

Global South. On December 10, 2021, Ayim opened an exhibition featuring Ghanaian and Afro-Brazilian artists titled *Efie: The Museum as Home* at the Center for Art and Creativity in Dortmund, Germany. “Efie” means “home” in Akan Twi, and the eponymous exhibition explored how museums came to be considered suitable “homes” for historical works of African art. Like Layiwola, Ayim juxtaposed contemporary and classical pieces, challenging viewers to question themes of home and belonging in relation to looted art.

There have also been varying degrees of institutional commitments to the field since 2018. For example, one can look to the discrepancies between current resource allocation for longstanding programs. At Indiana University, the Tanner-Opperman Chair in Honor of Roy Sieber African art professorship was endowed in 2018, while the University of Iowa (where Sieber famously earned the first American PhD in African art history) posted a nontenure-track, three-year lecturer position with a 4/4 teaching load in early 2023. By contrast, the University of Iowa’s Stanley Museum of Art Curator of African Art, Cory Gundlach, is employing a Mellon Foundation grant to create three new provenance-related positions and two new course offerings, one taught in collaboration with Allison Martino from Indiana University’s Eskenazi Museum of Art. Similarly, the Philadelphia Museum of Art’s forthcoming Brind Center for African and African Diasporic Art is poised to hire a curatorial director for the Center, as well as an assistant curator. These individuals will manage acquisitions, special exhibitions, public programs, publications, and a fellowship program (not unlike the suggestion of convening participants) to train graduate students funded by the Center’s endowment.

A State of the Field Convening: The Future of African Art provided African art scholars, curators, collaborators, community members, and wider audiences an opportunity to reflect on the field’s past, present, and future, and to identify innovative solutions to the most pressing challenges and opportunities. The convening was intended to foster broader, more nuanced discussion and promote further ideas about the priorities and directions the field should pursue. I am delighted to know the generative conversations are continuing and to see so many concepts engendered at the convening coming to fruition.

Building on the aforementioned suggestions for the field’s future, I believe it necessary to transcend traditional disciplinary boundaries within academia while engaging university programs, museums, and independent contemporary art spaces

in collaborative work for authentic, lasting change. We must interrogate the language we use, the value judgments we make, the topics with which we choose to engage, and how we conduct research, particularly on the African continent. It is imperative we use whatever privilege we may have to ensure opportunities for greater diversity amongst future scholars and curators.

The time is now to reimagine the accepted canon of African art to reject reductive and sexist colonial classifications that diminish work previously categorized as “craft” or “folk” art in favor of a cross-cultural approach rooted in Indigenous epistemologies and methodologies.

Like most disciplines, the legacy of African art history is complicated, and engaging in the work of transformation can feel uncomfortable. However, the current momentum of the collective body means the field is uniquely situated to galvanize academics and curators across generations and geography to move forward together in radical solidarity toward a necessary shift that will pave the way for a better future.

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Notes

1 I am grateful to Kristina Van Dyke for bringing me on board to serve as a coorganizer of the convening. Much of the language of this submission comes directly from previously unpublished content written collaboratively with Dr. Van Dyke. I want to thank her for encouraging me to write this reflection and for her ongoing mentorship and guidance.

2 The term “collaborators” was used to cover a wide spectrum of stakeholders, from audiences and donors to colleagues (both internal and external), to institutions whose support is needed to make African art visible and accessible.

3 Layiwola went on to work with Rautenstrauch-Joest director Nanette Snoep on the *I MISS YOU* exhibition, which opened in April 2022 and focused exclusively on the museum’s Benin Bronzes. On December 15, 2022, the museum transferred ownership of the objects to the Nigerian government, which subsequently transferred ownership to Oba Ewuare II in early 2023. At the time of writing, a handful of pieces have been returned to Nigeria, while many others remain in Germany on long-term loan.

THE RULE OF MUSEOCRACY

Álvaro Luís Lima

The privileged role of the museum in African art history has had conservative effects on the field, curtailing its potential. The blame lies not on African art curators—much of their work is admirable—but on the museum as an ideological domain. Restrained by their donor base, the survival of top US museums is dependent on sustaining the metonymy of art collection as material privilege. Conceded as a necessary evil to keep museums running, ultra-rich benefactors have killed the museum as a democratic space by minimizing its role as a center for public debate and by erasing class and social contradiction from its displays. The donor-funded museum exchanges democratic features for a luxurious visual experience that gives its viewers the feeling of being close to power. Overly dependent on the museum, African art history is affected by an ideology that works to occlude African art as a historical agent and plural discourse, instead measuring it through the social hierarchies museums seek to normalize.

Africanists’ dependency on museums to provide resources and employment plays a significant role in this state of affairs, especially since many university art history departments do not see African art history as an essential topic among their global offerings. Among *US News and World Report*’s thirty best American universities for 2024 with an art history program, slightly over half had a tenured or tenure-track faculty member whose primary field was African art. This contrasts with the 79% of departments that had a Latin Americanist and the 88% that had an Asianist (many had multiple specialists on these two regions). With only a limited number of scholars dedicated to full-time academic research in African art history, the future of research on historical and fieldwork-based themes looks bleak. The numerically low presence of Africanists in top programs is a chronic problem that will limit undergraduate interest and the number of doctoral students in the field for decades to come. Among the few doctoral students who do graduate, a significant number end up in museums, giving these institutions an inflated role in the field when compared to other areas of art history, where the university, journalism, public and private cultural organizations, publishing, galleries, and various display contexts support a more pluralistic array of voices. The reduced number of Africanist art historians encourages institutions to hire scholars without specialized training, further watering down the field’s impact in art history. Attempts to fill the gap

in universities by training future Africanist curators on the job are unlikely to succeed in replacing the intellectual breadth provided by doctoral programs and needed for the field to flourish.

As with most neoliberal institutions, US museums are managed like a company. But unlike a company, whose worth is measured by shareholders' financial profits, museums' primary valuation for their donors are tax breaks and status, making public relations a top priority of these institutions. The growing influence of the language of public relations in African art history is a direct consequence of the field's strong ties to the museum. The often patronizing discourse of "PR speak" and its need to convey clear, positive messages to the public has contributed to the field's overarching emphasis on breaking misperceptions of Africa—a mission now placed well above any other intellectual goals. In part, this is an obvious response to the persistence of clichés about Africa, itself a symptom of depoliticization of American public life in favor of spectacle. But the language of public relations has made of this concern a caricature. The aim of public relations is to contain public discussion by converting it into a technique of affect regulation. As such, it is primarily invested in offering responses tailored to elicit a reaction from its listeners (i.e., positive feelings toward the institution), rather than to facilitate an enriching, pluralistic dialogue on important issues.

Because the language of public relations aims to silence debate, when, in 2018, activists stormed museums with demands that they engage in decolonizing initiatives, museums raised the alarm, looking for ways to find maximalist expressions of a sudden wish for change while seeking to maintain the status quo as much as possible. The museum has become depoliticized, which is why it has not been able to address such concerns through generative debate. That is, museums view social movements as hostile presences that are ideally absent or, if not, are at least contained. Many will agree that the solutions that followed not only accomplished little in changing the way museums see the role of the public but also, unsurprisingly, have not led to the radical restructuring of their functions. Regrettably, museums narrowed the controversy to a call for the diversification of their top-ranking positions, which is welcomed, but far from sufficient in creating a decolonial and democratic museum. Little was said about the appeals to reconfigure boards of trustees, or to respond to museums' role in real estate prices in urban centers, or to explore how museums could support international solidarity movements. Nothing was said

about ways to protect museums from their wealthy donors. The limited response of museums was in great part the result of a strategic mistake made by the civil society groups, which seemed to fall for the museums' own narratives as institutions whose primary role is to assign privilege.

In retrospect, the strategic errors activists made in their targeting of African art must have seemed like a best-case scenario for museums, given the marginal place they have typically assigned to the continent. One of the more obvious effects of the museum's response to calls for decolonization has been hyperattention to the person of the Africanist art historian, who is subjected to increasing scrutiny of their identity and is encouraged to speak in clichés and the language of social media to demonstrate their legitimacy as a researcher in the field. The result is increasing, active discouragement of efforts to undertake the hard academic work needed to engage with African art in ways that honor its complexity. Years after the Brooklyn Museum's hiring controversy, Chika Okeke-Agulu's and Steven Nelson's responses—which felt like oases when they were published in 2018—seem to have been largely ignored (Nelson 2018; Okeke-Agulu 2018). Instead, museums have favored a media-friendly demonstration of decolonial efforts that ultimately narrowed discussion of museums' role in addressing social inequalities and in supporting American imperialism.

Not only Africanists but African art itself has been instrumentalized as part of the museum's ideological apparatus. African art is caught in a rhetorical limbo. In some instances, it is mobilized to show how cultural production on the continent is just like here (and shame on you for thinking otherwise). In other instances, it is mobilized to demonstrate its ontological otherness (and even more shame if you do not agree!). For modern and contemporary African art, this push and pull minimizes the attention paid to practices interested in aesthetic questions that are harder to place within an "us/them" dichotomy and are focused on something else altogether (i.e., the truly different). In parallel, there is an ever-growing attention to artists who are easily incorporated into the display cultures of the West. This easy absorption, whether because of training, medium, thematic interests, and so on, ironically encourages an increasingly homogenized modern and contemporary African art history that is supplementary rather than in tension with its Western counterpart, allowing its easy circulation within an institutionalized global art circuit (Ogbechie 2010). This homogenization in turn leads to an even stronger emphasis on cultural difference in

ever more superficial and legible ways to cater to a neoliberal rendering of inclusion; that is, formulaic performances of unthreatening difference that mask a demand for homogeneity. Material considerations of difference and inequality are omitted. Worse, because the museum holds so much power, it does not just support the making of these artistic trends but actively commissions them as ideal African art, an ironic twist of twenty-first-century imperialism. Sydney Kasfir's brilliant attempt to correct this blind spot in modern and contemporary art through her methodological focus on patronage and production can feel like a distant dream but is just as pertinent (Kasfir 2000).

African art history has been coopted by the museum as an instrument of virtue signaling and positive standing among its professional-managerial viewers (the ideological engines of neoliberalism). Cultural criticism and research on African art then lose out because, under the museum, their primary motivation becomes the creation of positive brand equity. Not only does this allow for African art to be more easily absorbed into the discourse of global capital, but it also limits the visibility of cultural work that addresses the concerns of the dispossessed. The demand to tie representations of Africa and its art to a positive message may appear progressive at first glance, but it raises a barrier to serious intellectual engagement with the continent's cultural production, since its analysis must arrive at the same conclusions. This reveals a distrust in African art's ability to sustain itself under scrutiny, such that it instead needs be "uplifted" by African art history. A patronizing hierarchy is established in the museum's branding as a good cop of neoliberalism. Under the approving eyes of its benefactors, the museum places itself in the topmost ranks of cultural power, from which perch it is then able to bestow "progressive" values on the public. The museum's use of African art for this type of promotion is revealed in the way that restitution has come to be front and center of many of these institutions' PR campaigns. The irony is that much of the museological discussion about restitution has consistently expressed disinterest in the objects meant to be returned, except as symbols of museums' new image. Africanist art historians have added nuance to these discussions and warned of the threat of a field turned into "forensic art history," but the danger remains (Strother 2021). The emphasis on restitution reduces attention from crucial platforms for African art, including calls for more research and more publications, posts, commissions, or exchanges with university programs and students in Africa. The power of this new

museum agenda on African art history does not translate to increased respect for the field in these institutions, as is illustrated by the fading interest of museums in their historical collections of African art (Vogel 2023).

The art museum is far from a hegemonic cultural institution in many parts of Africa. The establishment and maintenance of art museums are at times a matter of heated debate, at others a matter of plain disinterest. Africanists are under no obligation to transplant these sentiments to their own research, but we should at least question the follow-on effects of situating the museum as a privileged space of engagement with African art in the West. One danger is that African art will be remolded in ways that deemphasize its role in cultural discourse on the continent in favor of shaping an itemizable object that conforms to the visual regimes of Western benefactors. Africanist curators have long understood this challenge and have come up with creative solutions for the display of masquerades, for example, but these solutions are meant to remediate the European avant-garde's fascination with the mask as form, acting on the need to enliven an already canonic museum genre. As creative as these solutions have been, they cannot fully correct the museum's epistemic privileging of objecthood, in which artistic practices are transposed into commodities that—under their assigned allure as invaluable cultural heritage—can then be exchanged as part of an enlightened market.

Since the end of the Cold War, the supremacy of the museum has facilitated the embrace of African art history by the tentacles of neoliberalism. African art history sells itself short when it takes on the position of forceful solicitor of space in these institutions, but leaves their political authority unquestioned, if not enhanced. Outside the museum, African art history has a track record of working along the frontlines of global inequalities. The field should prize research that is based on fieldwork, radical histories, and topics at the margins of capital. Through such histories, it can project a targeted disdain for the gilded apparatus that is the present-day US museum, which operates on the very premises that create the inequalities that fields such as African art history seek to confront. By holding themselves out as bastions of culture, museums are able to short-circuit criticisms of their antidemocratic ties to capital, dismissing such complaints as anti-intellectual. Instead of falling into this trap, we should address the reemergence of freedom of speech as a crucial battleground in cultural and academic spaces in the United States. But if universities have found

themselves at times unable to safeguard this crucial part of their functioning, museums, today symbiotic with the interests of capital, are even less well equipped to cope with such pressure. If engagement with African art continues to rely on the museum, the field of African art history risks being swallowed by it.

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IN THE FUTURE, AFRICA MUST BE THE CENTER OF AFRICAN ART

Genevieve Hill-Thomas

I write to you about the future of African art studies from the position of someone who has had an unconventional path in the field. I started my undergraduate studies in the sciences and wound up switching to art history. I fell in love with African art during my master's program and eventually found my academic home at Indiana University, Bloomington, but then had to turn down postdoctoral dream jobs due to health complications during pregnancy. My husband's job and the desire to keep our family together hindered my ability to apply for the scarce jobs in our field. Instead, I worked in nonprofit development and then in K-12 art education until a faculty position came up at a college only an hour's drive away. By sheer luck, the position was at an art college, and as an artist myself, I love working with future artists. Five years later, I am an art history professor and the Fulbright Program Advisor at Ringling College of Art and Design, occasionally curating or consulting on the side.

My background in development and education sometimes gives me the feeling that I'm outside the field of African art

looking in, even though I'm now again actively researching, publishing, and participating in conferences. So it is from this semiperipheral, yet very privileged place, that I offer you my point of view: the future is one that requires recentering now. While some recent conversations, including the one at the 2023 European Conference on African Studies (ECAS) in Cologne, are squarely set on decolonization and repatriation, these comprise only one very important facet of our future. At this very ECAS conference, aptly titled *African Futures*, only half of the members of our panel were present because the other half of our colleagues were refused entry to the EU. What kind of future can our field have when our African colleagues cannot even attend the same conference? What dialogue results from absence?

The future must be international and inclusive. Many scholars have already noted the importance of decentering colonial knowledge and structures, as well as making this knowledge accessible (for an excellent perspective on this topic, see Grosz-Ngaté 2020). This not only means contemplating the nature of our academic language, especially in publications that have in the past favored a standardization of language¹ (and sometimes prioritized the detrimental pseudotranslation of terms that are unique to their language of origin), but also ensuring that our working groups are inclusive of scholars from around the world—and especially on the African continent. Partnerships must not only span national borders, but also reach beyond the cosmopolitan ivory tower. For example, my recent work with the weaving school at Dispositif d'Initiative pour les Metiers de l'Artisanat (DIMA) in Niamey, Niger—where I worked with incredibly talented weavers who could read weaving drafts but not written languages such as Zarma or French—proves that skilled wordsmiths are not the only producers of knowledge. Nor should academia be our only intended audience.

There also is the issue of the major boundary that prohibits open dialogue—the publication paywall. Who will be able to read what I write today if they desire to do so? I know from experience that students and scholars—both on the African continent and beyond—have not been able to access the article on *faso dan fani* that I published in *African Arts* over a decade ago.² There are costs associated with publishing,³ but a pay-for-print model and other creative solutions may be able to subsidize the loss of income. I also see a future where our digital technologies allow for a system of mentorship between international individuals; imagine an organized program matching professors to students from another