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OPEN FOR INTERPRETATION

An Experimental Exhibition Project in an Ethnographic Collection

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Abstract

This article discusses the curatorial strategy of open storage and its assumed potential to decolonize knowledge production in ethnographic museums. Showing masses of stored objects supposedly free from any institutional interpretation is thought to allow for shifting the authority over meaning-making from the museum to the public. Findings from public storeroom visits that were conducted in connection with a participatory exhibition project in an ethnographic museum call these assumptions into question.

Keywords: *ethnographic museums, exhibition, experiment, open storage, public participation*

There are so many things collected over generations by different people with various scientific or personal interests. Vast parts of museum collections will never be displayed to the public. What should ethnographic museums «do» with their «underused collections» (Bond 2018: 64)? Instead of taking all the objects out of storage, many museums make their storage rooms accessible to the public.

Exhibition formats known as open, visible or visitable storage[1] or depot exhibitions[2] promise to solve a set of problems, especially of ethnographic museums. These shows share the aim of increasing visibility and granting public access to the holdings of museums by showing masses of objects uncommented (Natter et al. 2010; Thiemeyer 2017, 2018). Open storage is said to lie at the root of a self-reflexive museum distinguishing itself by self-criticism regarding its collections and display practices and by a shift of authority over meaning-making from the institution to the visitor. The idea of open storage is closely connected to the ethnographic museum. Claims of indigenous communities to access their material culture and postcolonial debates that have taken place within the discipline of anthropology since the 1970s prompted ethnographic museums to rethink their modes of display. Critical theories about processes of knowledge production were influential in deconstructing and questioning the museum as a neutral container and mediator of «a truth» (Thiemeyer 2017: 143-144).

[1] ‹Visible storage› refers mostly to exhibition formats that stage large amounts of their collection in special venues. «Visitable storage» wants to offer a «glimpse behind the scenes» and to make work processes in the museum depot transparent (Bond 2018: 64).

[2] Thiemeyer (2017: 143) introduces the term «depot exhibition» (*Depotausstellung*) to refer to diverse exhibition approaches that centre around and deal with museum storage and collections in their spatial and epistemological dimensions.

In the curatorial and artistic practices of today, the storeroom stands for a non-curated space: it shows masses of objects supposedly free from any authoritative interpretation and does therefore not patronize the visitor (Thiemeyer 2017: 143). The storeroom does not necessarily apply a visual hierarchy. Therefore, it is thought to allow for an aesthetic access to the objects that evokes questions and associations and creates openness for new interpretations and meaning-making (Griesser-Stermscheg 2014).

For a participatory exhibition project in connection with its 125th anniversary, the Museum der Kulturen Basel, Switzerland, has put the principle of open storage into practice. As curator of the exhibition project, I invited different groups of people from and around Basel to the museum storerooms. The participants were asked to choose the exhibition objects without much information at hand and to comment on their choice.

By letting people from the «outside» choose, I expected «finding things that were not lost» (Thomas 2010: 7) or rather things that curators would usually not look for. More than bringing hidden accounts of the collection to light, this experiment turned out to raise first and foremost questions about forms of knowledge production in connection with claims for public participation in ethnographic museums. Against the backdrop of the widespread opinion that we find ourselves in a «decade of participation» (Piontek 2017: 14) and that public participation in cultural institutions is now the rule and not the exception anymore (Thiemeyer 2018: 258), this article touches upon the question of what happens, when the public participates in knowledge production and processes of meaning-making in an ethnographic museum. Based on observations I made while conducting this «exhibition experiment», I ask: What insights does a selection process guided by a certain contingency and unpredictability and a participatory approach that lets laypersons encounter non-curated things in the storeroom make possible? Does the shift of authority in meaning-making to the public help to decolonise knowledge production in ethnographic museums as it is presumed by the proponents of the open storage strategy?

To address these questions, I will first outline why ethnographic and other museums began to show their storage to the public. What socio-political and theoretical implications were decisive and what general problems of knowledge production in the museums did they try to solve? I will then present the exhibition project in detail. In the third part, I will discuss the empirical data that I generated in conversations with the participants during the visits to the storage area. My findings, as I will show, may question the potential of the open storage strategy for the decolonization of knowledge production in ethnographic museums.

Open Storage: A Promising Solution with a Sobering Outcome?

Open storage, as it is used in curatorial practice today, must be understood as a critique of traditional modes and politics of presentation and of institutional sovereignty over the interpretation and meaning-making in museums. In this section, I show how this practice developed within a shifting understanding of what kind of knowledge the study of museum objects can generate and the changing role of the public in museums. I will also mention some points of criticism concerning the practical implementation of ‹open storage› that I deem to be relevant for this project.

The spatial separation of museum collections in storage areas and in exhibition spaces became the main characteristic of modern museums. In the late 19th century, scientific collections grew exponentially due to more frequent expeditions and extended travelling. Soon, museums began to run short of space to display each object separately; they needed to be stored and taken care of in special facilities separated from the showroom. From then on, it became the curator's decision which objects were to be put on display and which were to be «hidden» from public sight (Penny 2002; Habsburg-Lothringen 2010; Griesser-Stermscheg 2013). From the beginning, public museums were shaped by and displayed power relations. Ethnographic museums, many of them founded in the late 19th century, hold collections that were put together according to scientific interest of that time. Evolutionist worldviews determined what ethnographic objects should do and who they should (re-)present. Objects were used for example to display the supposed superiority of western cultures by creating a contrasting image of the primitive Other. Therefore, collection policies focused mostly on «typical», «authentic» and «unspoiled» expressions of other cultures and excluded objects that told stories of migration or cultural exchange. At the beginning of the 20th century, masses of objects were appropriated by proponents of the so called salvage anthropology who feared that whole cultures would soon vanish (Fründt 2015: 97-100). Some of these objects were acquired within colonial expansionist projects of emerging nation states and carry traces of entangled histories of travel, empire, exploration, and exploitation. Some bear witness to or are the results of power asymmetries and problematic (western) modes of knowledge production about other people. All this has left traces in the storerooms of today (von Bose 2016: 103-106). Since postcolonial debates in anthropology reached the ethnographic museum in the 1990s, questions were raised about the possibility of a postcolonial museum and of a possible future use of biased ethnographic collections. Many museums looked for new forms of collecting and displaying that would not repro-

duce «classic», objectifying representations (Fründt 2015:100-101; Mauksch and Rao 2015: 116-117). Opening the storage to the public has promised to serve as an alternative mode of display and knowledge production through museum objects.

Most authors ascribe the origin of depot exhibitions to the ethnographic museums in the Anglo-American context of the 1970s; more precisely, to the Museum of Anthropology at the University of British Columbia (MOA) in Vancouver, Canada (Griesser-Stermscheg 2013: 104; Thiemeyer 2017: 146-147; Reeves 2018: 56). This exhibition approach emphasizing public access, transparency, and empowerment of the visitors evolved in the socio-political climate of intellectual protests and emancipatory movements of the 1960s and 1970s. Theories of knowledge production and its ramification with exertion of power led to a fundamental critique and distrust in public institutions such as museums (Thiemeyer 2017:144). There was also political pressure from Native American activists who publicly claimed the right to participate in cultural institutions, to independent self-representation, and to access their cultural heritage in ethnographic museums. The MOA in Vancouver reopened in 1976 with a large part of its collection staged as visible storage. It was meant to provide a less formalized and de-schooled form of learning and was promoted as a democratized pedagogical method facilitating access for everyone. Displaying objects without textual interpretation was meant to serve as a symbolic repatriation of objects to their communities of origin (which was later criticized because the actual property rights were not denounced). However, the results of this visible storage project were sobering: visitors did not understand the visual link to the museum storage because the exhibition design did not resemble the depot; and delicate, sacred objects with a difficult colonial past were exhibited in an inappropriate manner and left unexplained (Thiemeyer 2017: 146-150).

Despite the critique, this exhibition format inspired many other museums in North America and Europe, especially in German-speaking countries, from the 1990s and 2000s onwards. Museums «established the idea of a shared authority over objects; offered new, experimental ways of providing access to collections; and allowed for the implementation of self-reflexivity through the way they presented holdings» (Thiemeyer 2017: 144). Depot exhibitions in Switzerland, Austria, and Germany were less concerned with democratization and public access than with the potential of collections as repositories of knowledge. They were looking for alternative display formats (to the permanent exhibition) with new aesthetic and epistemological effects. Museum objects and collections could not figure as evidence for «a truth» anymore but could now, when carefully studied and analysed, shed light on culturally informed systems of thought, processes of valorisation, and epistemic interests of a specific time and place (Thiemeyer 2017: 151). Vast historical and scientific collections belonging to universities that had become scientifically redundant and lost their former meaning as representatives of now outdated taxonomies could henceforth be displayed as historical documents of science history. Because they are visually quite spectacular they also served as a visitor attraction like for instance the *Nasssammlung* of the Museum für Naturkunde in Berlin (Brusius and Singh 2018: 13-14).

New cultural theories emphasizing the effects and agency of things and material culture, also known as the material turn[3], were decisive for a renewed understanding of museum objects and their potential for knowledge production. Objects should be perceived «as they are» and not as evidence for a pre-existing body of knowledge. The exhibition *nexus* at the Literaturmuseum Marbach in Germany, for example, displayed works of literature in a depot-like venue. They meant to appear like pieces of art rather than as artefacts of cultural history. Visitors were encouraged to take a closer look and to draw their own conclusions from what can be discovered by simply looking at an object and its materiality (Thiemeyer 2013: 394). According to this approach, new insights should be gained not only by looking closely, but also through unusual, experimental combinations and assemblages of objects. Instead of representing already existing taxonomies, curators and visitors alike should get the opportunity to try and create new things and thus to break with established patterns of thinking. This approach turned out to be promising for ethnographic museums that attempted to cut themselves loose from a classical understanding of objects as representatives of cultural contexts (von Bose 2016: 102-103).

Objects can be thought of as having manifold potentials, effects and realities. They may have biographies as various social practices can be inscribed and materialized in objects (Mauksch and Rao 2015: 118). Objects can be attributed with plural meanings. They have historical dimensions and sen-

[3] Since the material turn in the 1990s it is common to understand the objects in ethnographic museums as multidimensional: not only as an object of aesthetic contemplation (art), a carrier of social, religious or practical functions (structural-functionalism) nor as symbols of underlying cultural patterns that can be read and interpreted (structuralism). It allows for an understanding of the object in its manifold social meanings, its potentials, effects and realities (Mauksch and Rao 2015: 117).

sory qualities and effects on the observers; they function as catalysers for questions, associations, memories and projections that exceed the informative and aesthetic value of the object. A simple glass of water can for example evoke thoughts about the human right to water. The object becomes a «thing of concern» (Latour 2005) that concerns us or at least should concern us. It points to the interconnectedness of material objects, humans, and ideas that form our understanding of our environment (Muttenthaler 2016: 40).

This notion of museum objects as having multiple potentials, allowing for various interpretations, made stored museum collections, as well as archives, especially promising localities for gaining new insights. Storage spaces caught the attention of many authors as they are thought to allow for constant renegotiation of meaning, knowledge and therefore of power (Kohl 2014; Basu and De Jong2016). The museum depots are understood by some authors as a realm of options, a «reservoir of unused possibilities, alternatives, contradictions, criticism and unremembered incidents» (Alaida Assmann as cited in Sternfeld 2014:109). Nicholas Thomas (2010) emphasizes the epistemic potential of the direct and rather banal work with museum objects and mentions the possibility of making discoveries in the storerooms: Discovery «often involves finding things that were not lost, identifying things that were known to others, or disclosing what was hidden or repressed. What needs to be considered is not the «selection» of artefacts or art works, but their discovery, the encounter with arrays of objects, and the destabilization that encounter may give rise to» (Thomas 2010: 7).

The role of the public in knowledge production in museums has changed as well, and with it the idea what knowledge is. Museums increasingly encourage different members of society, from the public or from communities of origin, to contribute to and shape exhibition contents, often emphasizing the experimental aspect of such projects (Kamel and Gerbich. 2014). Public participation in museums is perceived positively and equated with the social inclusion of marginalized groups and the diversification of viewpoints. As knowledge is not anymore understood as a solely cognitive performance by scientists who pass it on to laypersons, the public is not the passive receiver of a body of knowledge but is meant to participate in the production of knowledge (Hoins and von Mallinckrodt 2015: 13-15). Scientific expertise is more and more complemented by user-generated content and by initiatives that favour public contribution.[4] Museums are also challenged to consider «subjective points of view» and to find ways of fruitfully including «non-scientific» forms of knowledge production (Feest 2013: 193; Piontek 2017: 22). Fründt (2015: 106-107) suggests for instance that ethnographic museums could focus more on humans and their stories than on objects and could become archives where people actively store their memories and experiences.

Particularly with regard to open storage, Keene (2005) mentions that visitors may identify poorly documented objects, direct their attention to a possible interesting aspect of it or enrich the historical context with their personal memories. Bond (2018) identifies serendipity, transparency and wonder as measurable benefits of visitable storage, emphasizing the self-learning effect for the participants. Wondering about things should allow the visitors to engage with the objects in a meaningful way and to question familiar concepts.

Critical voices regarding the implementation of open storage have addressed the lack of information provided by the museum. Reichel (2010: 157-165) concludes for the German-speaking countries that non-expert visitors often felt lost due to a lack of information. They did not experience open storage as democratizing, but rather as «shopping» or «zapping» on a museum level. In addition, open storage did not meet their expectation for a museum to provide information and explanation. Thiemeyer is critical about the possibility that the visitors may gain insights for themselves by simply looking at an object. This approach, he argues, «quietly assumes an aesthetic sensibility and expert approach to objects but then leaves it to visitors to come to terms with the exhibited objects for themselves» (Thiemeyer 2017: 154). Furthermore, he maintains that the stories behind the objects with a colonial past are forgotten, hidden or even pushed out of a public consciousness. Instead of emancipating the visitor, open storage reveals the gap between experts and laypersons and renders obvious that some of these objects need extensive research (Thiemeyer 2018: 250-252).

Most of the literature discussing the implementation of the open storage strategy puts an emphasis on the visitor's experience or seeks to explain why museums show their storage to the public. Yet, there is little discussion about what *kind* of knowledge is produced when the public interprets ethnographic objects and how that knowledge relates to the scientific knowledge curators refer to. With the analysis of the exhibition project at the Museum der Kulturen Basel, I would like to address this lacuna and contribute a case study to the ques-

[4] See for instance the *Competence Center Citizen Science*, a joint project of the University of Zurich and the Eidgenössische Technische Hochsule (ETH) Zurich (University of Zurich 2018).

tion of what it means for an ethnographic museum to include so called non-scientific and subjective knowledge. To do so, I turn now to the exhibition project as an example of how open storage strategy is put into practice.

Letting the People choose: The Exhibition Project

Throughout 2018, the Museum der Kulturen Basel (MKB) celebrated its 125th birthday commemorating the foundation of the Museum Commission for the ethnographic collection in 1893. Shortly after I started to work at the MKB in 2017 as a scientific assistant, I was put in charge of organizing the anniversary exhibition. As a «curator's choice» could never have satisfied all expectations and preferences, I decided together with the museum management to hand the selection of the exhibition objects over to members of the public. My understanding of the public follows here Weibel and Latour's observation that «the public is not cast in stone for all time. We're not talking here about the people as represented by their elected officials. The public has to be created for each new issue, for each new matter of concern» (Weibel and Latour 2007: 99). Our public, so to speak, comprised of people living and / or working in or around Basel regardless of their state of citizenship or political status.

The museum holds more than 320'000 objects. It has two large, multi-storied store houses located on the outskirts of the museum area and the city centre. The objects are stored mostly along a regional, ethnic and / or material classification scheme in shutter cabinets, on open shelves, in wooden crates and drawers, and sometimes they are additionally covered with cardboard. The museum collection is organized along six geographic departments and has appointed a curator for each one, namely Europe, Americas, Africa, Oceania, South-Central-East Asia and Southeast Asia. On each floor, there can be objects from two or more regional departments. As I was new to the museum, I decided to take a tour with each curator separately in the run-up to the storeroom visits to figure out which objects they would consider interesting or, more importantly, inappropriate or even problematic for public display. For logistical reasons, I defined the storeroom sections that would be opened to the public in advance. As all the objects needed to fit the exhibition space, we imposed a restriction in size. Apart from that, there were also ethical constraints. I did not show sacred objects from Aboriginal Australia that are not meant to be seen by anyone except certain insiders from the community of origin. Some curators also expressed their unease with the display of human remains but left it to me to decide, whether to include them or not.

The visits to the storerooms took place during three months. We wanted to draw in a diverse audience regarding age, gender and origin. Therefore, we invited communities that already had a history of collaboration with the museum like a Basel carnival club or a Latin-American association; others were outsiders to the institution like a group of refugees, a secondary school class or the employees of an international finance institution. Our museum staff also mobilized friends and family members. In addition, a public call for participation was issued in the print and online edition of a local newspaper. At the end 275 participants took part in the storeroom visits.

I accompanied all the visiting groups together with a museum staff member, sometimes one of the curators, and handled the selected objects as the visitors were not allowed to touch them. The participants were asked to stroll around in the storage section and make their choices without much background information about the objects at hand, based on personal interest, taste and on the sensory effect of the objects. The available information about the objects varied. Some objects had a tag attached indicating what they were, where they came from, when and by whom they were brought to the museum. However, this information must be treated with caution, as it is in some cases copied from the original inventory card, written in the early 20th century and might not have been verified since then. Sometimes it contained terms that are not used in contemporary anthropology anymore. When one of the curators accompanied me she / he generously shared their knowledge about the objects with the visitors. Undoubtedly, the most obvious reference point for the visitors in the storage areas was the geographical classification. In order to give the visitors a rough orientation in the storage section I said for instance: «On the right-hand side there are objects from Africa and on the left-hand side objects from Oceania».

The whole exhibition project can be called «experimental» in the sense that it has brought together museum curators, visitors and objects «with no sure sense of what the result will be» (Macdonald and Basu. 2007: 2-3). Each participant selected one object. I asked the participants to state the reason for their choice and wrote it down. This preselection was then fed into a public online voting system with a picture, a short object description and the statements of the participants. The poll was conducted during two weeks and was meant to involve a larger audience than the storeroom visitors. The 125 objects which received the most votes were shown in the exhibition *Take your pick – 125 objects for 125 years* (14th September 2018-6th January 2019). I decided to categorize the 125 objects along the reasons for their choosing and to include the visitors' statements as a description of the object together with the curator's text. The curator's text was not intended to provide a corrective but to offer an additional point of view.

Open for Interpretation: Gaining New Insights or Reproducing Old Stereotypes?

In this section, I discuss the statements that the participants made about the selected objects during the depot visits in the conversations with me. The described exhibition project was not designed with the open storage strategy in mind. Yet, it contains some of the main features described above such as showing a large number of objects to the public in a storage situation without providing much information. I therefore believe that the participants' statements can be analysed with regards to the assumptions about knowledge production in open storage formats. These assumptions are: the storeroom as a non-curated space that allows the visitors to generate new insights for themselves due to an absence of authoritative interpretation; permitting shared authority over and a shift of meaning-making from the curators to the public. To discuss these assumptions, I will first outline what different kinds of knowledge the visits to the storage produced. I will point out that some accounts enrich or complement the curators' knowledge and draw the attention to a specific aspect of the object. Other interpretations fundamentally contradict the intentions and scientific agenda of the curators. Especially the latter aspect will lead me to a more fundamental critique about the assumed potential of open storage strategy to decolonize knowledge production. In my view, an open storage strategy is most productive when the very different bodies of knowledge the curators and the participants relate to, are juxtaposed in a dialogue.

Undoubtedly, «non-curated» objects in the storeroom seem to have the outstanding quality to invite people to talk. The objects triggered personal stories, memories, experiences and associations. Some participants voiced their associations and ideas that referred to topics that currently seem to be of a certain societal relevance. These «things of concern» (Latour 2005) would not necessarily be considered by the curator when dealing with this object. Thus, a woman reflected on how the work spheres of women shifted in this society throughout time and along technological developments when she was looking at a wash board from mid-20th century:

> *When I was leaving my flat today in the morning, I pushed a button to start the washing machine and when I come back in the evening my clothes will be clean. I felt a bit bad when I discovered this wash board. It reminded me that not long ago, women in this country were sitting there for hours to do the washing and it required a lot of strength. That's what you call women power!*

Another example shows how a participant contributed valuable information that directly benefitted the curator's research about an object. The visitor chose a ring made from silver with a red, round stone. Words in Arabic are written on it. He explained:

> *I know this kind of stone; you find it all over Afghanistan. We have many mines where gems and gold are extracted. I know refugees from Afghanistan that traded these stones for food and shelter on their way to Europe. It also means a lot to me in a religious sense: I am a Shiite and the ring shows the names of the family members of the prophet Mohammed.*

This ring belongs to a collection that lacks proper documentation and we would not have had any information available about this object besides that it most likely originated from Morocco. Apart from identifying the material and one of the central meanings of the object the participant also shared a historical account of the migration situation in contemporary Afghanistan. In this regard this object brought to light what Assmann (as cited in Sternfeld 2014) called an unremembered incident.

Accidental and unintentional chance discoveries in the storeroom may surprise and make one wonder. Bond (2018) identified «wondering» as an advantage of open storage. Wondering allows the visitors to have a meaningful engagement with the object and to learn something new from it. It can be argued that in dialogue with the curators some visitors may have had to revise their assumptions about another society and were prompted to reflect their existing conceptions. As an anthropologist working in an ethnographic museum you would like to encourage the public to rethink preconceptions about other cultures and maybe to reflect on the notion of foreignness, such as here: A man was struck by the sight of a human skull decorated with colorful flower ornaments. Intuitively, the man assigned the skull to Mexico due to similar depictions he knew in relation to the Day of the Dead. I told him that this piece was painted in Austria and is part of a still existing *memento mori* tradition. This news came as a big surprise for him as he had never heard of such a thing in central Europe and found it quite bizarre and fascinating at the same time. Another participant chose a bone-amulet from Sumatra, Indonesia with a text engraved in the local Batak-language. First, he had no idea what it was. After the curator explained him the function of this item he commented: *«Fascinating that people depict ornaments and letters on remains of an animal. One would rather associate writing with high culture. But apparently, those people have developed their own scripture!»*

However, personal accounts of knowledge turned out to be sometimes difficult for the curators to integrate into their form of knowledge production; especially, when the curator's knowledge about the object and the visitor's interpretation contradict each other.

One participant chose a small vessel flute, an *ocarina*, from pre-Hispanic Columbia in the shape of a bat. She found it very cute and shared her idea what she believed it was used for: *«I*

assume that this whistle imitated the call of the animal and was used to attract and kill it.» The curator who wrote the object's description for the exhibition text told me later that he found it ethically difficult to write down that it is in fact impossible for archeologists to determine what exact tunes and melodies were played with an instrument, when it is excavated. He felt uncomfortable to impose a corrective on the participant's statement that might even compromise her. In his view this undermines the idea of giving up authority over interpretation.

A red mask from Papua New Guinea, representing an ancestor and probably once used in mask dances to remind the viewers of the ancestors' omnipresence, was chosen for its long nose that reminded the visitors of the masks used in the Basel carnival: *«I find it interesting that masks are used for both concealment and buffoonery in all cultures»*, he remarked. The visitor thereby projected concepts from his own cultural environment to another, which cannot be transmitted one to one and is not an information that the museum would want to communicate as a fact.

These examples show that very different forms of knowledge are generated in open storage visits. To «know» the object for the curators means for example to have information about materiality, origin, function, meaningfulness, provenance and so forth. Forms of knowledge that are located on a more associative and individual level and do not contribute directly to these fields of knowledge are probably more difficult to integrate for the curator. Thus, a plurality of meaning and a diversification of viewpoints can also create fields of tension. On one side, curators are prompted to give up the authority over interpretation and to include different voices; on the other side, they feel to have a responsibility not to disseminate false information about the objects.

I agree therefore with Thiemeyer (2017) that open storage should not be about giving up authority over meaning-making and leave it completely to the visitors to come to terms with the exhibited objects for themselves. What the visitor sees in the storerooms are not objects in a neutral environment. I doubt that the museum storage is a non-curated space, free from interpretations. The order of things has an underlying structure based on knowledge about logistics, material, provenance, geographical origin and ethnic attribution. This structure has mostly practical reasons, but old taxonomies and collection policies like the intention to depict «cultural areas» shine through and may also influence how participants interpret objects. Furthermore, access to the storerooms and the objects had to be restricted. It was only granted according to logistical, project related and ethical considerations of the professional museum staff. I think that Thiemeyer is right when he maintains that museum storage is a place of expertise and might reveal the gap between experts and laypersons (Thiemeyer 2018: 250-252). As there is clearly a hierarchy within the institution regarding access to knowledge and between different bodies of knowledge, it is questionable how authority over meaning-making in museums can be «shared» with society members by opening the doors to the storage areas.

This leads me to another point of critique about open storage, namely, that it provides a way to decolonize knowledge production in ethnographic museums. Quite often participants shared their thoughts on how they picture the lives and realities of people from different cultures. These statements sometimes fundamentally collided with the agenda of the curators and the body of knowledge that contemporary anthropology stands for.

For many visitors, the ethnographic museum tends to be a place where they look for and inform themselves about the «exotic» and the «different». Some participants expressed their disappointment at the beginning of the depot visits when I announced that I would like to take them to a section with objects from Europe. They had been looking forward to seeing more «special and unknown» things: *«I'm looking for something that is natural and archaic, something that is connected to the earth»*, said a visitor when I asked whether she was interested in something in particular.

Participants' statements about people from different cultures were often formulated in the present tense even though the object they referred to was almost a hundred years old. A woman picked a ceremonial speaker's desk from Papua New Guinea resembling a wooden chair. An anthropomorphic figure with shaggy hair is carved into its back. The piece was collected in the early 20th century which she didn't know and couldn't tell from the appearance, as she was not familiar with the material culture of this region. The woman commented: *«It looks so wild and it corresponds to my picture of Papua New Guinea of cannibalism and white spots on the map. I mean they still live in such remote places!»*

Some statements reminded me of what is known as the noble savage, an image coined by the 18th century European romanticism that pictured indigenous people in a romanticizing way: they live in harmony with and close to nature, create beautiful pieces of art with primitive technologies and only simple materials at hand, believe in natural spiritual beings and enjoy music and dance. These depictions often alluded to an imagined backwardness in terms of technological or cultural development. One woman for instance picked a pair of children boots from Siberia and commented: *«I am fascinated by indigenous people, how they live with nature and cope with it.*

Those boots are testimonials of cultures that are slowly dying out. Civilization and politics make them disappear». Another woman picked a flute from Papua New Guinea. The tag read «flute for spirits» (*Geisterflöte*). This information was copied from the old inventory card handwritten in the beginning of the 20th century. She said about it: *«I am fascinated by this natural connection of primitive people (Naturvölker) to the world of the spirits».*

As an anthropologist, I would like to discourage the public from clinging to stereotypes and prejudice and I do not want to reproduce exoticizing and primitivistic imaginations about other societies. In a self-reflexive understanding of the ethnographic museums, I would want to show that ethnographic collections tell more about European (scientific) interests and the needs of identity construction through the creation of an opposed Other rather than reproducing the image of other people as exotic, archaic, magic, mysterious, special, odd, extraordinary and wild. I am aware that imaginations of the distant and primitive Other are nourished by ongoing confrontations with such images from different sources and media also outside of the museum. It is hard to tell whether the storeroom has influenced the visitor's perception in this regard. But I would like to question the decolonizing effect of an open storage strategy that provokes such ideas and leads to «projections of one's own culture into a non-European environment» (Jiroušková 2013: 122-123) and then leaves them uncommented.

In order to make these bodies of knowledge more resourceful for both parties, I suggest a more extended dialogue between the visitors and the curators. Their – sometimes very contradictory – conceptions about other cultures, foreignness, development and civilization could be contrasted and addressed more directly in conversation. To discuss with each participant their viewpoints would of course be a very time-consuming process and would not have been feasible within the framework of this project involving over 250 people. But I think that the storage area allows for a certain freedom of thought and findings that would not be possible in an exhibition space. Ethnographic museums that are concerned with issues of contemporary society might try to seek more exchange with the public in order to comprehend how society members see and think about certain things.

Conclusion

This exhibition project took place at a time and in a society, where participation and inclusion in cultural institutions are highly valued. But, what if evolutionist and problematic views about different cultures are reproduced by the public? How should ethnographic museums intervene without being paternalistic, moralizing and power-oriented once again? My findings from the storeroom visits do neither support the assumption that the open storage strategy necessarily leads to decolonizing knowledge production in ethnographic museums, nor that the storage area is a neutral place.

What makes in my opinion the approach of open storage promising is that objects are taken into the cycles of meaning-making and knowledge production that would otherwise have been overlooked. If people encounter objects in an environment more open to personal interpretation, objects may function as triggers for various forms of knowledge. They make people share their expertise, personal memories are remembered and stories that may enrich the context of objects may evolve.

If ethnographic objects are left completely open for personal interpretation, people might reproduce already existing clichés and images about other cultures that contradict current scientific standards in anthropology. Ethnographic museums (like other institutions as well!) must tackle and go against primitivistic imaginations so that stereotypes and oversimplified images about other people are not reproduced and perpetuated in the future. This caution, however, should of course not happen at the expense of polyphony in the museum. As contradictory as subjective and scientific points of views may be, they need a space where they can be voiced and confronted. Ethnographic museums can mediate between different forms of knowledge by using the analytic nature of anthropology – by collecting, comparing and suggesting different points of view. But just opening the doors to the storage area for the public might not be sufficient.

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