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The Metabolic Museum

Clémentine Deliss

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Book Review

Clémentine Deliss, *The Metabolic Museum*. Berlin: Hatje Cantz Verlag, in association with KW Institute for Contemporary Art, 2020. 128 pp. Softback \$22.00. (9783775747806)

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At their best, museums are transformative spaces of learning and engagement; at their worst, they reaffirm inaccurate narratives and racist hierarchies. The ethnographic museum—often overflowing with colonial spoils—can function at both of these poles. Clémentine Deliss's *The Metabolic Museum* proposes a messy and difficult solution to the question of how the ethnographic museum can remain relevant in the twenty-first century: become a post-ethnographic museum. From 2010–2015, Deliss was the director of the

Weltkulturen Museum, an ethnographic museum in Frankfurt, Germany. The museum's roots date to the founding of the Senckenberg Natural History Society in 1817, opening its doors as the Städtisches Völkermuseum, or Municipal Folk Museum, in 1904.¹ The museum prides itself on being a truly civic venture, with collections donated by Frankfurt residents.² The museum has had a few different names throughout its history, becoming the Weltkulturen Museum, or world cultures museum, under Deliss's directorship.³ City officials unceremoniously informed Deliss that her contract, originally set to expire in 2018, would be terminated early in spring 2015; her abrupt ouster was followed heavily by art presses.⁴ However, the sudden end to her tenure is mentioned only at the outset of her book; she instead focuses on the major ideals and minutia of running, in her words, a post-ethnographic museum. A short book, *The Metabolic Museum* is a fascinating look at a museum director who attempted to be truly transformative.

For her time at the Weltkulturen Museum, Deliss, a well-regarded figure in contemporary art and anthropology,⁵ is notable for the creation of new ventures in programming to reimagine the ethnographic museum as a public space. Reflecting her long practice of writing and publishing, *The Metabolic Museum* is not a typical academic book. It is organized into short chapters and written almost entirely in the first person. The author outlines her values related to museum work and moves out from her specific projects—artist residencies, explorative seminars, and unique public programs—to what they mean for an inherently colonial institution. Through brevity of text and a lack of images, Deliss presents a finished work similar to the personal journals on which the book is based. Her challenge to the authority of the ethnographic museum as it was imagined upon creation comes from a place of deep knowledge of such institutions. Through anecdote and personal experience, she argues that museums can function as living things, and are hence metabolic, referencing mostly living scholars whom she knows. In the author's own words, "This is the narrative of my endeavor to transform the

¹ The Weltkulturen Museum, "History," accessed October 23, 2020 <https://www.weltkulturenmuseum.de/en/museum/history/>

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ See Benjamin Sutton, "Director of Frankfurt's Ethnographic Museum Fired Without Explanation," *Hyperallergic*, June 18, 2015, <https://hyperallergic.com/215057/director-of-frankfurts-ethnographic-museum-fired-without-explanation/>. Also see Henri Neuendorf, "Tribunal Finds No Reason for Firing of Frankfurt Ethnographic Museum Director," *Artnet News*, March 22, 2016, <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/clementine-deliss-firing-frankfurt-ethnographic-museum-455162>.

⁵ Ibid.

modus operandi of a contentious genre of European museum and develop a post-ethnographic institution.”⁶

The Metabolic Museum provides poetic musings in the form of two manifestos that can be applied more broadly to this type of museum work. The first of these manifestos, “Manifesto for the Post-Ethnographic Museum Frankfurt/New York, October 2013,” was written in the midst of her directorship and begins with “Anomalous and anachronistic / It’s about working with a collection / that belongs to another time / that belongs to other people.”⁷ Organized into four stanzas, this opening manifesto presents some concepts picked up later in the book. The second stanza, “Domestic research,” emphasizes working from the very specific space and community of the museum. The stanza “Remediation over time” stresses the museum’s need to change and adapt, while “Curating neighborhoods” focuses on residency programs and visitors to the museum. Finally, “The Museum-University,” presents Deliss’s idea of a museum based on learning around and through collections, truly breaking down the importance of buildings and objects themselves.

Her concept of the metabolic museum reflects how the museum can function as a living organism that needs tending and care. Speaking of Weltkulturen, she muses, “I began to recognize the museum as a complex body with a severely ailing metabolism, afflicted organs, and black canals of circulation.”⁸ Thus the metabolic museum is the aim of the post-ethnographic museum—to be a healthy living institution.

Each chapter examines a broad topic. Though they build upon each other and her manifestos, each can be read as an individual article or essay. Primarily autobiographical, the book presents both her training leading up to her directorship and her many projects at the museum. She emphasizes the importance of the physical space of the museum and her push to center the museum as a research hub. According to Deliss, the post-ethnographic museum does not seek to understand cultures through study and categorization of objects, instead “taking these extraordinary objects as stimulus for future innovation and therefore the starting point for new knowledge production.”⁹ In this model, many types of knowledges have the capacity to expand one’s understanding of ethnographic objects and shift away from anthropological approaches.

Most striking is how Deliss, who possesses cultural anthropology training, pushes against the hierarchy and expertise of the ethnographic frame. She compares museum ethnographers who base their positions on “owning the keys to context and thus the authoritative frame of the object in question” to artists who are more likely to discover alternatives to this narrative in the collection.¹⁰ But rather than ignore her training, Deliss used it in key moments, such as in approaching the museum as fieldwork. Equally important to her tenure at the museum, her notion of the post-ethnographic museum is based on her earlier work—such as her first encounter with the revolutionary art collective Laboratoire Agit-Art, cofounded by famed Senegalese artist Issa Samb (1945–2017), with whom she repeatedly collaborated. She details her publication *Metronome*, a nontraditional art and cultural publication that she also thought of in organic terms.

The later chapters further explore her ideas of remediation and organic analogies to the museum. In “The Consequences of Remediation,” she introduces a metaphor in which the museum’s collection of objects is akin to the illegal organ trade market. “A Museum in Reverse”

⁶ Clémentine Deliss, *The Metabolic Museum* (Berlin: Hatje Cantz Verlag, in association with KW Institute for Contemporary Art, 2020), 9.

⁷ Ibid., 12.

⁸ Ibid., 18.

⁹ Ibid., 37.

¹⁰ Ibid., 65.

takes its title from artist Luke Willis Thompson (New Zealander, b. 1988), who sees the ethnographic objects as spoils of colonized people, thus necessitating the museum to begin dispersing objects.¹¹ Another chapter, “The “Lure of Objects” further questions the role of the ethnographic museum and its continued ties to colonialization. She writes, “Like the organ trade, the necropolitical colonial museum survives off the control and regulation of the nerve centers of agency.”¹² Deliss argues that the collecting of objects is always incomplete, as the objects can never represent the whole—much like a single organ cannot represent the entire body. This emphasis on human connection within museums is explored more deeply in “Models of a Museum-University,” a term that casts the museum as a university space rather than a museum at a university. Deliss has organized two iterations of the museum-university (initially called the School of Remediation¹³), contending that “the ultimate vector today needs to be the human being in an emancipatory and ecological dialogue with the existence of everything that this venue and its collections provide and invoke: a museum without condition to paraphrase Jacques Derrida.”¹⁴ Deliss’s concept of a “museum without condition,” emphasizing learning beyond the physical space of the museum, is extremely prescient, as many museums have closed their doors for long periods due to the novel coronavirus.

The Metabolic Museum ends with a second manifesto, “Manifesto for Rights of Access to Colonial Collections Sequestered in Western Europe, Dakar, May 2018.” Deliss calls on everyone to be part of a process of remediation, mainly to “return both respect and copyright back to their ancestors!”¹⁵ By recurrently metaphorizing the museum as a living body and its works as illicitly purchased organs, the museum seems to be bloated with the excess of its collections. Thus her call for return, presaging Germany’s set of guidelines for the return of objects from its former colonies,¹⁶ is the logical step for a museum that amassed collections through unequal power relationships, possessing peoples through their objects.

The brevity of *The Metabolic Museum* does not always translate into clarity. The book’s non-linear narrative is, at times, difficult to follow. The lack of visuals is also challenging given the emphasis on museum spaces, collections, and projects. Her extremely descriptive text does not compensate for the type of understanding readers would gain upon seeing these spaces and objects. Images of work created by the numerous artists and scholars who collaborated with the museum would also contribute to its precision; the volume of figures and the breadth of their work—and hers—can simply wash over the reader.

For its shortcomings, *The Metabolic Museum* is thoughtful and inspiring. Deliss provides an honest look behind the curtain of a museum that she argues cannot exist in its historical form. Such institutional ambivalence and radical thinking from a museum director are especially stimulating at moment when museums are combatting the twin pandemics of coronavirus and a reckoning with anti-Black racism. Museum professionals can take Deliss’s book as a roadmap for envisioning new activations of their collections. Readers with less background in this field might wonder what a manifesto of the post-pandemic museum might entail.

¹¹ Ibid., 90–93.


¹² Ibid., 99.

¹³ Ibid., 107.

¹⁴ Ibid., 113.

¹⁵ Ibid., 119.

¹⁶ Christopher F. Schuetze, “Germany Sets Guidelines for Repatriating Colonial-Era Artifacts,” *The New York Times*, March 15, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/15/arts/design/germany-museums-restitution.html>.

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