



Trauma and repair in the museum: an introduction

Maria Walsh¹ · Alexandra Kokoli²

Published online: 16 May 2022

© The Author(s) under exclusive licence to Springer Nature Limited 2022

Abstract Despite its considerable investment in questions of memory, attachments between subjects and objects, and trauma and its treatment, psychoanalysis has been largely sidelined in the unfolding reassessment of museums. This introduction to the special issue on ‘Trauma and Repair in the Museum’, which aims to reintroduce psychoanalytic perspectives in these debates, outlines the issues around reparation that surround the modern museum due to the traumatic legacies of coloniality. Timothy P. Brown’s notion of how the trauma of displacement and dissociation effects both objects and communities is key to our consideration of the museum as symptomatic of trauma, as is Cathy Caruth’s reading of history as trauma. Referring to several artists’ practices, such as Lisa Reihana, Erika Tan, and especially Kader Attia’s concept of repair, as well as a number of museological approaches to restitution, we expand on the complexities of ongoing coloniality and its implication with museums as institutions, practices of collection and display, and highly charged psychoactive spaces. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s rereading of Melanie Klein’s notion of reparation allows us to posit a form of decolonial repair that involves the assembling of damaged part-objects into ‘something like a whole [but] *not necessarily like any preexisting whole*’ (2003, p. 128, original emphasis). This approach enables a reckoning with trauma and its legacies that keeps them visible without ruling out processes of reparation. We follow our outline of trauma and repair in the museum with summaries of our contributors’ articles, which expose and unpack the mutual implication of collections, institutions and displays with patriarchy, colonialism and racial capitalism through the critical discourse of

✉ Maria Walsh
m.walsh@chelsea.arts.ac.uk

Alexandra Kokoli
a.kokoli@mdx.ac.uk

¹ Chelsea College of Arts, University of the Arts London, London, UK

² Middlesex University, London, UK



contestation, while also acknowledging the potential of museums to overcome their traumatic origins.

Keywords the modern museum · trauma · repair · reparation · coloniality · psychoanalytic discourse

The modern museum precedes the birth of psychoanalysis at the end of the nineteenth century. In its guise as a public modality of collection and display, this museum comes into being after the French Revolution. Championing the latter's liberalism, what were once private collections – royal, church and aristocratic – would now be accessible to all (Bennett, 1989, p. 89). Yet this ostensible idealism was fraught with paradoxical tensions. Adopting Eileen Cooper-Greenhill's Foucauldian approach to the museum, Tony Bennett (1989) refers to the contradictory origins of the modern museum as being both an elite temple of the arts and having a utilitarian impulse towards democratic education. In this dichotomous ethos, as Bennett argues, the museum was shaped into an instrument of the disciplinary society:

Through the institution of a division between the producers and consumers of knowledge – a division which assumed an architectural form in the relations between the hidden spaces of the museum, where knowledge was produced and organized in camera, and its public spaces, where knowledge was offered for passive consumption – the museum became a site where bodies constantly under surveillance, were to be rendered docile. (1989, p. 89).

It is tempting, in this special issue of *Psychoanalysis, Culture and Society*, to align Bennett's description of the museum's division of spaces – hidden and public – with the modern technique and discourse of psychoanalysis, itself an equally disciplinary modality. Indeed, as Milchman and Rosenberg (n.d.) state: 'For Foucault, psychoanalysis is a discipline that "disciplines," that helps to create politically and economically socialized, useful, cooperative, and – as one of the hallmarks of bio-power – docile individuals.' Both the modern museum and the modern discourse of psychoanalysis differentially operate in terms of what is public and what is hidden. At its most general, psychoanalytic discourse attends to the public display of symptoms as expressions of individual and collective unconscious neuroses and traumas that, to varying degrees, would otherwise remain hidden. It could also be said that the museum's techniques of display not only obfuscate the power bases of its dissemination of knowledge but keep the museum's 'repressed' origins out of sight. In this analogy, the museum's artefacts operate as ideational symptoms as well as symbols of power and wealth. In the official narrative of the birth of the modern museum, its public display of acquisitions was considered as being for the common good: to educate the 'crowd' and to inculcate narratives of national pride. Museums naturalise the sociocultural biases of the canon by inculcating standards of taste, aesthetics and value in their audiences, and mapping implicit hierarchies within their displays or, more poignantly, between what is on display and what remains in storage. Such mores ensure that the 'hidden' origins in



violence of their acquisitions are kept out of sight, both its intertwined histories of legitimised extractivism and looting, and its use of artefacts to prop up narratives of imperial mastery over others.¹

Trauma and repair in the museum

The contemporary museum both participates in and helps sustain a psychosocial regime which retains substantial potential to (re)traumatise. As Timothy P. Brown (2004) argues, not only is the artefact marked by ‘a traumatic rupture’, but the displacement and dissociation of its having been ‘violently transplanted from one context to another’ (p. 248) has the potential to re-wound the communities that cohere around the museum. In this sense, the museum remains at least doubly traumatic, whether it fails or succeeds in its ideological mission. In the first place, for communities from whom objects were stolen, and their descendants, encountering them in national collections can reactivate the trauma of loss and generate further ‘trauma’ in that these objects are displayed as evidence of colonial hierarchies and values that have been ostensibly overcome but are still politically and socially operational. Museums can provoke in the descendants of colonisers the shame of historic and ongoing complicity, or co-opt them into the museum’s colonial project. Artefacts obtained through imperialist invasion and looting are interpellated through the museum into material evidence of the supremacy and worthiness of the colonisers, thus perpetuating the legacies of empire and consolidating them into current global inequalities. In this way, museums help convert real violence into symbolic tensions and divisions within the communities they purport to serve. Nevertheless, Brown, in his consideration of the pedagogical role of museums in relation to such communities, argues that

trauma is not just a condition that is specific to certain groups; trauma characterises life in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Indeed, the effects of trauma can reverberate through a community to such a degree that the very notion of a national and cultural identity is kept in a perpetual state of crisis. (2004, p. 247)

The usefulness of thinking of trauma in this more expanded sense is that it untethers trauma from the polarised positionalities of victims and perpetrators and, rather than sealing it off in an irretrievable past, allows for connections of ‘wounds’ across cultures and times including the present.² Brown further argues that

¹ It is important to remember that the museological habit of repressing the violent colonial underpinnings of collections represents a twentieth century development. As the abolition of slavery and emancipation of enslaved people in the British-colonised Caribbean gave rise to new modalities of racism in the late nineteenth century, the museum both reflected and supported these by performing European supremacy contrasted with African ‘savagery’, often literally in the abject practice of so-called ‘human zoos’, such as the one in the royal park around King Leopold’s Royal Africa Museum in Tervuren (Hicks, 2020, pp. 190–191).

² For an account of the seepage of trauma across public and private registers in relation to cultural and media phenomena, see Mark Seltzer’s article ‘Wound Culture: Trauma in the Pathological Public Sphere’, *October* 80, Spring 1997, pp. 3–26.



Institutions that rely on cultural phenomena to communicate and educate should therefore consider a theory of crisis and pedagogy that can address the forever wounded artefact – the individual and collective body (2004, p. 248).

Such a ‘theory of crisis and pedagogy’ could be said to be operative in our pairing of ‘trauma and repair’. Just as trauma, in this framing, spills over events and can no longer be adequately named or contained, repair is also delinked from redemptive and restorative aspirations to operations that are simultaneously more modest and more complex. Aimé Césaire (1955/2000) famously equated colonisation with ‘thingification’ (p. 42), comparing museums to cemeteries of non-European civilisations where their ‘dead and scattered parts’ are ‘duly labelled’ yet from which nothing can be learned (p. 71).³ To rethink artefacts, therefore, as vibrant and dynamic, not mere documents of past crises or symptoms of ongoing ones but as agents for change, has the potential to endow the museum with an authentically pedagogical mission possessing decolonial potential. Thereby, ‘the museum artefact is no longer ... a self-contained object but ... a present “situation” that is used to negotiate the boundaries between past events and future possibilities’ (Brown, 2004, p. 253).

This special issue contributes to genealogies of trauma, and its materialisation and institutionalisation in the museum, and explores the potential of a reconfigured museological practice for repair. Contemporary curating, art history and art theory confront some of the most complex questions of museology and heritage studies in which practical considerations of conservation interweave with philosophical and political reflections on transience, memory and commemoration. Psychoanalysis offers a toolkit through which to explore how and why museums continue to matter, the strength of feeling by which they are condemned and defended, and the psychosocial, personal-political and ethical-aesthetic interstices that they occupy.

Trauma and repair in psychoanalysis

The specificity of trauma in classical psychoanalytic literature seems apposite to the museum given that one of its origins lies in Freud’s widely debated and disputed theories of sexual trauma. Indeed, the ‘implantation’ of sexuality for Jean Laplanche (1970/1976, pp. 43–44) is the traumatic core of the individual, marked by the pronounced temporal gap between their acculturation in an already sexual world and their own delayed ‘biological’ maturation. However, Freud’s model of structural trauma, while derived from his interpretation of his patients’ narratives of early sexual experiences as psychic fantasies rather than physical sexual abuse, complicates the temporality of traumatic events in ways that are useful to considerations of historical trauma. A ‘traumatic’ event is either not understood or

³ Césaire’s essay indicts the practice of European imperialism as well as the systems of knowledge that support it, focusing in particular on ethnography and psychoanalysis, which he dismisses as a renewal of old clichés and a justification of ‘absurd prejudices’ (1955/2000, p. 59). Although a more detailed analysis of his critique of French psychoanalyst Octave Mannoni falls outside the scope of this introduction, Césaire’s observations are a useful reminder of the work required to decolonise psychoanalysis, work that has been already undertaken and is still in progress.



acknowledged when it occurs but only gains significance, i.e., produces symptoms, when it is reactivated by a second event that recalls the ‘unconscious’ effects of the former. The gap between the two events, referred to as the latency period, results in an inability to place the originary (traumatic) event in chronological time. Both these conceptual aspects – latency and lack of conscious registration – of Freud’s structural model were developed by and predominated in what became known as trauma theory in Anglo-American literature and cultural studies in the 1990s. One of the most influential trauma theorists, Cathy Caruth, adopted Freud’s model to proffer the notion of trauma as ‘unassimilable to consciousness’ (1996, p. 116).⁴ This does not mean that trauma cannot be signified in representation but that it demands a form of representation that speaks to the nature of the event’s elision in memory. For Caruth, as for the art historian and critic Hal Foster who also adopted the latency model in his work, there is no subject of trauma.⁵ The event of trauma, in breaching the subject’s consciousness, evacuates it and it is only in the aftermath of reactivation that the subject, haunted by its aftereffects, is compelled to address the originary traumatic experience. In this address, cultural production can become like a form of talking cure in which gaps and fragments are pieced together to make sense of or give witness to trauma, though for Caruth all such attempts can only signify the truth of trauma by their failure to integrate it into a coherent narrative.

Caruth lifts Freud’s model from its sexual aetiology to address historical trauma, thereby reframing history, its experience and transmission, in traumatic terms. In this, she excavates another of the archaeologies of trauma in Freudian psychoanalysis, i.e., the violence of patricide, which, like the traumatic implantation of sexuality, also pivots on shameful secrets. In an early essay, ‘Unclaimed Experience: Trauma and the Possibility of History’ (1991),⁶ Caruth performs a close reading of Freud’s *Moses and Monotheism* (1964) to proffer the notion of trauma as an aporetic gap in conscious knowledge founded on an unconscious denial of historical atrocity.⁷ Freud’s essay is a speculative historical fiction of the traumatic founding of Jewish history and identity on a repressed crime, i.e. the Hebrews’ murder of Moses, the ‘Egyptian’ liberator, who led them out of captivity in Egypt and back to Canaan where they had previously lived in freedom. Freud positions this ‘return’ as a new beginning, a departure in which the murder was not only repressed but also made discontinuous in time by the assimilation of ‘the liberating acts of Moses to the acts of another man, the priest of Yahweh (also named Moses)’ (Caruth, 1991, p.184). Although Freud’s distortion of this story is disputed and discredited as historically inaccurate, it allows Caruth to posit history as ‘precisely the way we are implicated in each other’s traumas’ (1996, p. 24).

⁴ Other proponents of trauma theory developed at Yale University in the early 1990s were the literature professors Shoshana Felman and Geoffrey Hartman, and the psychiatrist and psychoanalyst Dori Laub.

⁵ For an account of this concept in relation to art, see Foster’s article ‘Obscene, Abject, Traumatic’ *October* 78, 1996, pp.106–124.

⁶ First published in a *Yale French Studies* special issue ‘Literature and the Ethical Question’ (1991), this article subsequently developed into Caruth’s influential monograph *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (1991).

⁷ See Ruth Leys *Trauma: A Genealogy* (2000) for a masterful critique of Caruth’s reading of Freud’s concept of trauma.



Caruth's reading of historical trauma as being founded on a repressed crime or violence can be productively read into contemporary debates about museum restitution and the public coming-to-knowledge of the murders and looting which underpin the modern museum (although, as in neurosis, there is always unconscious knowledge of the crime). The material and artefactual spoils of colonialist extraction are founded on traumatic encounters and actions whose latency period is over and whose repercussions are now generating heated and urgent debates about reparation. In Caruth's introduction to her edited collection *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (1995), trauma and repair become entangled in the act of bearing witness. Rather than treating trauma as an obstacle to transmission, thus also attempting to contain and repress it for transmission's sake (as the museum has historically been wont to do), trauma's acknowledgement by others leads to reparative ways out for which all parties bear responsibility.

How does one listen to what is impossible? Certainly one challenge of this listening is that it may no longer be simply a choice: to be able to listen to the impossible, that is, is also to have been *chosen* by it, *before* the possibility of mastering it with knowledge. ... To listen to the crisis of trauma, that is, is not only to listen for the event, but to hear in the testimony the survivor's departure from it; the challenge of the therapeutic listener, in other words, is *how to listen to the departure*. (Caruth, 1995, p. 10, emphasis in the original)

Caruth here hints at a way of moving beyond trauma's inaccessibility to traditional representation. In this, her work presages new developments in trauma theory which focus on postcolonial and perpetrator trauma (Bond and Craps, 2020) and belies the notion that the Freudian model of structural trauma that prevailed in 1990s trauma theory is reducible to that era. And while the current attention to perpetrator trauma identified by Bond and Craps is in no way to exonerate crime, it is useful to consider, however counterintuitively, how the flagrant rush to pronouncements of restitution may act as a defence mechanism rather than a meaningful 'reparation' in the psychoanalytic sense.

Museums and/as monuments

A long-contested cultural space, the modern museum is increasingly recognised as a battleground not only of competing understandings of its remit and value, but also, more literally, as material documentation of real violence. Although this was always 'known', it only achieved wide recognition in the public domain in the past fifteen years or so. In the UK, this recognition seems to have reached a pitch with the extensive publicity around Dan Hick's *The Brutish Museums: The Benin Bronzes, Colonial Violence and Cultural Restitution* (2020) as well as the protests related to Black Lives Matter, one of which resulted in the bronze statue in Bristol of merchant and slave trader Edward Colston being toppled into the harbour. Debates about what to do with these public commemorations of colonisers and slave traders, many of whom funded and founded museums, is underway. Even though at the time of writing (July 2021), the UK government continues to oppose 'the removal of



statues or other similar objects' (Dowden 2020), the trauma contained within the institution of the museum has been let loose (Price, 2021).

Freud's comments on the role monuments play in psychic life illuminate what is at stake in both the toppling of statues and the necessity of repatriation. In 'Five Lectures on Psycho-analysis' (1909/1957), Freud describes monuments as fulfilling two seemingly incompatible functions: on the one hand they commemorate past events and persons, but they also rely on being ignored. As 'mnemonic *symbols*' (p. 16, emphasis added), they work not as memory devices but screens, keeping memory at bay whilst they claim to mark it. To take them at face value and not ignore them is what hysterics and neurotics would do.

[W]hat should we think of a Londoner who paused to-day in deep melancholy before the memorial of Queer Eleanor's funeral instead of going about his business in the hurry that modern working conditions demand or instead of feeling joy over the youthful queen of his own heart? Or again what should we think of a Londoner who shed tears before the Monument that commemorates the reduction of his beloved metropolis to ashes although it has long since risen again in far greater brilliance? (Freud, 1909/1957, p. 16)

It is not altogether surprising that Freud's operative definition of sanity is accepting the incompatibility between the temporal registers of history and the quotidian: to ignore history – or rather consent to its aestheticised cover-up – in order to allow oneself to go about one's busy day. We do not accept his judgement but borrow his identification of monuments as the marker of a risky threshold, a point of crisis simultaneously taking place in public space and within us all that sabotages business as usual. Affirmative responses to this crisis vary. Hicks (2021) has said he would like to see Colston buried underwater for all time, a notion that alludes to the cleansing nature of water and burial as a hiding from view (or repressing). Other voices call for a resiting of these statues in museums, not to venerate these monuments but to remember their complicity in historical trauma and in the past erasures of that trauma, as part of a kind of pedagogical heritage and a way of accounting for it in a social healing or reparation. One can extend this debate about statues to objects in the museum and the discussions that have been ongoing behind closed doors, but which are now coming to the fore in mainstream public debate. For example, the Prussian Cultural Heritage Foundation, the body that oversees Berlin's public museums, has greenlit negotiations towards the repatriation of the Benin bronzes in its collections to Nigerian authorities (Adams, 2021), while the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford has been in long-term negotiations with indigenous communities about the return of human remains and artefacts, as well as engaging in the collaborative project Living Cultures.⁸ Initiated by Maasai elders from Tanzania and Kenya, the Living Cultures series of conversations are reconsidering what should be on display and how it should be displayed as well as thinking through how people-centred, listening relationships in which

⁸ The project includes team members from the Pitt Rivers Museum and the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, Cambridge, as well as Oxford-based participatory film facilitators, Insight Share. For more information see: <https://prm.web.ox.ac.uk/event/living-cultures-getting-to-know-you-building-caring-relationships-and-earning-trust>.



knowledges are shared might shift and rebalance the power in UK museums. This resiting is not only an acknowledgement and righting of a wrong on behalf of the colonisers and their descendants but also a recognition that objects are not one-dimensional. They embody multiple histories and are in many cases forever transformed by the enforced journeys of pillage and looting. Acknowledgement and recognition of this is part of the painful analytic processes taking place in museums, painful to the colonisers' descendants and museum curators having to come to terms with past violence, and painful, most of all, to the communities who have directly suffered from colonialism and its legacies, in and beyond the museum. Repatriation, however, need not be confined to such melancholic frameworks, nor viewed narrowly as a movement from the former coloniser to the former colonised. In the words (and art practice) of Erika Tan, repatriation is productively approached as 'an instability of form' and 'a kind of "shape shifting"': it no longer need be 'the physical, material and geographical "return" of an object, but a movement of sorts that extricates the object from proprietorial notions of interpretation and value' (Tan, 2014, pp. 33–34).

From restitution to reparation and/as repair

However, in the resurgent culture wars, objects become interpellated in complementary fantasies of mastery and denial anew. For example, in a further form of colonial paternalism, an excuse against repatriation by Western museums has been to set conditions to other countries that they can have their objects back only if they provide an adequate museological infrastructure. Aside from the fact that many of the objects in Western museum collections were never meant to be displayed but used or destroyed as part of collective ritual (for example, in Oceanic and African societies masks were often burned after ceremonies), this excuse also imposes Western and fast outdated notions of the modern museum and the preservation of 'heritage' onto other cultures that may have different ideas about conservation and historical transmission. The question remains, whose stories are visible in these museum spaces and how do they serve their audiences?

In 2017, President Emmanuel Macron made an unprecedented announcement that France would enact 'temporary or permanent restitution' of objects of African heritage housed in its museums. He subsequently commissioned economist Felwine Sarr and art historian Bénédicte Savoy to write a report on restitution. Their report, *The Restitution of African Cultural Heritage: Toward a New Relational Ethics* (2018), a 252-page document consisting of three densely researched sections and for which 150 African interlocutors were consulted, was falsely interpreted by the media as calling for an out-and-out evacuation of museums, especially from the Musée du quai Branly-Jacques Chirac in Paris, which contains 70,000 of the estimated 80,000 African objects in French museums. Although on receipt of the report Macron ordered the return of 26 objects looted from Benin, and in his initial announcement had said restitution would take place within five years, according to Sally Price (in Price and Hicks, 2020), only one object had been 'returned' by January 2021, a Senegalese sword which was already on loan to a museum in Dakar.



(The ‘loan’ was thereby extended for five years.) The final section of Sarr and Savoy’s report addresses the legal frameworks that make restitution very difficult if not in part impossible, as they require governments and courts to change laws around provenance. Such legalities are beyond the scope of this special issue let alone our introduction, but it is interesting to note that discussion and acts of restitution in the UK are equally fraught. Some regional museums are moving at considerably greater speed, and with more willingness, because they are not bound by the imperial constraints of British provenance law. For example, the Cambridge Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, which ‘owns’ one of the largest collections of objects from Benin, has stated that if a claim is made, the expectation is that all Beninese works looted during an 1897 British military campaign would be returned, whereas the British Museum and other national institutions such as the Victoria and Albert Museum are prevented from doing the same by the British Museum Act 1963 and the Heritage Act 1983 (Bakare, 2021). If restitution is to become a reality, decolonial curatorial practice in itself will not suffice without wide-ranging political and legislative change.

Artists’ voices are very much to the fore of the debate, not least thanks to art’s capacity to negotiate and even overcome the impasses of trauma (cf. Pollock, 2013).⁹ Sarr and Savoy briefly refer to several contemporary artists in their report on restitution, most notably the French-Algerian artist Kader Attia, whose concept of repair in his vast installation *The Repair from Occident to Extra-Occidental Cultures* (2012) is a model of how the exchange of objects between and across cultures might be rethought in terms that include the agency of colonised peoples. Taking inspiration from the repair of African objects – calabashes in particular – and the Japanese craft of *kintsugi*, Attia proffers a notion of repair that retains the visibility of the damage or wound. Rather than repair as a return to a prior wholeness or unity, repair is posited as a process of negotiation between damage and its suture that acknowledges the history and the time of the object and/or event, including the wounds of colonialism. Attia’s concept of repair is uncannily reminiscent of Melanie Klein’s psychoanalytic notion of reparation in which the latter, rather than simply making good on the psychic damage done to the mother’s body in the infant’s paranoid-schizoid phase, is a process of maintaining the ambivalence of good and bad, wholeness and damage in the ensuing depressive reparative phase. As Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick argues, reparation is a flexible to-and-fro process of negotiating damage. In her reading of Melanie Klein’s depressive position, she focuses on how damage is in a productive, rather than a purely negative, tension with repair, offering the possibility to the infant/subject ‘to assemble or “repair” the murderous part-objects into something like a whole [but] *not necessarily like any preexisting whole*’ (2003, p. 128, original emphasis).

⁹ Drawing on the theories and art practice of Bracha L. Ettinger as well as the Anglo-American canon of trauma studies, Griselda Pollock (2013, p. 4) proposes a definition of trauma ‘not in terms of event ... but in terms of *encounter with its traces* that assumes some kind of space and time, and makes some kind of gap as well as a different kind of participating otherness’. Art is pivotal in mediating this encounter with traces: ‘the destructuring void that is trauma ... ceases to be trauma once transformed by the structuring of aesthetic translation of after-affect into after-image while still carrying, as both words suggest, traces of trauma’.



Reparation of the object in Kleinian thinking is not ‘about undoing or reversing damage’ (Best, 2016, p. 80). Rather it is about maintaining the ambivalence of negative experiences, such as anger and fear of annihilation, alongside positive feelings, like hope. Building on Sedgwick, art historian Susan Best describes artist Judy Watson’s etchings *the holes in the land* (2015), which focused on and redeployed Aboriginal cultural material in the British Museum’s collection, as ‘taking into account situations where damage cannot be (or has not been) reversed, but which nonetheless call out for some kind of acknowledgement and recognition’ (2018, p. 80).

In the film that forms the centrepiece of Attia’s installation *The Object’s Interlacing* (2020), several talking head sequences are montaged from interviews he conducted with historians, philosophers, psychoanalysts, and other experts and interested parties, including Sarr and Savoy, on the issue of the restitution of African artefacts that were violently displaced into Western ownership in the era of historical colonialisms. Through the edit, the different voices and divergent views appear to be in conversation, thereby enabling the complexities of the issue to be circulated and aired, though what predominantly emerges is the hybrid, rather than the authentic, nature of the displaced objects. For example, philosopher Souleymane Bachir Diagne, arguing against the purity of ‘origins’, describes the objects as mutants. This is accentuated by the installation in which sculptural copies of such objects, some made by 3D printing, face the screen, casting shadows on the projection as if haunting the conversation but from a point in the future rather than the past. As Attia notes:

They are now the incarnation of different stories and we cannot claim the return of them by denying the hundred years of the history of white intellectuals who have been placing their own history and their own utopian view on them. We are all, of course, for the restitution of objects, but, at the same time, I’m working on the question of whether it’s an honest desire to return, rather than a kind of a fake self-assumption: ‘OK, we gave you back your objects and now it’s done, we never committed those crimes.’ I’m sceptical about the denial of the mutant aspect of these objects. It’s very reductive and is also a form of puritanism that works on both sides. (in Walsh, 2021, p. 4)

The installation poses, but does not answer, questions. In the film, the psychoanalyst Christine Théodore speaks about her neurosis of losing objects such as keys for example. Relating this to the death of her mother when she was a very young girl, she refers to how this neurosis became displaced by a singing workshop project she developed with her patients in which most of the songs were about mothers. Such psychoanalytic concepts of loss and reparation reverberate back onto the other voices in the film and complicate the apparent choice between being pro- or anti-restitution, highlighting instead the questions of who gets to see the ‘returned’ objects, who will be their custodians or destroyers, and who will be making the decisions, and on whose behalf.

Lisa Reihana, an artist of Māori descent, whose large-scale projection *in Pursuit of Venus [infected]* (2015–2017) was shown in the New Zealand pavilion at the



Venice Biennale in 2017, has also been vocal on these issues. Conceived as a corrective response to the French scenic wallpaper designed by Jean-Gabriel Charvet, *Les Sauvages de la Mer Pacifique* (1804–1805), also known as ‘Captain Cook’s voyages’, Reihana’s panoramic projection is 24 metres long, lasts 64 minutes, and has 1500 digital layers made up of more than three trillion pixels. Although the original wallpaper was said to represent Pacific landscapes and peoples, it was in reality a completely fictional mash-up of flora, fashions and people from other times and places. Digitally ‘stitching’ 70 vignettes depicting historic and imagined scenes to slowly scroll across a hand-painted landscape, Reihana re-envisioned the ‘first contact’ between Captain Cook’s crew and Pacific peoples. Featuring mainly indigenous actors, Reihana’s reimagining emphasises indigenous customs, skills and culture. The opening sequences depict acts of cross-cultural exchanges that are sharply stalled by the eruption of colonial violence initiated by the British, its horror somewhat lulled by the hypnotic scrolling motion of the projection which is accompanied by an immersive soundscape composed by James Pinker (Reihana’s partner) with Sean Cooper that includes dialogue in several Pacific languages, a key factor in the work’s reparative sensibility.¹⁰ Reihana’s *in Pursuit of Venus [infected]* was also included in the Royal Academy’s blockbuster exhibition *Oceania* (Brunt and Thomas, 2018) which, marking 250 years since Cook’s first voyage to the Pacific, sourced three-quarters of its exhibited objects from European collections. In acknowledgement of the problematic nature of some of its displays, the Royal Academy organised private and public blessing ceremonies for indigenous groups to honour the show’s sacred exhibits. Subsequent to its opening, a Solomon Islands museum director called for the return of a seven-metre-long, crocodile-shaped feast trough, which was looted by a British captain in 1891. Discussing these issues in *The Guardian* newspaper, Reihana advocated for a ‘circulation’ of artefacts rather than a one-way return of disputed works. She stated: ‘Circulation is really interesting with the Tahitian people, in terms of their tattoo culture. Because cultural practices were banned, they look to the patterns on these objects and start to employ them on to the body. So they become living and part of the general conversation’ (in Smallman, 2018). However, when it comes to the repatriation of exhibits containing human remains, she is rightly uncompromising: ‘You want your people and your bones back, right?’ (in Smallman, 2018).

Ultimately, an object-relations psychoanalytic approach offers the perspective that reparation is to always reckon with damage, not deny it, as otherwise historical trauma continues to resurface rather than being worked through by both acknowledging and acting on the haunting traces and impact of injury. Can the museum house the narratives of pain and displacement held by objects in ways that acknowledge the rupture of trauma, but also present more entangled symbolic and material relations between cultures and publics? If it proves unable or unwilling to do so, the future of the museum in any shape or form seems uncertain.

¹⁰ As Etan Smallman (2018) writes, Reihana struggled to persuade indigenous communities to act out her scenes because of the removal of artefacts from their countries of origin: ‘Some people have been devastated by colonisation and they’re too scared to even give something over because it’s like you’re taking something again and again.’



Special issue: contents

While our introductory essay has mostly addressed historical trauma and the restitution of objects in relation to repair, it provides the backdrop to this special issue of *Psychoanalysis, Culture and Society* in which the ramifications of museological origins, histories, practices and user experiences are addressed through various schools of psychoanalytic thought and psychoanalytically inspired art theories and practices. The issue focuses on the critical discourse of contestation, which exposes and unpacks the mutual implication of collections, institutions and displays with patriarchy, colonialism and racial capitalism. Following the shift in contemporary museology, in which emphasis has moved from mere display to more participatory intervention, the issue attempts to track how contestation has morphed into lively negotiations in which historians, curators, artists and stakeholders explore new ways of understanding the histories and publics assembled in the museum.¹¹ As part of this new understanding, the therapeutic potential of engaging with museum collections and exhibitions is being explored from psychodynamic object-relations perspectives such as those found in the work of Lynn Froggett and Myna Trustram whose essay ‘Object relations in the museum: A psychosocial perspective’ (2014) is cited by a number of our contributors. Asking whose stories are visible in museum spaces and how they serve their audiences, our issue explores how psychoanalytic thinking might enable both a regenerative approach to such questions and a critical lens through which to examine the inherent ‘goodness’ thought to reside in object relations. Our theme of the binary couplet ‘trauma and repair’ puts that ‘goodness’ into question while not out-ruling it as part of the contemporary museum experience. Whereas cultural theorists who advocate a post-critical museology may view the disciplinary idea of the museum as anachronistic, we maintain the value of sticking with the anachronistic to address the contemporary. As art historians and theorists, we gravitate towards art practices and artworks that perform museological critique and reparation in visual and material forms, both within them and in their sites and situations, in and through museum collections. ‘Trauma and Repair in the Museum’ consists of five scholarly articles and, in the Counterspace section, three shorter interventions by curators and artists. While case studies from art, film and curatorial practices and exhibitions are key to all contributions, they are a central focus of the texts in Counterspace.

Sarah-Joy Ford often works with quilting and embroidery in ways that are not merely informed by archival research but challenge the distinction between militant research and queer feminist art practices. Her original quilt for the Beyond the Binary project at the Pitt Rivers Museum, Oxford, gave Ford the opportunity to piece together fragments from her research into the personal archive of Karen Fisch,

¹¹ In *Post Critical Museology: Theory and Practice in the Art Museum* (2013), Andrew Dewdney, David Dibosa and Victoria Walsh describe a shift from the custodial display of objects to a public-oriented environment albeit a necessarily supervised one (p. 25). Claiming that the Foucauldian disciplinary museum has reached the limit of explanatory power, they argue that we need to think of transcultural subjectivities instead of communities (pp. 12–13). However, we would contend that localised diverse communities are still the museum’s mainstay, both relating to and resisting the global hegemony of the transcultural, globalised museum.



Drag King and Rebel Dyke, and the Pitt Rivers collection, in which queer culture does not feature in any obvious way. The trauma of lesbian absences is both pried open (with arrowheads, ‘a thicker kind of needle’) and mended in and through Ford’s quilt, which is offered as a resonant, tactile and responsive interface between erasure and desire, past trauma and world-making possibilities fostered by makers.

Paula Chambers examines the response-through-practice of a fellow artist to the collections of the Bolton Museum and Art Gallery in Greater Manchester: in response to the mummy of a young girl in the museum’s Egyptology collection, Tabitha Moses created *The Dolls* (2004), a series of carefully wrapped and bound dolls sourced from charity shops that were exhibited alongside the Egyptian artefacts already in residence ‘for the girl to take with her to the after-life’. Homing in on the x-ray photographs of the dolls included in Moses’s exhibition, Chambers draws on Hito Steyerl’s new materialist take on forensic investigation as a process whereby objects get to speak their trauma, while the ambiguity of the mummy and dolls lead her back to Freudian definitions of the uncanny, which are reviewed and revised. The travails of Moses’s materials (from treasured toys to charity resale to artistic reclamation) and the mummified girl (from her Egyptian tomb to a small museum in the north of England) cross and illuminate each other, even though their mutual silence prevails.

Adriana Valderrama, Clara Cecilia Mesa, Livia Ester Biardeau and Mariluz González present a fascinating case study of curatorial approaches to museum collections that are shaped by psychoanalytic thought. The museum Casa de la Memoria (House of Memory) in Medellín, Colombia, contends with the difficult heritage of violence that plagued the country and in particular the city of Medellín for many years. The authors revisit their project, *Violence, a self-portrait: the place denied by man* (2017–2018), a reinterpretation and curatorial intervention in some of the museum’s displays, which pivots on the death drive and cultivates an acceptance of ambivalence in tackling the problem of violence, both as heritage and social threat. Their project makes space between a history of trauma and traumatic history, showing that – and how – they need not coincide.

The case study is also present in the each of the five scholarly articles, though it functions differently within the texture of longer arguments about the role of psychoanalytic thinking in the contemporary museum. Malcolm Quinn locates two kinds of trauma in the contemporary museum, in its dissimulated origins in violence on the one hand and, on the other, its naturalisation of the canon and its biases by inculcating standards of taste and aesthetic value in its audiences. He transposes the concept of ‘radical philistinism’ on curatorial acts, illustrating it through two examples. Framed through Lacan’s engagement with utilitarianism in *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, Jeremy Bentham’s auto-icon is presented as a form of radical philistinism against prejudice, anticipating Lacan’s ‘discourse of the analyst’ which is characterised by a shift from interpretation to intervention and from knowledge to truth. Quinn’s other example is the temporary removal of J.W. Waterhouse’s painting *Hylas and the Nymphs* (1896), a signature object of the Manchester Art Gallery, by artist Sonia Boyce in consultation with museum staff. Boyce’s intervention took place within existing games of culture and cultivation in which the



museum was enmeshed, but its emphasis on the causal truth of trauma meant that curating was successfully enlisted to the cause of the fall of a cultural game.

Nicole Ritchie critiques the prescription of museum visits as a form of preventative and remedial health care in a 2018–2019 pilot project based in Ontario, Canada, called Rx: Community. Turning to Melanie Klein's psychoanalytic framework, Ritchie identifies 'museums on prescription' as a redemptive strategy of museology's foundational paranoid and manic reparative logic. In the representational specificity of the Canadian context, this article ultimately challenges the museum's purported prescribability as a defence against its inherent ambivalence: its 'goodness' is inextricable from – and compromised by – its historical and ongoing role as a colonial nation-building institution. The colonial museum cannot possibly repair the traumas of settler colonialism unless it first decolonises itself.

Fictional museums can reveal as much about museological operations as real ones. Dhee Sankar offers an interpretation of Orhan Pamuk's novel *The Museum of Innocence* (2008) alongside the actual museum by that name curated by Pamuk in Istanbul. The museum differs fundamentally from any 'real' museum in that it is a collection of objects memorializing the relationship between two fictional characters in Pamuk's novel, the fictional curator and his lost love object Füsün. By relinquishing any claim to objectivity and embodying pure affect through actual objects of quotidian use, the museum conveys the traumatic experience of a fictional personal history. The museum embodies metafiction, using verisimilitude with a cathartic impact. The fictional curator has a fetishistic relationship to the objects displayed, such that the novel and the museum synchronise to produce a structure of feeling that Sankar terms as 'the fetishistic sublime', an excess of emotion generated by the unobtainability of the object of desire.

Taking the controversy generated by Luke Willis Thompson's film installation *autoportrait* (2017) as her starting point, Chari Larsson undertakes a comparative analysis between Cathy Caruth's widely used formulation of trauma and French art historian Georges Didi-Huberman's notion of the symptom. Contrary to Caruth's notion of trauma as 'unrepresentable', Didi-Huberman's symptom (drawing on Freud, Gilles Deleuze and Pierre Férida) is by definition overdetermined, with no single point of origin. A symptomatic approach to trauma shifts the terms of engagement from absence and invisibility to its productive appraisal as agent with an active role in the world. Unlike trauma, the symptom is capable of disrupting and reconfiguring the relation between the historian and their object of study, and, by extension, between the museum's collections and its publics.

Kimberley Lamm returns to Egypt via the British Museum's galleries. She approaches Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen's avant-garde essay film *Riddles of the Sphinx* (1977) as a cinematic text that turns the museum into a site for imagining psychoanalytic feminism as a reparative reading practice. The film questions gender and race as 'musealised' images that make predetermined essences present, offering instead a cinematic approach to working through the damages of sexism and racism freed from the polarised binary of idealisation and denigration. Taking the psychic life of a middle-class white woman as its focus, the film follows her in the demanding process of extricating herself from the narrow confines that white patriarchal culture has allotted her. In so doing, Lamm argues that *Riddles* unpicks



the visual logics of castration, thereby offering the possibility that white women can, instead of defending themselves against shame, respond to the forms of sexism and racism that write Black women's lives.

It has been more than a little strange to assemble a special issue on museums while being unable to visit them in person for much of this period due to Covid-19. We will not hazard a psychoanalytic take on the common phrase 'absence makes the heart grow fonder' but it is clear that all contributors to the issue continue to have a libidinal investment in this compromised institution and to strive for its survival-through-transformation. In their theoretical and practical approaches that reactivate the past to produce new stories, our contributors are oriented towards the future life of museums as potentially reparative public spaces that reckon with the traumas of dispossession and exclusion, both individual and collective, historical and personal. In different ways and to varying degrees, the pandemic has disrupted the life and work of all our contributors, peer reviewers, journal editors and production team. We would therefore like to extend a special thank you to them all for their insights, collegiality and perseverance in times that are in reality far from unprecedented but that have been very difficult all the same.

References

- Adams, G. K. (2021, July 2). Trustees approve return of Benin bronzes held in Berlin museums. *Museums Association Journal*. <https://www.museumsassociation.org/museums-journal/news/2021/07/trustees-approve-return-of-benin-bronzes-held-in-berlin-museums/>
- Attia, K. (2012). *The repair from occident to extra-occident cultures* [Art installation]. <http://kaderattia.de/the-repair-from-occident-to-extra-occidental-cultures-fridericianum-museum-kassel-germany-2012/>
- Attia, K. (2020). *Les entrelacs de l'objet/The object's interlacing* [Installation with video]. <http://kaderattia.de/les-entrelacs-de-lobjet-the-objects-interlacing-2020/>
- Bakare, L. (2021, March 26). Regional museums break ranks with UK government on return of Benin bronzes, *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/mar/26/regional-museums-break-ranks-with-uk-government-on-return-of-benin-bronzes>
- Bennett, T. (1989). *The birth of the museum: History, theory, politics*. Routledge.
- Best, S. (2018). Anger and repair: The art and politics of July Watson's *the holes in the land* (2015). *Third Text* 32(1): 79–100.
- Bond, L., & Craps, S. (2020) *Trauma*. Routledge.
- Brown, T. P. (2004). Trauma, museums and the future of pedagogy. *Third Text*, 18(4). 247–259.
- Brunst, P., & Thomas, N. (2018). *Oceania* [Exhibition]. Royal Academy of Arts, London, United Kingdom. <https://www.royalacademy.org.uk/exhibition/oceania>, <https://www.royalacademy.org.uk/exhibition/oceania>
- Caruth, C. (1991). Unclaimed experience: Trauma and the possibility of history. *Yale French Studies*, 79, 181–192.
- Caruth, C. (Ed.). (1995). *Trauma: Explorations in memory*. Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Caruth, C. (1996). *Unclaimed experience: Trauma, narrative and history*. Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Césaire, A. (2000). *Discourse on colonialism* (J. Pinkham, Trans.). Monthly Review Press. (Original work published 1955)
- Dewdney, A., Dibosa, D., & Walsh, V. (2013). *Post-critical museology: Theory and practice in the art museum*. Routledge.



- Dowden, O. (2020, September 22). Letter from Culture Secretary on HM Government position on contested heritage. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/letter-from-culture-secretary-on-hm-government-position-on-contested-heritage>
- Freud, S. (1957). Five lectures on psycho-analysis. In J. Strachey (Ed.), *Standard edition: Vol. 11* (pp. 9–56). Hogarth Press. (Original work published 1909)
- Freud, S. (1964). Moses and monotheism. In J. Strachey (Ed.), *Standard edition: Vol. 23* (pp. 3–140). Hogarth Press. (Original work published 1939)
- Froggett, L., & Trustram, M. (2014). Object relations in the museum: A psychosocial perspective. *Museum Management and Curatorship*, 29(5): 482–497.
- Hicks, D. (2020). *The Brutish museums: The Benin bronzes, colonial violence and cultural restitution*. Pluto Press.
- Hicks, D. (2021, June 16). Let's keep Colston Falling. *Art Review*. <https://artreview.com/lets-keep-colston-falling/>
- Laplanche, J. (1976). *Life and death in psychoanalysis* (J. Mehlman, Trans.). Johns Hopkins University Press. (Original work published 1970)
- Milchman, A., & Rosenberg, A. (n.d.). A Foucauldian analysis of psychoanalysis: A discipline that “Disciplines”, Academy for the Psychoanalytic Arts, <https://academyanalyticarts.org/milchman-foucauldian-analysis>
- Pollock, G. (2013). *After-affects—After-images: Trauma and aesthetic transformation in the virtual feminist museum*. Manchester University Press.
- Price, S., & Hicks, D. (2020, January 6). Has the Sarr-Savoy report had any effect since it was first published? *Apollo*. <https://www.apollo-magazine.com/sarr-savoy-report-sally-price-dan-hicks/>
- Price, D. (2021). Binding trauma, *Art History*, 44, 8–14.
- Reihana, L. (2015–2017). *in Pursuit of Venus [infected]* [Video]. Fine Arts Museum of San Francisco, United States.
- Sarr, F., & Savoy, B. (2018). *The restitution of African cultural heritage: Toward a new relational ethics* (D. S. Burk, Trans.). Online report http://restitutionreport2018.com/sarr_savoy_en.pdf
- Sedgwick, E.K. (2003). *Touching feeling: Affect, pedagogy, performativity*. Duke University Press.
- Smallman, E. (2018, October 15). Why I made Captain Cook lose his breeches: Lisa Reihana on her colonial video epic, *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2018/oct/15/lisa-reihana-in-pursuit-of-venus-infected-oceania-royal-academy-london>
- Tan, E. (2014). *Come cannibalise us, why don't you? Sila Mengkanibalkan Kami, Mahu Tak?* NUS Museum.
- Walsh, M. (2021). Repair and reparation: Kader Attia interviewed by Maria Walsh. *Art Monthly*, 448, 1–5.

Publisher's Note Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.

