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# THE POSTCOLONIAL MUSEUM AND NONSYNCHRONOUS HERITAGE

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**Cultural enclosure**  
**cultural heritage**  
**nonsynchronism**  
**postcolonial**  
**museum studies**  
.....

*This essay proposes a concept of “nonsynchronous heritage” to reimagine the role of the museum in postcolonial times. Current discourses on the postcolonial museum have focused on important questions about decolonizing contested heritages, the restitution of looted artefacts, and making the space of the gallery relevant to minorities and non-hegemonic groups. However, these discourses cannot be detached from the problem of the museum as a cultural enclosure, a space born in an age of colonialism and capitalism. In postcolonial times, the aesthetic form of the museum shifted from an encyclopaedic exhibitionary complex to the sensorium of a capitalist utopia, embodying the extractive operations that also underlie formal subsumption and the international division of labour. From this point of view, the museum epitomizes a capitalist modernity fraught with inequalities and reflective of the expanding process of combined and uneven development. The heritage that museums conserve and appropriate cannot be reduced to the synchronicity of the present or a scenario of total commodification. As aesthetic form, the postcolonial museum rather testifies to globalization as a process of dialectical interlocking of different regimes of temporality. This nonsynchronous heritage can complicate the*

*dilemmas pitting universalism against restitution, globalization against nationalism. A notion of nonsynchronous heritage drawn from the philosophy of Ernst Bloch can help rethink the role of the postcolonial museum. By no means external to the unevenness of capitalism, the contemporary museum displays a contested field of differing temporal strata and surviving historical ages still active in a turbulent and incomplete present.*

## **Introduction**

In 2007, the United Nations approved a Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, which indicated that states should provide “redress”, including restitution of any “cultural, intellectual, religious and spiritual property taken without their free, prior and informed consent or in violation of their laws, traditions and customs” (United Nations n.d.). This declaration was an important step in raising awareness on the role of museums and art galleries today. Since then, especially in former colonizing nations, public debates developed around the right to retain objects looted or forcibly acquired from formerly colonized countries. Museums in various parts of the globe have responded to these problems and addressed questions about restitution and redress. In the UK, the Museums Association now promotes a campaign to “unreservedly support” projects to decolonize museums and to “recognise the integral role of empire in museums” (Museums Association n.d.). In this essay, I discuss whether the idea of a “nonsynchronous heritage”, inspired by the philosophy of Ernst Bloch, might help to rediscuss the function of the museum in postcolonial times. This is a critical and speculative essay: I do not offer practical guidance for curators, while I will address two resonant examples of curatorial politics in the concluding section of the essay. My contention is that any attempt to decolonize the museum should be complemented by a consciousness of the nonsynchronous logics of formal subsumption and combined and uneven development that underlie the functioning of global capitalism. This awareness could shift our attention from heritage as material object to the social histories of exploitation, oppression, but also solidarity and resistance of producers across geographical locations and historical eras. The postcolonial museum could be reimagined, as I will show in the concluding part of the essay, as a knot of intergenerational solidarities in the making of a global working class and a mapping of the unevenness of a capitalist modernity. This means rethinking the “post-colonial” quality of the museum from an historical materialist perspective.

An important example in this context concerns the case of the Benin Bronzes held at the British Museum in London. This collection was plundered by the British army during the invasion of Benin City in 1897, while

Nigerians have been reclaiming these objects since the 1930s. The case for the restitution of the Bronzes to Nigeria has been advocated, among others, by Dan Hicks in his book *The Brutish Museums*. As Hicks notes:

European voices have a service to fulfil in the process of restitution: one of sharing knowledge of the process of cultural dispossession, and of facing up to the colonial ultraviolence, democide, and cultural destructions that characterised the British Empire in Africa during the three decades between the Berlin Conference of 1884 and the outbreak of the First World War. (Hicks 2020, xiii)

Curators, Hicks suggests, should “catalyse a new acknowledgement of the scale and horror of British corporate-militarist colonialism ... Anthropology museums represent crucial public spaces in which to undertake this social and political process” (xiii). The restitution of artefacts plays a very important part in the project of decolonizing the museum and could help work through the violent and traumatic legacy of colonial histories. This important example of advocacy for restitution and redress, however, sparked criticism from museum directors in Britain, including V&A director Tristram Hunt and the Cambridge University Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology director Nick Thomas. Critics like Tristram Hunt have defended the inherited role of the museum and a continued ownership of objects acquired during the age of imperialism, as Hunt notes in an article for *The Guardian* newspaper:

alongside colonial violence, empire was also a story of cosmopolitanism and hybridity: through trade, religion, war and force, peoples and cultures mixed and, in many cases, expressed that exchange and interaction through the type of material culture now found in museums. That was the case for the Roman, Ottoman, Ming, Ashanti, Habsburg and, yes, British empires ... Perhaps the real challenge is how we create more, rather than fewer, universal museums. (Hunt 2019)

The refusal to return artefacts is hence based on a vision of the museum as hegemonic tool of cultural domination, accompanied by a fatalist concept of the history of empires as unavoidable and necessary.

Interestingly, Hunt’s view on colonialism mobilizes here notions of cosmopolitanism and hybridity that have been central to the development of post-colonial studies. Hybridity is a nineteenth-century term derived from botanical and biological studies, originally indicating the offspring of different species, half breed, and subsequently adapted to the racial theories of the time, as Robert Young has noted in his critique of the history and adaptations of this term (Young 1995, 6). In the twentieth century, the term shifted from biology to culture and was rescued from its initial negative connotations. It

came to be identified, especially after influential essays by Homi K. Bhabha in the 1980s, with a celebration of non-identitarian, migrant, diasporic experiences, and eventually equated with the situation of postcoloniality. Hybridity, along with postmodernist philosophical trends, emerged in an historical conjuncture in which, under rampant neoliberalism and post-Fordist economic regimes, older struggles for social equality and workers' rights were replaced by a culturalist emphasis on flexibility, coalitions, middle grounds, and a triumphalist portrayal of capitalist globalization (Lazarus 1991; Parry 2005; Sivanandan 1990). In similar vein, cosmopolitanism, as Timothy Brennan notes, has a double valence as a term indicating both "an enthusiasm for customary differences" and "a theory of world government and corresponding citizenship" (Brennan 2001, 76). Cosmopolitanism hence links an appreciation of cultural diversity to a political and economic suppression of the nation-state, the crushing of any emancipatory and oppositional nativism, and a dismissal of the idioms of internationalist solidarity and class struggle, now dubbed as old Left orthodoxy. As the jargon of hybridity celebrates cultural ambivalence and complicity with power while neglecting social antagonism, economic dispossession and class inequality, cosmopolitanism aligns with neoliberal and late imperial ideals of world domination. Far from being an unquestionably progressive utopia, the ideal of cosmopolitanism, Brennan suggests, could be summarized as "a discourse of the universal that is inherently local – a locality that's always surreptitiously imperial" (Brennan 2001, 81). Not surprisingly, these notions appear to be very easily amenable to current apologies for the Western Museum and this unyielding denial of restitutions and of righting wrongs. How then can postcolonial studies help the mission of giving back stolen heritage and a concrete decolonization of the museum, when some key postcolonial concepts are summoned for the opposite ends?

As Neil Lazarus notes in his introduction to *The Cambridge Companion to Postcolonial Literary Studies*, there is a hegemonic version of postcolonial studies that is "constitutively anti-Marxist", evincing "an undifferentiating disavowal of all forms of nationalism and a corresponding exaltation of migrancy, liminality, hybridity, and multiculturalism", hostile to totality and dialectics, and refusing "an antagonistic or struggle-based model of politics" (Lazarus 2004, 4). The project of decolonizing the museum should be linked to oppositional postcolonial perspectives that aim at fostering economic equality and social justice worldwide, rather than reinforcing a class-blind form of postcoloniality aptly described by Arif Dirlik as "the condition of the intelligentsia of global capitalism" (1994, 356). Accordingly, the transformation of the contemporary museum should be aligned with a recuperation of the energies of the struggles for national liberation in the Global South and the underlying Marxist politics that inspired them. Living in post-colonial times entails a critique of the continuing dispossession that

capitalism operates on former colonized countries. The global economy reproduces oppression on various levels, and the question of social class is still at the centre of a world based on the international division of labour and the logics of combined and uneven development. As the Warwick Research Collective explain, the theory of combined and uneven development “originated in the work of Engels, Lenin and, especially, Trotsky”; it indicates that

even within capitalist or capitalising social formations, vast rural populations continued to ground the persistence not only of earlier economic conditions, but also of social relations, cultural practices and psychic dispositions ... the imposed capitalist forces of production and class relations tend not to supplant (or are not allowed to supplant) but to be conjoined forcibly with pre-existing forces and relations. (Warwick Research Collective 2015, 10–11)

These historical processes are not new: they indicate that decolonization as national liberation is not a thing of the past, but an open-ended, unfinished project. In sum, anti-hegemonic perspectives in postcolonial studies highlight the historical dimension of the postcolonial present as a continuation, not a break or disjuncture, of the inheritance of anti-colonial and anti-capitalist struggles of the past century.

A perspective such as the one developed by Neil Lazarus can deeply enrich discourses on decolonizing the museum by showing how the postcolonial condition demands a focus on global economic inequality, the continuation of imperialism, and on material exploitation, rather than the deconstruction of an imagined fetish of the West (Lazarus 2002). A very important effect of the current controversies on decolonizing public spaces – from squares to universities and museums – has been to clarify the fact that colonialism is still an open wound in the public consciousness of countries affected by the violence, genocides, and dispossession of imperialism. Decolonizing cannot entail a celebration of identities and the role of cultural exchange in the making of colonial histories. Decolonizing has regained an oppositional quality: the material exploitation and dispossession of formerly colonized peoples cannot be countered by wishful celebrations of hybridity and cosmopolitanism, but by concrete practices of discontinuing privilege, contesting heritage, material redress, and the fight for fair working and living conditions. Alírio Karina notes, in a recent essay on the topic, that “the violences the museum helped authorise have imposed upon the world a structure of unpayable debt”, and in this context, new curatorial strategies “may, at most, make reference to this. A return may recognise it, restitution acknowledge that something is owed; but this leaves the foundation unaddressed” (Karina 2022, 659). A true decolonization of the museum entails calling into question this “foundation”, the wider economic and social processes that reproduce

inequality worldwide today. This essay will outline the predicaments, complexities, and possible angles for reimagining the postcolonial museum against a continuing global oppression. In the first part, I will address important discourses on the museum and capitalism, starting from Rosalind Krauss's pivotal essay on the theme, alongside Saloni Mathur's response to Krauss from a postcolonial perspective. In the second part, I will build on these debates to redefine a concept of nonsynchronous heritage that could pave the way for turning from the cultural enclosure to a possible indication of a simultaneously decolonized and anti-capitalist museum.

### **The postcolonial museum in an era of global capitalism**

The colonial and capitalist roots of the museum are well documented. As Flora Edouwaye S. Kaplan notes, museums and nation-states share a common genealogy “in the early mix of medieval mercantile capitalism and fifteenth-century European global expansion” (Kaplan and Edouwaye 2006, 152). Kaplan writes about the origins of the museum in the epoch of violent colonial conquest, and its entanglements in the history of resistances and movements of national independence throughout the twentieth century. Kaplan notes:

National museums in the West (as we now know them) are rooted in the humanism of the Italian Renaissance, and flourished in the light of eighteenth-century scientific experiment and rationalism. Colonialism, which spread with nineteenth-century industrial capitalism to distant continents, generated new wealth and expressions of pride at home that quickened world fairs and the growth of museums. (Kaplan and Edouwaye 2006, 152)

In influential studies on taste, art, and cultural reproduction, Pierre Bourdieu linked the creation of the museum to the ideological necessities of capitalism, the rise of a middle class, and the reproduction of social inequality (Bourdieu and Darbel 1997). As Tony Bennett notes, museums originated as a display of power and as “a set of cultural technologies concerned to organise a voluntarily self-regulating citizenry” (Bennett 1995, 63). In our contemporary age, however, how do the transmutations of capitalism affect the changing nature and role of museums and art galleries? Museums are not simply tied to the establishment of a national identity, but rather follow the globalizing and commodifying logics of the economy. A thriving field of critique of the ethnographic museum as colonial site for the appropriation of non-Western art has developed in cultural anthropology, drawing on foundational works by critics like Ruth Phillips and Annie Coombes, Amy Lonetree,

Sally Price, George Marcus, Fred Myers, and Nicholas Thomas (Coombes and Phillips 2015; Lonetree 2012; Marcus and Myers 1995; Price 2001; Thomas 2022).

Reckoning with histories of colonial domination and inequality, the paradigm of a postcolonial museum links curatorial practice to pressing issues about class, race, and gender discrimination, new forms of imperialism, and the exploitation of workers and environments in the Global South. For this reason, debates over restitution and redress, or the so-called “contested heritages” – such as the statues of slave-owning, colonial leaders – reposition the contemporary museum within a global and postcolonial history. As the authors of the introduction to a collective volume titled *The Postcolonial Museum* write:

What is at stake here is not a pacific integration of the missing chapters of the forgotten, excluded and subaltern voices into inherited accounts, but rather a deconstruction and rewriting of those very histories through the irrepressible presence of these other narrations ... Avoiding the risk of reducing art to an expedience for inclusive and moribund accounts of the transcultural present, postcolonial aesthetics invites us to consider art as the possibility through which our connection with otherness, with present and past ... is problematised and activated. (De Angelis et al. 2016, 3)

A postcolonial historical consciousness entails a rewriting of postcolonial histories, and reimagining pressing current issues through the prism of artistic production and curatorial practice. Yet, there is still an open question about the postcolonial museum: emptied out of any controversial item and attentive to the demands of oppressed nations and communities, the postcolonial museum cannot eschew its function in a world increasingly dominated by the process of combined and uneven development, where the enrichment of the few coincides with an augmented impoverishment of the many. Postcolonial heritages are fully entangled in the tendency of capitalism to maximize profits and concentrate wealth through what Samir Amin (1979) described as “unequal exchange”, dispossessing communities, privatizing natural resources and the commons, hyper-exploiting workers in the South, and reviving ancient forms of exploitation such as slavery and bonded labour for its current needs. A problematic point concerns the upholding of the jargon of “property”, an enclosing and privatizing logic that belies the supposed universalism of its scope. If property is the only remedy to colonial piracy and looting, the postcolonial museum remains trapped in an endless repetition of stories of acquisition and dispossession. Bound to the discourse of ownership, the postcolonial museum might simply be the latest novelty in constantly changing market trends. A postcolonial museum can still be a capitalist museum, fully compliant with the

logics of property and commodity. The pressing question for postcolonial museum studies, hence, would be whether alternative forms of custodianship and curatorship can challenge in any way the appropriation and commodification of heritage.

The rise of discourses on decolonizing the museum, representing minorities, and disavowing colonial heritage, quite uncannily and problematically, concurred with an increasing “globalisation” of the American and European museum as multinational corporation, as the museum turned from national, public educational space into something more akin to a retail and entertainment space, focused on branding, merchandizing, expanding the customer base, and selling products through the gift shop. The debates on the “selling out” of the Louvre, through its new Jean Nouvel building in Abu Dhabi, epitomize these problems (Graebner 2014), as well as the global expansion of the Guggenheim in the 1990s, which gave rise to the so-called McDonaldization of the art world. The problem is not so much what is shown or not shown in a museum space, but whether the museum space can become something else rather than mere cultural enclosure, that is, the coding of material heritage as product or experience to be sold and traded.

The term enclosure, as an important issue of the *Midnight Notes* publication emphasizes, is a keyword in the Marxist account of the origins of capitalism:

The Old Enclosures were a counter-revolutionary process whereby, after a century of high wages and breakdown of feudal authority, beginning in the late 1400s farmers in England were expropriated from their land and commons... They were turned into paupers, vagabonds and beggars, and later into waged workers. (Midnight Notes Collective 1990, 1)

The enclosures, however, are not simply the starting point of capitalism: they “are not a one time process exhausted at the dawn of capitalism. They are a regular return on the path of accumulation and a structural component of class struggle” (1). In a capitalist world, the museum partakes of this process of fencing and appropriating resources, products of human labour, and heritage; the capitalist museum is an enclosure because it takes part in the logics of dispossession at the core of capitalism.

The question of the temporality of the museum might be an important aspect to consider in these discourses. If the enclosure is a permanent, periodic feature of capitalist accumulation, the temporality it reveals is not a punctual event, a genealogical past, or a superseded phase in the history of modernity. The museum appropriates objects that might be transmitted from a pre-capitalist past or produced in a way that does not align with the current forms of capitalist production of non-artistic commodities. This

variety of capitalist and non-capitalist modes turns the museum space into a gallery of nonsynchronous strata, differing temporalities, and residues of forms of labour that the museum appropriates and encloses. A museum that would not simply abide by the logic of enclosure would need to start by challenging the logic of accumulation that the museum replicates. This means, rather than focusing on the experience of the viewer, reimagining the museum as the space of an uneven material heritage, functioning as image and cognitive map of the worlds of labour – from slavery to industrial to post-Fordist and artistic work – as well as the multiple social forms that still survive within the frame of a global market. This perspective could resonate with Dave Beech’s important argument about the way capitalism has affected the world of art in his milestone book *Art and Value*. As Beech writes:

Instead of theorising art’s relationship to capitalism through the concepts of commodification, culture industry, spectacle and real subsumption, all of which have a superficial ring of truth, the key to understanding art’s relationship to capitalism must be derived from questioning whether art has gone through the transition from feudalism to capitalism ... this means examining the mode of production of art, rather than being distracted by impressionistic perceptions of art’s deep involvement in the market, its close proximity to corporate capitalism, its globalisation and its conspicuous super profits. (Beech 2015, 8)

Beech’s important point, here, concerns the fact that the contemporary museum cannot ignore, or simply take for granted, the relationship between art and *a global capitalism marked by the international division of labour, the logics of formal subsumption, and combined and uneven development*. As Beech notes in his recent work on art and labour, the formation of art “carved out a specific mode of production that is neither a remnant of pre-capitalist production nor an example of capitalist manufacture” (Beech 2020, 2). The worlds of art and artistic labour cannot be detached from the realities of imperialism and differing regimes of exploitation: the space of the museum operates as a sort of mediator between overlapping processes of accumulation. The concept of nonsynchronous heritage advanced in this essay, drawn from the philosophy of Ernst Bloch and aligned with the theory of combined and uneven development, would emphasize the fact that the museum encapsulates a world of differential temporalities that combine within the global history of capitalism. This is a process that Massimiliano Tomba describes as a “plurality of historical temporalities synchronised by the temporality of socially-necessary labour” (2009, 44). The museum cannot be reduced to the scenario of total commodification or, on the other hand, simply abstracted from it, as if art were immune to the processes of exploitation and accumulation that define our world. The

postcolonial dimension of the contemporary museum, for this reason, does not simply indicate the inclusion of cultural diversity, representation of otherness, migration, hybridity, race and so on as additional themes for an exhibition. The postcolonial rather indicates an historical phase in which different regimes of material exploitation overlap, pre-capitalist and capitalist temporalities that combine in the present and open up synchronicity to a dialectical, expanded, and materialist historical consciousness. Neither the museum as heterotopia nor the culturalism of celebratory theories of hybridity and cosmopolitanism would make a museum distinctively postcolonial, but rather an illumination of the nonsynchronous dialectics of global capitalism.

The intersections between the history of the museum and the history of capitalism are complex and open-ended, as Rosalind Krauss demonstrates in a pivotal 1990 essay titled “The Cultural Logic of the Late Capitalist Museum”. Krauss describes a major change in how art galleries operate at the end of the twentieth century. In an important passage, she tells of an uncanny “revelation” made by former director of the Guggenheim Thomas Krens, who played a significant role in turning the foundation into a global enterprise. Krauss narrates the initial inspiration and trigger of Krens’s revolution in the art world. As Krauss writes, Krens was inspired by “a spectacular gallery made from a converted factory building”, and “had the revelation of MASS MoCA. Significantly, he described this revelation as ... an entire change ... within the very conditions within which art itself is understood” (Krauss 1990, 7). MASS MoCA, Krauss explains in a footnote, or Massachusetts Museum of the Contemporary Arts, was a project to transform 750,000 square feet of abandoned factory space into a gigantic arts complex, which included a museum, exhibition galleries, hotels, and shops, and was costed at \$35 million. The premises of MASS MoCA are a former industrial hub previously owned by an electrical company which closed down in 1985. The place was listed as a contaminated site, and the art gallery established on a location symbolic of post-industrial decline and toxic build-up. The radical change Krens was talking about consisted, according to Krauss, of a turning point in perceptions of the ideal and social function of the art gallery.

There are two aspects of this turning point, or “profound and sweeping change” (1990, 7), as Krens dubbed it in Krauss’s account, which remain of utmost importance today. The first one is what Krauss described as the passage from diachrony to synchrony, as she explains:

Thus, what was revealed to him was not only the tininess and inadequacy of most museums, but that the encyclopedic nature of the museum was “over.” ... The discursive change he was imagining is, we might say, one that switches from diachrony to synchrony. The encyclopedic museum is intent on telling a story, by arraying before its visitor a particular version of the history of art. The synchronic museum – if we can call it that – would forego history in the name of a kind of

intensity of experience, an aesthetic charge that is not so much temporal (historical) as it is now radically spatial. (Krauss 1990, 7)

The passage from diachrony to synchrony aligns with theories of postmodernism as a shift from time to space à la Fredric Jameson, but also signals an important shift in the ideological role of the museum. The synchronic gallery goes beyond genealogies of the exhibition as a national and colonial institution, dating back to the eighteenth century, which cemented the encyclopaedic and educational task while placing peoples and countries on the single and univocal line of an evolutionary history. The former – colonial, national, linear – chronology of the pedagogical exhibition is today replaced by a different kind of institution and a different aesthetic form. In Krauss's analysis, the synchronic museum has become the absolute domination of space over time, of immediacy and the present over the perspective given by historical distance. This partly resonates with a recent intervention on museums and temporalization, where François Hartog outlines the passage, in the history of European museums, to a new regime of historicity (or a-historicity) since the late twentieth century. This is what Hartog defines as “presentism”: while the birth of the museum in Europe coincided with the consciousness of a temporal cleavage, a break between old and new, in the late twentieth century this break has been replaced by a tendency to synchronize the objects on display within an absolute and totalizing present, merging past and present in a unique, synchronic time (Hartog 2021).

This synchronic temporality of the museum, however, should not obfuscate the nonsynchronic tendencies that inhabit global capitalism: presentism is counterbalanced by the proliferation of temporalities and what James Clifford aptly describes as the “returns” that complicate any reduction of time to the infinite present of capital (Clifford 2013). In Rosalind Krauss's analysis, the rise of a synchronic museum is somehow complicated by a second important aspect captured in Krauss's analysis of the late capitalist museum, which opens up the boundless present of the new museum to a different, overlapping and dialectical temporality of anticipation. She explains this as a sort of “cultural reprogramming”:

What is exposed in this analysis is then the logic of what could be called cultural reprogramming ... while the artist might be creating a Utopian alternative to, or compensation for, a certain nightmare induced by industrialization or commodification, he is at the very same time projecting an imaginary space which ... works to produce the possibility for its receiver fictively to occupy the territory of what will be a next, more advanced level of capital. (Krauss 1990, 11)

While artistic production, including movements such as Minimalism (which Krauss explores in her essay), might aim at contesting the commodification of

life and the seriality produced by late capitalism, art is ultimately captured by the historical dynamics of a spiralling accumulation of capital. The kind of intensity of perception promised by Krens, in Krauss's analysis, stems from the project of Minimalism as an artistic movement. Krauss suggests that Minimalism still aimed at a gesture of compensation, "an act of reparations to a subject whose everyday experience is one of increasing isolation, reification, specialization, a subject who lives under the conditions of advanced industrial culture as an increasingly instrumentalized being" (1990, 9). Against this late capitalist atomization and anaesthetization of experience, Minimalism posed itself as an "act of resistance to the serializing, stereotyping, and banalizing of commodity production" (1990, 9), holding out "a promise of some instant of bodily plenitude in a gesture of compensation that we recognize as deeply aesthetic" (1990, 9–10). This bodily plenitude and phenomenological apprehension were meant as a critique of the alienating effects of capitalism.

However, Minimalism ended up anticipating its own dissolution, the recovery of a full and intense level of experience as trademark of a new, even more completely capitalist and neoliberal gallery space. Minimalism, Krauss notes, "had the potential to let that whole world of late capitalist production right back in" (1990, 10). As Krauss continues,

the imaginary space projected by the artist will not only emerge from the formal conditions of the contradictions of a given moment of capital, but will prepare ... a future real world ... restructured not through the present but through the next moment in the history of capital. (1990, 11)

Krauss reframes here the utopian or potentially subversive valence of art as symptomatic of a process of historical change that is about to take place in society. Arguably, Krauss frames the position of art vis-à-vis capitalism through a logic akin to what Fredric Jameson described as the vanishing mediator. Jameson defined this important concept in a classic essay on Weber. In his rethinking of the role of religion and, more specifically, Protestantism in Weber's theory, Jameson found a way to discuss a complex problem in Marxist theory, the historical change or "transition" between two different historical epochs. Jameson writes:

Protestantism will itself serve as a kind of mediation between the traditional medieval world from which it emerged and the modern secularized one which it in its turn prepared ... Weber's hypothesis recovers something of its original and paradoxical wilfulness: the transition from religion to *Entzauberung*, from the medieval to the modern moment, is effected, he tells us, not by making life less religious but by making it *more* so. Calvin did not desacralize the world; on the contrary, he turned the *entire* world into a monastery. (Jameson 1973, 75–76)

The role of Protestantism operated as a sort of bridge between the religious world of the Middle Ages and the “disenchantment” of modernity. This bridge was the enabling vector of a profound historical change, that is, the onset of capitalist modernity; the vanishing mediator transforms a static dualism of before and after, or past and present, into a narrative of fading, overlap, and articulation. As Jameson explains:

Protestantism assumes its function as a “vanishing mediator.” For what happens here is essentially that once Protestantism has accomplished the task of allowing a rationalization of innerworldly life to take place, it has no further reason for being and disappears from the historical scene. It is thus in the strictest sense of the word a catalytic agent which permits an exchange of energies between two otherwise mutually exclusive terms. (Jameson 1973, 78)

In Krauss’s analysis, Minimalism operates in a logic similar to Protestantism in Jameson’s reworking of Weber from a Marxist perspective. Minimalism anticipates a new world and sets the terms for the appearance of a new phase in the history of capitalism. By confronting the alienation produced by an industrial society with an emphasis on the intensity of phenomenological experience, Minimalism paved the way for an incoming transformation of the museum world into the status of multinational corporation. As Krauss explains:

An example of this, we could say, would be the great *unités d’habitation* of the International Style and Le Corbusier, which rose above an older, fallen city fabric to project a powerful, futuristic alternative to it, an alternative celebrating the potential creative energy stored within the individual designer. But insofar as those projects simultaneously destroyed the older urban network of neighborhoods with their heterogeneous cultural patterns, they prepared the ground precisely for that anonymous culture of suburban sprawl and shopping-center homogeneity that they were specifically working to counter. (Krauss 1990, 11–12)

The radical, transformative potential of art and architecture translates into its opposite, an anticipation of an atomizing and totalizing capitalist culture: the logic of the late capitalist museum would make this reversal manifest, as Krens’s markedly economic running of the Guggenheim foundation testifies. Krauss’s analysis can ultimately suggest that the museum does not simply refer to either an anamnestic diachrony referring to the past, or the presentism of an experience reduced to the here and now of synchrony. The temporalities of the museum are much more varied and complex: the anticipation of the future fades into a vanishing past while complicating any reduction of the gallery to the present of its fruition. A postcolonial museum is a sort of “catalytic agent” which constellates and configures different temporalities.

Fifteen years after Krauss's important reflections on the capitalist museum, Saloni Mathur takes Krauss as a starting point to explore the transformations of the museum in an era of global capitalism. The shift in the role of the art gallery does not merely concern the restricted context of a "late capitalism" mostly limited to North America and Europe. Rather, Mathur observes how the change of museum culture initiated by Krens is immediately global and postcolonial. Mathur notes that what is new "is not the fact that museums are behaving increasingly like corporations, regardless of their profitability, but that they are, in the case of the Guggenheim, behaving like *multinational* corporations" (2005, 700). But Mathur is not entirely pessimistic or critical of the globalization of the museum. Indeed, she acknowledges the damaging effects of the global expansion of art galleries like the Guggenheim, which opened branches on different continents and embodied a project of global expansionism, followed by other important institutions such as the Louvre. The logic of social change and advancing capitalism described by Krauss has hence reached a global scale. However, Mathur also notes the new configurations of resistance and the rebalancing of power relations these new developments can demonstrate. As she writes:

At the same time, in the past two decades we have seen a significant challenge to the authority of museums by indigenous peoples and other minority groups, and an increased attention by western museums to the contemporary arts of the non-western world. In short, new global relationships have resulted in different kinds of configurations of power and new kinds of political challenges to such power, and this has changed the dynamics between centers and margins that previously structured our exhibitionary world. (Mathur 2005, 701)

The globalization of the museum has entailed a shift in discourses about heritage, entitlement, curatorship, and ownership. Museums, as James Clifford noted in his reworking of Mary-Louise Pratt's famous concept, are true "contact zones" of exchange and traffic between objects but also people and histories. As Clifford writes, in contact zones,

geographically and historically separated groups establish ongoing relations. These are not relations of equality, even though processes of *mutual* exploitation and appropriation may be at work ... contact zones are constituted through reciprocal movements of people, not just objects, messages, commodities, and money. (Clifford 1997, 194)

The contact zone offered by the contemporary museum cannot be limited to Europe and North America, as the exchange is increasingly multivocal and multidirectional.

Building on these new trends and transformations, Mathur makes the case for a renewed postcolonial approach to museum studies, attentive to

the relationship between power and knowledge in the archive, the question of how to write history itself, the problem of the difference of non-western modernity, the challenge of the colony to our theories of global capitalism, and the problem of conceptualizing the complex legacy of colonial history for our postcolonial world. (2005, 705)

A postcolonial museum studies, writes Mathur, should be

re-orienting itself towards these larger themes. For instance, museum studies must learn to take seriously the issue that postcolonial thinkers have called ‘the problem of Europe’ ... not a decentering of Europe, but rather a *re-positioning* of its knowledge practices, and a closer look at its interpenetration into all aspects of life in the non-European world. (2005, 705–706)

This implies a radical reorienting of the museum away from its roots as expression of colonial and national hegemony, deconstructing that display of “possession and mastery of the world”, as Sharon MacDonald writes, which allowed museums to demonstrate “the accumulation of material culture from the countries that they colonized” (MacDonald 2006, 85). The role of the museum in an era of global capitalism needs to take into consideration these sites of appropriation, contestation, and resistance, and the emergence of new issues, including the intersections between heritage, race, gender, and class and the uneven geographies of the museum world.

### **From the cultural enclosure to nonsynchronous heritage**

Saloni Mathur’s reflections point out important new terrains of analysis and discourse in postcolonial museum studies. However, reading Mathur’s essay alongside and after Krauss’s seminal work on the capitalist museum can raise some important questions: How can the museum help reposition Europe and contribute to a decolonizing agenda, if the museum itself, as an institution, does not escape the logics of global capitalism? How can a postcolonial museum reformulate the relation between art and the neoliberal logics of what David Harvey (2003) famously described as “accumulation by dispossession”?

If the globalization of the museum entails some kind of dislocation of the present, and a welcome challenge to curatorial authority, the problem remains whether these dislocations point to the possibility of dismantling the power of capitalism or simply reinforce it. Krauss’s essay highlights the risk that even the most utopian energies of avant-garde art could not

ultimately escape the power of the white cube, the commodifying enclosure of the museum as a vector of capitalist exploitation. By becoming commodity and display, or surplus capital of multinational corporations like the Guggenheim, artworks not only lose their autonomy and critical potential, but also become part of the culture of exchangeability and seriality some modernist artists wanted to contest and to challenge.

American photographer Allan Sekula and Noël Burch's critique of the Guggenheim in their important essay film *The Forgotten Space* somehow resonates with Krauss's analysis, but also radically goes beyond it and repositions the idea of a late capitalist museum on a more global scale marked by combined and uneven development. Sekula and Burch show that the opening of a Guggenheim in Bilbao, Spain, does not at all contemplate the possibility of new sites of resistance, a repositioning of Europe or the rise of a new social consciousness about inequality. Rather, the Guggenheim simply sanctions the power of contemporary capitalism and an utter and definitive disconnection from locality and the previous communities, economies, and heritages that are being crushed by an emerging neoliberal economy. The world of art embodied by the Guggenheim is nonsynchronous and heterochronic only in the sense that it documents the world of art's mirroring of the processes of dispossession at work in a global capitalism. As Sekula writes in a cogent essay on Guggenheim Bilbao's architect, Frank Gehry:

Frank Gehry's Guggenheim Museum for Bilbao is a Los Angeles export product, a leviathan of California postmodernity beached on the derelict riverfront of the economically depressed maritime-industrial capital of the Basques. As such, it marks the first move in a projected campaign of economic "revitalization," tied, as one might expect, to land speculation and tourist promotion ... The symbolic function of Frank Gehry's architecture is to "refer" obliquely to the organic unity of this maritime older economy while celebrating at the same time its replacement by a new, flexible order of accumulation. (Sekula 2005, 212–215)

Any supposed "reference" to the past, to specific location, or previous economies and heritages is only an empty gesture in the contemporary multinational museum. The unity of past, present, and future only ends up in the presentism and synchronicity described by critics like Krauss and Hartog. Rather than linking the present to the past, the museum cannibalizes other temporalities by replacing them with a logic of endless accumulation. Within this context, it remains an open question whether the postcolonial museum can really be the site for shaping new configurations of power, emerging sites of resistances, or repositionings of Europe and its colonial legacies.

A concept of nonsynchronous heritage derived from the philosophy of Ernst Bloch could reorient discourses on the postcolonial museum away

from presentism and from a dilution of the radical potential of debates on decolonizing practices into yet another play with the logics of profitability and the market. Nonsynchronism does not equal a concept of anachronism, a term employed by Khadija von Zinnenburg Carroll in the context of her critique of an idea of progress broadly derived from the legacy of the European Enlightenment (Carroll 2016). While anachronism would be, in Carroll's definition, the state of being out of time, nonsynchronism does not simply entail a critique of progress and a postmodern celebration of the fragment and the multiple. The key question at the heart of Bloch's concept of *Ungleichzeitigkeit*, a term variously translated as nonsynchronism or non-contemporaneity – a theory he developed in his important work on Nazism, *Heritage of Our Times* – concerns the fact that capitalism, as a mode of production, does not flatten everything and everyone into the same punctual present. While the logic of commodification is pervasive and global, capitalism entails a differential temporality, the reproduction and survival of times other than the present through what Bloch aptly described as a *multiversum*. Capitalism is plural and heterogeneous while totalizing, in a dialectical way, social forms and values that derive from the past as well as the future. Bloch described the case of Germany in the first decades of the twentieth century as “the classical land of non-contemporaneity, i.e. of unsurmounted remnants of older economic being and consciousness” (1991, 106). This vision challenged the idea of history as a unilinear and univocal set of stages on a pre-given line of development, but also any pluralistic and fragmentary idea of a multitude of histories without combination and amalgamation within a unique, capitalist totality. As Bloch explains:

Ground rent, large landed property and its power, were almost universally integrated into the capitalist economy and its political power in England, and differently in France; whereas in long backward and even longer diverse Germany the victory of the bourgeoisie did not even develop to the same extent ... The “unequal rate of development,” which Marx assigns ... to material production compared with the artistic kind for instance, equally existed here for long enough in material terms ... [A] whole museum of German interactions was preserved at any rate, an anachronistic superstructure. (Bloch 1991, 106)

Interestingly, Bloch compares here the condition of nonsynchronism to a “museum” that preserves anachronistic elements within the present. This anachronism, however, has concrete roots in the process of combined and uneven development, whereby some aspects or some parts of society live in a different temporality, while combining with more advanced sectors of the present. Thus, for example, in a world dominated by waged labour, supposedly archaic forms of exploitation such as bonded labour or slavery might

coexist and combine to create new, hybrid modes of oppression by recycling elements of the past for the needs of the present.

Capitalism does not entail a linear and univocal transition from one mode of production or social form to the next. Elements from different epochs coexist and combine in the present, as testified by the use of sweatshops in the chain of production and logistics of multinational corporations today or the reproduction of non-waged labour described by Maria Mies in her classic study on gender and the accumulation of capital (Mies 2022). The contemporary museum is not immune to this nonsynchronous logic that defines the historical developments of capitalism. As a space of conservation and cultural transmission, the museum is manifestly a place where different times meet: the present of the visitor, the past provenance of the artefacts and their trajectories but also, uncannily, the time-capsule nature of the museum as an institution pointing to itself as the site of a future permanence of these artefacts beyond the individual life spans of its producers or consumers. This means, from this point of view, that the museum is a nodal point across generations, a knot where past, present, and future generations mingle through common spaces and artefacts. This is not the triumphal celebration of the museum as a contact zone, or the neo-imperialist defence of the museum as a space of cosmopolitanism and hegemonic universality. The idea of nonsynchronous heritage does not end up defending the colonial mission of the museum and rather compels restitution and redress.

However, any restitution and redress also needs to be complemented by a rethinking of the very idea of heritage that goes beyond the objects themselves and, instead, reveals a wider materiality of work, exploitation, and dispossession beyond the walls of the art gallery. As Françoise Vergès notes in an illuminating essay on the project of a “museum without objects”, a postcolonial museum should move away from the “economy of predation”, accumulation, and dispossession of exploited peoples, or an “economy of consumption that invested the object with narcissistic meaning” (2016, 25). Rather, Vergès emphasizes the possibility of a new exhibition space of *objets de rien*, small objects deprived of a market value, as opposition to the colonial and capitalist model of the museum. Before tragically passing away in 2013, Allan Sekula was at work on a similar project, a *Dockers’ Museum* mostly composed of postcards he had bought cheaply on eBay. Sekula aimed to challenge the triumphalist ideology of globalization as driven by the internet, immaterial labour, and the abstractions of finance and contemporary capitalism, as Hilde Van Gelder, Gail Day, Steve Edwards, and Alberto Toscano note in their responses to Sekula’s project (see Day 2015; Edwards 2015; Toscano 2015; Van Gelder 2015). Rather, Sekula foregrounded the worlds of exploitation, industrial labour, and older, anachronistic forms of production that still drive the global economy. The only way to document these realities would have been through a mode of curatorial work that would challenge

the premise of the museum as an aesthetic form, turning the museum into a cognitive map of historical processes of uneven and combined development. As Sekula wrote in some notes left for his project of an alternative kind of museum:

The main difference with earlier artist museums is that the visual set up of *The Dockers' Museum* does not use the notion of the museum as an implied power platform that is then reflected upon, used as a support or a framing device. The museum is no longer a given strength ... Neither does *The Dockers' Museum* use the memory of this former strength as a platform. It rather aims to find again an embryonic potentiality within this setting, quite close to the curiosity cabinets that are at the origins of modernity. (Sekula 2015, 112)

Sekula's Dockers' Museums, alongside the museum without objects envisaged by Vergès, as her contribution to the MCUR (Maison des civilisations et de l'unité réunionnaise) project on Réunion Island, could be examples of a postcolonial museum that is not simply celebrating hybridity or non-Western cultures against what Lazarus has described as a fetishized idea of the West (Lazarus 2002). Rather, these projects go beyond the logic of property that underlies the curatorial culture of a capitalist world.

In her essay on the museum without objects, Vergès narrates her involvement in the creation of a local museum on Réunion Island in 2000. This project aimed at constructing a form of cultural transmission "that did not fossilise history or memory ... a space that would display episodes where violence, brutality and poverty prevail, without becoming a space of expiation" (Vergès 2016, 30). The case of Réunion is significant in that the island had been represented, since the times of French colonization, "through goods (sugar, coffee) or through the *Creole art de vivre*, an imagined gentle way of life in the colony, masking its brutality" (Vergès 2016, 30). The museum hence aimed at countering colonial stereotypes or a facile celebration of creole identity. Instead, Vergès notes, the

economy of the MCUR rested on a reflection of the island's economy seen in relation to its environment and the ways in which inequalities had been widening ... the wretched condition of the infrastructures, non-application of labour legislation, extremely brutal employers, racist schools and churches, malnutrition. (2016, 30)

For this purpose, centring the museum on the preservation and display of objects would have felt wrong:

The object could not be central to the MCUR ... No vernacular object before 1848 had survived, and we wish to underline that: there was *no* collection of testimonies

of slaves after the abolition of slavery ... Starting from an absence led to revisiting the notion of the object. (2016, 32)

Against the fixity and acquisitive dimension of the object, the MCUR was eventually based on the metaphor of the trail – both geographical and historical – as a way of reconnecting the present to the lost and vanishing pasts of the island. Vergès describes this turn from object to trail as follows:

We chose the path as the metaphor of exile that crosses routes of trade and empire. It evokes the trails of the maroons and their resistance, the appropriation of the territory by the trails of fishermen, farmhands, market women vagabonds. These paths and trails outlined another cartography, another archive of the island. The path led drew the ancestor's course: the one leading from him to us and the one leading us back to him. (Vergès 2016, 33)

This description could be approached as a possible example of a nonsynchronous heritage because it moves away from the economy of acquisition and consumption proper to the capitalist museum and points, instead, to a different temporal order. It could be described as retracing the history of enclosure in reverse motion: from the present, the museum unravels the toils and trails of the exploited and enslaved workers that made the island's economy throughout the centuries, recasting the museum as a node of intergenerational solidarity. This kind of museum goes back to the past, as Sekula suggests, to find an "embryonic potentiality" (Sekula 2015, 112) that was inherent to the museum space at the beginnings of modernity. The postcolonial museum goes back to the past, nonsynchronously, while pointing to anticipations of the future, working as a transgenerational vector to connect histories of the oppressed. The premise for possibilities such as these, a museum that would eschew simultaneously its colonial past and its capitalist present, can be conceptualized through the idea of a nonsynchronous heritage.

Rather than the spoils of colonial conquest – which should be returned – or the experience of the viewer in the here and now, absorbed by the synchronic presentism of the capitalist museum, a new approach to these matters is not limited to the artefacts, but rather the possibility of recovering the lost stories of the *producers* of heritage, from antiquity to the present. As Vergès writes in her outline of the project of a postcolonial museum without objects:

The history and culture of the vanquished and the oppressed is rarely embodied in material objects. They bequeath words rather than palaces, hope rather than private property, words, texts and music rather than monuments. They leave heritages embodied in people rather than stones. Songs, words, poems, declarations, texts often constitute the archive through which to evoke their past. Their

itineraries retrace the history of struggles, of migrations, of the global organisation of the workforce rather than the accumulation of wealth. (Vergès 2016, 28–29)

Nonsynchronous heritage would make manifest all the transgenerational solidarities, transmissions, and cultures of the oppressed – the postcolonial museum could become the beacon and the frame for preserving the long-term history of a global working class. From this point of view, emptying out colonial museums can be a first and necessary step, but only the beginning of a truly decolonized museum. The second step would entail a work of historical reconstruction, retrieval, and remembering for the making of a global history of the oppressed, not simply the current generations but also the past, forgotten generations of exploited workers, alongside the emerging worlds of production and creation that point beyond the present. A nonsynchronous heritage entails reopening the present to the interlocking temporalities of differing regimes of production, interrogating without end those blanks and holes in the public memory that museums have for so long perpetuated.

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