

# ENIGMATIC DEBRIS

Clémentine Deliss

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## 1. Scene of the Crime

A large gleaming liver lies on a table, cut to the diagrammatic shape of the Etruscan liver of Piacenza.<sup>1</sup> Next to this viscous lump of flesh sits a multi-tonal mop of hair. It's a brush made from woven strands cut from the heads of thirty-six people in the room. Recently removed from living bodies, both animal and human, these organs effect a forensic fascination, as if they constituted live DNA at the scene of a crime. Scattered around the smudge of blood are other things: a rat trap woven out of reed; a clock with one hand; a label for an object that is not there; some pieces of coloured paper with printed texts; two small flickering light boxes by Jenny Holzer; and a painted Virgin Mary made of synthetic plaster around thirty centimetres high. Together, these different agent-objects act within a Debating Chamber organised by the Metabolic Museum-University (MM-U) at KW in November 2021.<sup>2</sup> Placed in different constellations to one another, they become 'participative devices', connecting people to things, words and ideas and forecasting new meanings and interpretations (Korsby & Stavrianakis 2020, p. 95). Transitional, inquiry-led and semi-private, this three-hour-long 'contingent exhibition' offers a curatorial conduit for us to momentarily explore and understand how we can come together as a circle of colleagues. The situation is vulnerable. The Stenographer types:



MM-U Debating Chamber, 2021 at KW  
with BLESS hairbrush and cow's liver.  
Image-work: Eva Stenram

People slowly arrive. Everyone's wearing a mask. There are refreshments at one corner of the room by the stairs leading down through the gallery, across four floors. Guests are handed a collection of four slim pamphlets in various colours, bound together with a thin brown paper band. In the centre of the room stands a table, divided into numbered segments. It looks like a rudimentary city map, the numbers indicating the different neighbourhoods. There are some green-coloured segments, too, that look a bit like parks. Black plastic chairs with metal legs are arranged around the table in a circle, interrupted by a white lectern with a microphone on it and a large digital clock. Across the table from the lectern stands another tall table, behind which a man – the lawyer – wearing a checked scarf is seated. There are various spotlights arranged around the table, as well as people with film and still cameras. Off to one side of the central table is a second table, decked out with objects. Underneath it there are some shelves with various artefacts placed on them. In the back corner sits a technician who speaks French. Most people are speaking English. I'm sat to the left of the lectern on one of the same black chairs as form the circle around the table and am typing on a laptop on a small, squat table. It's just gone 3 p.m. and things are about to begin. A strange, repeated sound plays on the PA. A man steps up to the lectern to welcome us and remind us that the gallery is state funded. Clémentine then welcomes us all to the MM-U.<sup>3</sup>

With its graphic design and five metres in length, the ovoid table could be in a casino or a war room.<sup>4</sup> The thick red lines and black numbers painted on the surface demarcate forty sectors. In the original Babylonian context, these zones would have referred to the pantheon of gods. Today the grid presages the dangers of categorical thinking and what one can or cannot do, be this in art, curatorial practice

MM-U Debating Chamber, 2021 at KW, various prototypes and ominous objects. Image-work: Eva Stenram





or related fields of inquiry. There is always an organisation to be put to the test and dismantled in this decolonial exercise of ‘academic iconoclasm’.

The Debating Chamber commences. Guests are seated, still, and waiting, as if for an art conference to begin with a recognisable discursive format.<sup>5</sup> Then a mirroring occurs between the need to negotiate our presence together and the incongruous grouping of objects on the table. Identified as ‘prototypes’ or ‘ominous objects’, they mediate core expressions of individual ways of thinking and, like omens, articulate current concerns in the conditional tense, the ‘what if?’ necessary to future readings.<sup>6</sup> In the design of life, prototypes defy archival death. They contain the potential to transform, even when surpassed or forgotten by research and design.<sup>7</sup> Like a revenant, a prototype is there to be re-energised, or risk falling into oblivion. In *Eupalinos or the Architect* (1921), French poet Paul Valéry describes the morphological and semantic ambiguities of an object that Socrates finds on the beach:

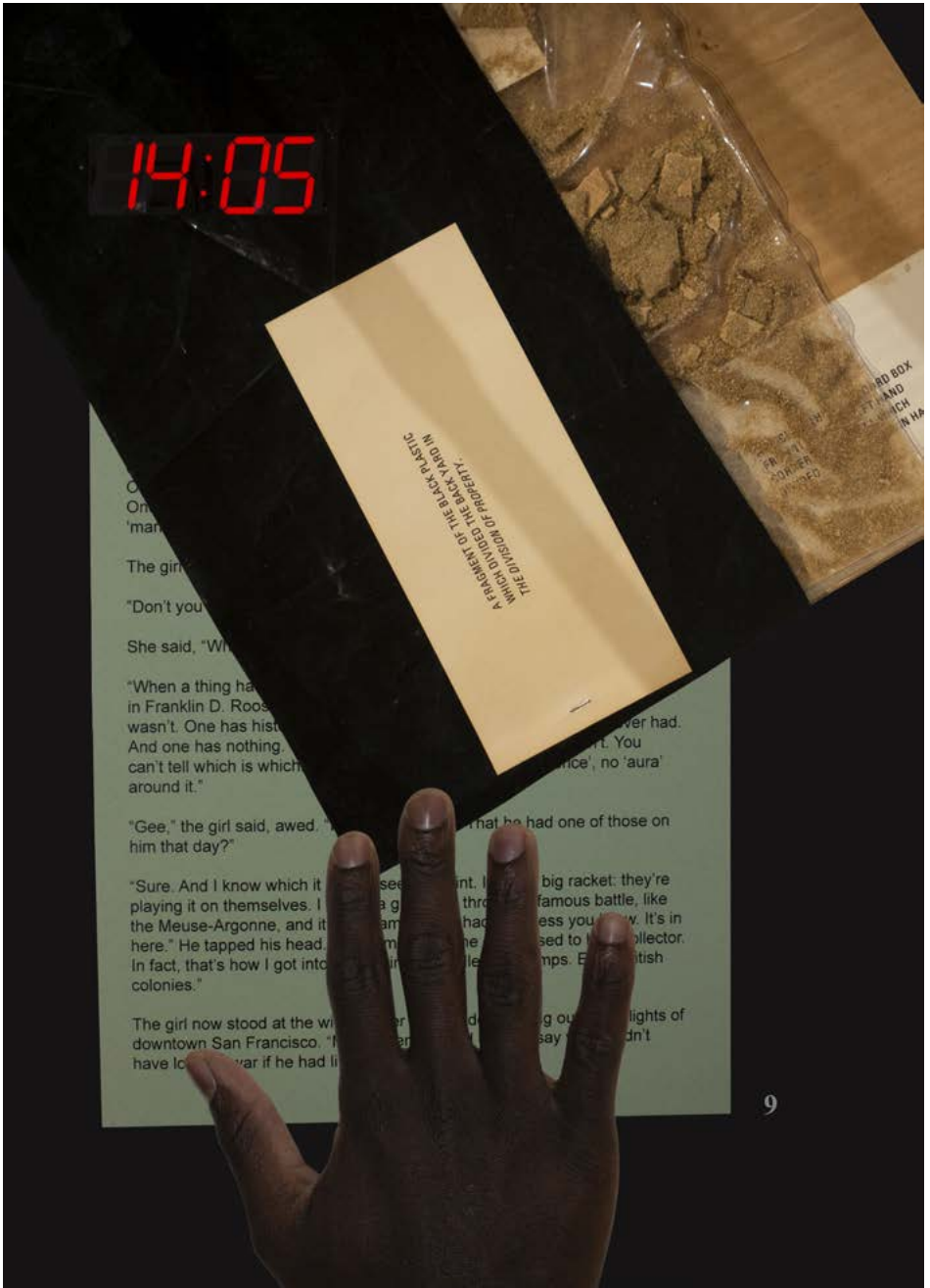
It was made from its own form, doubtful matter. Was it a fish bone, bizarrely worn down by fine sand? Or ivory carved by a craftsman beyond the waves for what purpose I do not know? Was it a divine existence that perished in the same vessel for which it had been made to prevent its sinking? Who was its author? A mortal who followed a concept, who used their hands to form an object different to the raw material, carving and etching, cutting, and joining; stopping and looking; then finally letting go of their work – because something told them it was complete. Or perhaps it was not the work of a living body but made without self-awareness, shaped out of its own substance, blindly forming organs and armatures, shell, bones, and protection, feeding and pulsating by itself, and taking part in its own mysterious construction for time unknown. Or maybe it was just the fruit of infinite time? ... For a while, I considered it from all

its dimensions. I asked questions without waiting for answers. This ambiguous object was the work of life, or art, or time, or a game of nature. I could not tell the difference, so I threw it back into the sea (Valéry, 1921).

When positioned in adjacency to one another, prototypes can function like a contrast medium, highlighting differences and providing both a critique of former systems of classification and evaluation, as well as motivating questions, meanings and technicities.<sup>8</sup> In their unfinished and intermediate status, these artefacts, images, words, sounds and texts trigger observations and conversations, and underpin the foundation for a transversal methodology.<sup>9</sup> Their divergent values, reflected by authored as well as anonymous or undocumented artists, locate them outside of the art market. Research collections made from the ‘enigmatic debris’ (Valéry 1921) of an artist’s work are not sold at auction or in fairs. Private galleries, if they own the estates of artists, are not particularly engaged in collating and selling these individual archives as artworks. Yet these are far from being the biographic addendum to an oeuvre. They have a prelusive quality that is significant and generative.

The start of this inquiry takes place a few months earlier at an MM-U online meeting or ‘Bureau d’Esprit’. Just as the ‘situation designers’ BLESS begin to present their digital archive to the group, our doorbells ring. Unexpectedly, each of us is handed a parcel containing a BLESS prototype. I receive ‘Fur Wig 00’ (1996), one of their very first designs; Matthias Bruhn is given the folding stool made of cowhide, Krista Belle Stewart the mini treadmill, Tom McCarthy a pair of sunglasses with gold chains dangling over the lens like in a lap-dancing club, and Margareta von Oswald a long knobbly walking stick with a wine glass for a handle. Through this action, BLESS have broken the strictures of our virtual conversation. For rather than show us their prototypes online, they have literally sent them out to us by messenger at a time





when we are confined to our homes by the pandemic.<sup>10</sup> Later, when we realise that this action is a performative moment without any transaction of ownership, a particular conjecture remains: What if BLESS had gifted one of their prototypes to the MM-U? Could this act of radical generosity form the basis for a polysemic collection made from our individual research materials? Might one produce symbolic capital from this ideational aggregate or ‘holding for inquiry’ that reflects our individual identities and aesthetic affiliations?

However, by extracting key designs and placing them into another archival context, that of a research collection, one is fracturing professional biographies and quite possibly giving away both quasiartworks and codes of production. Such academic iconoclasm refutes the validity of an ‘original context’ and the sanctity of named authorship in favour of an experimental, unfinished archive with its own idiosyncratic style of ordering, naming and documenting. It reverses the common anthropological process in which another culture’s artistic ingenuity is appropriated and reframed within a logos of ethnos. With the MM-U, we are doing it to ourselves, fracturing our own bodies of work, propagating re-readings and re-design, devising alternative terminologies and seeking to produce a venue that can reflect this transgressive paradigm.

In his final publication, Paul Rabinow searches for methods and terms to convey venues in which ‘thinking and invention’ can take place collaboratively (Korsby & Stavrianakis 2020, p. 95). He states, ‘The challenge – and this could be pedagogic too – is what to do with multiplicity? How do you assemble multiplicity into an assemblage that’s dynamic, preserves the heterogeneous character of the parts, but brings them into some relationship with each other that’s unexpected and good for everybody?’ (Rabinow 2014). At the University of California, at Berkeley, he sets up the ‘Labinar’, a workspace for sharing materials, talking about ‘empirical instances’, and noting how different groupings can provide terms of analysis and synthesis. ‘The aim’, he writes, is ‘to avoid the reduction of the seminar space to

a proxy zone for merely advancing in one's thesis research. Simply put, we wished to try and think together about things that we had not yet thought about' (Korsby & Stavrianakis 2020, p. 82). At one point, his collaborators describe the increasingly repetitive tone of the meetings and how they decide to introduce a fresh animal liver into the Labinar, surprising their colleagues who pass it around noting the tactile quality and incongruity of the organ within the university setting.<sup>11</sup> This physical intervention dislodges the stasis felt in the group and creates an unexpected moment of collectivity. Referring to the work of Pedersen and Nielson, the agency of the liver is described as a 'trans-temporal hinge' (Pedersen & Nielson 2013), a theoretical tool for understanding situations or phenomena in which different temporalities (certain past, present and future events) are momentarily assembled.<sup>12</sup>

## 2. Same Words, Same Ills<sup>13</sup>

The three-hour Debating Chamber at KW follows eighteen months of pandemic-induced isolation. The procedure for the day is planned by Tom McCarthy and Matthias Bruhn with rhetorical and performative prompts along the lines of a parliamentary assembly.<sup>14</sup> This is combined with oracular protocols, which are equally political. The gathering opens with a 'Calling to Order', a sonic intervention composed by Augustin Maurs in which a shrill voice cries out 'Die Welt ... die Welt ...' (the world ... the world ...). Guest Assyriologist, Netanel Anor, pronounces a prayer to the Babylonian sun god Shamesh in ancient Akkadian. Later, Anor will close the session by reading the prognostics of the liver and interpreting the ritual of pouring oil into a bowl of water.<sup>15</sup> In the short interval between the acts, a shuffling of chairs enables a switch in positions. It is hard not to notice the generational divide in discourse, referentiality and stance. We are effectively as diverse and as interconnected as the artefacts laid out in front of us, both in turn reflecting the 'modern fiction of radical openness'.<sup>16</sup>



35

34

MM-U Debating Chamber, 2021 at KW, exercise in visual thinking. Image-work: Eva Stenram

After around thirty minutes, propositional groupings start to form. The rat trap, first placed upright on the table, mimicking a monument or high-rise, is laid on its side, 'ready to catch an edict'.<sup>17</sup> A plastic folder containing dust from a sawn-off beam and belonging to Geoffrey Hendrick's *Flux Divorce Box*<sup>18</sup> now neighbours the prefab souvenir of the Berlin Wall brought by Henrike Naumann. In between both lies a broken shard of reddish land made by artist Krista Belle Stewart and used to transport her heritage from Spaxomin in Canada to Europe. It works well next to the grey sheet of paper prepared by Elhadj Abdoulaye Sène that reads, 'The term FICTION as an instrument in law'.<sup>19</sup> Questions of land, partition and fractured relationships materialise between people, words and things. 'What is language and what is an object? Can we as actors become open to the point where we don't matter anymore? Do these objects play with us?' asks Kristian Vistrup Madsen, the designated Observer.<sup>20</sup>

The whole game is about language/symbolism, but only until it isn't any longer. Then it becomes a process of eroding the context that was established by the ritual (presenting the objects/prototypes; announcing them) and the table (the map, and mapping not as a way of producing knowledge, but changing it). But the objects are only open or closed within that context, otherwise, open to what? To language? In the end, there is something ironically stable about their openness; any combination seems possible. But where is the stopper, the limit; what would the last action be? To take care, in this case, seems to mean taking care not to end the game. Some participants are keen to end it, not by breaking rules, but re-establishing them: closing the vertigo openness of the objects.<sup>21</sup>

Several transgressions take place over the course of the three hours, actions which are defined by one participant as 'disruptive'.<sup>22</sup> The

first is the removal of human hair performed right at the start as people are finding their seats and taking in the situation. Once gathered, each lock is bound with thread and slipped through the rubber base of a brush. No one seems particularly bothered about this activity carried out by Hiro, the guest hairdresser, together with Ines and Desiree of BLESS, who sit in silence making this surreal and tautological object. A second disruption occurs when Matthias Bruhn picks up the statuette of the Virgin Mary and pushes her iconic face into the glutinous liver. Alluding to the blood of Christ, he veers precariously close to an act of art-historical and theological blasphemy. The Madonna is put back onto the table and told by Karl Holmqvist to ‘face the digital clock’. Sometimes a sense of humour and playfulness revs up the session. But the highlights remain moments when a disturbing action suspends current perceptions, like in that instance of fall and retrieval found in syn-copation.<sup>23</sup> Then, as if in chain reaction, Augustin Maurs performs an extensive rendition of the unpronounceable word, ‘ZZXJOANW’, Ruth Buchanan shoves all the objects to the far side, clearing the table as if to play a new set and Calum Bowden grabs the lamb’s liver from the plate, slapping it onto the white surface of the table and staining it red. At this point, Sam Parfitt the Stenographer notes:

Someone gets up and attempts to pronounce the unpronounceable word. He takes the page of text to the podium and makes ssss and zzzz sounds, then gargling sounds. It’s a long word, more of a poem. It ends quite dramatically, almost like an orgasm. Guests are then invited to throw whatever is in their pockets on the table. In a moment, the table is littered with used tissues, cigarette packets and train tickets. It is suggested to move all the objects to one end of the table. Suddenly, the wig, wine and Mary are all congregated together, at the far end of the table. Calum wants to take the liver out of the dish and onto the table, placing it on Nos. 30 and 24.

The wine bottle is removed. The hairbrush is dangerously close to the liver. People are gesticulating wildly around the table; tensions are running high.

Three curatorial principles inform the MM-U's Debating Chamber. The first is its insertion into an existing exhibition, momentarily jarring and expanding the canon of the host display; the second is the concern to create a mood of vulnerability in a semi-private environment with an invited set of participants; the third is the attempt to deviate from academically legitimised norms of evaluation and modes of transmission. The Debating Chamber has no breakdown of themes, list of speakers or titles of papers. With a set of heteroclitic agent-objects, it throws confusion into expectations of context and documentation. Moreover, as a curatorial platform positioned backstage, it may not be permanent or visible to all. In fact, it is likely to discourage consensus and be dysfunctional regarding institutional structures. It is not meant to compete with an exhibition, but to act as a performative bypass, activating 'motion in thought' (Korsby & Stavrianakis 2020, p. 67), and pushing against disciplinary taxonomies. This aspect addresses the conceptual nature of the documentation produced both before, during and after the meeting. If artists develop a form of implicit communication between each other, beyond the glare of the media and wider public, then this exchange based on conceptual intimacy, when curated, necessitates a vector that will carry over their fragile, codified references.

To this purpose, I invite three artists to film and photograph the 'organisation of knowledge' of the Debating Chamber.<sup>24</sup> The results of the day are subsequently edited into a montage that relays an alternate version of our inquiry rather than merely recording it.<sup>25</sup> For example, works by Eva Stenram use the trope of the cut-up and collage to perform a meta-commentary on the photographic document, accentuating the framing of object photography with its directives and biases. Between the poetics of surrealist configurations and the presumed ob-

jectivity of museological imaging with its visual construction of taxonomies, her work translates the Debating Chamber into a photographic assemblage for future discussion. What happens that afternoon in November 2021 at KW is not represented through photographs of us all sitting in a circle looking at a group of things. Stenram is offering the reader a prototype model of visual thinking with collections.

### 3. Documenting Counter-Conduct

In what manner can a recording supersede its banality and presumed objectivity to convey a critical stance, both political and aesthetic? Is it possible to radically subjectivise the act of documentation and keep it private? How much pressure is placed on curators by the broadcasting requirements of public-funded institutions? What happens to the more initiate, tentative and obtuse expressions that are also part of artistic and curatorial practice and that often run against the grain of public-facing events? Does it constitute a form of counter-conduct to withhold information, to perform communicational abstinence as an instance of critique?<sup>26</sup>

Actionist photography, for example, devised its own channel of documentation, providing an image-concept (*Bildidee*) with a visual grammar of subjective reportage that retains fascination 50 years later (Gorsen 2008, p. 9). As an art student at the cusp of the 1980s, I caught the tail end of Viennese Actionism and witnessed remarkable performances by Vito Acconci, Abramović/Ulay, Gina Pane, VALIE EXPORT, Reindeer Werk, Stuart Brisley, General Idea and many more.<sup>27</sup> I remember nakedness, surfaces penetrated, punctured and bleeding, like rituals of transgression on the part of the artist. The materiality at hand was that of the human body as a heightened transmitter of conceptual propositions. In particular, I noted those artists who worked closely with the performers, entrusted to translate their presence through photography and film. Kurt Kren, Ernst Schmidt Jr., Heinz Cibulka and







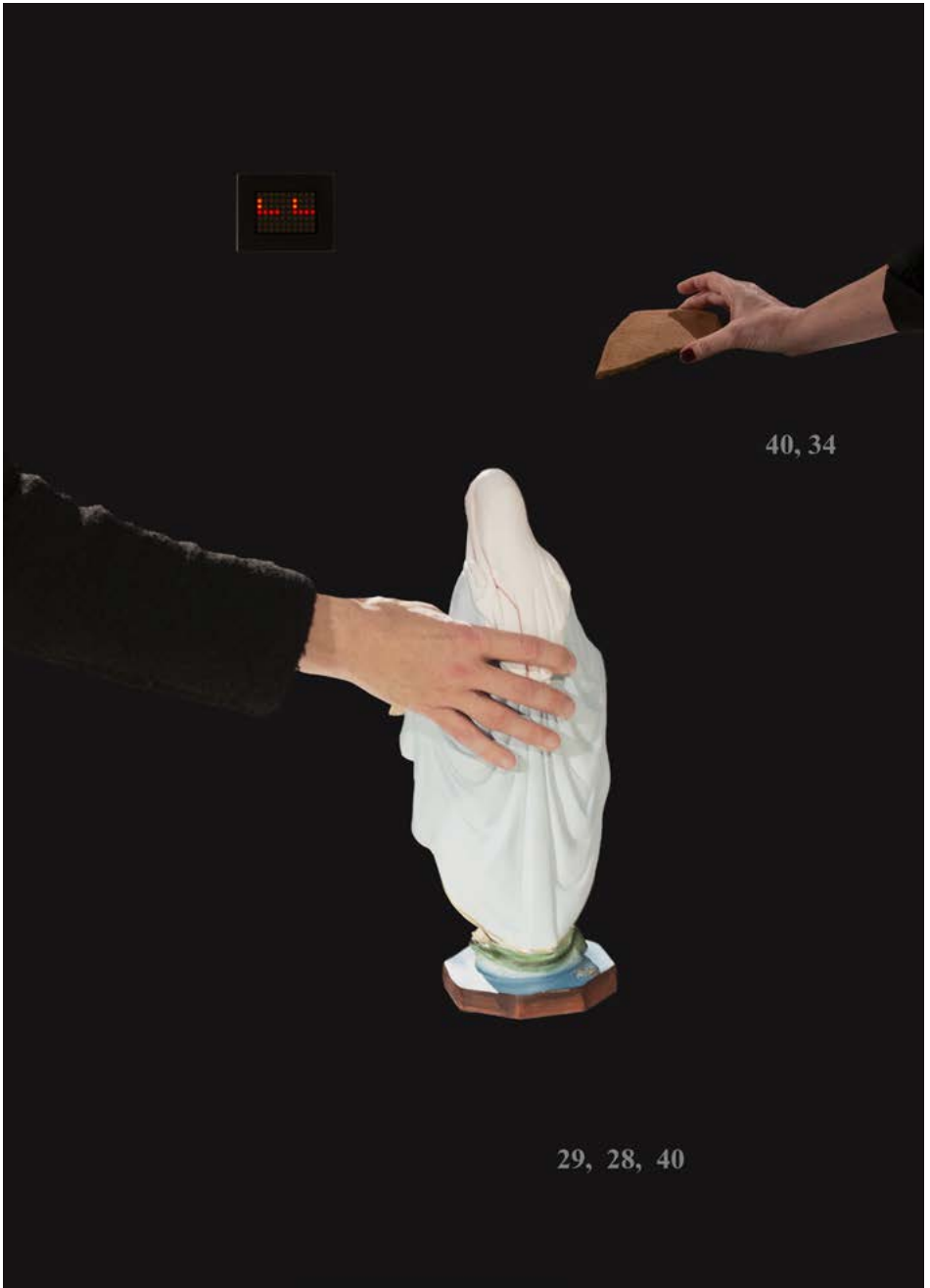
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57

zwölf (tsvëlf), *G.* Twelve. **Z.-achteltakt** (äkh-tël-täkt). 12-8 time.  
**Z.-saiter** (zī-tër). "12-stringed"  
bissex.  
**zymbel** (tsēm'-bël), *G.* Vide CYMBAL.  
**zxxjoanw** (shaw). *Maori*. 1. Drum.  
2. Fife. 3. Conclusion.



24



Luigi Hoffenreich transported the artists' individual identities by inscribing their actions dialogically onto celluloid. Both artist and documenter were implicitly partners in an act of representation that necessitated an aesthetic break with post-war social and political ideologies. Cultural historian, Peter Gorsen, claims that the photography of Viennese Actionism was an 'obsessive form' of 'simultaneous translation', using the trope of 'psycho-physical naturalism'. He writes, 'The actor acts and becomes the material of the action, mumbling, stuttering, falling, sighing, vomiting, laughing, biting, shitting, and rolling within the materiality of these emissions' (Gorsen 2008, p. 9). This was 'revolutionary subjectivism ...', a work of '*Totalaktion*' on the 'material-body existence without categorisation'. Influenced by imaginative and reflexive ethnographers such as Gregory Bateson, Michel Leiris, Jean Rouch, Clifford Geertz, Hans-Peter Duerr and Michael Oppitz, this period of artist-led archival formation was not only emancipatory, but also simultaneously artwork *and* document.

In the second half of the 1980s in Europe and the US, things change. It is no longer hip to belong to a commune, take part in artists' workshops, or hand over the representation of one's work to another artist to define. Photographs of exhibits by Haim Steinbach or Jeff Koons, for example, taken at the time of production in the mid- to late 1980s, frame the image of the art object as manufactured, speculative capitalism.<sup>28</sup> These squeaky-clean sculptures contrast with the messy, organic expressions of earlier art actions and their quasi-ethnographic renderings. Photography is no longer 'in there', shooting corporeal presence (as in cinema vérité), but has a new role to play. By moving away from an understanding of the document as empathic and generated through artistic collaboration, these neo-conceptual artists and their galleries introduce a dispassionate focus on the individual work.

With 1989, and the expansionism of the art world beyond European and North American borders, the document changes once again. Now it veers towards increasing context-specificity, and with the

rise of cultural studies, affords another paradigm of quasi-ethnographic representation for artists working with referential practices of place, gender and community.<sup>29</sup> The work of Renée Green, the writings of Miwon Kwon, and the curatorial practice of Ute Meta Bauer are examples of this self-conscious site-specific stance.<sup>30</sup> In parallel, the journal *Texte zur Kunst*, launched in Germany in 1990, institutes a new narratology for critical transferral.<sup>31</sup> Alongside this textualised form of documentation, discursive formats in art spaces are no longer add-ons to exhibitions but central events, in turn becoming essential to the academic formalisation of artistic research. Today, the standardisation of terminologies that underpin identifications of people and subject matter in exhibition-making works to neuter the potential for a practice of counter-conduct that might confront normative formats for showing, discussing, documenting and disseminating art.

The Laboratoire Agit'Art in Dakar offers an alternative approach to this condition. In the 1990s, the transdisciplinary collective wrote manifestos when it sought to announce a cultural and political urgency in the country, for example deforestation or poverty. However, when it came to performances carried out by the group there was no script. Each member knew what they could bring to the table, and in the crossover between painting, performance, film and photography, roles were implicitly self-allocated. Bouna Médoune Sèye took photographs of the performances, Djibril Diop Mambéty was responsible for film, El Hadji Sy for costumes and scenography and the organ *Metronome*, which I first published in Dakar in 1996, provided an international platform for mediation between artists and writers. *Metronome* could transmit the code of the Laboratoire without handing over the keys to the house. Texts by Issa Samb, juxtaposed with those of Paul Virilio, Guy Brett or Édouard Glissant, remain consciously opaque.<sup>32</sup> Characters often appear under pseudonym, as if on stage. There's a military dictator, a radio host, an art dealer, deceased militants and opportunist artists. In Samb's narratives, the parameters of art practice are rendered



Proceedings of the Metabolic Museum–University,  
Metronome, no. 12, vols. I–IV, 2021.  
Image–work: Eva Stenram

to the outside reader in a prose that is neither contextual nor clearly informative, but dramaturgical and interventionist on several levels. Samb was a 'passeur' between the ministries and the street, the politicians and the paupers.

Aliou, I had no choice, or anyway, a difficult choice to make. Art is in fashion, in fact there's one sure sign: there are no more real civil servants, they've all become project-mongers. Look at the gentlemen on the screen to the left on Wall Street. These New York guys who've kindly set it all up for you, expecting to see the riches rain down on Mélanie<sup>33</sup> and its posterity. D'you get it? All these cocksure kids and childish artworks for sale on the Bamako market, to music by Bazoumana Sissoko. So, of course the military boys and the predators come flocking from all over when they see this stuff hanging on the picture rails. They run wild and open up the operating theatre to all those rats, collecting both the organs and the money. (Samb 1997, p. 50)

The Metabolic Museum-University requires a similarly encrypted style for transferring the dynamics between matter and thought. To this end, each participant is sent the *Proceedings of the Metabolic Museum-University* ahead of the Debating Chamber. Printed in Berlin on coloured government paper, the four small pamphlets contain the distillation of the Bureau d'Esprit meetings held by the MM-U over the course of 2020–21, and during which we shared our personal methodologies and dilemmas. The pamphlets, which relaunch *Metronome* after 15 years, are purposefully not online. It is the intimacy of their passing that counts, and the gesture of handing a booklet to another trusted interlocutor to read. In today's pandemic-induced immobility, these *Proceedings* respond to the need for a private, non-digitised circulation of unfinished and potentially sensitive inquiry. In one of the pamphlets, for example, Tarek Atoui describes sound recordings that he made in



Beirut's harbour the day before the explosions, and the difficult choices he now faces around their transmission. Concept-work of this nature effectively suspends dissemination to an arbitrary public in favour of distinct person-to-person communication. As Luke Willis Thompson, artist, and member of the MM-U, asks, 'How can the institution become a channel for artistic interference and classificatory transgression? Does digital hypervisibility serve the decolonial work we undertake?'<sup>34</sup>

#### 4. Parallel Taxonomies

Today's understanding of documentation in art is forensic, traceable and contractual. The impact of the blockchain and its protocols of acquisition, ownership and transferral is right on track with the new taxonomies currently being composed to deal with the evaluation of artworks illegitimately acquired during colonialism and lacking biographical data. If ethnological provenance studies are about filling in the lacunae of an object's background and its journey to Europe, this requires an extra booking technology to substantiate ownership (Reichert 2021, p. 11). With this digital inventory system, a new order of conservative historicism restores authority and veracity to ethnology's nineteenth-century focus on ritual and iconic 'masterpieces'. Engagement in provenance studies, parented by European foreign and cultural ministries, is laudable, but it remains closely tied to future exploitation, not to mention the continuity of the ethno-colonial museum at home and abroad (Deliss 2020). The most valorised ethnographic object is either one that has no intermediary dealer but has gone straight from source to museum, or one that has circulated between prestigious owners, gaining museological and art-historical credibility along the way. By producing proof of provenance, one effectively augments the value of the item on the global market.

There is a curious conjunction between the current fascination with tracking and tracing, and the digital ownership of prime works of

so-called ‘tribal art’. To this effect, museum anthropology revives its earlier morphological focus and deploys CT scanners to produce visual data for exploitation, all the while supporting restitution. Yet the ownership of this new downloadable object is in the hands of the museum that has the power to reproduce representations on any scale, in any medium and for whatever purpose. With the aid of the hospital scanner, the formerly unclassifiable object achieves ontological determinism. Ultimately, ethnology has produced a cult of possession, an obsessive focus on the inscription of ownership through disciplinary tropes of contextualisation.

Questions of ownership and audience (i.e., the need to balance access and restriction, to ‘quarantine’ a portion of our deliberations from the public, even as we plan to eventually enact them in some kind of public arena) have loomed large in our discussions, as have those of how to manage or accommodate the often unsettling backstories housed and stored up by containers of the sort we’re dealing with.

I think a vital axis for us here is ‘Tikanga’. For us, this would translate into the question: On whose authority are we operating? Under whose jurisdiction? Just as Count Dracula’s boxed earth passes through many legal territories en route to London (we get detailed records of the fees, taxes, bribes etc. paid to each regional authority), so the artefacts in Berlin’s many collections have seen their location, ownership or status morphing with the various shifts in geography or geo-politics or simply time that they have undergone.<sup>35</sup>

Both legal complexity, contention and ambiguity underlie the relationship between research collections of the past and their latent potential for future knowledge production. For the younger generation, there can be no in-depth remediation without the elaboration of a le-

gal language with which to redistribute rights. Nothing is open-source, and even less so if it is embargoed within the universal museum. Who has the right to produce derivatives based on objects in ethnological collections? Who controls the legitimacy of interpretation? To open the caskets of colonial museums in Europe is to deal with the complex ramifications of a new social responsibility built around the ethics of accessibility to this vast cultural heritage. Such engagement is about architectonics and methodology, reconfiguring physical space in museums for assemblages to be metabolised and rethought as interdependent of several narratologies, locations and systems of ownership.

The overarching twentieth-century formulation of ‘permanent’ and ‘temporary’ exhibitions is neither sustainable, nor does it correspond to the requirements of a decolonial art history formulated via the agency of collections. To this purpose one can begin to think of the exhibition as a moving, growing, flourishing and transitional plant, with artworks and artefacts in all media arriving, leaving, being placed into momentary constellations, taken down new routes of inquiry and documented in a multitude of different ways. To transgress the rhetorical systems of art history, anthropology and curatorial practice means working on situations that smuggle in complexity through channels and interfaces that cannot be made visible or marketed easily. Contingent exhibitions such as the ‘Debating Chamber’ at KW clearly stimulate turbulence.<sup>36</sup> Disquieting moments are there to question the mirage of curatorial clarity and push both organisation, reception and documentation into a subjective, vulnerable mode. They are exercises or rehearsals in academic iconoclasm that can help to construct new narratives and performative ways of exhibiting and documenting collections and ideas in the twenty-first century.

## ENDNOTES

- 1 The table is based on a diagram of the bronze model of a sheep's liver found in Piacenza, Italy, dating back to 400 BC, and drawn by Alessandro Morandi in 1991. It depicts sixteen sections that in turn represent astrological houses or dwelling places of individual deities. Strategists, often in war, would make their final decisions as a result of oracular protocols conducted by Babylonian haruspicians for which liver or entrails were read as 'ominous' objects.
- 2 The members of the Metabolic Museum-University (MM-U) in 2020–21 are BLESS (situation designers), Matthias Bruhn (art and media historian), Clémentine Deliss (curator of the MM-U, associate curator KW), Krist Gruijthuisen (curator, director KW), Iman Issa (artist), Augustin Maurs (composer, musician), Tom McCarthy (novelist), Henrike Naumann (artist), Azu Nwagbogu (curator), Margareta von Oswald (anthropologist), Manuel Raeder (designer), Elhadj Abdoulaye Sène (lawyer for investment and tax), Krista Belle Stewart (artist) and Luke Willis Thompson (artist). A first experiment with an assemblage of artefacts was conducted between members of the MM-U in July 2020. It took place within the exhibition of Hassan Sharif on a day when KW was closed to the public.
- 3 These are extracts from the report drafted by Sam Parfitt, anthropologist, and invigilator at KW, who was invited to take on the role of Stenographer of the Debating Chamber.
- 4 Artist Santiago Mostyn suggested the setting evoked the partitioning of Africa in Berlin in 1884.
- 5 Guest participants included Hubertus von Amelnunx (art historian, director Archivio Conz), Netanel Anor (Assyriologist), Dido Baxevanidis (psychotherapist), Calum Bowden (anthropologist and digital designer), Ruth Buchanan (artist), Shoufay Derz (artist), Sam Durant (artist), Olivier Guessele-Garai (artist), Paz Guevara (cultural theoretician), Anna Gritz (curator, KW), Hannes Hacke (cultural historian), Jakob Karpus (artist), Mariamargherita Maceli (art historian, Archivio Conz), Marc Hollenstein

(graphic designer), Karl Holmqvist (artist), Sofie Krogh Christensen (curator, KW), Léon Kruijswijk (curator, KW), Talya Lubinsky (artist), Kristian Vistrup Madsen (art critic and writer), Antje Majewski (artist), Santiago Mostyn (artist), Matt Mullican (artist), Tahani Nadim (sociologist of science), Thais Napomuceno (filmmaker), Ana Prvački (artist), Daniel Rosenberg (historian), Franka Schneider (cultural historian), Eva Stenram (artist, photographer), Sérgio Taborda (artist), Robin Watkins (artist), Ivo Wessel (collector).

- 6 List of prototypes and ominous objects: miniature concrete reproduction of a segment of the Berlin Wall; set of engraved wooden forks and spoons for a bride and groom; silk tie with embroidered dogs; wall clock with one hand (Henrike Naumann); bottle of red wine with SI on the label (Tom McCarthy); broken tile made from the land of Spaxomin (Krista Belle Stewart); Madonna made from plastic and used in an Italian TV programme (Matthias Bruhn); sealed cardboard box as a proxy for an object non-present; written description of the contents of the cardboard box, 'Rund, schwer, glatt, schmutzig grün' (Iman Issa); Fur Wig 00, 1996; hairbrush made during the Debating Chamber with strands of hair from all participants (BLESS); welded steel letters also used as birds' houses (Manuel Raeder); the term 'fiction' as an instrument in law (Elhadj Abdoulaye Sène); two black-and-white photographs of displays on 'Africa' exhibited at the Ethnological Museum in Berlin, Dahlem (Margareta von Oswald); the word that is unpronounceable, ZZXJOAWN (Augustin Maurs); conversation between Marcel Broodthaers and his cat (Krist Gruijthuisen); fresh liver; instrument for smoothing the shaft of boots, once belonging to Lothar Baumgarten; wooden shoe-making lasts, unchanged since 2002; rat trap made in rattan, Lusanga, Democratic Republic of Congo; registration form for antiquities, Nigeria, 1974; wood mould of a head for shaping performance costumes, Nigeria, 2021 (Clémentine Deliss); box of thirty-six coloured wooden cubes (Matt Mullican); extract from P. K. Dick, *The Man in the High Castle*, 1962 (Sergio Taborda); neolithic arrowhead and a coccyx bone (Ana Prvački); two light boxes by Jenny Holzer with 'Truisms' and 'Inflammatory Sentences', 1996; electronic digital clock (Ivo Wessel); three pieces from the 'Flux Divorce Box' by Geoffrey Hendricks, 1973; collage made from a handwritten letter,

- a shipping envelope and a book placed in a wooden box by Alison Knowles, 1997 (Archivio Conz).
- 7 The term prototype is used by Issa Samb, co-founder of the Laboratoire Agit'Art in Dakar, who reiterates that no object in a museum is 'useless'. See Clémentine Deliss (2020, p. 18).
  - 8 Adjacency 'sets in motion heterogeneous elements, practices and forms', implying that there are generative qualities harboured in collections that can support the flourishing of collaborative practices of concept-work. See Korsby and Stavrianakis (2020, p. 53).
  - 9 For details on the Prototype Collection see *Metronome* no. 12, vols. I–IV (2021), available only by post or directly in person from KW Institute for Contemporary Art, Auguststrasse 69, 10117 Berlin. Further examples of this concept can be found in Deliss 2011.
  - 10 BLESS had suggested the same operation take place before the Debating Chamber, and that we send one prototype to each of the guest participants in advance of the session, to live with it and understand it further. Unfortunately, this proposal could not be executed for reasons to do with timing and organisational capacity.
  - 11 Sheep or lamb's liver, freshly removed, is an ancient medium for strategic divination. Recognised as the key metabolic point in the body, the liver offers the imprint of a life once lived while signalling a future yet to be enacted.
  - 12 To quote Korsby and Stavrianakis, 'What we take from these collaborative moments, and what we hope to pass on to others with this account, is to offer an alternative perspective on what scholarly work in the university might look like' (2020, p. 84).
  - 13 'Mêmes mots, mêmes maux', artist and philosopher Issa Samb in a short text sent to the author in 2003.
  - 14 The procedure is elaborated by Tom McCarthy and Matthias Bruhn.
  - 15 Some drops of sesame oil into water act as an additional oracle. Anor's reading is auspicious.
  - 16 A comment made by Kristian Vistrup Madsen, designated Observer of the Debating Chamber.

- 17 A comment made by Tom McCarthy during the Debating Chamber.
- 18 The works by Geoffrey Hendricks and Alison Knowles were kindly lent by Archivio Conz, Berlin.
- 19 This statement on the printed card was brought to the Debating Chamber by MM-U member and lawyer Elhadj Abdoulaye Sène. While this sentence has truly polysemantic reverberations, it also indicates the civic status of future residents of Germany. The government employs the unusual term of *Fiktionsbescheinigung* (Fictional Certificate) to represent the intermediary status of citizenship pending a residence permit.
- 20 An observation made by Kristian Vistrup Madsen.
- 21 Kristian Vistrup Madsen, notes.
- 22 The term is used by Léon Kruijswijk to designate significant ruptures in the Debating Chamber.
- 23 For an expanded discussion on syncopation, see *Metronome* no. 12, vol. II, 2021, 'Syncopathologies'.
- 24 See MacKenzie Wark.
- 25 The artists are Eva Stenram ([evastenram.net](http://evastenram.net)), Thais Nepomuceno ([thaisnepomuceno.art](http://thaisnepomuceno.art)) and Jakob Karpus, a former art student of mine at the HfBK (University of the Arts, Hamburg), who collaborated on [homemuseum.net](http://homemuseum.net) and set up the artists' research collective Birds of Knowledge.
- 26 See Foucault 2009.
- 27 Witnessed in 1978 at different galleries in Vienna (Galerie Nächst St. Stephan; Modern Art Galerie Grita Insam), and at the International Performance Festival Wien and Graz, organised by the Österreichische Kunstverein.
- 28 For an expanded curatorial model that brings the ethnological in dialogue with the neo-conceptual, see *Lotte or the Transformation of the Object*, curated by Clémentine Deliss for Styrian Autumn 1990, and Academy of Fine Arts, Vienna, 1991. Catalogue *Durch*, 1990, Akademische Druck und Verlagsanstalt, Graz (series produced by Peter Pakesch). Pakesch, P. (ed.). 1990. *Durch*, exh. cat. Academy of Fine Arts Vienna, Akademische Druck und Verlagsanstalt, Graz.

- 29 In 'The Artist as Ethnographer', published in 1995, Hal Foster states, '...rogue investigations of anthropology, like queer critiques of psychoanalysis, possess vanguard status today: it is along these lines that the critical edge is felt to cut most incisively.'
- 30 See Kwon 2002.
- 31 While visuals featured in the pages of *Texte zur Kunst*, its model was the American journal *October*, which was text-heavy.
- 32 *Metronome* issues nos. 1, 3 and 7 (1997–2001), available from the author on request. Not made for online circulation.
- 33 Mélanie is code for Senegal, referencing the pigment melanin.
- 34 In Deliss et al. 2021.
- 35 By referring to 'Tikanga', Tom McCarthy extends the proposition of Luke Willis Thompson that this Maori word is relevant to the constitution of the MM-U. Thompson states, 'The word is often mistranslated from Maori into English as protocol, but it's really a philosophy of law and a system of governance. I think the best translation is ritualized practices designed for survival.' In *Metronome* vol. III, no. 12, p. 3.
- 36 I am grateful to KW Institute for Contemporary Art for enabling me to hold the Debating Chamber, and to all members of the MM-U, the invited guests, and the team from KW for their support.



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