaped and, typically, dominated by (neo)colonial gestures that render the minority exotic, *other*, subordinate, exploited, and commodified in the face of the majority, at the same time, neither these gestures, nor the stereotypes they generate define the minority in its entirety (Clifford 1997: 200). An example of this I like in particular comes from Dennis O'Rourke's 1988 documentary *Cannibal Tours*, whose title Michael Ames borrowed for his famous book (Ames 1992) and study (Ames 1994) *Cannibal Tours and Glass Boxes* on the colonialist – i.e. cannibalistic – nature of museum representation. The film (2) follows American and European tourists as they travel the Sepik River of Papua New Guinea and are presented with every horrifying stereotype of 'primitive' peoples 'civilised' Western tourists could possibly have. The silent viewer feels shame as a privileged representative of Western culture that unethically exploits the cultures of others. At the same time, certain passages in the film subtly illuminate how the stereotype of superiority frequently obscures the way indigenous peoples, in permitting themselves to be photographed for money while placing their seemingly authentic lives on display, though 'suffering' a shockingly and irremediably humiliating and dependent situation, are, at least in part, exploiting their own oppression. Though I have no doubt that Deliss is aware of the complexities of the issue, her approach both to false appropriation on the part of museums, and to the master-slave relationship that arose from it is, in my view, unduly unilateral and oversimplified. For one thing, it ignores the diversity of experiences of museum users. In the museums she describes, everyone suffers – feels exploited and subordinated from what they experience, with no room for edification without injury. Of course, both of us are exaggerating, but what does seem to get lost in the telling is that metabolism comes with not only *anabolism* (synthesising or constructive metabolism with an absorption of energy), but also *catabolism* (destructive metabolism with a release of energy).

10.

Deliss's narrative of the *metabolic museum* and its violent, radical, extremist reaction to the problem it seeks to address bear eerie similarities to the ecological crisis that has culminated in recent years and the more radical discourses surrounding how it might be overcome. Such narratives reflect both an air of total degeneration and despair, and at the same time a faint ray of hope for survival: namely, in the power of diversity and collaboration. But what does this all imply for the future of ethnology museums? In Deliss's view, the only viable path toward broad social relevance and continued existence is to make the assets they safeguard accessible to all. Her thinking as to how this is to be achieved, however, is substantially more radical than anyone else's: the museum according to Deliss is a field anyone can use (Deliss 2012: 18–23; Gómez 2020), a place where lie objects brought from previous fields, together with the typically colonial, but in terms of power relations, at minimum problematic strata of meaning that have been deposited over them. By rooting around among them, new findings, understandings, and narratives can be brought into being, such that each person handles the collection according to their own interests, education, imagination, and needs. In this context, the museum – through its collection – stands as an entirely open resource base, but nothing more: a reserve that neither explains, teaches, grows, nor creates new interpretations, but grants space to others – a place that is fully 'of the public'.

11.

The concepts of the metabolic museum and metabolic university-museum, having been presented in the written theoretical context, along with the questions and uncertainties that arise from them, make for a particularly exciting splash on the museum scientist's conceptual palette because their originator, Clémentine Deliss, is currently attempting to shift them into critical praxis. Deliss, together with her students at the Exhibition Design and Scenography Department of the Karlsruhe School of Arts and design, has launched an MM-U (Metabolic Museum-University) project aimed at experimentally redefining the concept of collecting and altering the way in which collections are utilised. As I see it, this project has made great strides in refining, shaping, fleshing out, and making real the concept, interpretation, and mentality of the metabolic museum. By all counts, the first MM-U exhibition, called SKIN IN THE GAME, a methodological attempt at the application of the metabolic museum concept, opened in September of 2023.

12.

Perhaps this practical interpretation and testing of Deliss's theory will reveal just how similar the museum, collection, and museum science or ethnography really are to the human body. (3) Will they someday age as the body does, or will they instead merit eternal life? Is it possible that certain of their organs must eventually be sacrificed or replaced that others might be kept in perpetuity? Is it possible that a little surgical intervention, make-up, and recreation can remediate the metabolism of the whole museum-body, or will it only save it from the more torturous symptoms of indigestion?

NOTES

1 At the event entitled *Down to Earth #04 Talk: The Metabolic Museum w/ Clémentine Deliss & Gábor Wilhelm @ OFF-Biennale* held on 10 May 2021, Deliss gave a statement in response to my question regarding the future of ethnography museums.

2 The full film can be seen here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KUQ_8wI93HM&ab_channel=VisualAnthropology, while a brief summary of it is available here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sVjQcTfHrwI&ab_channel=JulietteSutherland (downloaded: 03. 03. 2022.)

3 One such attempt was the 2019 Ljubljana Grafikai Biennálé's cooperation with MM-U, where a different organ was assigned to each of the seven days and the themes of the university-museum experiment derived accordingly. On 'brain day,' for example, participants co-operated on the basis of humour, on 'skin day,' on the basis of feelings, and on 'heart day,' on the basis of trust. https://www.academia.edu/39174501/Metabolic_Museum_University and <https://hfg-karlsruhe.de/en/projekte-rundgang-2019/metabolic-museum-university-mmU/> (last downloaded: 5. 21. 2023.)

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