

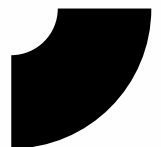
WHEN THE EMPORERS GET WEARY, THE OBJECTS MAY RETURN

Njoki Ngumi in conversation with Jim Chuchu

Formed in 2012, the Nest Collective are a Kenyan multidisciplinary arts cooperative who use holistic applied research methodologies to create cultural bodies of work with film, fashion, literature, and other media. The collective are founding partners in the International Inventories Programme (IIP), an ongoing international research project and exhibition about the implications and effects of having African – and specifically Kenyan – objects in museums in the Global North. The project considers especially those objects of dubious provenance, and the knowledge, data, and history gaps existing around them. In June 2021, the Nest Collective are slated to co-curate the “Unexpected Lessons” project, a series of digital and analogue talks, lectures, and artistic interventions on decolonising knowledge and memory, happening concurrently in Berlin and Nairobi. The topic of restitution has been raised

at different levels by publics, governments, and institutions, who have been accused by its proponents in Africa of making the entire process more political and long-winded than it has to be. This mirrors the increasing pushback by European publics unsatisfied with state justifications for the legitimacy of collections featuring looted objects in their public museums. One example is the Humboldt Forum in Berlin, where criticism of the exhibition of numerous stolen objects was raised shortly before the opening. Specifically, historians and anti-racism activists in Germany say the museum needs to explain how its collection of thousands of brass, bronze, and ivory sculptures and carvings, taken by British soldiers from the royal palace in Benin City (in what is now Edo State, in southern Nigeria) in 1897, got to Europe. The Nigerian government has called for the return of the Benin Bronzes – as they are known – but they remain housed in private collections and Western museums, such as the British Museum in London, which has come under particular criticism for its refusal to return the approximately 950 Benin Bronzes in its collection.

In November 2020, French senators voted to return twenty-seven objects held in French museums to Benin and Senegal over the course of the next year. The Nest Collective members Njoki Ngumi and Jim Chuchu use this event, and the troubling ways in which this gesture of return was framed, as a prompt, continuing into a discussion about the troubling persistence of unequal power dynamics between nations, and what possibilities there are to subvert them.



Njoki Ngumi I'm really struggling with something the French Culture Minister said, which was that returning twenty-seven

objects to Benin and Senegal was “not an act of repentance, but an act of friendship and trust”. I mean. Really?

Jim Chuchu I found that statement so perplexing. Who gets to decide the tone or meaning of a gesture? Do the people on the receiving end get to say, “No, that doesn’t make sense to us.”?

NN Global Northerners get to define the terms, and then everyone else has to work with those terms or look bad for starting a fight about semantics. This is entry-level playground psychology, which is probably also what made their ancestors just take those things from others in the first place.

JC I also hate that the governments of Benin and Senegal didn’t respond to that gesture with, “Sorry, this won’t fly.” Are Africans not allowed to say these things, perhaps because of all our neo-liberal dependencies?

NN The conversation on objects is evidence of power dynamics with obvious disparities. We may act like equals at the UN, but because Global North money pays for children’s vaccines, and Global North money invests in African agriculture, water, health, and infrastructure, African governments dare not risk diplomatic kerfuffles over objects because that might topple the entire house that Jacques built.

JC I find the intense interest the Global Northerners have in managing the semantics of exchange obscene. The power dynamics between us are already quite formidably in their favour; why insist on winning the narrative war as well? That’s either very petty and vindictive or demonstrative of a deep awareness that there is power in controlling narratives. What does the word “friendship” even mean here, in this exchange of a history of violence?

NN It’s farcical. It reminds me of family photos where people are told to smile even if they’re really angry, so

when everyone remembers that day, they can all pretend it was a happy one. Happy faces masking ancient conflicts. Doesn't that reflect real human households and communities?

JC I have been telling you, over the past few months, that I am unable to be hopeful about the question of object movement ever being resolved in a meaningful way, especially with regard to their return to Africa. We've worked on this IIP project for two years now, and what we have learned most about are the innumerable technicalities, explanations, policies, and laws that are firmly in place to prevent the return of objects. When Macron gave his big announcement about the return of objects, I was disappointed to see that one of the first African reactions – gleefully quoted in the French press – was that of Simon Njami, editor of the Paris-based art journal *Revue Noire*, who called the move “a foolish promise that would never materialize beyond rhetoric”. I respect Simon, but that quote was so deeply cynical and allowed no room for any response to Macron's statement other than cynicism. No outcome other than the retention of the status quo. How will oppressive structures ever be dismantled if we are so effusive and forward about our pessimism? Is cynicism the only parcel that older Africans hand down to the generations following them?

NN Two years working on IIP have taught us that if you explore any problematic structure long enough, you find the same dysfunctions at the heart of them. I think Simon's cynicism is a layered thing, if he were to elucidate his thoughts in a wider context than is possible from a single quote in the press, because of those innumerable factors you mentioned. As you said, the system was designed as a one-way ticket for objects. Simon is not wrong about that, if that's what he meant. There can be multiple truths here, and his, however harrowing, is one of them.

JC You've always been aligned with this idea of multiple

truths coexisting, and I struggle with that. The closest I have come to allowing this world view is to posit that perhaps truths don't sit at the edges of spectrums, but are the entirety of what lies between the poles. In the case of object movement, to give an example, perhaps it's not that the objects will either return or not return, but that the dystopian soup in the middle - that mix of compromise and institutional cowardice, of erasure of memory and revision of history - all of that is the truth of object movement. And that soup is one in which I fear there can be no meaningful object movement in the years to come. And by meaningful, I mean object return that does more than move bits of old wood and stone and skin, but acknowledges the absence and the hurt of the illegitimate movement. We come from a generation for whom the question of object movement is abstract, because we were born in the absence of these objects and have lived with it, whereas previous generations who witnessed the looting of their cultures didn't fix the problem, but rather handed it down to the next, next, next generations.

NN Binaries simplify complex things; and simplistic presentations of complex issues are good for politics and PR. But real life is a maze of complexity, so even the seduction of simplicity is fleeting. I think there can be meaningful object return. The more likely outcome of object-movement activism is not that all objects will return; rather, some people will return some objects in some ways. This gives me hope. In the same dystopian buffet serving the soup of compromise and cowardice, there is another dystopian culinary mix: optics, the success of the movement for Black lives, of white people with problematic ancestors who need to redeem their present selves.

JC It's great that you've mentioned optics to describe this more hopeful soup. We talked about semantic gymnastics just now, and semantics and optics sit within the same family. I

am not alone in fearing that we live in a world where semantics and optics are the outcome of most activism, and that rarely does activism achieve the fundamental objects of its agitation. Instead, the named oppressors learn the language, semantics, and optics that allow them to continue to exist with minimal change in their operations. We're living in the Age of Optics. Now, if – as in the example above – the oppressed parties (minorities, Africans, Brown folk) don't push back on these optics, aren't they carrying butter knives to a battlefield?

NN I like this butter knife analogy. Those arriving clad in "friendship and trust" couture are actually saying, "We came with guns before, but today we have left them at home." Carrying anything sharper than a butter knife to this conversation makes us look like we are the ones spoiling for a fight.

JC Tell me about this optimistic soup, then. What gestures do you see? Because all I see stretching forward into the next ten, twenty years is more "acts of friendship" by virulently unfriendly states. I see the return of tiny percentages of objects via untenable permanent-loan arrangements, which allow institutions and states to avoid admitting culpability. These semantic games accumulate over years of denial and revisionism to create new facts, new histories.

NN You're right, but that outcome is not one hundred per cent certain. We have to hold space for a truth to exist that we cannot yet fathom. The idea that African countries would ever be independent was ridiculous until the colonialists were on ships and planes going home – it was an unfathomable outcome for the cynics of the time. We are also not accounting for the empires of the Global North getting tired of the gargantuan weight of their self-appointed duty as custodians of "universal knowledge", when they don't even

like or want to be near the realities of a diverse world where multiple knowledges sit in communion with one another, not in hierarchies.

JC Empires? Tired? Ha!

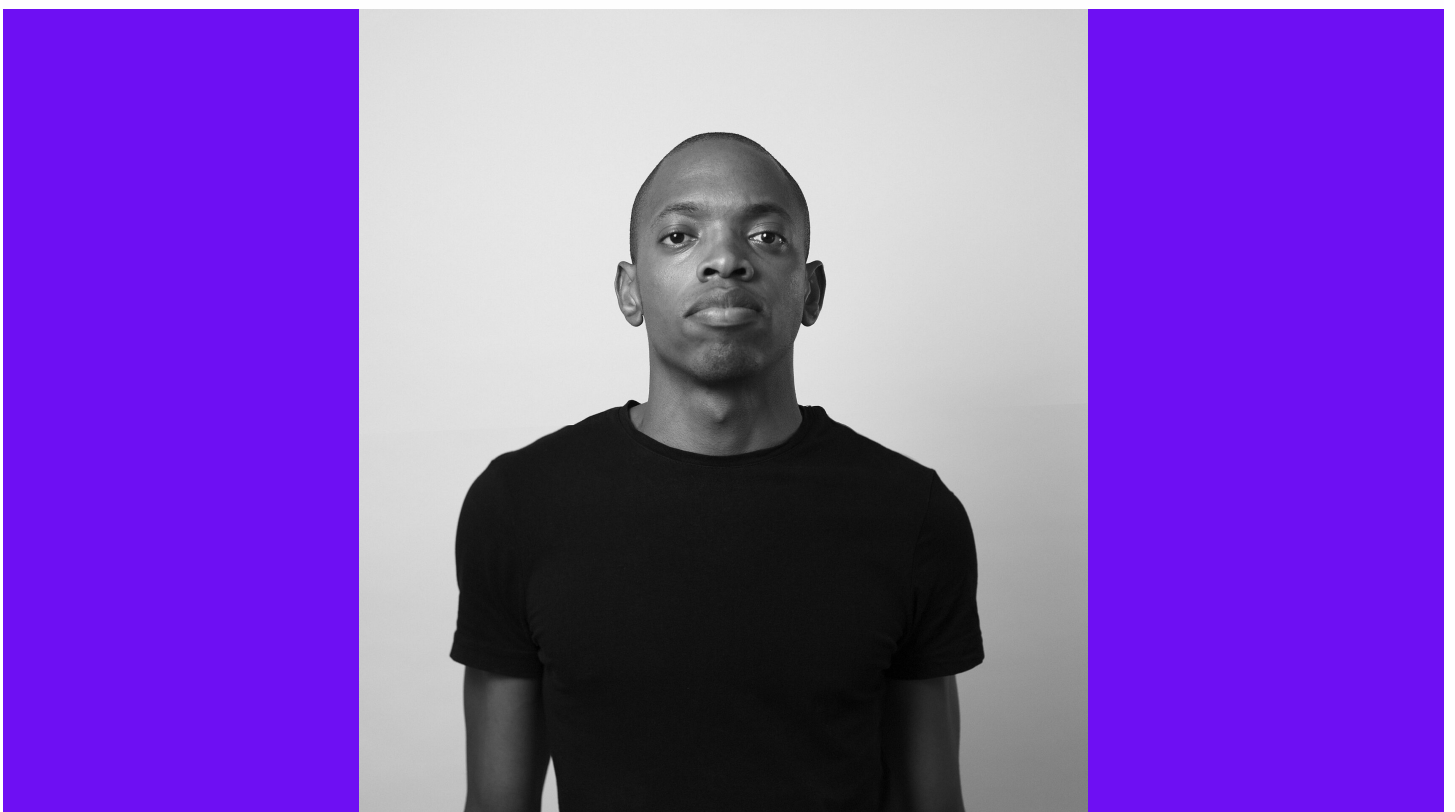
NN Rome fell. Greece fell. They became too big, too unwieldy and unpredictable.

JC Okay, I'll allow for that as a distant hope. The idea that when the empires get weary, the objects may return.

NN Perhaps. And some may lead the way, maybe even in our lifetime.

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Njoki Ngumi and Ji Chuchu are part of the curatorial team of the event UNEXPECTED LESSONS.





07.07.2021

Talking Objects

Of Narrative Objects and Collection Narratives ▶

12.06.2021

Unexpected Lessons Day 2

Decolonizing Memory and Knowledge ▶

11.06.2021

Unexpected Lessons Day 1

Decolonizing Memory and Knowledge ▶

◀ Zurück

TALKING OBJECTS LAB will be part of the project TALKING OBJECTS initiated by Isabel Raabe. TALKING OBJECTS also includes the TALKING OBJECTS ARCHIVE, a digital archive for decolonial knowledge production, which is scheduled to go online in 2024.

Das TALKING OBJECTS LAB wird Teil des von Isabel Raabe initiierten Projekts TALKING OBJECTS sein. TALKING OBJECTS beinhaltet auch das TALKING OBJECTS ARCHIVE, ein digitales Archiv für dekoloniale Wissensproduktion, das 2024 online gehen soll.

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