

Contemporary Artists on Colonial Museums

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ABSTRACT: Ethnological museums are not only where objects from primitive societies are exhibited, but also creators of categories, parameters and models of behaviour and understanding of the world in relation to such societies. The objects collected in colonial expeditions slowly began a process of reformulation in the twentieth century, which was the century of contemporary art museums and the aestheticization of objects to which we nowadays refer as «primitive art».

Ethnological museums held great appeal for artists throughout the twentieth century. Firstly, it was there that the avant-garde got to know and came to appreciate the works of primitive art which would have such an influence on the formulation of Modernism. Later, ethnological museums prompted artists to reflect upon and develop the principles on the basis of which western society has confronted the Other, the relationship between western culture and non-western cultures. That is the case of Hannah Höch, Candida Höfer and Bertrand Lavier.

KEY WORDS: Contemporary Art, Ethnological Museums, Ethnocentrism, Hannah Höch, Candida Höfer, Bertrand Lavier.

Artistas contemporáneos en el museo colonial

RESUMEN: El museo etnológico no es solamente el ámbito de exhibición de objetos pertenecientes a sociedades primitivas, sino también es el creador de categorías, parámetros, modelos de comportamiento y comprensión del mundo respecto de ellas. Los objetos provenientes de expediciones coloniales comenzarán lentamente un proceso de reformulación durante el siglo XX, que no será ya el siglo de los museos etnológicos sino el de los museos de arte contemporáneo y de la estetización de los objetos que hoy llamamos de «arte primitivo».

El museo etnológico, a lo largo del siglo XX, ha ejercido una gran atracción sobre los artistas. Primeramente es el ámbito en el cual la vanguardia conoce y aprecia las obras de arte primitivo que tanta influencia ejercerán en la formulación de la modernidad. Con posterioridad, será el motivo de reflexión y elaboración por parte de los artistas de las pautas con las cuales la sociedad occidental se ha enfrentado al Otro, de la relación de la cultura occidental y las culturas no-occidentales. Tal es el caso de Hannah Höch, Candida Höfer y Bertrand Lavier.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Arte contemporáneo, Museos etnológicos, Etnocentrismo, Hannah Höch, Candida Höfer, Bertrand Lavier.

From the viewpoint of European culture, ethnological museums are not only where objects from primitive societies are kept or exhibited, but also creators of categories, parameters and models of behaviour and understanding of the world in relation to such societies. The vast array of objects set out for the fundamental purpose of educating and transmitting values, against the backdrop of colonial activity, slowly began a process of reformulation in the twentieth century, which was not the century of ethnological museums but of contemporary art museums and the aestheticization of objects to which we nowadays refer as primitive art (Ocampo, 2011).

Ethnological museums held great appeal for artists throughout the twentieth century. Firstly, it was there that the avant-garde got to know and came to appreciate the works of primitive art which would have such an influence on the formulation of Modernism. Later, ethnological museums prompted artists to reflect upon and develop the principles on the basis of which western society has confronted the Other, the relationship between western culture and non-western cultures.

The three artists I have chosen are not the only ones who have deconstructed museum ideology, but they have certainly been very significant in that process. They have used different aesthetic procedures, namely photomontage, photography and installation, to reflect on what lies behind museums as reproducers and transmitters of the ideas involved in the relationship between European culture and the non-European cultures. As early as the 1920s Hannah Höch called upon viewer's analytical capabilities, deconstructing the ideas present in museums through her display methods. Candida Höfer did likewise in the late twentieth century. Bertrand Lavier has done so early in the current century, at an exhibition held on 2013. Unaccompanied by any kind of explanation, their works are intended for active viewer participation and make use of irony, even humour at times. They could be said to be «conceptual» in that they become a discourse on ethnocentrism. The titles of the three artist's series that we are going to analyse are unequivocal. Höch's is called *From an Ethnographic Museum*, Höfer's *In Ethnographic Museums* and Lavier's *New Impressions of Africa*.

Hannah Höch

Hannah Höch's *From an Ethnographic Museum* series comprises 18 to 20 pieces. She worked on it intermittently between 1924 and 1934, the year of her solo exhibition in Brno, in which she included some of its components (Lavin, 1993: 160). In her own words, «[...] *From an Ethnographic Museum*, which was inspired by a visit Kurt Switters and I paid to Leiden Museum's abundant ethnographic collection, reflects the huge stimulus with which artistic manifestations of primitive cultures began to provide the west in around 1910, based on Fauvism and the Die Brücke movement» (Höch, 2004: 68). Höch had a very close relationship with German Expressionism and Dada through different artists, fundamentally Raoul Hausmann (Makela, 1996: 70), who became her partner and shared her passion for primitive art. However, unlike the Expressionists, whose focus was on actual pieces of primitive art, Höch took an interest in such pieces in their European context, i.e. in museums, and in what they said about cultural organization at the time. Criticism of aestheticization and fetishization, two of museum's fundamental conceptual procedures, lies at the heart of her work.

As far as aestheticization is concerned, Höch's photomontages feature an unequivocally characteristic element of museums, namely the pedestal or base upon which pieces rest, having been decontextualized, deconsecrated – we must not forget that we are talking about objects of ritual – and then placed on display. The vast majority of the components of Höch's series show the figures in her photomontages on a pedestal. *Monument I [1]*, dated 1924, depicts a strange being with three legs – a kind of animal's leg, a female leg and a trouser-clad male leg – and a body with a mask for a face, atop a pedestal. Compositions featuring human – generally female – elements and pieces of primitive art on museum pedestals are characteristic of Höch's series. Her combination of western and non-western elements, superimposed upon one another in different scales and colours, prompts reflection on each part and the meaning of the whole.

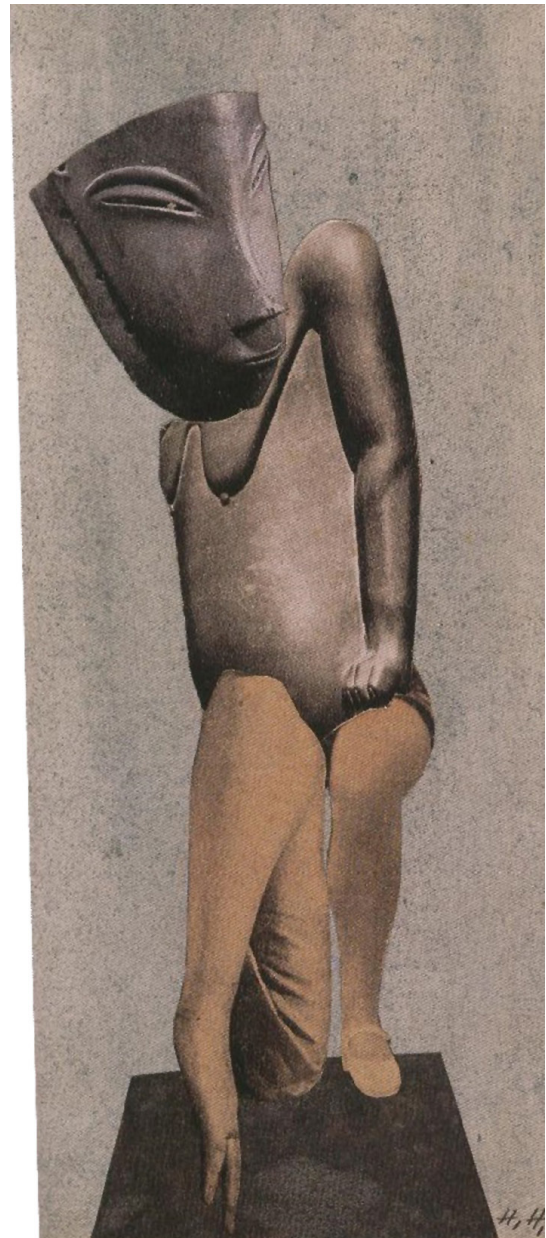
Höch goes even further with certain images that are framed by lines suggesting the presence of glass cabinets, showcases in which the depicted individuals are enclosed as if they were objects. This generates the fetishization that is the second procedure of which she is implicitly critical. The same theme features in Candida Höfer's work, as we will see later. In *Negerplastik*, Höch places a figure composed of a baby's body and an ivory mask from Benin on a very small pedestal. In the early twentieth century, it was very common to associate primitive art and children's art, and, on the basis of objects, primitives and children. Höch criticized that practice, in keeping with the avant-garde's idea of calling for recognition of the intrinsic value of both.

However, the fundamental association that Höch made was that of museums fetishization of primitive objects with the fetishization of women. That is why her figures, on their pedestals, always include a female fragment – breasts, legs –, objectified, fetishized in the same way as pieces of primitive art are in museums, decontextualized and deconsecrated. The procedure followed in museums is the same as that followed in society. Höch's photomontage entitled *Marlene* (Lavin, 1990:63) speaks volumes. It shows Marlene Dietrich's famous legs, fragmented, objectified and fetishized, on a museum pedestal, under the ecstatic gaze of a group of men. Just as ethnological museums render western culture's relationship with the other transparent, Höch uses the primitive/civilized or European/non-European compari-

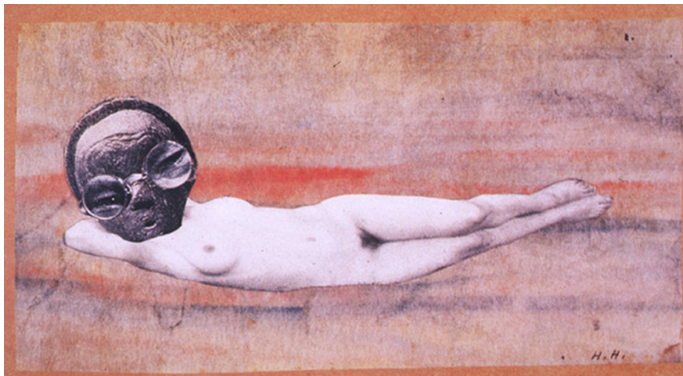
son to highlight the social relationship between the genders and the way women are looked upon as fetishized objects. Höch was the first artist to adopt that perspective. While avant-garde artists had used primitive art in their criticism of Europe's social reality in their day, they had not focused on the situation of women in doing so.

The result of Höch's photomontages is disturbing and puts paid to any notion of women being portrayed as «objects of beauty». *Strange Beauty* [2] is one of her most symbolic works in terms of her criticism of the fetishization of women. Its female figure is composed of a photograph of a naked woman's body and the head of an ancestral figure of the Bushongo, an African ethnic group. The female body is in the classic pose corresponding to beauty and sensuality. The inclusion of a primitive figure's head is an ironic observation on how women have traditionally been represented in the history of European art and the consequent fetishization of the female body, making use of the impact that combining the two elements causes. In a later work, *Strange Beauty II*, dated 1966, Höch returned to the theme of the fetishization of women (Lanchner, 1996: 144), drawing on the same resource, a female body and the head of a figure deemed primitive art. In this case, however, the fetishization is the result of fashion and its tyrannical effect on women. Instead of the classic naked pose seen in *Strange Beauty*, the work portrays a fashion model and the imposition on women of the standards dictated by the fashion world and stereotypes.

1. Hannah Höch, *Denkmal I: Aus einem ethnographischen Museum (Monumento 1: De un Museo Etnográfico)*, 1924, fotomontaje, Berlinische Galerie, Berlín



2. Hannah Höch, *Fremde Schönheit (Extraña Belleza)*, 1929, fotomontaje, colección privada, París



Candida Höfer

Although produced more than half a century later, Candida Höfer's work takes up Hannah Höch's standpoint on ethnological museums again, to a certain degree. Höfer's *In Ethnographic Museums* (Höfer, 2004) series reflects on such institutions as a mine of information on western culture's relationship with the Other, albeit less explicitly than in the case of the work of the Dada artist.

Born in 1944, Höfer trained in Cologne and, later, Düsseldorf, where she firstly studied cinema and then photography with Bernd and Hilla Becher. She began her career with an interest in anthropology, reflected in her *Turks in Germany* series (Oppitz, 2004: 13). In 1971, with her career still at a very early stage, she had photographed Denmark's National Museum in Copenhagen. Her subsequent series focus on the architecture of public places of cultural and human memory, which she photographs when there are no people present. The result is that, over and above its aesthetic qualities, each location acquires a capacity for revelation that goes unnoticed in everyday life. She has taken pictures of libraries, universities, palaces, theatres, churches and museums, showing them in all their silent eloquence. She photographs places of art and knowledge.

In Ethnographic Museums is particularly notable among Höfer's multiple series because it hints at what such museums mean in relation to culture and memory, and at what the organization of objects reflects in terms of categories of thought and action. Höfer is a very reflective artist. In an interview about a trip she went on to various Asian countries, she revealed that she researches and reads up on objects before photographing them. «I don't see through the camera», she said. «I see first and then I take photographs. Sometimes I don't even take photographs, I just look»¹. She has observed that «in recent years, the theme has been the same but my photography has become more concentrated, denser»². Her work is more meaningful, not aesthetically speaking but in terms of what it enables viewers to deduce about the relationship that the cultural spaces she photographs have with the creators of culture.

In the case of ethnological museums, Höfer and her camera record the different strata of time preserved in objects and the way they are exhibited. Höfer's aesthetics and working technique are of great help to viewers of her se-

ries in the task of deconstruction they are asked to perform. Nothing is made explicit. Unlike other conceptual artists, she does not provide explanatory texts. She merely identifies the museum in each photograph, the city in which it is located and the year in which the picture was taken. The scarcity of non-visual information means that it is entirely up to the viewer to reflect on what the image transmits.

Höfer does not alter the conditions of the things she photographs. She uses natural colour and light. Light is a very important element, as it accurately conveys one of the ways in which a museum presents its discourse. «I take light as I find it», she says, «as it creates the space. With regard to the way I take photographs and the work I do with them to obtain images, I suppose you could say that my method is "old school"»³. It is precisely that «objectivity» that makes it possible to concentrate on the actual museum and its approach to displaying objects, and, through that approach, its implicit cultural and ideological categories. Art museums have used light for the purpose of «focusing», i.e. to isolate an object from a context by causing the viewer to concentrate all their attention on it. They thus transmit the qualities of the work of art: autonomy, uniqueness, solitude, in that it is one of a kind in the whole world. That is the idea that placing a spotlight on a work conveys. In contrast, ethnological museums use natural light or central lighting because their objects are positioned indiscriminately in their showcases, more as examples of material life than as works of art, even in the case of those that subsequently find their way to art museums as unique works. Höfer's photographs reflect the phenomenon very accurately thanks to their use of natural light.

The ethnological museums Höfer has chosen to photograph are highly significant in terms of the history of both collecting and colonialism. She has not photographed every museum established on the basis of colonial expeditions, but those that feature in the series are «must-see» institutions. That, of course, is no coincidence, but rather a consequence of previous research on which museums would best communicate ethnological museum's significance in western culture's development. They include the *Kunstkamera* in Saint Petersburg; the ethnological museums of Dresden, Berlin and Hamburg; the Museum for Central Africa in Tervuren; the Tropenmuseum in Amsterdam; the Trocadero Ethnographic Museum in Paris and its present-day successor, the Quai Branly Museum; Oxford's Pitt Rivers Museum; and the

Museum of Natural History in New York. They are all «must-see» museums. Furthermore, they are institutions that reflect the process of redefinition currently occurring in ethnological museums, which are seeking to take action from within with regard to their colonial origin. This is a real undertaking applied to memory, one geared to preserving their history but also to them ceasing to reproduce prejudices, discrimination and ethnocentrism.

Ethnological museums preserve the memory of cultures through objects. Additionally though, they preserve the memory of different ways of collecting objects, as well as of the type of objects that were of interest in the past. If we were to arrange Höfer's series of images in historical order, the cabinets of curiosities that her photographs of Saint Petersburg's ethnological museum and of Teylers Museum [3] in Haarlem show would come first. It was in cabinets of curiosities that objects from non-European cultures were first exhibited, alongside natural elements that aroused interest or captured the imagination, such as prehistoric animal's bones, shells, elephant tusks and rhinoceros horns, stones and antidotes to poison. Europe's efforts to conquer and colonize Africa, the Americas and Asia led to the inclusion of hitherto unknown or rarely seen objects in cabinets of curiosities stemming from colonization (Schlosser, 1988; Le Fur, 2006: 58-103).

With the constitution of modern states, many of the objects of primitive art in princely collections became the property of state museums. However, the main influx of such objects into Europe occurred at the height of colonialism in the nineteenth century.

Scientific, military and trade expeditions brought large quantities of objects back to their respective metropolises, moulding the collections of the ethnological museums founded in Europe's principal cities as of the middle of the century. Those museum's dependency on colonial activity is entirely evident, due not only to the composition of their main collections but also to the ideology behind them and the goals pursued thereby, chiefly involving disseminating pro-colonialism propaganda. All the faces of a prismatic reality converged in the establishment of ethnological museums in Europe's main cities between the 1870s and 1900. They had a common governing ideology, under which non-European cultures, regarded as primitive or savage, were assigned to the realm of natural science and prehistory.



3. Candida Höfer, *Teylers Museum Haarlem II*, 2003

The museum that best symbolizes nineteenth-century colonialism and its expression in an approach to organizing displays is probably the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford [4], of which Höfer has taken various photographs, offering an insight into the said approach's implicit intellectual structure. The deed of gift signed by Pitt Rivers stipulated that his organizational system must never be altered, a principle that the institution has respected (Chapman, 1985: 15). Consequently, a nineteenth-century ethnological museum's typological display criterion – that of grouping exhibited objects together on the basis of form or function rather than geographic or cultural origin – can still be perceived today. It is probably in the Pitt Rivers Museum that the intention to educate and transmit scientific positions through display-related criteria is most clearly visible. For example, its founder's ideal of transmitting categories through an object's location in a space involved concentric circles starting from a central point corresponding to the Palaeolithic Age and opening out



4. Candida Höfer, *Pitt Rivers Museum Oxford*, 2004

into subsequent circles until arriving at the present (Pitt Rivers, 1891: 117).

Candida Höfer's photographic relationship with the Pitt Rivers Museum has a highly significant precedent in the work of Lothar Baumgarten. Much of his work is devoted to conceptual reflection on the relationship between western culture and aboriginal cultures. He lived in South and North America, among indigenous Amazonian groups and on Native American reservations, giving rise to multiple works and exhibitions. Between 1968 and 1970, Baumgarten produced a series of 80 slides on the Pitt Rivers Museum to be projected as part of an installation entitled *Unsettled Objects*, through which he highlighted the conceptual procedures applied to objects, such as classification, reinvention and generalization. Like Höfer, his focus was on the museum and its implicit categories, not the items contained in it. Consequently, most of his photographs are general views, pictures of shelves and showcases rather than of individual pieces. His slide called *confined*, which shows glass cabinets full of objects, is very similar to the work of Höfer years later.

Baumgarten is much more direct than Höfer, as each of his slides features a word that tells viewers what he is seeking to communicate. Höfer leaves her images wordless,

confident that they are sufficiently eloquent in their own right. The accumulation of objects, grouped together on the basis of function or form and superimposed upon one another, was implicit in the display criteria that Pitt Rivers developed for his museum. The same criteria were widely used in other museums of the time in question. As a result of the colonial process, such museums collections swelled from a few thousand objects to hundreds of thousands in a very short period. The age of capital accumulation, of the infinite multiplication of goods, was also that of the progressive museification of everything produced. As early as 1912, in a text entitled *The Artistic Expression of Primitive Peoples*, Emil Nolde (1968: 177) observed that «Our museums are becoming increasingly large and full, and are growing quickly. I am no friend of these vast agglomerations that suffocate us with their size. I hope we will soon see a reaction against these excessive collections».

The non-European human is present in ethnological museums, but in a decontextualized fashion, extracted from their culture, made a mere representative of the species, a universal human who ceases to be universal precisely because of the absence of context; hence the grouping criterion being based on form rather than meaning. The «human forms in art» showcase (Höfer, 2004: 29) contains a collection of different objects representing shamans, divinities and ancestral figures from a variety of cultures, all grouped together without distinction. However, sculptures representing European humans are conspicuous by their absence, making it clear that there is a hierarchy among the aforementioned objects and their European counterparts, which reside in art museums.

A fundamental aspect of nineteenth-century ethnological museums was the use of large showcases containing mannequins wearing clothes and headdresses, and carrying weapons and other objects, supplanting humans, giving the impression of having been snatched from their lives for a permanent, timeless exhibition. The so-called «Negro of Banyoles», undoubtedly an exceptionally shocking case, exemplifies what is symbolically underlying in these glass cabinets. The exhibit in question was a bushman who had been exhumed in Botswana and taken to the Darder Museum in Banyoles, Spain, where he was stuffed as if he were one of the animals – stuffed birds, lions, elephants – displayed in other galleries in ethnological museums. In 1992, following

a complaint by a citizen of Banyoles and the subsequent intervention of various African governments and Kofi Annan, the bushman was returned to his homeland, where he was buried with great honours by way of redress.

This example reveals what is symbolically present in showcases. It is not only objects that they decontextualize and exhibit; they also exhibit people. In the early days of the colonial expeditions, exhibiting individuals brought back from the colonies was rather common, a practice that existed in Europe's foremost capital cities (Lloyd, 1991: 31-32; Gille, 2005: 54). Where ethnological museum showcases are concerned, people from colonies, from those non-European cultures, that Other, who, once tamed, were exposed to Europeans' curiosity or genuine interest in learning, constitute a historical and symbolic reference point. The angle from which the Candida Höfer's photograph *KIT Tropenmuseum Amsterdam VII* [5] is taken shows the colonial servant, enclosed in a showcase, facing colonists and their families, painted in oils in all their dignity. Dioramas, such as that of the Museum of Natural History in New York (Höfer, 2004: 65), fulfil the same function, although the idea of an image is more aseptic than that of a mannequin in a showcase. Nonetheless, the reference to the relationship between westerners and aborigines is clear in the one that Höfer photographed.

The proliferation of objects from different parts of the world in museums established in the late nineteenth century was a metaphor for what was happening universally. Museums offered the general public the chance to experience, on a reduced scale and without leaving their city, a colonial empire and the range of beings and things found there. Museums, world's fairs and the villages set up in European zoos were a vehicle, one that both educated and entertained (Bennett, 1997:77).

The fact that the history of colonialism and of prejudices towards non-European cultures are implicit in ethnological museum's nature and their display-related principles has led them to undertake an internal process of total reform, one of the most recent examples of which is the Quai Branly Museum, which was set up from scratch on the basis of exhibits from the old Musée de l'Homme and the Musée national des Arts d'Afrique et d'Océanie. Candida Höfer (2004: 37) photographed the original layout of the Trocadero Ethnographic Museum, conceived by Paul Rivet



5. Candida Höfer, *KIT Tropenmuseum Amsterdam VII*, 2003

and Georges-Henri Rivière, using a technique that shows the importance of natural light and its homogenizing effect on showcases. She also photographed the institution's successor, the Quai Branly Museum (Höfer, 2004: 87) [6], the aseptic storage facilities of which, looking more like a hospital's operating theatre than a space for housing a museum's reserve collection, are sufficient proof of the transformation that has taken place.

Looking through Höfer's series of ethnographic photographs in historical order would provide an overview of ethnological museum's entire development process, spanning their roots in cabinets of curiosities, their days as colonial ethnological museums and their present-day reformulation.



6. Candida Höfer, *Musée du Quai Branly Paris I*, 2003

Bertrand Lavier

Bertrand Lavier is a conceptual artist whose works are related to Höfer's in that they always revolve around reflection on artistic activity and the cultural perception of art. Lavier says (2012:17): «Une oeuvre dont on ne peut rien dire, je suis désolé, ce n'est rien». That statement of Lavier sums up his outlook. He organizes his output as an eloquent discourse, one that is immediately graspable upon seeing his pieces and the way he constantly restructures meaning. His work is always based on a point of view and on a reflection performed through the perceptible.

Since 1995, when he was invited to the Johannesburg Contemporary Art Biennale (Gauthier, 2012: 74), Lavier has been working on the analysis of ethnological museum's display and, thus, discursive procedures and their meaning. Some of the objects he exhibited in Johannesburg subsequently reappeared in other shows, and he has also added other, new items to the series. We will analyse a particular section of his Centre Pompidou's anthological exhibition, ended in January 2013, titled *Bertrand Lavier, since 1969*. It updated a process that Lavier began in 1995 and has since revisited on various occasions.

The title of the aforementioned section of the exhibition is *New Impressions of Africa*. This title in itself tells us a great deal. It refers to Raymond Roussel's book *Impressions of Africa*, published in 1909, and his later work *New Impressions of Africa*. *Impressions of Africa* is a text that was firstly serialized in the newspaper *Le Gaulois du dimanche* and subsequently published, at the author's expense, in the form of a corrected edition. In the text, the *Lyseus*, a ship carrying a group of characters travelling to Buenos Aires for different reasons, sinks off the coast of Africa. The shipwrecked travellers are captured by Emperor Talou VII, who demands a sum of money to set them free. While they await their release, they prepare various performances for a show called the «gala of incomparables». The novel begins with a description of the gala and the events that surround it, taking the reader completely by surprise and plunging them into a world of Surrealism avant-la-lettre. The following chapters explain the capture, the history of Talou VII and his people, and the preparation of the gala's performances, restoring a certain degree of logic to the tale. Roussel actually suggested that readers begin in the middle of the text, at page 147, and then work backwards to read the story in its logical order. The work was made into a play in 1922. However, it was a huge flop and met with violent rejection. It was only appreciated by a group of young artists who went on to shape Surrealism. Duchamp was a great admirer of Roussel, also entailing a connection with Lavier, in whose work references to the ready-made and Duchampian aesthetics are a constant. Roussel later wrote *New Impressions of Africa*, which was published in Paris in 1932 by the same publisher as its predecessor. Again, Roussel paid for its publication himself.

Impressions of Africa was published when colonialism and interest in primitive peoples were at their peak. Ethnological museums had generally been established for twenty five years; dealers were selling avant-garde artists African objects brought to Europe by sailors and soldiers; one international exhibition featuring non-European objects followed another; and the whole of European society was closely following the colonial process. Africa, as Roussel tells us in his book, is a place of marvels, a kind of union of the dreamlike, the transcendental and the miraculous. It is also an invented place, where the imagination can run free. It is thus no surprise that the Surrealists identified so closely with his vision. Roussel was perfectly aware that it was a question of *Im-*

pressions of Africa. And like all impressions, his were fleeting, subjective, a personal product.

The fact that Lavier titled his exhibition *New Impressions of Africa* suggests, firstly, a tribute to Roussel's imagination and experimental spirit, and, secondly, his own take on the relationship between Africa and the west, his own «Impressions of Africa», formed in the early twentieth-first century, when Europe is facing the task of doing away with many of the prejudices against Africa that were reflected in its institutions.

New Impressions of Africa consists of a series of objects set out on a platform or pedestal that delimits an area with a meaning: everything on it is a museumified object. That meaning stems not only from the platform, which homogenizes the objects, but also from the metal arms and stands that, like those found in ethnological museums, hold the objects in position. As mentioned earlier, Hannah Höch's work made use of the power of the pedestal or base as an element inherent to the discourse of aestheticization and fetishization. Lavier uses a ready-made – a refrigerator – as a pedestal for a mechanical jack positioned in the style of an aestheticized work (*High-Lift Jack/Zanussi*, 1986). The process of aestheticization is even more complex in this case. The piece is considered art because it is on a platform that delimits an artistic area in a wider aesthetic space, that of a museum, and which also aestheticizes an everyday object, the mechanical jack, which, based on the similarities between its form and that of a certain type of totem, plays the role of a primitive object. A pedestal has the power to separate an object from everyday life and to remove its emotive or subjective values. With that in mind, in the first version of this exhibition, in Johannesburg, one of the objects on Lavier's pedestal was a worn teddy bear (*Teddy*, 1994). Despite it being an everyday, personal object par excellence, it was neutralized by the museum procedure, mirroring the way museums treats non-western works, which are objects of ritual rather than pieces of art, in their dual process of fetishization and aestheticization. Lavier's pedestal features not only decontextualized African objects but also everyday western objects of no particular interest. Following the same procedure as museums, the artist aestheticizes those objects, alters their meaning and opens them up to interpretations related not to their value in terms of use but rather to an added symbolic value.

Lavier includes a series of dissimilar objects on his pedestal, where they are homogenized by his own artistic perspective, which, as a museum does, guides viewers on how to interpret them. The objects in question are a nickel-plated bronze sculpture of Christ, cast using a mould of a nineteenth-century wooden sculpture; sculptures of African ancestral figures, also in nickel-plated bronze, obtained from moulds of the original sculptures; a motorcyclist's helmet; a mechanical jack on a refrigerator, which serves as a pedestal; a chainsaw; a lock; a skateboard; a piece of cement; a chair designed by Marc Newson; and a kayak. Each of those objects refers to a different aspect of the processes of museumification and establishing new, symbolic meanings. In addition to their status as individual pieces, however, there are relationships in terms of approach between the non-European objects and the western objects of art and everyday life, based on similarities with regard to shape and on common areas of meaning. There are also profound contradictions and oppositions between them.

One of the most meaningful procedures is that which Lavier has carried out with a series of original wooden sculptures from Africa [7] (Lavier, 2008). Museums aestheticize objects of ritual. Lavier has gone further, using the sculptures in question to make moulds from which he has obtained pieces in nickel-plated bronze, an utterly western material that gives each of them an appearance totally unlike that of the original. Using the said material makes it very clear that each piece cannot be African, despite its form being identical to that of the original African sculpture used to produce its mould. Lavier has not only done away with the sculpture's sphere of activity – ritual – and their original culture, together with their material – wood –; through his industrial manufacturing procedure, he has also turned them into pieces only found in a western context. Additionally, the use of moulds introduces the concept of serial production, which is typical of western capitalism, commercial secularization and the preponderance of decoration without transcendental meaning.

These African objects of ritual – sculptures of ancestral figures, masks – are in dialogue with another religious figure, although in this case a European one, with which Lavier has performed the same procedure. It is a French nineteenth-century sculpture of Christ, in very poor condition, which he has also used to produce a mould and a nickel-plated bronze piece. The objects of both origins have undergone the same

7. Bertrand Lavier, *Iba*, 2008

symbolic and technical process. However, Lavier reveals further meaning, namely that all religions are based on the relationship between humans and the transcendental, and all their objects of ritual have been aestheticized, deconsecrated and decontextualized upon entering museums. The artist has carried out the same deconsecration procedure that ethnological museums have performed on non-western objects of ritual. His nickel-plated bronze copy of Christ is no longer the cult image, although it still hints at its original function, just as the African sculptures do. The western and African cult objects belong to religious spheres that the west always thought incompatible. Primitive religion, regarded as barbaric, confronts Christianity, which Europe considered to be the only true religion throughout the colonial process. The Surrealists had already included African objects and Christian figures in *The Truth about the Colonies*, an alternative exhibition they staged in Paris in 1931 (Blake, 2002:51), where an image of the Virgin with Child was displayed as a «European fetish» alongside African sculptures of ancestral figures.

Lavier highlights other relationships based on similarities in terms of shape. To that end, he decontextualizes objects and positions them in a specific way or obliges viewers

to look upon them from a particular angle. He thus gives a lock (*J.M.B. Classique*, 1994) the appearance of a primitive piece, and makes a helmet and a chainsaw (*Metabo*, 2008) look like masks. Art museums have always selected and displayed pieces of primitive art on the basis of the likeness of their shape to that of pieces from western culture. A mask is turned into a sculpture of a face. A statue of an ancestral figure becomes a full-body sculpture. Lavier has carried out the opposite process. He has turned everyday items into primitive objects by setting them out to be viewed in a certain way. The helmet, from 2011 and bearing the name «Shark», has been turned into a mask. As it fully conceals the face and head, it bears a resemblance to a mask, particularly one of the kind that covers its wearer's entire head. An individual can become another being by hiding their face. A mask's wearer ceases to be themselves and becomes the transcendental being whose mask they possess. The presence of the word «Shark» on the helmet is not meaningless. The shark is a totem animal in all primitive cultures that come into contact with the sea, and a beast regarded as a great predator in the west, with echoes of totemism. The procedure that Lavier has carried out with the *Metabo* 2008 chainsaw [8]

is similar to some extent. Its unusual position gives it a likeness to a mask, specifically one bearing a sawshark's snout, which has a pair of long barbels ahead of the mouth and is edged with different-sized teeth. Sawsharks are also totem animals in many primitive cultures. In primitive masks, part of an animal is held to be a symbol of the whole animal. We are generally accustomed to this kind of synecdoche procedure, and consequently associate the chainsaw with a sawshark straight away.

Another way in which museums deconsecrate and aestheticize objects is by setting them out in a way geared to emphasizing their form rather than their function, to the extent of turning them into entirely different objects. Consider, for example, African spoons exhibited as sculptures. Lavier has undertaken the same procedure with a western object, a skateboard [9]. On the museum plinth, an iron display arm is used to hold the skateboard in a diagonal position in midair. Made in 1995, the *Chuck McTruck skateboard* is an object that Lavier bought in a bargain store. He had its base and pedestal fitted by a specialist in performing such work for exhibitions of primitive objects. Its condition makes it clear that it has been used, although it is not its use that is emphasized but its symbolic value. The image visible on the bottom of the skateboard depicts a skater being run over by a lorry. The object no longer has an owner, a geographical origin or cultural context. And, of course, its function has vanished.

Lavier used a similar procedure in his work entitled *Embryo*, produced in 2002, which features a chair of the same name created by Marc Newson. By changing the chair's position, Lavier turned it into a horned being, in an operation not unlike that which Picasso carried out with his *Bull's Head* sculpture in 1942, when he welded the seat of an old bicycle to a rusty set of handlebars to transform them into an effigy of a bull.

Ethnological museums submerge objects in a time that stands still, that kind of limbo beyond time, in which the destruction inherent in primitive objects has been nullified. Primitive objects are always made from perishable materials and are not intended to be preserved. Either time is allowed to take its toll on them, turning them back into matter – in water, in earth –, and they are replaced by others, or they are deliberately and ritually destroyed. Museums achieve their mummification of primitive objects through a complex res-



8. Bertrand Lavier, *Metabo*, 2008



9. Bertrand Lavier, *Chuck McTruck*, 1995

toration system. In 2001, Lavier read an article about a sea kayak (Gauthier, 2012: 74) that had been disinterred in very poor condition and fully restored to be included in a museum. That inspired his work *Nautiraid*, dated 2002, consisting of a seriously damaged polyester resin kayak restored using the same methods applied in the restoration of primitive or archaic objects. Following the example of many ethnological museums, where kayaks tend to be prominently positioned, Lavier has placed a kayak on his museum pedestal. His kayak, however, belongs to our present-day culture. Taking great pains and incurring considerable costs to artistically restore an item that could easily be substituted by another

of the same kind highlights the procedures through which objects are placed in time that has come to a standstill, museum time, when outside such institutions they would be alive, engaged in a process of deterioration, destruction and replacement by new equivalents.

At different stages in terms of contemporary art, the three artists to whom I have referred have taken ethnological museums and their subsequent restructuring as art museums not only as an object of reflection but also as inspiration for the creation of work rich in aesthetic suggestion, work that speaks to us eloquently of the relationships between humans and culture.

Notes

- 1 Candida Höfer, in Through the Lens of Candida Höfer. Asia Tatler.com, interview in <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gfAmjCyPcZw>. Accessed May 20, 2015.
- 2 Candida Höfer, in Through the Lens of Candida Höfer. Asia Tatler.com, Interview in <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gfAmjCyPcZw>. Accessed May 20, 2015.
- 3 Candida Höfer, interview in MARTÍN, Alberto, «La gente se hace más visible al estar ausente de un espacio», *El País*, Madrid, 14-4-2007.

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