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Invisible Inventories – Nairobi – Cologne – now Frankfurt – Interview mit/with Leonie Neumann ger/engl

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Invisible Inventories, invisible objects; this is a Kenyan-German exhibition project. After Nairobi and Cologne, the exhibition has now arrived in Frankfurt. The most interesting aspect of this exhibition is the cross-border cooperation between the Kenyan artists' collective „THE SHIFT“, „NEXT“ and the National Museums of Kenya.



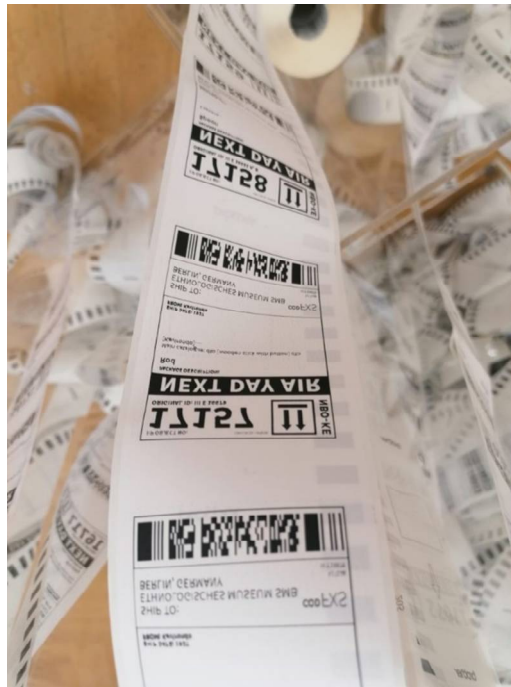
On the German side, it was the Rautenstrauch-Joest Museum in Cologne and the Weltkulturenmuseum in Frankfurt am Main. The core of the exhibition is not what is shown, but what is not shown or cannot be shown. There are slide projections, archive stamps that look like franking labels run through the rooms.

Everything is meant to remind us that the actual treasures are not there and can be marvelled at. Because they couldn't in Nairobi either. So the disappointment about the absence can also be felt in Frankfurt. It leaves a queasy feeling. Instead, voices on the absence of the objects, on the request to return them or large-format collector portraits can be seen.



While numerous objects were shown in Cologne, visitors in Frankfurt are confronted with a lot of emptiness. Instead, the few objects are in their depot. What does it do to the people in Kenya that they cannot see „their“ art objects in their own country? The discussion about restitution, restitution and the meaning of ethnological museums in the 21st century.

These were fundamental questions in the diverse discussions of the artists and scholars from Germany and Kenya. The accessibility of the IIP database to the public is a central achievement of the project.



For the first time, the objects are now also accessible in Kenya. And there are many: Over 32,000 objects from Kenya are stored in Western museums. The majority are in the former colonial power Great Britain, in Germany and the USA.

The exhibition opened the 6th of October and runs until 9th of January 2022.

The archive database of the IIP is available on the website of the inventories programme:

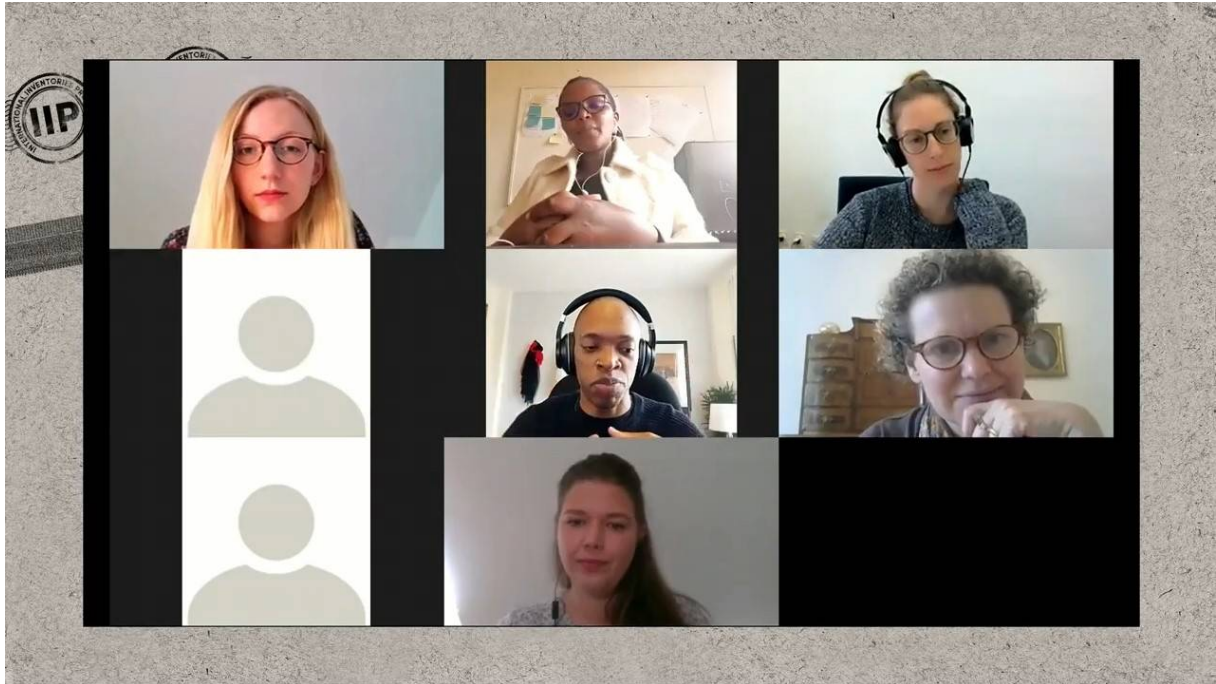
<https://www.inventoriesprogramme.org>

See the discussion of the exhibiton makers in the link:

Die Archiv-Datenbank kann auf der Seite des IIP abgerufen werden. Dort finden sich auch alle Details und weiterführende Links, um das Thema zu vertiefen.:

<https://www.inventoriesprogramme.org>

See the discussion of the exhibiton makers in the link:



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=46uWtH1B5cA>

What does the visitors in Nairobi say? See in the link down here:



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fOdObn4FpuY>

The link leads you to the Nairobi exhibition and its artists, the both art collectifs „THE SHIFT“ and „NEXT“.



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LynvkJdrkBA>

INTERVIEW WITH LEONIE NEUMANN

Weltkulturen Museum Frankfurt

Hans Hofele (HH): Invisible Inventories came from Nairobi to Frankfurt. Why Kenya, what was the starting point for the exhibition?

Leonie Neumann (LN): The project, the International Inventories Programme, was founded by the Kenyan artists' collective „The Net“ and the collective „Shift“. They got together, they started the initiative.



Leonie Neumann, Weltkulturen Museum Frankfurt am Main

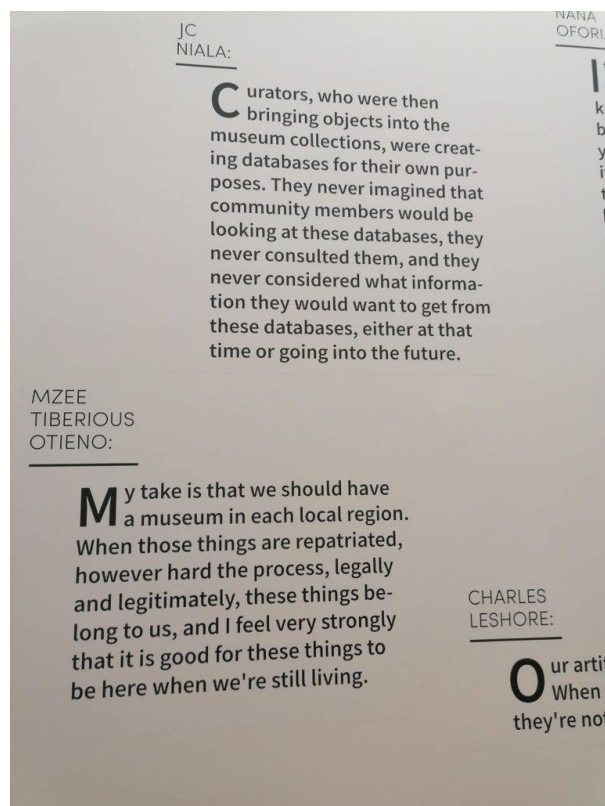
They then approached the two museums, the Rautenstrauch-Joest Museum in Cologne and our museum here in Frankfurt and that's how the project got rolling. So the initiative came from Kenya. The Cologne museum has a relatively small collection of about 80 objects, we have a larger collection here, which is mainly because we have a larger collection of contemporary art from Kenya.

The dialogue was more or less the essence of the project, that we talk about collections and what it means that the objects are present here in Germany but absent in Kenya.

HH: Can you describe what it was like working with the collectives in Kenya?

We were a big team because we worked with colleagues from the collectives, the National Museums of Kenya and the two German museums. There were many discussions, and due to Corona, many Zoom meetings that we did together. But that was also a bit of the core of the project, because we wanted to broaden the discussion to include these Kenyan voices, Kenyan perspectives and to bring them together with museum perspectives from Kenya but also from the West.

The dialogue was more or less the essence of the project, that we talk about collections and what it means that the objects are present here in Germany but absent in Kenya.



HH: There were discussions about the exhibition concept in the three museums, how the objects would be exhibited, or what would not be shown?

LN: In Nairobi it should be shown that nothing is there, that the objects are invisible. In Cologne, the (somewhat smaller) collection of all Kenyan objects was shown. Frankfurt is the third station. It was clear that we could not exhibit all 800 objects.

We also have a very diverse collection context. Many of the objects date back to the 1970s and are contemporary art. The question was, can we not exhibit them either, even though they were legally acquired? Since there was no agreement, we decided to change the objects shown in our collection during the exhibition and to disclose our archive. The objects on display will be shown in an archive situation, not in an exhibition as usual.

HH: At the opening of the exhibition it was said that „the exhibition makers are confronted with violence-laden history in a complex way“. How do you deal with this?

We have about 14,000 objects of African origin. There are, of course, collections that originate from the colonial context, even after that the power relations were unequal. We have always tried to think about what that means, that the objects are here and not in Kenya. It has to be said that for our Kenya collection, only 23 out of 800 are from the colonial period, these are from the British colonial period, not German.

HH: Would it be mischievous to ask, „Did we avoid the really big conflicts because we didn't focus on the German colonies in Africa, Tanzania, Cameroon, Namibia, Togo, but instead on Kenya?

It was the case that we were approached from Kenya, but we are not afraid of conflicts with other countries either. Besides Kenya, we have been working with many other African countries in large and small projects for years.



We do not avoid conflicts, but certainly this project has become very big and has connected many houses. It is also an opportunity for our house to learn from it for future projects, to grow from it and also to learn through dialogue and discussion with those affected, the representatives of the communities.

That was also a very emotional process. By making the objects accessible through the new database, these objects are now also visible in Kenya. The initially neutral data now has an emotional level.

HH: There is a film accompanying the exhibition, which shows the exhibition in Nairobi, numerous voices of the exhibition makers and visitors. There are very emotional statements to be seen. Some of the visitors are seeing these objects from their history for the first time. Or they learn that these objects are not there but in Europe. Does this emotional level actually leave no trace on the professional exhibition organiser?

LN: That is definitely a job, when you work so closely with people and feel what meaning certain objects have for these people, very touching. It's clear, we have a big Africa collection, we have a lot of objects and we don't have the personal connection. Even if there is no context of injustice, you realise that objects have a history, a kind of soul.

They would certainly have a much more effective meaning in the community in Kenya than in the depot here. For us, this raises the question of what significance it actually has that they are here and wouldn't it make much more sense if they were on site in Kenya? Because there they are used, there they are touched, marvelled at, and here they are stored in depots and are not even shown for years.

That was also a very emotional process. By making the objects accessible through the new database, these objects are now also visible in Kenya. The initially neutral data now has an emotional level. I download objects from the database as a normal process, in Kenya there might be objects, grandparents already talked about them. This has now become clear through the project that it not only has a material value but also an emotional value.

HH: The discussion about the return and the sense of keeping the thousands of collected objects from a colonial context is increasing. What is their responsibility towards the public? Is there also moral ballast stored in the archives?

LN: You can call it moral ballast, but as an ethnologist I see myself more as responsible. We are the ones who manage the collections and also make them accessible, also for those from whom the objects originate. This has been done in museums for years.

The difference now is that the problem has reached the political arena and we now have much more leeway than before. The discussion about the Benin Bronzes and the public debate about restitution have set a lot in motion. I see it as the task of ethnology to be part of the whole. We have the expertise, we are much more than custodians of objects, we are in exchange with the experts in the countries.



We want to help make the stories around the objects visible. And we do so very critically. How did the collections come into being? Where were they taken from? What were they used for and what can they stand for in the future?

HH: In the past, the Ethnological Museums were rather defensive when it came to restitution and critical attitudes to museum collections. Is this offensive, which is also visible in „Invisible Inventories“, new? Would there need to be more educational work for the diverse work of museums and ethnology?

LN: I think that was already the case ten years ago. The Weltkulturenmuseum in particular had been working with artists from all over the world for years. Even back then, there was talk about restitution. There just wasn't as much public interest as there is now. The current debate about the Benin bronzes has intensified all this. However, the discussion should not stop with the ethnological museums, it should continue with the art museums, with the archaeological museums.

HH: Can the Weltkulturenmuseum rule out objects from grey markets coming to the museum? Would you actually still accept objects from the colonial period or before?

LN: We are offered objects again and again. There are also many privately owned objects that have different contexts of origin or from scientific collections. The Weltkulturenmuseum no longer actively collects objects.

You have to put the question in a larger context, because having collections at all and also having museums is a very Western concept. This brings us to a philosophical question, „how long will the concept of the museum last?“ „Is the museum the place where restitution debates should be discussed?“ I do believe that ethnological museums can provide a forum for this. But we are only the starting point. There has to be an overall social discussion about everything that is connected with it.

But to return everything is too simple, to whom do we return it?

HH: What is your opinion on restitution? One could make a cut and return everything that is from a colonial context?

LN: If it is quite clear that there are contexts of injustice, or if in discussions we come to the conclusion that objects should be returned, we are open to that, and that is also initiated. But to return everything is too simple, to whom do we return it?

The return of objects should not be the responsibility of the Western museums, it can also be negotiated at government level, including with the authorities in Kenya. It has to be said that we are not currently receiving any requests for restitution. The IIP project was not designed as a restitution project from the beginning. It was meant to broaden the discussion.



But for us it has already moved a lot, we are already looking more closely at our collections, where can we get in touch with communities.

Even if our depots were empty, the Ethnological Museums would not cease to exist. We would continue to collaborate with people from all over the world and could address many current issues.

HH: Is the exhibition „Invisible Inventories“ a step into the offensive like many museums in Europe are doing now?

LN: It was definitely a step because we exposed the collections through the database. We dealt intensively with the collection again, we had an exchange with scholars from Kenya. It gave us a completely different approach to the Kenyan objects. We want to work much more closely with the National Museums of Kenya.

HH: Thank you very much.

The Nest Collective: Jim Chuchu, Njoki Ngumi (Kenya)

SHIFT Collective: Sam Hopkins (Kenya/Germany), Marian Nur Goni (France), Simon Rittmeier (Germany)

National Museums of Kenya: Lydia Nafula, Philemon Nyamanga, George Juma Ondeng', Njeri Gachihi, Lydia Galavu and the Tuzi Collective (Kenya)
Rautenstrauch-Joest-Museum: Clara Himmelheber (Germany)

Weltkulturen Museum: Julia Friedel, Leonie Neumann, Frauke Gathof (Germany)