

## ABSTRACT

Imagine a group of people joining the art delivery transportation services responsible for moving objects from the old Ethnographic collection house in Dahlem (Berlin) to the new building of the Humboldt Forum. The transportation vehicle suddenly stops and the two drivers ask the people who joined them to step out along with the artefacts in their crates. Imagine those people standing in the middle of the city with the crates in their hands – what would they do now? Where should they take these objects? What are the tools they have to make decisions? In October 2021, I performed one such ritualistic rehearsal towards a possible act of emptying the museum of heritage. My performance, part of the Moving the Forum project – a participatory dance residency programme at the Humboldt Forum Berlin – unfolded in parallel with the long-running and complex operation of transferring thousands of artefacts from the Ethnological Museum of Berlin to their new ‘permanent home’ inside the reconstructed imperialistic Berlin Palace. During my performative ritual, which consisted of a series of imaginings towards a counter course of action, the public was invited to witness members of the restoration team and art handlers emptying the display cases in the new exhibition spaces. I conceived this performative act as a pre-enactment, a proposal for physical and mental training in reassessing and unlearning the relationships between caretakers of objects in imperial museums and the future and possible fate of plundered objects.

In this article, I discuss notions of training, imagining, and repetition as ways of reassessing and transforming the relationships between imperial institutions acting as caretakers and violently plundered objects. The article offers a fictional script of this ride from the Ethnological museum in Dahlem to the Humboldt forum, drawing on months of field research conducted in preparation for this ritualistic ceremony, *Restless Objects of emptying the Forum*, during which I closely observed the operational and political aspects of the relocation procedures and examined the structural powers at the basis of imperial collections.

## keywords

RE-IMAGINING  
TRAINING  
UNLEARNING  
ART-HANDLING  
CARETAKING  
PRE-ENACTMENT  
EMPTYING THE MUSEUM  
EMPTYING IMPERIAL POWER

# *Final(?) DISPOSITION* (Restless Objects)<sup>1</sup>

## A Ride from the Storage to the Palace

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HAGAR OPHIR

### Introduction

<sup>1</sup> This is a scripted narrative of an event that was planned but never materialised in its fullest. It is based on fragments of events that took place in various locations, not necessarily those indicated in the text, that for the purpose of this essay were assembled and imagined into a single narrative. A different performative work titled *Restless Object* was developed and presented during a participatory dance residency *Moving the Forum* at the Humboldt Forum Berlin, 20-21. The research carried out for *Restless Object* informs this essay and the scripted performative piece *Final(?) DISPOSITION*.

<sup>2</sup> ‘Constructed in 1443, the Berlin historical palace was considered a symbol of the Prussian monarchy, under which German colonialism was placed under state protection by the so-called Congo Conference of 1884. However, the palace was partially destroyed during World War II. These ruins made way for the Palace of the Republic (*Palast der Republik*), the seat of the parliament in the German Democratic Republic (GDR). In 2003, the German federal parliament decided to tear down the Palace of the Republic and to reconstruct the old Berlin Palace’. For more, see [www.no-humboldt21.de](http://www.no-humboldt21.de).

Imagine a group of people joining the art transportation services responsible for moving objects from the old Ethnographic collection house in Dahlem (Berlin) to the new building of the Humboldt Forum.<sup>2</sup> The car suddenly stops, there is a problem, and the driver asks the people who joined the journey to immediately step out of the car and take the artefacts with them. Imagine those people standing in the middle of the city with crates in their hands – what would they do now? Where should they take these objects? What would inform their decisions? What are the tools at their disposal? The events described here – *The Final (?) Disposition* – occurred in October 2021 during a moment in time when the objects were being moved from their old to their new host location in highly technological glass cases in the climate-controlled environment of the Humboldt Forum. Nowadays, all these objects are on display. Among those who joined the *Final (?) DISPOSITION* drive was an anonymous reporter who described the experience as follows:

Reporter:

*[Describing the events in retrospect]*

It was a sunny day in October 2021. On my way to the Dahlem Museum, I was talking with a friend about plundered art and its possible restitution, expressing my concern that this issue was merely another fashion of the art and the academic



Fig. 1 – Back entrance to the Ethnological Museum Dahlem

world. And yet I was curious about this performance, *The Final (?) Disposition*. The time had come to empty state institutions out of their power, empty museums and collections in Europe of objects and goods, and detach collected heritage from its role as diplomatic cards in the hands of European institutions.

We arrived at the back door of the building and signed in. Despite my scepticism, excitement was high. I wasn't sure if we would get close to the objects hidden in storage for more than a hundred years since they were looted or bought in violent circumstances. Did my ancestors loot any of them? I looked at the eight-floor building where the collection is kept and couldn't avoid thinking that time had left its imprint on it.

Ext/The Ethnological Museum entrance at Dahlem

**Guard:**

*[reacting with a sort of cynical tone to the reporter's  
sceptical gaze at the eight-floor building]*

Yes... not the best safe, ha...?

Well, there are almost a million residents, actually prisoners, who remained in that eight-floor building. Can you imagine? The best of 'German inheritance'. [Fig. 2]

Fig. 2 – The Corridors

Fig. 3 – Restoration Street

<sup>3</sup> 100 Jahre museum für Völkerkunde zur Geschichte des museums, Sigrid Westphal-Hellbusch, 1977



**Reporter:**

*[Describing the events in retrospect]*

We entered through a backdoor into corridors leading to the ‘restoration street’. Our phones and bags were taken. We learned that this is the third time the objects have been moved to another institution since they arrived in Germany. The museum was first located in Prinz-Albrecht-Straße (today Niederkirchnerstraße) in the same building which served as the headquarters of the Gestapo between May 1933 until its bombing in 1945. I remembered seeing pictures of the old wooden display cases from that old building.<sup>3</sup> [Fig. 3]

We followed our guide, who was dressed in a white robe. We crossed corridors filled with large rolls of packing materials, plastic boxes, and storage cabinets. The guide explained that it takes several months before each object can leave the building.

Indoor/the Ethnological Museum’s staff entrance corridors

**Guide:**

*[Talking to the group while walking and leading their way]*

The objects that are being transferred must stay in the *whitening* room until it is confirmed that they are not contaminated. We call them 'black' before being cleaned of the dust and toxic chemicals that cover them. A special machine removes all kinds of dust and traces of life from them, and only from then do they count as white.

**Reporter:**

*[Describing the events in retrospect]*

We looked at the conservators at work and how they carefully prepared small beds to fit each patient with little prosthetic legs and robes. We were given gloves and joined the last stage of packing the following objects: a pair of shoes, a knife, a pot, a little cloth with some seeds, and a big wooden mask. We helped pack them into grey boxes and attached coded stickers. We were told these objects were not yet ready to go – they first had to go through isolation in the vacuum room. We were instructed to go to the first floor to get 'our' objects and carry them to the lorry. [Fig. 4]

One hour later, we were in the car, driving from Dahlem, north west Berlin, to the Museum island, at the centre of Berlin. With the grey boxes on our laps, we were not sure what was in them.

Int/transportation car with 8 seats



Fig. 4 – Whitening room

<sup>4</sup> The German word for vacation.

[four passengers sitting in the transportation vehicle each have a grey box on their lap. The lorry starts to move slowly. During the journey, the driver and the art handler in the front seats are busy gossiping about the identity of the new curator of the Islamic collection. The people in the back seat manage to catch some snatches of the conversation.]

**Driver:**

*[talking to his colleague next to them,  
unaware that the passengers can hear them]*

...they also don't know who will take over the African collection yet. No one wants to deal with the bureaucratic and curatorial aspects of handling the Benin bronzes room and the hassle around restitution ceremonies and artist demonstrations.

**Art handler:**

*[More pragmatically]*

I don't care who takes over and where I deliver the art, you know... I can deliver it to Kinshasa right now if they want me to, or back into the salt mines in the centre of Germany for a few more years... I really don't care...

**Reporter:**

*[Describing the events in retrospect]*

They spoke as if no one was listening until the art handler shushed the driver, who immediately tried to rephrase what he had said.

Fig. 5 – The Drive



Int/transportation car with 8 seats

**Driver:**

Don't get me wrong, I'm just doing my job the best I can, you know. But truly, how many times can they keep postponing this process?! I will not cancel my *Urlaub*<sup>4</sup> again. It's unacceptable! [Fig. 5]

**Reporter:**

*[Describing the events in retrospect]*

At this point, finally, the art handler turned towards us and asked if we knew that in 1941, scientists and soldiers oversaw the transfer of some items of the collection to the famous salt mines to protect them from potential bombs but also from insects and decay. They anointed them with toxic materials, and until today the only way to get rid of it is to whiten them. They showed us a picture of a man in a robe and a mask hugging a human skeleton while anointing it.

**Art handler:**

*[Take the picture back and continue]*

This was not the last time these poor objects were moved. The collection was split – half was sent to St. Petersburg and half back to Dahlem. No art handler was there to accompany them while they were transported on military lorries – can you imagine?! Rumour has it that some bored and traumatised soldiers played shooting games with pots from the Americas collection as if they were empty beer cans...

**Driver:**

*[Adding to the information shared by the Art handler]*

And even after this long journey back and forth, and all the clay pots that were left behind broken on the side of the road, there are still hundreds of pots in the Americas collection. [Fig. 6]

**Reporter:**

*[Describing the events in retrospect]*

I started to wonder what I had in my box. Is it one of the Inca ceramics that survived? My hand got a bit sweaty from the idea of carrying such responsibility. I was



Fig. 6 – From the collection of the Ethnological Museum Berlin

<sup>5</sup> Passenger. 2012, *Let Her Go*, from the album 'All the Little Lights'.

relieved to see the white gloves on my hands – they would shield this precious and vulnerable survivor from my fingerprints. A few minutes later, the driver lit a cigarette, opened the window, and turned on the radio as if this were a normal taxi ride. A cheesy song by *Passenger* was playing:

Int/transportation car with 8 seats

**Radio:**

*[At first loud and clear and then fading into the background]*

*Only know you love her when you let her go*

*And you let her go...<sup>5</sup>*

Int/transportation car with 8 seats

**Driver:**

*[While the car stops on the traffic light, taking the hand out of the window and pointing in the direction of the Syrian embassy building]*

You see, this is where objects like those in your box will probably never be transported... at least not in the current political circumstances,

**Driver and Art handler:**

Chuckling.

**Art handler:**

*[Continuing in a more neutral way]*

To your left, you can see we are passing by the Syrian embassy – so many expeditions were recorded to greater Syria before the Sykes-Picot agreement separated Palestine and Lebanon from Syria. The collections in Europe are filled with bounty looted by soldiers, scholars, artists, folklorists, archaeologists, and architects from Germany, Austria, France, and the United Kingdom.

**Reporter:**

*[Describing the events in retrospect]*

I got a bit lost in the story's nuances about which objects would or would not be restituted, but it was clear that objects from the Muslim world were unlikely to be transferred from European institutions through via diplomatic paths. The art handler later mentioned that the sculpted horses of the Brandenburger Tor were looted by Napoleon in 1806 but restituted back to Prussia a couple of years later. I won-





Fig. 7 – Bradenburger Tor

dered what could have happened if Germany had not got them back or if one would question their legal status (arguing, for example, that Germany is not Prussia). Was this story present in the minds of those debating restitution? [Fig. 7]

The driver picked up a call. We heard a worried voice asking the driver to turn off the speaker phone and . We tried to make sense of the situation and picked up the words ‘strike’ and ‘safety’. The driver and the art handler looked at us without saying a word. One could already see the gold cross atop the Berlin Palace<sup>6</sup> when the driver and the art handler suddenly jumped out of the vehicle and ordered us to step out. We suddenly found ourselves standing in the street with those boxes of precious objects in our hands. They both jumped back in the car. The art handler said some kind of security problem mean we could not enter the Humboldt Forum building with the vehicle.

The vehicle quickly tore off, leaving us behind. The art handler and the driver waved to the group of passengers holding boxes in the middle of the street with a look of shock on their faces.

The driver shouted from the window while accelerating off: ‘We know you will do the right thing!’

And with that they were gone.

I was furious. How could they just leave us like that? As if we were actors in a bad show, with these ‘props’ in our hands? What should we do now? So disrespectful and irresponsible, I thought to myself.

<sup>6</sup> The Humboldt Forum sits inside the Berlin Palace. In 2017, a debatable decision was made to place a golden cross on top of the building in contradiction to the original architectural plans of the building and referring to the period when the Dom of the historical Berlin Palace served as a church.

One of the abandoned passengers assumed that our phones were in one of the crates that the driver removed from the transportation vehicle. The passengers placed their boxes on the ground. They seemed lost until they got their phones in their hands. After a few moments of silent staring each on their screen, one began to speak.

I was reminded of something the driver had said: 'There are too many objects and not enough space.' Maybe these objects were not registered. Maybe the Art handlers had lied to us and the objects here actually had been deaccessioned? I was thinking about this option as each documented movement of these little seeds I helped packing or any other object adds to their price and means that all the procedures they went through need to be performed again whenever they get to a new destination.

Outdoor/side of the road/Berlin Museum Island  
(the gold cross on top the Berliner Palace in the background)

**Reporter:**

*[Asking aloud without expecting an answer]*

What if there are seeds in one of these boxes? Should we plant them in the ground? Mark the flowerbed with little stones and wait to see the future result? Is this an opportunity we shouldn't miss?

**Participant 1:**

I don't believe these are real objects. [pause] We should just throw them away or take them home. No one will notice they are missing. There is no chance the museum would have let us touch 'real' objects.

**Reporter:**

What do you mean by 'real'? I helped pack some 500-year-old seeds before we left the Museum in Dahlem. Do you consider that real? Can seeds be fake?

**Participant 2:**

You are all completely out of your mind. These objects should be taken to their destination immediately. We don't have the skills or professional knowledge to take care of them. We have a responsibility to our heritage.

**Reporter:**

Our heritage...?

**Participant 2:**

After all we've heard and what happened just now – I simply don't trust this institution. Shouldn't we do what the institution refuses to and find a way to send them back to South America, Asia and Africa, where they come from? This is our chance to do the right thing and save these objects from these corrupt European institutions.

**Participant 4:**

Who are we to decide what should happen to these objects? We have no address to mail them to. Can we somehow reach out to people who might have ties to those objects?

**Participant 5:**

It may be that these objects have no value outside a museum context. They are real only for those who miss them, who are deprived of access to them, or to the life they were part of.

**Participant 3:**

The museum is a 10-minute walk from here. Let's take them back before the police arrive. We could be accused of stealing German heritage. This is a serious crime! Even if you don't come with me, that is what I am doing.



Fig. 8 – Are they still standing there, debating?

**Participant 1:**

The guards will think we are a bunch of art activists trying to get access to the building. No chance they know about whatever it is that is happening here. [Fig. 8] The reporter ended their description there, providing no further details about what happened from that point on.

Are they still standing there, debating? Did they open the crates and perform a series of séances, conjuring ancestors and owners of these very objects in order to figure out what to do next?

We do not know what happened next. Where did the 8 boxes and their contents end up? The institution will never admit to such a scandal.

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