

THE DEADLOCK OF THE DECOLONIZATION OF MUSEUMS: WHEN THE COLONIZER BECOMES THE DECOLONIZER

Cihan Küçük

Abstract: Museums have traditionally served as custodians of cultural heritage, yet their history is inextricably linked with colonialism, often involving the acquisition of artefacts through coercion, exploitation, and violence. This article explores the complex and controversial legacy of national museums, particularly those with colonial histories, as they confront increasing demands for decolonization. By examining the historical context, including pivotal events such as the Berlin Conference and the Scramble for Africa, this article highlights the systemic looting and cultural destruction that have shaped these institutions. The analysis focuses on the ongoing global movement towards restitution and the challenges museums face in addressing their colonial pasts, exemplified by the British Museum and the Humboldt Forum. The latter, inaugurated in 2021, symbolizes the persistent influence of colonialism and the difficulties in achieving genuine decolonization. Despite efforts towards restitution and inclusivity, museums continue to grapple with deeply rooted colonial legacies, raising questions about their ability and willingness to undergo fundamental transformation. This article underscores the need for a comprehensive reassessment of museum practices and narratives, advocating for a more equitable approach to cultural preservation and representation.

Keywords: *The Humboldt Forum, British Museum, decolonization, colonialism*

Museums have long been the custodians of cultural heritage, preserving and displaying artefacts from diverse civilizations. However, the history of these historic institutions is deeply intertwined with colonialism, where artefacts were

often acquired through coercion, exploitation, occupation, and violence. There is an increasing awareness of historical injustices and a corresponding movement toward social justice, equity, and human rights. This shift includes a focus on decolonization, emphasizing the need to address and rectify the lingering impacts of colonialism within various institutions, including national museums. The reason why museums are in a controversial position today is the legacy and the burden of their history. Dan Hicks describes such national museums with colonial histories as “brutish museums” (Hicks 2020: 4). National museums, which house artefacts acquired through colonial violence, can no longer evade accountability for this history. Regardless of the methods by which these artefacts were obtained, the time has come to return them to their rightful lands rather than keeping them in museums, mostly in storage units for decades. Museums often argue that the artefacts entered their collections through legal means, but this perspective, which absolves them of responsibility for the circumstances under which the objects were acquired, is no longer tenable.

Colonialism is collective plunder planned and carried out by empires. The Berlin Conference, convened under the leadership of Otto von Bismarck on 15 November 1884, stands as a pivotal example of this collective exploitation and destruction. The General Act of Berlin, signed on 26 February 1885, may be regarded as the institutionalization of the Scramble for Africa, which had already gained significant momentum by the time of its enactment. Signed by Her Majesty the Queen of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland, Empress of India; His Majesty the German Emperor, King of Prussia; His Majesty the Emperor of Austria, King of Bohemia, etc, and Apostolic King of Hungary; His Majesty the King of the Belgians; His Majesty the King of Denmark; His Majesty the King of Spain; the President of the United States of America; the President of the French Republic; His Majesty the King of Italy; His Majesty the King of the Netherlands, Grand Duke of Luxemburg, etc; His Majesty the King of Portugal and the Algarves, etc; His Majesty the Emperor of all the Russians; His Majesty the King of Sweden and Norway, etc; and His Majesty the Emperor of the Ottomans, the conference paved the way for colonial powers to rapidly occupy different parts of the world, mostly Africa. Therefore, the conference is an important milestone in the history of colonialism that led to a period of looting. Dan Hicks calls the period between the Berlin Conference (1884) and the outbreak of World War I (1914) as “World War Zero” (Hicks 2020, 226). He explains how anthropology museums during this era were filled up with looted objects from Africa:

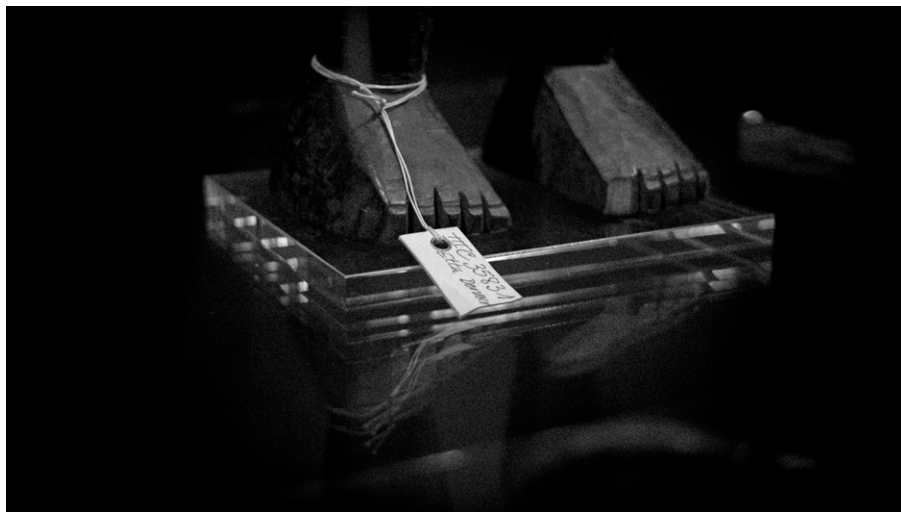


FIG. 1. A shackled object inside a showcase, the Ethnology Museum in the Humboldt Forum, 10 November 2021. (Photographed by the author)

Looting became something new during the three decades between the Berlin Conference of 1884 and the outbreak of World War I in 1914, through the actions of anthropology museums. This is the brutish museum: a prolongation of violence in the name of sovereignty. These colonial museums became the infrastructure for a new kind of white supremacy. (Hicks 2020, 233)

The cultural destruction resulting from this plunder is of unfathomable proportions. According to the report *The Restitution of African Cultural Heritage: Toward a New Relational Ethics*, commissioned in 2018 by French President Emmanuel Macron and authored by Felwine Sarr and Bénédicte Savoy, approximately more than 90% of Sub-Saharan Africa's cultural heritage is held outside of the continent (Sarr, Savoy 2018: 3). In total, 161 institutions across 23 countries hold Benin Bronzes, which have become the symbol of the restitution struggle, in their collections (Hicks, 2020: 248–252). Many of these artefacts from Benin, now housed in national museums, were explicitly labelled as “loot”, as with the British Museum (Lunden 2016: 184). Ironically, some objects are shackled inside the fancy exhibition showcases and guarded by security like captives themselves.

Global movements have highlighted systemic racism and colonial legacies, prompting institutions and museums to reflect on their own roles in perpetuating these issues. Indigenous and local communities are increasingly advocating for the return of their cultural heritage and for greater representation and respect in how their cultures are portrayed. Academic research and cultural discourse have shifted towards a more critical examination of colonial histories and their ongoing impacts, influencing public opinion and institutional policies. The museum is not merely the institutional space where decolonization efforts are performed and enacted; it is also intertwined with the colonial power dynamics that are now being critically examined, and which curators, museologists, scholars, and more importantly, the public are striving to dismantle. As a result, decolonization has become an issue that museums can no longer avoid addressing, and it has increasingly become a priority on institutional agendas.

Nearly all nations with a colonial history are implicated in this dark legacy. To grasp the historical depth and ongoing relevance of this issue, one need only examine two museums established nearly 250 years apart. The British Museum, founded in 1753, holds vast collections acquired during the era of the British Empire, including numerous items obtained through colonial exploitation and military conquests. The Humboldt Forum, which opened in 2021, within the reconstructed Berlin Palace, similarly houses artefacts acquired during Germany's colonial period, including significant collections from Africa and Asia. Despite their different histories and contexts, both institutions face increasing scrutiny over the origins of their collections and are emblematic of the broader global movement demanding the restitution of cultural heritage looted during colonial rule. These two institutions, founded roughly 250 years apart, demonstrate that the legacy of colonialism persists today, still exerting a powerful influence. They share the same pathology: the imperial pride of holding plundered artefacts.

Museums can be seen as a “gift” of colonialism to humanity. If we liken these institutions to a tree, the exhibited works are the leaves, the institution is the trunk, and the colonial past forms the roots. Every step that museums take toward decolonization is invaluable in a situation where the problem is so deeply rooted, strong, and current. Undoubtedly, implementing the decolonization of the museum will primarily fall to the institutions or, more broadly, to government administrations themselves. However, this fundamental shift is too significant to be entrusted solely to the initiative of bureaucratic institutions, which are inherently resistant to change. In his seminal study, *The Birth of*

the Museum, Tony Bennett argues that since its emergence in the 19th century, public museums have served to produce a form of governmentality that seeks to “incorporate the people within the processes of the state” (Bennett 1995: 98). On the other hand, the museums have increasingly become entangled in what he calls “the governmentalization of culture” (Bennett 1995: 24). Historically, museums were intended to facilitate public participation. However, over the course of approximately two centuries, these institutions have evolved into sites where culture, often displaced from its original context, has been appropriated and transformed into a display of power and grandeur.

The decolonization of museums represents a profound and transformative shift in the role and function of these institutions. This process involves not only the reassessment and recontextualization of collections, often acquired through colonial exploitation, but also a fundamental rethinking of how museums engage with diverse communities and histories. By challenging traditional narratives and power structures, the decolonization of museums signals a radical departure from established norms, fostering a more inclusive and equitable approach to cultural preservation and interpretation. In the absence of external pressures like public demand, how prepared and willing would museums be to undertake this profound transformation toward decolonization? To address this question, we must first examine the “decolonizer”. The identity of the decolonizer is formed by activists, scholars, academics, museum professionals, artists, and most importantly, victims of colonization. The first “decolonizers” were, unsurprisingly, the indigenous populations who actively resisted and opposed colonial powers. However, the accountability of the decolonizer was assigned to museum administrations, public institutions, and on a broader scale, the ministries of culture and arts. The current efforts led by the bureaucracy to address these colonial legacies, though well-intentioned, are frequently dictated by Western institutions, perpetuating a cycle of dominance and control. Undoubtedly, the decolonization of museums is not a transformation that can be achieved rapidly. Expecting institutions shaped over two centuries to undergo such a radical change in such a short period is unrealistic. At present, many national museums, including the British Museum, which is the symbol of the colonial past, are actively working to confront and address their colonial pasts, whether through voluntary initiatives or in response to public pressure. However, the Humboldt Forum, which opened in Berlin in 2021, exemplifies the numerous obstacles that museums encounter in the process of decolonization.

The Humboldt Forum, inaugurated in 2021, serves as a testament to the enduring relevance of colonialism. Established 137 years after the Berlin Conference – a pivotal event that ushered in an era of destruction and exploitation in Africa whose effects are still felt today – this museum presents itself as “a palace in Berlin for the whole world”. Located at the very heart of Berlin’s historical centre, Museum Island, the institution is formed by four partners: the Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz (Prussian Cultural Heritage Foundation) with the Ethnologisches Museum (Ethnological Museum) and the Museum für Asiatische Kunst der Staatlichen Museen zu Berlin (Asian Art Museum – the State Museums in Berlin), the Stadtmuseum Berlin (Berlin City Museum) together with Kulturprojekte Berlin (Culture Projects Berlin), the Humboldt-Universität (Humboldt University), and the Stiftung Humboldt Forum im Berliner Schloss (Humboldt Forum Foundation in the Berlin Palace).

The Humboldt Forum is taking shape in the historical heart of Berlin as a unique place of inquiry and encounters. A place with a significant past. A place for the arts and sciences, for exchange, diversity, and a multiplicity of voices. A place where differences come together. The outstanding collections that have been assembled under one roof and the varied programme of exhibitions, events, and educational and digital offerings inspire visitors to gain new insights into the world of yesterday, today, and tomorrow.¹

The first discussions about the Humboldt Forum, which describes itself as “more than a museum” and “a palace for the whole world”, began with the architecture itself and the cross crowning the building. This building, which was rebuilt as a replica of the Berlin Palace, representing Germany’s imperial period, has also become architectural propaganda. The Humboldt Forum’s reconstruction in the form of the Berlin Palace is more than the rebuilding of a cultural heritage; it is a reincarnation. With a cost of 670 million euros, the building became one of Europe’s most expensive and ambitious cultural centres. As the capital of three different Germanies (the Kingdom of Prussia, Nazi Germany, and modern, reunified Germany), the architectural development plans of Berlin have always been in the hands of different political systems. Throughout this range of political systems, the site of the Humboldt Forum has evolved into a place with many historical layers on top of each other. However, the decision as to which

¹ “About”, Humboldt Forum, Accessed 18 September 2024. www.humboldtforum.org/en/about/

cultural representation would reincarnate in which form in this historically layered area became a decision of which culture and political system (East–West, socialist–capitalist) would dominate the other in the new (or on the contrary, old) capital city of a united Germany. In 1997, during the Schlossdebate for the deconstruction of the Palast der Republik, which was erected on the ruins of the Berlin Palace after World War II and served as the parliament building of East Germany, the CDU Senator for Building in Berlin stated:

Overall, regarding the design of Berlin Mitte, it can be said: if we want to give it an identity, in the new reunited capital city, we must base this identity on the roots of our shared history. Not only German history but also European history [...] However, it must also be in the common awareness that there was a unified Germany in a shared Europe and a common development line before the division of our country. (Russell 2017, 59)

Curator Bonaventure Soh Bejeng Ndikung describes the social level of West Germany domination over East Germany after the reunification as follows: “Not only did the people of the former GDR lose, expeditiously, their social, economic and political structures and ways of life, they also lost their bearings, as their street names were changed, monuments were contested, political figures chastised, identity questioned and shamed, and history challenged, to erase the communist past” (Ndikung 2018, 39-40). This war of social domination between the West and the East is one of the recent manifestations of colonial domination. These domination discussions became even more heated in May 2020. The already-problematic reconstruction of the Berlin Palace as the Humboldt Forum was crowned with a monumental, five-meter-high cross. Crowning a cultural institution resurrected as the form of imperial palace, raises questions regarding the sincerity of its commitment to confronting this legacy. After serving two years on the advisory board of the Humboldt Forum, the art historian Bénédicte Savoy resigned in disagreement with the museum’s way of dealing with its colonial history. Savoy compares the Humboldt Forum to Chernobyl, due to its toxic heritage.² This is perhaps the most accurate analogy made for the Humboldt Forum, not just because it describes the toxicity of the building itself by comparing it to Chernobyl, but also because it defines the

² “Kritik an Humboldt-Forum-Konzept” TAZ, July 21, 2017. <https://taz.de/Kritik-an-Humboldt-Forum-Konzept/!5434344/>

people who have been fighting against its colonial past. In this sense, all of the researchers, activists, cultural workers, and artists who strive to decolonize the Humboldt Forum can be compared to Chernobyl liquidators, who were urgently called to remove the radioactive debris from the disaster site after the meltdown. They bravely carried out their duties. Their endeavours, particularly in cleaning the roof of the nuclear power plant, are still regarded with reverence to this day. Museums with colonial collections are in a state of radioactive poisoning. Just like in Chernobyl, many volunteers are working to clean up the symbolic debris from the roofs of both buildings to repair this toxic legacy. According to the Coalition of Cultural Workers Against the Humboldt Forum – which organizes protests against the institution alongside other activist groups such as BARAZANI.berlin, No Humboldt 21, Berlin Postkolonial, Decolonize Berlin, and AfricAvenir – the Humboldt Forum is “dead on arrival”.³ In one sense, the Humboldt Forum is more of a “museal” than a museum – something with which the observer no longer has a vital relationship and which is in the process of dying, as described by Adorno (1967: 175).

The numerous restitution projects undertaken with good intentions within the Humboldt Forum and its associated institutions demonstrate that these entities are not indifferent to decolonization efforts. For instance, the Ethnological Museum, which operates under the Humboldt Forum, has been a member of the Benin Dialogue Group since 2010. The museum, which houses a collection of approximately 500 “Benin Bronzes”, reached an agreement with the Nigerian government in August 2022 to return these artefacts. As part of this agreement, about one-third of the works will be loaned to the Humboldt Forum for a period of 10 years.⁴ Given that the Benin Bronzes have become a global symbol of decolonization and restitution, this action reflects a broader trend, with many national museums, including the British Museum, initiating similar agreements to return these works to their countries of origin. However, in this long-standing struggle, not all societies have seen the same level of success as Benin. Decolonization is not just about the restitution of the stolen objects but also the recognition of the Other. Many museums with colonial legacies justify retaining and exhibiting artefacts collected from former colonies by claiming

³ “Dead on Arrival” Coalition of Cultural Workers Against the Humboldt Forum, Accessed 18 September 2024. https://ccwah.info/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Dead-on-Arrival-CCWAHF-statement_EN.pdf

⁴ “Temporary Redesign of the Benin Rooms: Benin Bronzes”, Humboldt Forum, Accessed 19 September 2024. www.humboldtforum.org/en/temporaere-neukonzeption-der-benin-sammlung/



FIG. 2. The showcase of a bust collection from Afghanistan, The Ethnology Museum in the Humboldt Forum, 10 November 2021. (Photographed by the author)

that these objects should be accessible to global audiences. They argue that the artefacts are available to all, whether for tourism or research purposes. The museum's purpose is to preserve these artefacts for future generations. However, we can gain insight into how accessible these artefacts are to the society they belong to through a straightforward example. For instance, the visa process that an Afghan individual must undergo to travel to Berlin to study the bust collection from the Kandahar region, now exhibited at the Humboldt Forum – an institution that describes itself as “the palace of the whole world in Berlin” – is a telling example of how the Other remains insufficiently recognized. Following NATO's withdrawal from Afghanistan in April 2021, in which Germany participated, Germany closed its embassy in Kabul and shifted its visa application processing for Afghan citizens to locations in Islamabad, Teheran, Dubai, and Istanbul.⁵ To what extent, then, is it feasible for an Afghan individual to engage with artefacts of their own culture at the Humboldt Forum, as asserted by the institution?

While this may be accurate for the average visitor, a recent case highlights the critical need for embracing the concept of decolonization, extending beyond

⁵ “Visa and Entry”, German Embassy Kabul, Accessed 23 September 2024. <https://afghanistan.diplo.de/af-en/05-VisaEinreise>

museums to include individuals and governmental bodies. In 2022, a team of provenance researchers from Cameroon was invited to take part in a conference and workshop at Munich's Museum Fünf Kontinente (Museum of Five Continents) to investigate the provenance of 200 Cameroonian artefacts that were acquired for the Bavarian royal collections in the 1890s by Max von Stetten. However, the authorities denied three researchers' visa applications, citing "justified doubts about [their] intention to leave before [their] visa expires".⁶ The lack of recognition or disregard for the Other extends beyond visa-related challenges. Although various decolonization initiatives focusing on restitution and provenance research have been carried out within the Humboldt Forum, these efforts often come to a standstill. In September 2021, the Ethnological Museum opened the first part of its new exhibition in the Humboldt Forum. A specific gallery room dedicated to "Colonial Cameroon" consists of artefacts that had been "acquired" (*erworben*), by "collectors" (*Sammler*), in "punitive expeditions" (*Strafexpeditionen*) (Legall 2024: 4). One artefact that was exhibited, Ngonso, a female figure from the historical Nso Kingdom in northwestern Cameroon, entered the collection of the Ethnological Museum in 1903, having been acquired by the colonial officer Kurt von Pavel. On the opening day of the Ethnological Museum, at a demonstration held by members of the Coalition of Cultural Workers Against the Humboldt Forum, Barazani Berlin, and Bring Back Ngonso, activist Shiynyuy Semaïy Gad explained the importance of Ngonso to the Nso dynasty:

When the lieutenant, von Pavel, brought this object to Germany, Germans welcomed it and kept it in the Ethnological Museum in the bunker for decades without bringing out an exhibition. And today, the Humboldt Forum is proud to bring the object out in public for exhibition. I therefore stand with my friends to pass a message to the Humboldt Forum: Ngonso is not a public object for exhibition. Ngonso is not a museum object. Ngonso, she is the centre of what is sacred to [the] Nso people and her rightful place is only in the Nso palace in the Nso Kingdom.⁷

⁶ Catherine Hickley, "Cameroonian provenance researchers denied visas for Munich conference", *Art Newspaper*, 13 January 2022, www.theartnewspaper.com/2022/01/13/cameroonian-provenance-researchers-denied-visas-for-munich-conference

⁷ Cihan Küçük, "The Chronicles of the Humboldt Forum", Filmed in 2020–2021, Posted on 2024, *Affect and Colonialism*, 25:40. <https://affect-and-colonialism.net/video/the-chronicles-of-the-humboldt-forum-protests/>

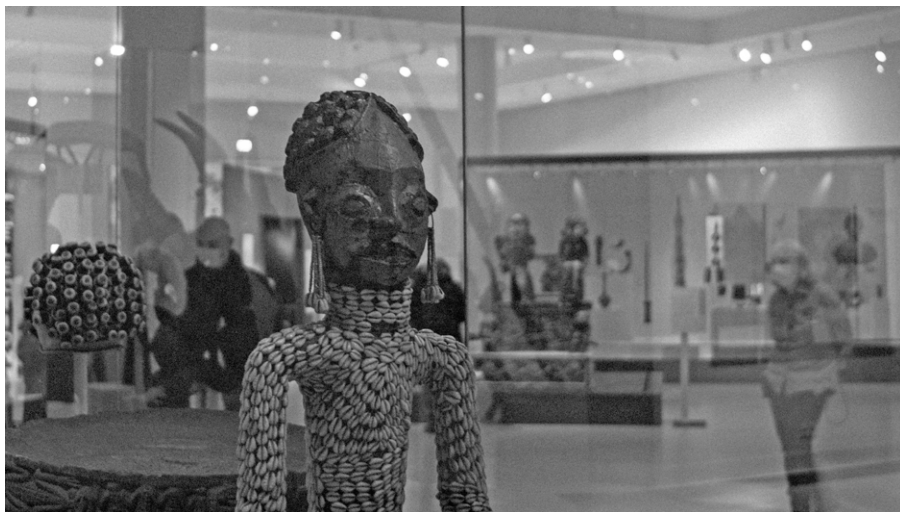


FIG. 3. Ngonnso, inside the showcase, the Ethnology Museum in the Humboldt Forum, 10 November 2021. (Photographed by the author)

On 27 June 2022, the Humboldt Forum announced the decision to return the Ngonnso to Cameroon.⁸ The king of the Cameroonian Nso people, Fon Sehm Mbingio I, had to wait more than 30 years to see the Ngonnso.⁹ However, the people of Nso will have to wait even longer to see it, as the artefact still has not been returned to Cameroon. The continued absence of this work, removed from its homeland in 1903, despite a decision to return it nearly two years ago, cannot be justified solely by bureaucratic procedures, documentation, or permissions.

Frantz Fanon describes the process of decolonization as “total liberation that involves every facet of our personality” (Fanon 1961, 233). This complete liberation begins within individuals and should progress to institutions. Although the decolonizing of the museum has regularly been synonymized with the restitution of objects, their decolonization involves their liberation from principles that are deeply rooted in modernity and coloniality (Ariese,

⁸ “Press Release”, Stiftung Preussischer Kulturbesitz, Accessed 2 August 2024. www.preussischer-kulturbesitz.de/fileadmin/user_upload_SPK/documents/presse/pressemitteilungen/2022/220627_STR_Ngonnso_ENG.pdf

⁹ “Royal Visit From Cameroon in Humboldt Forum”, Stiftung Preussischer Kulturbesitz, Accessed 02 August, 2024. www.preussischer-kulturbesitz.de/en/news-detail-page/article/2022/11/23/royal-visit-from-cameroon-in-humboldt-forum.html

Wróblewska 2021, 12). When an individual in a decision-making role within the decolonization process fails to genuinely internalize the existence of the Other, these efforts are doomed to either fail or produce results that are ultimately superficial. Approximately 250 years after the establishment of the British Museum, often regarded as the first national museum, the revival of the German Imperial Palace in the heart of Berlin as “more than a museum” only compounds longstanding issues that remain unresolved.

In September 2019, I travelled to Berlin for two reasons. The first reason was to enrol in the Visual and Media Anthropology master’s program at HKMW. The secondary purpose of my visit was to attend Cevdet Ereğ’s *Bergama Stereo* exhibition at Hamburger Bahnhof. Taking its cue from the Great Altar of Pergamon, an artist’s installation was exhibited in 2019 first at Turbinenhalle as part of Ruhrtriennale in Bochum, and then at the museum Hamburger Bahnhof, as part of the series *Works of Music by Visual Artists*. A version of this sound installation was also exhibited at Arter (Istanbul) in February 2020. “*Bergama Stereotip*”, produced by me, is a sound-based architectural installation designed by the artist specifically for the gallery space at Arter. *Bergama Stereotip* was the last exhibition I held at Arter as the exhibition production manager before I moved to Berlin to further my education in visual anthropology. As in the previous version – *Bergama Stereo* – sound, architecture, and historicity play a central role in *Bergama Stereotip*. The installation consists of an architectural construction and 13-channel sound. In Ereğ’s interpretation, the auditory components of the work assume a role analogous to the visual elements in the historical altar. He reimagines the Grand Frieze, renowned for its depiction of the clash between giants and gods, as a frieze of loudspeakers projecting a sound composition throughout the gallery space. Cevdet Ereğ has never seen the Great Altar of Pergamon at the Pergamonmuseum, as it was closed to the public during that time too. This fact has shaped his use of the monument as a conceptual and architectural basis for his work. The process of realizing this installation is explained as follows in the exhibition catalogue:

This impossibility of accessing the historical monument directly confirms that distance is a major constituent of *Bergama Stereo* and *Bergama Stereotip*. Proceeding by means of variation and differentiation, both works connect from afar with the source they share; each one takes a step further away from it, and every spacing they both make creates space for interpretation. In place of the “original” edifice, Ereğ has given shape to his work by referring to the textual and iconographic

sources he had within reach: models and plans of the antique edifice, small-scale souvenir objects, and archival photographs that document the altar's odyssey, its political role in the course of history, and its perception here and abroad. (Evren, Ansel 2020, 2–3)

In this sense, as the curator of the exhibition Selen Ansen explained, Ereğ's installation was built on the ruins of the past, with the ghosts of the present (Evren, Ansen 2020, 54). *Bergama Stereotip* is an immersive experience that combines sound and space. Each speaker in the installation plays a different sound. As you walk around the structure, you hear the different sounds. You can hear the drums, bells, and heavy breathing like chanting. The sounds of *Bergama Stereotip* remind us that every act of repetition creates an alteration, along with the potential for change and novelty.

On 03 March 2023, the Staatliche Museen zu Berlin (State Museums in Berlin) announced that the Pergamonmuseum would be closing for major renovations. As part of the “Museuminsel Master Plan”, the North Wing of the museum and the hall with the Pergamon Altar are expected to reopen in spring 2027. However, its south wing will not reopen until 2037. Discovered in the 19th century during archaeological excavations at the ancient city of Pergamon (in modern-day Bergama, Izmir Province, Turkey), the Great Altar of Pergamon, also known as the Zeus Altar, served in ancient times as an outdoor monument for sacrificial rites. Its expansive frieze depicts the legendary battle between the subterranean Giants and the divine Olympian gods. Gradually succumbing to decay, it remained partially buried until German archaeologists unearthed it at the turn of the 20th century. In the 1880s, the remains were transported from the Ottoman Empire to Berlin, the capital of the newly established German Empire. Excavation permits were granted around the same era of the Berlin Conference, on the condition that objects selected according to certain criteria were divided up and taken to Berlin. A dedicated museum, the Pergamonmuseum – built from 1910 to 1930 by order of Emperor Wilhelm II, according to plans by Alfred Messel and Ludwig Hoffmann – was constructed to house the altar, where it was reassembled and exhibited. The museum hosts the Pergamon Altar, the Market Gate of Miletus, the Ishtar Gate, Qasr Mushatta, and many other historical artefacts. The altar's historical relocation fuels an ongoing discourse surrounding the circumstances of its acquisition by the German state. As a researcher and cultural worker focusing on the decolonization of museums, I prioritize introspection on the emotional impact of these works, temporarily setting aside considerations



FIG. 4. Cevdet Ereğ's "Bergama Stereotip", Arter, February 2020
(Photographed by the author)

of the circumstances and agreements surrounding their acquisition and display in Berlin. The emotions it stirred within me then differ markedly from those experienced today as I wander around Museum Island.

Edgar Mittelholzer (1909–1965) was a Guyanese novelist, and one of the Caribbean's first significant literary figures, who came to England in the 1950s

and gained a reputation with his novels about the violence and the racism that had been at the heart of European empires. His famous novel, *My Bones and My Flute*, tells the story of a group of colonialists who travel up a river into the jungle in Guyana, guided by an old manuscript about a slave revolt. The manuscript's owner invites a painter, Milton Woodsley, to search for the remains of a Dutch slaveowner who died by suicide after his family was killed in the 1763 slave revolt. Anyone who reads this old manuscript starts to hear the distant sound of a flute. They become possessed by something that is reaching out from the jungle and infiltrating their thoughts. It is the anger and the fear of the slave owner who put down the rebellion and it refuses to release its grip on them. As an artist, Milton thinks he has been invited to make some paintings of a rich businessman. Instead, he finds himself surrounded by a ghost of the colonial past. Upon my relocation to Berlin in 2020 to pursue a master's degree in Visual and Media Anthropology, I identified parallels between my circumstances and those of Woodsley, the protagonist of the novel. The traces of violence and racism described by Mittelholzer are exhibited in museums in Berlin, and I listen to the sound of the flute just like the sounds in Cevdet Ereğ's artwork. This colonial past haunts the museums. To effectively address and dispel this issue, it is imperative to undertake a comprehensive decolonization of museums. However, for this process to be truly successful, it must be embraced on an individual level as well, in line with Frantz Fanon's assertion that decolonization represents.

Cihan Küçük (b.1987) is an art worker, visual anthropologist, writer, and editor at e-Skop. Responsible for the section called "museum politics", his main research areas focus on art workers' rights, unionization efforts in museums, art-washing and decolonization of the museums. After working on many different museum and exhibition projects in Istanbul, he moved to Berlin 3 years ago to continue his education. I recently accomplished my second Master's degree in Visual and Media Anthropology at HMKW/Berlin, a significant achievement that complements my educational background. Prior to this, I obtained a Bachelor's degree in Information and Document Management, which provided a solid foundation for my professional endeavors. Furthermore, I hold an additional Master's degree in Museum Management, obtained from Istanbul University, further enriching my expertise in the field. The topic of her master's thesis in visual anthropology was on the decolonization of museums based on the Humboldt Forum. Also last year, his article on this subject, "Visitor of a Museum", was published in the University of Chicago/Illinois's journal *Fwd: Museums*.

Bibliography

- Bennett, Tony (1995). *The Birth of the Museum: History, Theory, Politics*. London: Routledge.
- Evren, Süreyya & Ansen, Selen (2020). *Cevdet Ereğ: Bergama Stereotip*. Istanbul: Arter.
- Fanon, Frantz (1961). *The Wretched of the Earth*. New York: Grove Press.
- Hicks, Dan (2020). *The Brutish Museums: The Benin Bronzes, Colonial Violence, and Cultural Restitution*. London: Pluto Press.
- Legall, Yann (2024). "Punitive Expeditions in German Colonial Contexts in Africa" In: *Journal of the Historical Association: History*, 108 (384–385).
- Lunden, Staffan (2016). *Displaying Loot: The Benin Objects and the British Museum*. Gothenburg: Reprocentralen, Humanities Faculty, Gothenburg University.
- Mittelholzer, Edgar (2015). *My Bones and My Flute*. Leeds: Peepal Tree Press.
- Ndikung, Bonaventure Soh Bejeng (2018). "Those Who Are Dead Are Not Ever Gone: On the Maintenance of Supremacy, the Ethnological Museum, and the Intricacies of the Humboldt Forum" In: *South as State of Mind*, 10. Marina Fokidis (ed.) Greece: Cube Art Editions
- Russell, Frieda (2017). "Building a Castle of Humanism and Oblivion – The Humboldt Forum and its Struggle with German National Identity." MA – Heritage and Memory Studies. Amsterdam: University of Amsterdam.
- Sarr, Felwine & Savoy, Benedicte (2018). *The Restitution of African Cultural Heritage: Toward a New Relational Ethics*.
- Humboldt Forum. "About." Accessed 18 September 2024. www.humboldtforum.org/en/about/.
- TAZ. "Kritik an Humboldt-Forum-Konzept." July 21, 2017. <https://taz.de/Kritik-an-Humboldt-Forum-Konzept/!5434344/>.
- Coalition of Cultural Workers Against the Humboldt Forum. "Dead on Arrival." Accessed 18 September 2024. https://ccwah.info/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Dead-on-Arrival-CCWAHF-statement_EN.pdf.
- Humboldt Forum. "Temporary Redesign of the Benin Rooms: Benin Bronzes." Accessed 19 September 2024. www.humboldtforum.org/en/temporaere-neukonzeption-der-benin-sammlung/.
- German Embassy Kabul. "Visa and Entry." Accessed 23 September 2024. <https://afghanistan.diplo.de/af-en/05-VisaEinreise>.
- Hickley, Catherine. "Cameroonian Provenance Researchers Denied Visas for Munich Conference." *Art Newspaper*, January 13, 2022. <https://www.theartnewspaper.com/2022/01/13/cameroonian-provenance-researchers-denied-visas-for-munich-conference>.
- Küçük, Cihan. *The Chronicles of the Humboldt Forum*. Filmed in 2020-2021. Posted on Affect and Colonialism, 2024. Video, 25:40. <https://affect-and-colonialism.net/video/the-chronicles-of-the-humboldt-forum-protests/>.
- Stiftung Preussischer Kulturbesitz. "Press Release." Accessed 2 August 2024. https://www.preussischer-kulturbesitz.de/fileadmin/user_upload_SPK/documents/presse/pressemitteilungen/2022/220627_STR_Ngonnso_ENG.pdf.
- Stiftung Preussischer Kulturbesitz. "Royal Visit From Cameroon in Humboldt Forum." Accessed 2 August 2024. www.preussischer-kulturbesitz.de/en/news-detail-page/article/2022/11/23/royal-visit-from-cameroon-in-humboldt-forum.html.