The Postcolonial Museum

The Arts of Memory and the Pressures of History

Edited by Iain Chambers, Alessandra De Angelis, Celeste Ianniciello, Mariangela Orabona and Michaela Quadraro, Università degli Studi di Napoli 'L'Orientale', Italy

This book examines how we can conceive of a 'postcolonial museum' in the contemporary epoch of mass migrations, the internet and digital technologies. The authors consider the museum space, practices and institutions in the light of repressed histories, sounds, voices, images, memories, bodies, expression and cultures. Focusing on the transformation of museums as cultural spaces, rather than physical places, is to propose a living archive formed through creation, participation, production and innovation. The aim is to propose a critical assessment of the museum in the light of those transcultural and global migratory movements that challenge the historical and traditional frames of Occidental thought. This involves a search for new strategies and critical approaches in the fields of museum and heritage studies which will renew and extend understandings of European citizenship and result in an inevitable re-evaluation of the concept of 'modernity' in a so-called globalised and multicultural world.

Long overdue, here is a volume that updates and reconfigures the intersection of postcolonial critique with multiple interpretations of the museum and social praxis in globalisation. The Postcolonial Museum *charts gaps, achievements and prospects in 20 chapters that re-interpret the connection of past and current imperialisms. Introducing a wealth of new voices, this is essential reading for anyone interested in curatorial practice and theory, modern and contemporary art, ethnography, museology and the interventionist potential of research in the humanities overall.*
Angela Dimitrakaki, University of Edinburgh, UK

Cover image: *The Tomb of Qara Köz* by Ronni Ahmmed and Ebadur Rahman, Venice Biennale, Lido, 2011. Image courtesy of the artist and the curator, Ebadur Rahman.
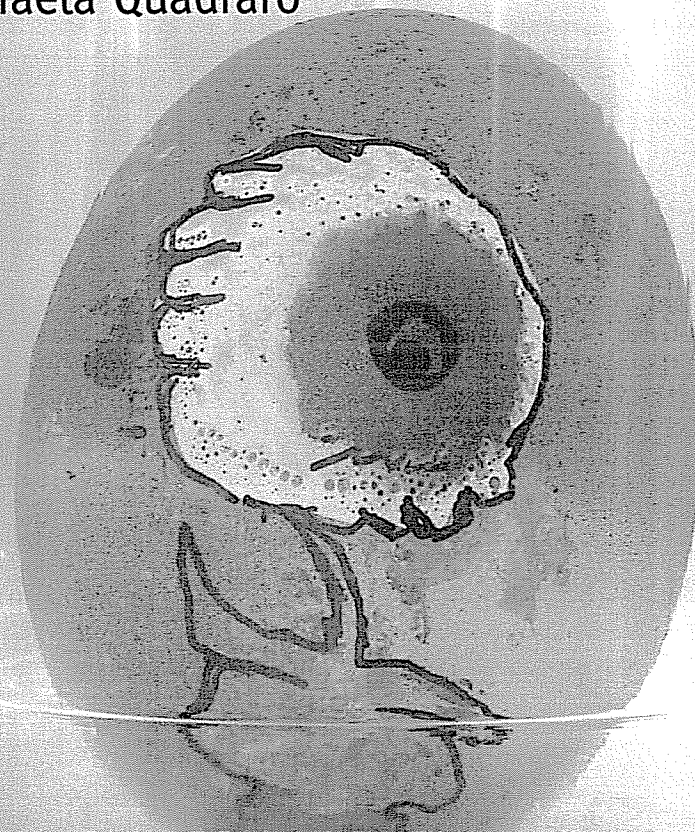
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Introduction: Disruptive Encounters –
Museums, Arts and Postcoloniality

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Postcolonial art is intimately linked to globalisation – that is, to a critical reflection on the planetary conditions of artistic production, circulation and reception. This implies focusing on the interweaving of the geographical, cultural, historical and economic contexts in which art takes place. The relationship between globalisation and art, as Okwi Enwezor observes, conceived and institutionalised by the European history of modern art in terms of separation or simply negation, here acquires fundamental importance (Enwezor 2003). It represents both the premise through which the relationship between art and the postcolonial can be conceptualised, and the matrix that helps to convey the cultural and political value of this relationship, together with its significance as a *disruptive encounter*. Far from being lost in the sterile and abstract, yet provincial, mirror of self-referentiality masked as universalism – with the implicit claim of the autonomy and independence of art from other cultural forms and activities – postcolonial art is deeply and consciously embedded in historicity, globalisation and social discourse. On one hand, it reminds us of how power is organic to the constitution of the diverse relations and asymmetries that shape our postcolonial world, and hence of how 'bringing contemporary art into the geopolitical framework that defines global relations offers a perspicacious view of the postcolonial constellation' (Enwezor 2003, 58). On the other hand, postcolonial art also shows how aesthetics today presents itself as an incisive critical instance. Postcolonial art proposes new paradigms of both signification and subjectivation, offering alternative interpretative tools that promote a reconfiguration of a planetary reality.

Analysing the link between modernity and this global reality, we can say that globalisation can be understood as the planetary 'expansion of trade and its grip on the totality of natural resources, of human production, in a word of living in its entirety' (Mbembe 2003). It was inaugurated by the Occident through a violent process of expropriation, appropriation and an exasperated defence of property, spread globally through capitalism and its imperialist extension. This is a political economy that is deeply rooted in, and sustained by, the humanist, rationalist, colonialist and nationalist culture of the West. The central phenomenon of modernity, born in a historical exercise of power, was fed by the religion of 'progress' and the racist ideology of 'white supremacy' imposing itself for centuries as a universal ontological category through the institutions of laws,

Chapter 2

Decolonising National Museums of Ethnography in Europe: Exposing and Reshaping Colonial Heritage (2000–2012)

Felicity Bodenstein and Camilla Pagani

The postcolonial turn has been accompanied by the claims of cultural minorities for identity recognition all around the world, subjecting ethnography museums to new critical perspectives in terms of their goals and roles (Mauzé and Rostkowski 2007). Hence, since the beginning of the twenty-first century, several museums have taken different paths towards postcoloniality (Lebovics 2007) adopting a range of strategies with the aim of cancelling out, neutralising or indeed critically exposing colonial roots – it is this last option that we will consider here in its widest sense.

Undeniably, since the late 1980s, a wave of refurbishments, new displays, message renovations, name modifications, new foundations, relocations and so forth has to a large extent reshaped the ethnography museum landscape in Europe. In attempting to come out of the shadow of the colonial legacy, many ethnography museums now reinvent themselves by implementing policies of recognition for previously marginalised groups and attempt to repair historical wrongs. As Tony Bennett explains, the challenge is to create 'new relations and perceptions of difference that break free from the hierarchically organised form of stigmatic othering' (Bennett 2006, 59).

This chapter will focus on how museums reshape their colonial heritage using the museum as a space for recognition (Taylor 1992) and historical reconciliation. In analysing the strategies that ethnography and former colonial museums in Europe adopt in order to go beyond the colonial legacy, two essential kinds of effort can be identified. They may loosely be defined as museological and institutional, and though intrinsically linked, they will be dealt with here by considering four cases that illustrate the different scales of transformation that can be observed: two current permanent exhibits, and two major projects involving a policy-oriented reframing of colonial heritage.

Whose Objects? in the Museum of Ethnography, Stockholm

The reinstallation of the Benin collection of artefacts at the Ethnographical Museum of Stockholm in 2010 gave the curators the opportunity to formulate
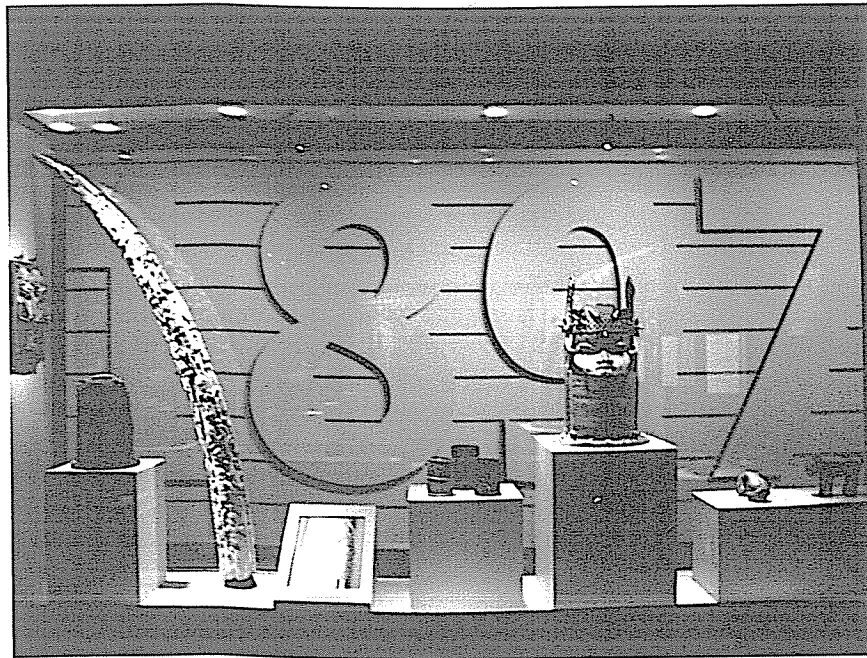
Figure 2.1   *Whose Objects?* Photograph by Camilla Pagani, June 2012

the fundamental question of the legitimate ownership and guardianship of objects taken from foreign lands. Museographically, the reinstallation, which has since become part of the permanent exhibition, brings together 'rhetorics' of value (Kratz 2011) that have increasingly become related to ethnographic art collections, but which are rarely confronted in displays themselves. The first is produced by the increasing attention given to the biography of the object; the individualisation of its career before entering the museum serves to negate its status as 'specimen'. The second is the ever-stronger aestheticisation of the ethnographic object in museum displays, described by Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett as an 'art of detachment' that works 'by suppressing contingency and presenting the objects on their own' (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998, 25).

Yet it is precisely this contingency that *Whose Objects?* incorporates into its presentation by surrounding a highly aesthetic and attentive exhibition of the bronzes with the historical and contemporary terms of the debate concerning the restitution of the Benin works of art. The iconic image of the Queen Mother India that is reproduced at the exhibition's entrance, a coveted piece in the British Museum, sets the tone for a presentation that takes a 'glocal' point of view, inasmuch as it is relative on the one hand to the museum's own collection, but questioned as part of a general European and even worldwide issue (Östberg 2010, 52). In terms of exhibition design, it is a date rather than any single object that

occupies a key position, monumentally blown up to cover a large part of the main wall of the exhibition space (Figure 2.1).

In 1897, British troops invaded the Benin royal palace – bringing about the single greatest departure of precious objects from its soil. Presented in conjunction with elements on how these objects circulated in Europe to reach Stockholm, it becomes key to understanding the presence of the Benin pieces in Sweden.

This reinstallation came about three years after the very large temporary exhibition *Benin: Five Centuries of Royal Art* toured Europe in 2007 from the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna, to Berlin, Chicago and Paris. The modest scale of the Stockholm collection, made up of 74 pieces, is probably what has allowed the museum to confront the problem of the Benin claims to the objects in such a frontal, direct way. A series of labels present 'voices in the ongoing debate', beginning with a quotation from the Oba Erediauwa's preface text in the 2007 exhibition catalogue: 'It is our prayer that the people and the government of Austria will show humaneness and magnanimity and return to us some of these objects which found their way to your country' (Erediauwa 2007, 13).

The curator of the presentation, Wilhelm Östberg, uses a chorus of viewpoints, from Neil MacGregor to the West African Museums Programme to ICOM (International Council of Museums), as an initial measure of how the renegotiation of power relations in the world is expressed in this debate. But room is also made for the voices of more modest stakeholders concerned locally, present in the video installations that question five members of the Nigerian community living in Stockholm.

Significantly, the objects themselves occupy an 'island' of display cases in the centre, as the main purpose of the exhibit remains to show them to their best advantage (Östberg 2010, 6), and the visitor cannot simultaneously consider the terms of the debate and contemplate the artworks. However, the visitor also gains information about the situation of Benin today and how the role played by these pieces, in reproductions and popular imagery, contributes to the identity of a community for whom their function and political significance is historically specific and unique (HRH Prince Edun Akenzua, in Östberg 2010). This sense of negotiation can also be observed in the way communications concerning the exhibition were handled, and the exhibition opening was conceived of as both a cultural and a diplomatic event.

It is not a new debate, even to the general public, but the merit of this exhibit is to have clearly exposed it in the museum itself. In the conclusion of the catalogue, the curator himself admits that Stockholm cannot really afford to lose its Benin collection; indeed, the prestige that these objects bestow on anyone who holds them, owns them and exhibits them stands out as the one common value that is sought by all the participants of the debate that surrounds them (Östberg 2010, 68). The juxtaposition of values expressed by this exhibition allows the museum to offer a form of partial reparation, as it demonstrates its respect or at the very least its awareness of other claims to the interpretation of the object's place, its cultural, social and political importance, although it cannot offer, at least in the near future, any promise of actual restitution.

From the Object to the Subject: *The Colonial Theatre* at the Tropenmuseum

Alongside the issue of the material heritage of appropriations in colonial contexts, there is the even more complex question of the intangible heritage of the colonial experience. The renovation of the permanent displays of the Tropenmuseum in Amsterdam undertaken between 1995 and 2009 explicitly attempted to provide a visual and narrative expression of the intangible heritage that was the culture of collectionism and its relationship to colonialism both inside and outside the museum. Interpreted as a way of thinking about the world and about alterity, colonialism had to become an identifiable aspect of the museum's narrative, as a part of Dutch culture which at the height of its influence was, according to Susan Legêne, director of the renovation scheme, 'based on a mix of enlightenment ideals *and* repressive actions' (Legêne 2009, 12).

Key to this project has been the establishment of a display known as *The Colonial Theatre*, characterised by the museum website as 'an interactive presentation of lifelike mannequins representing characteristic figures from colonial history'.[1] It offers an ironic materialisation of the idea formulated by Nicholas B. Dirks (1992, 3) that 'the anthropological concept of culture might never have been invented without a colonial theatre'.

Indeed, *The Colonial Theatre* offers an inversion of how the world was visualised in colonial museum culture by adopting the use of the diorama to stage anew the layout introduced into the museum in 1938 to celebrate the forty-year reign of Queen Wilhelmina. An empty throne provided the metonymical presence of the queen herself surrounded by wax figures representing different categories of colonial subjects in traditional native costumes. When the museum decided to recreate this scene, it replaced 'the ethnic types' by 'some historical archetypes of people who contributed to the very creation of these images of otherness. ... And as founders of the museum, they also speak for the museum about the past of its collections' (Legêne 2009, 18).

Yet perhaps the most interesting point here is the critical relationship to the museum's own strategies of representation – the diorama. It is all the more remarkable as it is a mode of display that more than any other directly engages the public, as it is capable of provoking a strong sense of 'recognition' (Schiele 1996, 11). This recognition is attained by looking through the glass box that separates the viewer from the object/subject on display. First developed for use in natural history museums, the diorama's origins are used here to cast an ironic gaze on the actors of its own past, as the coloniser is presented in his 'natural habitat', successfully inverting another usage of the colonial museum – its tendency to represent 'nature and culture' together in the display of indigenous people (Dias 2000, 19).

The glass cases are shaped like scientific test tubes, and thus apt for the presentation of 'specimens'; they also echo the stone columns in this monumental display hall. The figures that represent the Dutch actors of this 'colonial theatre'

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1   See http://www.tropenmuseum.nl/5870 (accessed 10 March 2013).

are placed inside these glass boxes; however, some of the original mannequins from the 1938 exhibition have been reused to represent native workers in the colonial system – a civil servant and a textile worker, this time wearing clothes that bear witness to their acculturation and placed outside the glass cases. Though obviously ironic, the display is not devoid of a certain sense of nostalgia that is at once contradictory and fitting for such a paradoxical exercise in self-reflexive museum representation. Indeed, the actors of colonialism – specimens and pillars of the museum's history – are displayed alongside their individual stories that allow them to appear as the museum's own ancestors, thus becoming an accepted part of how the institution understands its colonial past.

The Museum as a Place for Shared Memory

In order to understand how colonial memory and heritage are becoming part of institutional museum culture itself, one can consider the ongoing project for the renovation of the Royal Museum for Central Africa (RMCA) in Tervuren, Belgium, due to reopen by 2016. The renovation process began in 2001, when the museum initiated a policy of consultation with international experts, scholars, members of African associations and the African diaspora in order to reshape the permanent exhibition and to critically contextualise the colonial roots of the building and collections.

As a colonial museum in the most literal sense, the Royal Museum for Central Africa was founded following the 1897 Colonial Exhibition in Tervuren, and displays objects collected throughout the colonial period until the Republic of Congo gained its independence in 1960 (Figure 2.2). The main idea that has driven this renovation process since 2001 is that 'the history of the institution and its collections belongs to Belgians as much as it does to the peoples of Central Africa and their diasporas' (RMCA 2007–2008, 46).

Since 2003, the museum has developed a policy of consultation and mediation with African associations and diasporas through the institution of COMRAF (Comité consultative du RMCA – Associations Africaines), an elected committee composed of five professionals of RMCA, nine members of African associations and three 'resource persons' (RMCA 2007–2008, 46). The mediation with the Congolese diaspora within the project of renovation is crucial, since the museum intends to build a place for shared memory.

Undeniably, this approach has already influenced the dynamic temporary exhibitions policy that specifically intends to make visitors aware of this shared history by offering interpretations of the past that refer to multiple voices. For example, the exhibition *Indépendance! Congolese Tell their Stories of 50 Years of Independence* (2010) was interpreted from the Congolese point of view. Similarly, *Fetish Modernity* (2011) implied: 'a process of reflection about the function and the future of the 'ethnological' museum, in the knowledge that this description, which is often controversial these days, relates to a form of identity
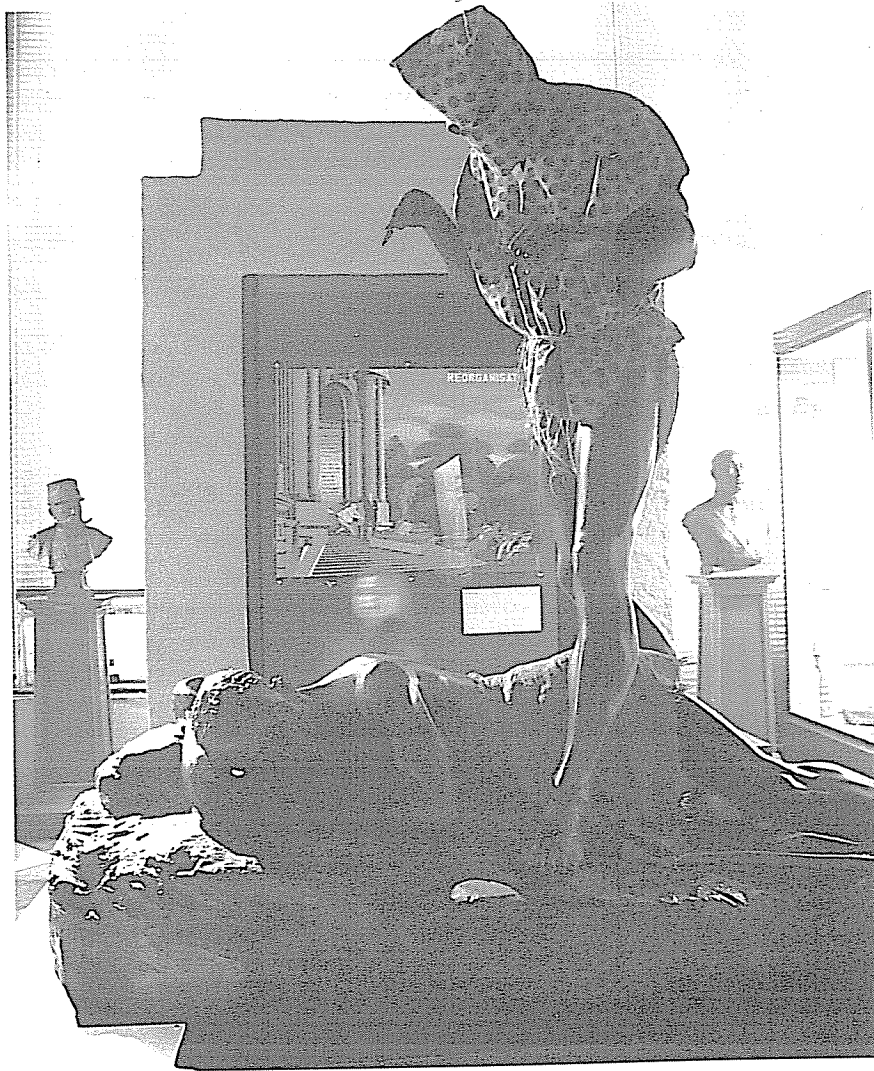
Figure 2.2   **'L'homme léopard' at the Royal Museum for Central Africa, Tervuren. Photograph by Felicity Bodenstein, January 2012**

connected with the colonial past of the West, and the meeting with "other" cultures' (Bouttiaux and Seiderer 2011, 18).

The renovation project is about modernising, renovating and adapting the museum structure and building for the needs of the twenty-first century. This implies a significant architectural intervention, led by Stephan Beel's cabinet. Of the changes to be undertaken, one point appears particularly relevant to this

discussion. The museum's entrance itself will no longer be through the main door at the front of the historical building. A new building will provide an entry that centralises all the visitor facilities. Once inside, a path will lead visitors into an underground gallery, where there will be two spaces for temporary exhibitions, an auditorium and rooms for workshops. The provisional plan specifies that this will allow for visitors to be *warned* before accessing the historical building, which will become part of the exhibition. Therefore, the public will be able to look at the museum as an object in itself from a critical and detached perspective[2] that is made possible by this *metahistorical* strategy.

Another challenge for the project is to describe contemporary Central Africa through collections that date back to the 1960s and are explicitly linked to the colonial past.[3] Since the building and the permanent collection belong to the Belgian Federal Heritage, 60 per cent of the permanent exhibition displays will not change. Aware of this limitation, the museum can attempt, through its historical building and collection, to play the role of what Pierre Nora (1984) defined as 'un lieu de mémoire'. It aims, however, to be a *lieu* of a different kind, pertaining not only to a national and exclusive memory, but to a transnational relationship between two communities, united by a common but undoubtedly difficult past.

As well as becoming a metahistorical object to provide a critical distance to the history and the stereotypes of Africa that were showcased by the museum during colonial times, the permanent exhibition will also be transformed through an interdisciplinary approach, which explicitly proposes to deconstruct traditional ethnographic and scientific categorisation in order to have a closer impact on the public. It is hoped that this pluridisciplinary perspective will contribute to opening up the permanent collection to themes that deal with Central Africa in a contemporary, diversified and dynamic way.

Beyond Self/other Dualism: 'Glocal' Paradigm, Multiple Voices

By adopting an interdisciplinary approach and a policy of temporary exhibitions, the brand-new institution the Museum of World Culture, which was inaugurated in Gothenburg, Sweden in 2004, illustrates a very different kind of strategy to question the colonial heritage of ethnography museums and to relate it to contemporary topics. It is part of the state-owned National Museums of World Culture, which includes three other museums: the Museum of Far Eastern Antiquities, the Museum of Mediterranean and Near Eastern Antiquities, and the Museum of Ethnography, Stockholm. In 1999, the Swedish government decided to create:

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2   Interview with Christine Bluard conducted by Camilla Pagani, Royal Museum for Central Africa, 29 October 2012.

3   Ibid.

something new in the world of museums .... It will mirror similarities and differences in ways of thinking, lifestyles and living conditions, as well as cultural change in Sweden and in the world. Visitors will be given the opportunity to reflect on their own cultural identity and those of others. (Lagerkvist 2008, 89)

Indeed, the National Museums of World Culture have been established 'to play a specific role in dealing with the challenges of multicultural Sweden, through their international collections and networks' (Swedish Government 1998, 25). According to the official statement: 'the Museum of World Culture is a forum for emotional and intellectual encounters that helps people feel at home wherever they are, trust each other and accept joint responsibility for the planet's constantly changing future' (Swedish Government 1998, 25).

The museum houses the collections from the old Ethnographic Museum of Gothenburg, consisting of about 100,000 items, most of which come from Latin America, but intentionally it has chosen not to define itself as an ethnography museum. It does not have any permanent exhibitions, but hosts temporary exhibitions in its five halls. Alongside the exhibit halls there is a large and diverse programme of experimental music, dance, theatre and conferences.

The museum focuses on the concept of 'world culture' – which is the translation of the Swedish neologism *världskultur*. For the English translation, according to museum curator Cajsa Lagerkvist, it was decided to adopt the singular instead of the plural form in order to break with the ethnographic tradition, where different cultures were displayed as distinctly identifiable. Thus 'world culture' is interpreted 'in a dynamic and open-ended manner' (Museum of World Culture 2004), dealing with contemporary issues such as globalisation, migration, cultural diversity, hybridity, postcoloniality and gender studies through a multiple-voice and interdisciplinary perspective (Lagerkvist 2006). According to the official website, 'world culture is not only about communication, reciprocity, and interdependence, but the specificity, concretion and uniqueness of each and every individual'. From a regional focus, the museum investigates global contemporary issues, using a transnational and 'glocal' paradigm (Lagerkvist 2008).

The strategy it adopts is an intense policy of idea-oriented temporary exhibitions (lasting from a few months up to three years) where it is possible to offer a take on different sensitive topics that can be discussed by visitors inside the exhibition space or during specific conferences. Since the opening, 37 exhibitions have featured contemporary global issues such as migrations, HIV, inter-religious dialogue, cultural diversity, and gender and LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender) issues. A telling example was *Jerusalem*, an exhibition of pictures portraying LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer) persons from the three monotheist faiths living in Jerusalem, representing naked people or homosexual activities next to quotations from the sacred texts which condemn LGBTQ habits. As reported by the curator of contemporary global issues Klas Grinell, this case 'is important and worthwhile' because 'the sensitive issues are forced to the surface' (Grinell 2011, 228). In particular, he highlights the
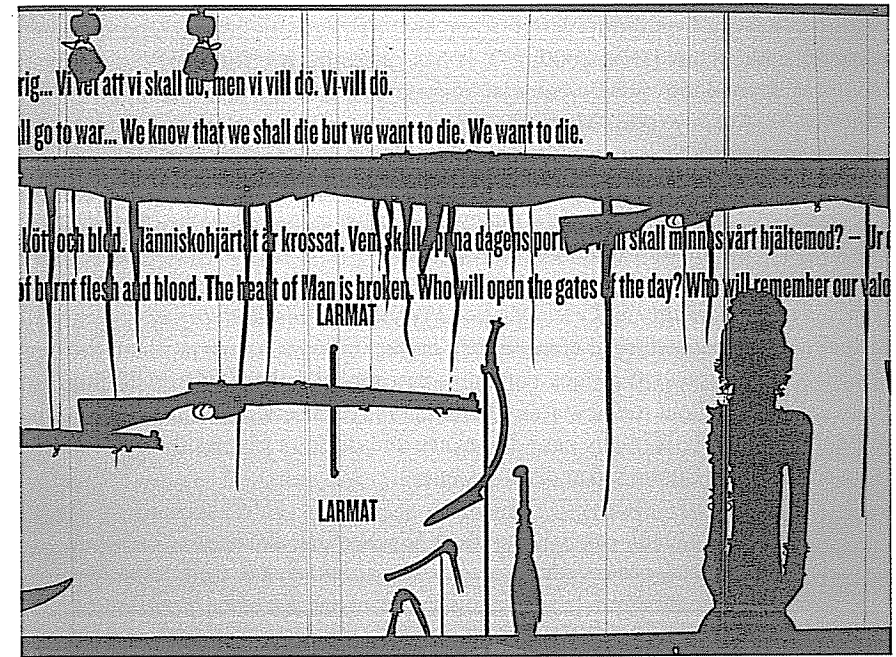
Figure 2.3   **Detail of permanent installation, National Museum of World Culture, Gothenburg. Photograph by Camilla Pagani, June 2012**

complexity of conceiving an exhibition where there is 'intersectionality' between different sensitive topics belonging to different frameworks such as sexuality and religion.

The museum also offers the possibility for reflection on collecting in the former colonial context, through some rare permanent installations situated in the stairwell (Figure 2.3). Objects collected by Swedish Lieutenant Otto Ljungqvist in Congo during the Belgian occupation or by Swedish explorer Thorild Wulff in China in the late nineteenth century are displayed alongside open-ended questions placed next to the objects: 'Why were these objects taken?' 'Who owns these objects?' The museum does not want to provide answers. Rather, it tries to place conflicts and debates about the colonial legacy of collections in the exhibition path itself.

Conclusion

The concept of 'decolonialising collections' has been around since the end of the 1980s, and essentially designates a process in which a postcolonial discourse serves to progressively singularise the ethnographic object and extract it from

former systems of museum classification that *de facto* maintained the object in its 'colonised' status (Dias 2000, 27). It has generated a critique of the museum that goes beyond the specific colonial context of collecting and display; in 1992, Michael M. Ames wrote: 'Museums are about cannibals and glass boxes, a fate they cannot seem to escape no matter how hard they try' (Ames 1992, 3). To perhaps escape this 'fate', the efforts described above suggest ways in which this 'cannibalistic' appropriation of the materials of other cultures and the exhibitionary process that accompanies it might be exposed.

What does this 'exposure' of colonial roots allow us to say about the relationship between postcoloniality and globalisation? What does this strange juxtaposition of historical and metahistorical commentary on the museum's own past and the new attention to the issues that face contemporary global culture, observed in all of these cases, say about the new role of ethnography museums and former colonial museums? The role is in any case an uneasy and difficult one, as the specialist in African literature Simon Gikandi points out:

> Besides their shared cultural grammar, however, the relationship between globalization and postcoloniality is not clear; neither are their respective meanings or implications. Is postcoloniality a consequence of the globalization of culture? Do the key terms in both categories describe a general state of cultural transformation in a world where the authority of the nation-state has collapsed? (Gikandi 2005, 609)

Certainly the 'glocal' repositioning of these national museums is an attempt to question their historically central position (as opposed to peripheral colonies) in the definition of cultures as a binary process that separates 'us' from the 'others'. The reflexive process of exposing colonial roots is key to overcoming this duality, as it allows the museum to look at itself as the other, as it contemplates its own ancestors behind glass cases, as it asks why these objects belong here, as it becomes an historical object in its own right by becoming strange to itself. It may be hoped that the sense of foreignness, perhaps even unease, that these displays and museum strategies can provoke will only lead to new discoveries.

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