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Of Art Worlds – Collecting and Archiving Modern and Contemporary Art on the African Continent

Summary

The project is inspired by a perspective of multiplicity that foregrounds art collections and artworks as multi-layered configurations. It aims to look at art collections (on the African continent and, due to the pandemic, here in Germany), by starting analytically with artworks, their formal qualities and what these might bring to light, and exploring the object biographies of each artwork in a collaborative (!) and sensory approach, as all information is linked to the form and histories of the collections and the institutions associated with them. It also helps to question established narratives and one's own view on artworks and art worlds in general.

The project builds on the work of previous research projects such as *African Art History and the Formation of a Modern Aesthetic: African Modernism in Institutional Art Collections Related to German Collecting Activities*, in which the history of modern art is seen as an intertwined history that needs to be considered from a trans-cultural perspective and in which collections are examined as networks, but also through an in-depth analysis of the biographies of singular artworks.

Key Questions

Artworks and collections are the empirical joints for the study of modern and contemporary art. They are not static but change in time and space, they are always relational and multifaceted, which means that the (e.g. economic) aspirations, strategies and desires associated with them are also fluid.

The guiding research questions are: What collections of modern and contemporary art exist where? What is collected by whom, where and why? Who oversees collecting and its afterlife? Why is its digitisation important and for whom? How accessible are the collection? Who are the gatekeepers? How do collections in general inform the art world

Methods and Concepts

Regardless of how individual artworks are constituted, they are embedded in fluid clusters with further subdivisions. One of the basic assumptions is that the relationality of a given artwork directly influences the understanding of higher-level forms such as the art collection and, subsequently, the notion of art worlds and their respective identities. To understand the characteristics of collections, a collaborative and sensory

approach is combined to actually grasp their meanings and possibilities. In three major sub-projects we explored forms of artworks and collections. The first project focused on the artworks of Tijani Mayakiri that were 'liberated' from their frames to reveal hidden places and spaces. The idea was to find new ways of caring for and curating modern artworks so that they could be seen, appreciated and understood, while the works themselves could unfold their own agency within a post-colonial production of knowledge. The second project aimed at different medialities of objects and their transformations in the context of the oeuvre of Uche Okeke, one of Nigeria's most important modern artists. The various processes of media transformation were critically observed, as the creation of digital objects and the corresponding meta-data as well as their embedding in physical and digital infrastructures are not neutral processes but are shaped by where and by whom they are carried out. The third project Onyemaechi focuses on the collection and archive of Ndidi Dike, one of the leading contemporary female artists in Nigeria. Her collection will be indexed and digitized as extensively and completely as possible, and nearly forty years of research data will be made digitally accessible for further research to provide the ultimate overview of the artist's work. Here the questions arise: What is worth documenting for an artist? What aspects of self-representation are hidden behind this and how does this affect a collection? What collecting strategies does the artist intend and how does this play out in the context of the institutional work of the Iwalewahaus?



Insights into the archive of Ndidi Dike, 2021. (Photo: Lena Naumann)

Vision

The project aims to contribute to the understanding of the form of collections and artworks as multiple actors and interests are involved. As most of the team's researchers are based in Germany, the collaborative approach is crucial in this project and is understood as a decolonizing strategy, a collective process that can open structures to different claims, perspectives, and intentions, and reflects existing, sometimes unquestioned structures and power imbalances. Therefore, all sub-projects revisit the collection of the Iwalewahaus, question its legacy and possible return, and try to keep opening the discourse on their own role and established narratives.

Relation to the Cluster's Aims & Goals

The research provides in-depth research of the constitution of single collections with a strong focus on women voices (as artists, as researchers, as caretaker of artworks and archives). It also looks at digital spaces, their drawbacks, and the opportunities for researchers in different fields and locations. Again, the collaborative approach is key to questioning the role of white European researchers and their given realities, contributing to further reconfiguration of African Studies.



Exhibition 'We will now go to Kpaazaair – Transitions and journeys through Uche Okeke's work' at Iwalewahaus, 2022. (Photo: Mohamed Elhennawi)



Ndidi Dike in front of her archive in Lagos, Nigeria, 2021. (Film still: Lena Naumann)



Nantume Violet and Ijeome Uche-Okeke at the Iwalewahaus, 2022. (Photo: Lena Naumann)



Michelle Nkemakolam scanning and inventorying the archive of Ndidi Dike, 2023. (Photo: Michelle Nkemakolam)

Further Links

Find more information on the project here:
https://www.africamultiple.uni-bayreuth.de/en/Research/1research-sections/art_aesthetics/Of-Art-Worlds/index.php

<https://www.iwalewahaus.com/event/we-will-now-go-to-kpaaza>