

Temporality and Universalism in the Contemporary Ethnographic Museum

Two Collection Presentations at the Tropenmuseum

Luuk Vulkers

Introduction

The Tropenmuseum in Amsterdam is currently in a process of making innovative changes to its displays. The museum aims to critically engage with its own past and simultaneously be an inclusive platform for reimagining the future. Especially for an ethnographic institution like the Tropenmuseum, these are complex tasks. The museum was founded in 1864 as the *Koloniaal Museum* (Colonial Museum) in Haarlem. In the first half of the twentieth century, the institute's main purpose became to collect, categorize, and display products and cultures from the colonies, establishing a Dutch national identity and expressing cultural dominance and superiority over the country's colonies. These colonial foundations still manifest themselves in the institute's collection, as well as in the imposing architecture of the building that has housed the museum since 1923, determining the institute's conditions of existence in the present.¹

In recent years the Tropenmuseum has engaged with these complex tasks by initiating collaborations with individuals, groups, and organizations from outside the museum. This has, for example, resulted in the intervention *Decolonize the Museum* (2017), the publication *Words Matter* (2018) and a

reinstallation of the more permanent displays of the museum.² These displays now consist of three parts. On the first floor the thematic exhibition *Afterlives of Slavery*, which opened in 2017, can be visited. It explores the ways in which slavery continues to shape Dutch society today. The second exhibit, occupying the rest of the galleries on that floor, presents geographical groupings of the collection according to the broad regions of New Guinea, Southeast Asia, and Indonesia. This presentation has been altered in recent years, but, as will be discussed in what follows, it is for the most part a remainder of a previous, more comprehensive and geographical arrangement of the collection that itself was the result of an extensive refurbishment of the collection displays between 1995 and 2008. Thirdly, *Things That Matter* opened on the ground floor in 2018, a completely new exhibition “about important things and the importance of things.”³ Here, objects from the collection are grouped in nine thematic blocks that propose questions about living and being human in the contemporary world.⁴

The recent changes in the permanent displays of the Tropenmuseum not only follow lively public debates about identity and the Dutch colonial past but also academic discourses around the changing role of the museum at large. Since the emergence of New Museology and the discursive turn in museological research in the 1990s, the notion of the museum as an objective authority, categorizing and representing knowledge, has been dismantled as a Western construct, a product of Enlightenment ideologies.⁵ In the present, the focus of this debate has shifted to the ways in which the entire concept of the museum as public space can be understood to be embedded in colonial modes of structuring knowledge. As Robin Boast states, “Where the new museology saw the museum being transformed from a site of determined edification to one of educational engagement, museums of the twenty-first century must confront this deeper neocolonial legacy.”⁶ Accordingly, questions are raised about what new roles museums could and should have in today’s globalized, postcolonial societies—questions that the changing displays of the Tropenmuseum explicitly engage with.

While an extensive amount of museological literature has been concerned with the changing notion of the museum on this broader level, the aim of this article is to thoroughly engage with the actual results of these discourses: redefined curatorial practice and altered modes of display. In doing so, my aim is to reflect on the ways in which meaning is made in the present-day museum, and could be in the future. It is, as this article will also demonstrate, in particular a discrepancy between “concept” (policies, visions, and mission statements) and “practice” (strategies of display) that prompts such a visual engagement.⁷

In the following, I will analyze several specific elements of display in the Tropenmuseum’s ground-floor exhibition, *Things That Matter*, in relation to the exhibit featuring geographical displays on the first floor. The latter I will relate

to archaeologist and historian Laurent Olivier's concept of temporality, in order to show how a self-reflective and multifaceted engagement with the past persists through the exhibit. In case of *Things That Matter*, I will consider how universalism manifests itself in the exhibition, something that I will critically relate to by considering Sarat Maharaj's notion of untranslatability. The analysis of both exhibits will lead me to argue that a dynamic between divergent modes of meaning-making is created in the Tropenmuseum, illustrative of the complex position of the present-day ethnographic museum.

I chose to focus on these two permanent exhibits, and refrain from discussing *The Afterlives of Slavery*, not because I consider these two to be the most significant of the three—*The Afterlives of Slavery* is certainly a relevant and bold statement—but because these two exhibits are both primarily collection displays.⁸ Accordingly, together and in relation to each other, they can be said to embody the ways in which the present-day Tropenmuseum aims to reconsider its own institutional history in order to challenge the colonial modes of structuring knowledge in which most of this collection is embedded. As this study is a selective visual analysis more than a study of the complete narrative structures of these two exhibits, I allow myself to start with the older, geographical exhibit on the first floor and then move to *Things That Matter*, the most recent curatorial statement on display in the ground floor atrium, through which visitors enter the exhibition spaces of the museum.

However, before moving to “practice” by proceeding with my analysis of the two exhibits, I will briefly turn to “concept” by outlining a recent history of policies, visions, and changing organizational structures, which will lead me to address a rather unvarying discourse in the context of which both presentations of the permanent collection should be understood.

Policies and Visions: Rethinking the Tropenmuseum since the 1990s

In 2012 the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs abruptly announced it would discontinue funding the Tropenmuseum Amsterdam. Major cuts had to be made in the ministry's budget for cooperation development, on which the institution depended for almost half of its income. After two long years of uncertainty regarding the future existence of the museum due to political indecisiveness, the Dutch Ministry of Education, Culture, and Science finally granted the Tropenmuseum a new subsidy. Yet this was done under conditions with far-reaching consequences; the institute was required to merge with two other Dutch ethnographic museums in Leiden and Berg en Dal. The three separate museum locations were retained, but became part of the newly established *Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen* (National Museum of World Cultures, NMvW). Consequently, research related to the collections of these

three museums is now conducted by the overarching Research Center for Material Culture (RCMC).⁹

This merger did not only have administrative consequences. The National Museum of World Cultures formulated a motto that constitutes the core of a new policy, mission, and reimagined curatorial practice: “Apart from the differences, we are all the same.”¹⁰ Ever since, the Tropenmuseum explicitly presents itself as a museum about *people*, and didactically aims to promote inclusiveness and world citizenship. By showing that we all deal with the same universal themes, such as mourning, celebrating, loving, and fighting, the museum wants to engender unity and inclusiveness. In terms of display, this policy meant a gradual shift from a more geographical approach to a focus on trans-historical, trans-cultural, and thematic narratives.¹¹

In 2018 the head of research at the RCMC, Wayne Modest, stated that this newly envisioned mission of the Tropenmuseum must also coincide with a reconsideration of the museum as a *political* space instead of only a cultural one. His comments strikingly echo those made by Boast about the neocolonial legacy of the museum. For Modest, this reconsideration firstly means an acknowledgement of and critical engagement with the Tropenmuseum’s own colonial roots. By extension, he also prompts us to “rethink public institutions and their roles in maintaining and reaffirming these colonial structures.” Secondly, according to Modest, the Tropenmuseum must “move beyond retelling the story of the colonizer,” and “explore how people from all over the world have lived their lives otherwise.”¹²

Important to consider here, however, is that this process of reimagining the Tropenmuseum has been going on for a much longer time. In a 2008 policy paper, former chief curator Susan Legêne marked the year 1990 as a turning point in the museum’s vision, when the organization of the exhibition *125 Jaar Verzamelen (125 Years of Collecting)* led to

*a re-examination of the museum’s own collection history. The collection was no longer viewed simply as a depository or storehouse of material culture, but as a source of information about historical interactions, processes of representation, collectors and the forming of dogmas. By implication, the museum chose this moment to confront its colonial past head on.*¹³

Consequently, this shift in vision had a major impact on a large refurbishment of the semi-permanent galleries from 1995 until 2008, for which colonial and institutional histories, issues of Othering, the engagement of source communities, shifting to thematic narratives, and the contemplation of the ways people live together were all important topics.¹⁴

Just as with Boast and Modest, a clear unanimity can be found in terms of policy here; Legêne’s statements on the vision of the museum in 2008 are very much in line with

those of Modest ten years later. The univocality of this discourse not only points at the importance of considering the different ways in which such general policies and visions manifest themselves specifically in modes of display but also raises another question. What has recently been altered in relation to the 2008 refurbishment?

Indeed, as already pointed out, several aspects of the 2008 displays in fact remain in place as of today, most notably a number of theatrical dioramas, such as the *Colonial Theatre* with its wax figures of historical archetypes, the reconstruction of the *VOC Curiosity Cabinet*, and the *Bamboo Room*, modeled after a 1912 display at the Tropenmuseum's predecessor, the Colonial Museum in Haarlem. At present, all these rather striking curatorial elements are still part of the geographical exhibit on the first floor. However, it is important to note that the former geographical arrangement also included the Middle East, North Africa, India, Sub-Saharan Africa, and Latin America, making up a representation of almost the entire world. In its present state, only a grid of three broad regions remains intact in the geographical exhibit of the collection on the first floor of the Tropenmuseum.

Pluritemporal Perspectives within a Geographical Grid

In his 2011 publication *The Dark Abyss of Time: Archeology and Memory*, archeologist and historian Laurent Olivier explores different notions of time and their consequences for the ways in which meaning is made in relation to material culture. I will discuss the author's theory on temporality in order to illustrate how different temporal perspectives persist throughout the geographical exhibit on the first floor of the Tropenmuseum.

Olivier considers our relationship with the past to be a key element in forming collective identities. At the same time, he argues against understanding this past in "empty and homogeneous" cyclical or linear terms. Olivier considers sequential notions of time to be only recent inventions, constructions of nineteenth-century historicists. These sequential understandings of history create a simplified, causal understanding of the past as an accumulation of events and contexts, implying a comprehensible origin and development.¹⁵

As Legêne, who has conducted extensive research on the Tropenmuseum's institutional history, has emphasized, ethnographic exhibition practices have often "frozen" peoples and cultures within such a sequential understanding of the past. In a 2009 symposium report on ethnographic display, she argues that throughout the early twentieth century the creation of systematically ordered *series* of collectibles with formal, functional, and geographical affiliations fossilized and stereotyped the Other, mediating

cultural as well as physical difference to a Dutch audience. In line with such an approach to display, colonial collecting practices tended to focus on village life, tradition, and craftsmanship, fixating cultures in a past that was undefined, yet simultaneously had a clear place, closer to “origin,” in a sequential hierarchy of cultural complexity.¹⁶

In order to analyze the present-day geographical exhibit on the first floor of the Tropenmuseum, I will turn to the temporal approach to material culture that Olivier proposes, instead of this linear historicism. The author argues that it is, in fact, not at all the past that should be reconstructed with objects. Instead, the multiple ways in which the *memory* of the past exists in the materiality of the present-day object should be explored. He states:

It is not, strictly speaking, history which is being made up by the impact of the phenomena of repetition and reproduction which archaeological materials provide proof of, it is memory as recorded in materials. This is a key distinction, since memory-time functions in a way which has nothing to do with history-time.¹⁷

Accordingly, for Olivier, an object is inherently cast in a fusion of past and present, and should not be positioned within the sequential, historical time frame on which conventional methodologies of archaeology and other humanities largely depend. In terms of curating, such a shift in focus from an object’s place in history to the memory recorded in objects makes it possible to consider *different and conflicting* temporal perspectives simultaneously.¹⁸ It is through such pluritemporality that, as I will argue, the geographical exhibit on the first floor enables processes of meaning-making that move beyond statically freezing the Other in a timeless past.

On the first floor of the majestic museum building, three of the four galleries looking out on the central hall are dedicated to the regions New Guinea, Indonesia, and Southeast Asia (including Indonesian art and culture), creating a U-shaped routing that can be approached from two sides. The two outer galleries are dedicated to material culture from New Guinea and Southeast Asia. In both departments, thematic groups have been created, dedicated to different, specific subjects. For the Southeast Asia department, topics include “Karo rituals associated with death,” “Court culture” and “The kris, a national symbol.” In the New Guinea department, themes such as “Ancestors,” “Rebalancing society” (about headhunting practices), and “Treasures of the man’s house” are dealt with in several display cases, each accompanied by a modest explanatory text.

In first instance, the nature of these themes makes these two departments reminiscent of the traditional, “timeless” mode of ethnographic display outlined by Legêne; the themes are surely more related to craftsmanship and village life than they are to technological innovation or urbanism. However, upon closer examination, several temporal



Fig. 1. Installation view of the New Guinea display at the Tropenmuseum, 2019. Photo: Luuk Vulkers. Courtesy of the Tropenmuseum.

perspectives exist simultaneously. The texts accompanying the current display cases generally differentiate between the timeless past in which the tradition on display is cast and a present-day reality. A text on the New Guinean treasures of the man's house, for example, clearly explains that these houses *used to be* (in a time unknown) the center of the community, where important initiation rituals took place, such as scarification. It then continues to state that, in the present, these rituals are less common, but that man's houses are still being built. Yet it does not stop at this dual temporality; the thematic display cases of ethnographic objects are interwoven with many other strategies of display, all providing different textual and visual contexts and, accordingly, additional temporal perspectives.

Firstly, there is the attention given to the history of the collection, which is at play on different levels. To begin, where possible, the provenance is listed for each individual object, creating awareness of the sociohistorical context in which the objects became part of the collection. A stroll through the New Guinea department, for example, teaches me that, by far, most of the objects on display here are early twentieth-century acquisitions, either bought by the Colonial Museum or gifted by named individuals or organizations. In addition, multiple texts contextualize the ways in which the objects on display became part of the collection. This includes the relatively lengthy text on the important collector Georg Tillmann (1882–1941). Tillmann is described as a connoisseur, driven by a personal fascination for the Indonesian archipelago, who put together a collection of more than 2,000 Indonesian art objects with great cultural-historical as well as aesthetic value in a relatively short period of time. Interestingly, the fact that Tillmann himself never visited the regions whose material culture he collected is nowhere mentioned.¹⁹ But problematic sides of the collection are exposed in multiple wall texts as well. Before walking into the Southeast Asia department, a prominently displayed text is headed “Given, bought and stolen,” and a visit to the New Guinea department starts off with “How did the museum acquire its collection?” These texts primarily, and rather cautiously, deal with the difficulties of tracing provenance, but they also suggest an awareness of colonial power balances.

Secondly, in the middle gallery that connects the New Guinea and Southeast Asia galleries, different phases of the Dutch colonial past are explored by means of dioramas: visual reconstructions of scenes, rooms, and figures from the past. For a small part, this concerns New Guinea; for example, there is a reconstruction of the office of the missionary Petrus Vertenten (1884–1946) and an arrangement of objects and photos that relates to “scientific” explorations in the early twentieth century, intended to map the colonial territories and their peoples. But most of this middle gallery is specifically devoted to Indonesia. The *Colonial Theatre* on display here features wax figures, each telling a different story about everyday life in the early twentieth-century colonial societies of Indonesia. These figures were not invoked by the museum as static

representations of the colonial Other, but rather as “historical archetypes of people who contributed to the very creation of these images of otherness.”²⁰ Besides the *Colonial Theatre*, there is a reconstruction of the 1912 *Bamboo Room* at the Colonial Museum in Haarlem, as well as a VOC cabinet of curiosities. Numerous texts accompany the reconstructions, each exposing another aspect of colonial history.

Turning to the effect of these strategies of display, the dioramas displayed on the middle gallery of the first floor provide specific temporal perspectives on Indonesian and New Guinean art and societies that *differ* from the temporal perspectives that persist in the geographically ordered display cases of the other two galleries that I have discussed. Whereas these display cases are mostly concerned with exhibiting “traditional” ethnographic objects as they were supposedly used in an undefined, timeless past, the dioramas each contextualize an event or place—true or fictionalized—from various specific pasts. Combined, all of these perspectives do not present a linear, understandable history of the geographical regions represented. Rather, they create an uncertain and unfinished patchwork of different as well as conflicting understandings of the past. All these temporal perspectives, however, relate to the *memory* that is generated by the various objects on display in the present. Even though, for example, most Indonesian art objects from the Southeast Asia galleries were made considerably later than the VOC expeditions that the reconstructed cabinet of curiosities refers to, as Olivier reminds us, these events can still make up an important part of the memory generated by these objects.

Thirdly, the scientific assumptions that have determined the structure of the present-day collection are exposed. In the Southeast Asia gallery a large display case features thematic oppositions such as dragon (underworld) and bird (upperworld), in line with a structuralist approach to anthropology that aims to explain cultures as interconnected structures for which such symbolic opposites are fundamental. The strategy of display, however, is simultaneously exposed in an accompanying text that outlines this scientific approach and states that, for a long time throughout the twentieth century, Indonesian cultures have been studied according to this structuralist and Eurocentric method. Another text in this department refers to eighteenth-century travelogues, which characterize the inhabitants of Southeast Asia in a way that created persistent stereotypes that were also fostered by the museum itself: “These were the prevailing views at the time, some of which persist to this day, even in this museum. One example is the particular focus on ancestors, magic and rituals, as can be seen in this section, which helped perpetuate these old views.”²¹ Other texts and display cases highlight the ways in which physical anthropology and documentary photography, both also important for the structure of the Tropenmuseum’s collection, have shaped concepts of the Other based on classifications.



Fig. 2. Reconstruction of a VOC cabinet of curiosities at the Tropenmuseum, 2019. Photo: Luuk Vulkers. Courtesy of the Tropenmuseum.



Fig. 3. Display cases with structuralist thematic groupings at the Tropenmuseum, 2019. Photo: Luuk Vulkers. Courtesy of the Tropenmuseum.

Especially the latter category of display strategies raises questions about effectiveness. While outdated assumptions are being exposed in *text*, the displays that accompany these assumptions also remain visually exposed in actual space. It can be argued that this implicitly reaffirms the outdated modes of structuring knowledge that are being discussed as outdated. This recalls the 2008 article “Staging Colonialism: The Mise-En-Scène of the Africa Museum in Tervuren, Belgium” by Murat Aydemir.²² In this text the author analyses the 2008 display of the Africa Museum’s collection in relation to the alternative “walking tour” that is provided. Aydemir concludes that “the expository agent of the Africa Museum is split. To this day, the main exhibition of the museum remains staunchly colonial and racist in its implications.” He continues, “The main expository agent tells the viewer: ‘Look! That’s how the primitives are.’ The second supplementary agent adds [nostalgically]: ‘Look! That’s how we used to display the ‘primitives.’”²³ However, such a mechanism does not seem to predominate in the case of the Tropenmuseum. Indeed, the self-reflexivity of the geographical exhibit on the first floor is largely dependent on textual resources, and there is a clear discrepancy between text and image. However, as exemplified above, implications of colonialism are not reduced to footnotes or a walking tour, but constitute a central *topic* of many of the displays. Besides this, the museum continuously shifts its temporal perspective; within the same exhibit, art is being displayed in different and conflicting contexts, while at the same time this same act of display is being exposed and questioned, not only by texts but also by visual reproductions. These visual reproductions, the dioramas, either stage the colonial mode of display as a specific and outdated historical episode or engage with the past from the perspective of both colonizer and colonized.

In this context, there is one more strategy of display that should be mentioned, which is evoked by the display of contemporary art, adding yet another, conflicting temporal perspective to the geographical exhibit. The Southeast Asia department prominently features *Planets in My Head* (2011) by Yinka Shonibare, and the beginning of the New Guinea gallery is marked by the work *Red Calico* (2000) by Roy Villevoe. The latter work is a large installation showing a group of variously ragged T-shirts made by people from the Asmat region in New Guinea, as well as photos of the owners wearing them. As the exhibition text reads, the work can be interpreted as referring to stereotypes of “the poor dressed in rags,” as alluding to traditional scarification of the face, or as commenting on the rules of dress imposed by the Indonesian occupier. However, the work can also be seen to function in the context of the larger geographical exhibit of the collection. In a way, it is not part of the displays that teach us *about* New Guinea, but it comments on these very displays from the contemporary perspective. In its ambiguity the work questions the notions of representation and interpretation that inherently underpin the geographical modes of display in the museum. It thus constitutes a self-reflexive commentary on the structuring mechanisms of the museum.



Fig. 4. Roy Villevoe, *Red Calico*, 2000, installation view at the Tropenmuseum, 2019. Photo: Luuk Vulkers. Courtesy of the Tropenmuseum.

Together and Universalism: *Things That Matter*

The exhibition *Things That Matter*, more than the geographical exhibit on the first floor, reflects the recently envisioned mission of proclaiming unity through universal themes. In relation to the geographical displays, emphasis has shifted from self-reflexivity and colonial entanglement to the possibilities of objects for knowledge production in the now—the universal stories that they can tell today.

Several pavilions comprised of black boxes are spread over the entire ground floor, creating a theatrical setting for the exhibition through which visitors can wander freely, without a preconceived route. The nine themes that are dealt with both inside and outside of the pavilions are each introduced with a question. “How do you create new life?” addresses the theme “fertility,” for instance. Inside the pavilion, the walls are covered with green grass and the lights are dimmed. In the middle of the pavilion, a harmonious constellation of small objects densely placed together presents itself to the visitor behind a glass dome. While the different objects, mounted on a steel structure, show no formal similarities, they create an aesthetic unity as a single cabinet of curiosities. A text on the wall reads:

The desire to have children and build a future for yourself or your community is universal. It is a timeless wish but it has particular significance today. The global population is growing and people are living longer, but at the same time in many countries male fertility is decreasing and women are having children later in life.

Medical knowledge is constantly expanding and doctors can do more than ever before. Yet there are many who want to have children but are unable to. That is why people all over the world use rituals, customs and objects to help create new life.²⁴

Indeed, all of these objects have to do with fertility, but this might be the only thing they have in common. Not only do art objects such as the Inuit *Amautik* and the Japanese *Votive Tablet* come from a wide range of geographical regions, they were also made in completely different times. A careful examination of the different object texts, tucked away underneath the steel structure, tells me that these objects were made between the nineteenth century and 2011. Considering these strategies of display with regard to the previous discussion of temporality, the diversified pluritemporal perspective seems to have made room for an all-encompassing presentism—objects are decontextualized in order to fit the universal, present-day urge of the theme that is addressed.

Surely one can wonder if this practice should at all be considered problematic. If the historic objects can be relevant in the present, as the Tropenmuseum implies, by being tools to understand one another and to inspire inclusive ways of living together, why shouldn't they? In the



Fig. 5. Installation view of several pavilions, *Things That Matter*, Tropenmuseum, 2018. Photo: Sarah-Dona Manev. Courtesy of Kloosterboer Decor bv.



Fig. 6. Installation view of the “fertility” pavilion, *Things That Matter*, Tropenmuseum, 2018. Photo: David Vroom. Courtesy of the Tropenmuseum.

thematic group on “writing,” for example, tenth-century calligraphy on an Abbasid Quran page is combined with contemporary *calligraffiti* by the French artist eL Seed. Indeed, most visitors will not notice that the calligraphic art was produced a thousand years ago, nor will they learn anything about the sociohistorical context in which it was made. Following the Tropenmuseum’s line of thinking, however, the combination does make an inspiring point about art, beauty, and the universal and timeless human urge to create beautiful things. A realization of such things might indeed engender a sense of togetherness.

What I argue is not so much that the strategies of display here should be considered inherently problematic, but more that there is a missed opportunity to contemplate the togetherness that the institute aims to engender. This has to do with the specific notion of universalism that underlies the entire curatorial concept of this exhibition, in relation to the present-day urgency of the themes that are being dealt with. In order to come to a truly profound sense of togetherness, we might first need to find ways to negotiate and contemplate *difference*.

In his 1994 text *Perfidious Fidelity: The Untranslatability of the Other*, Sarat Maharaj argues against the idea of a transparent translation of meaning.²⁵ The author states that the idea of “untranslatability” was distorted by the apartheid regime of South Africa to “argue that self and other could never translate into or know each other.” Accordingly, it was used to institutionalize a suppressive racial policy of separation. Drawing on Jacques Derrida’s concept of translation and employing it in a cultural context, Maharaj aims to contest this negative connotation. He argues that translation should not be understood as a transparent process of “carrying over.” This leads us to a tempting yet dangerously superficial attitude to multicultural translation, “even in the face of an adverse actuality that thwarts and distresses such an ideal at every turn.” He continues, “But to focus on untranslatability is not only to acknowledge from the start the impossibilities and limits of translation. It is to highlight the dimension of what gets lost in translation, what happens to be left over.” For Maharaj, it is exactly the contemplation of these leftovers, “elements of hybridity and difference,” that can lead to new meaning being created *in between* preexisting concepts and entrenched ideas.²⁶

Following Maharaj, within the narrative structure of *Things That Matter*, there seems to be little space for the contemplation of such untranslatability. While pressing (political) issues are certainly not avoided, they also seem to have already been resolved with harmonious and universal sameness. Consider the theme “belief.” In a chapel-like setting, several objects, again from divergent times and places, have been brought together to illustrate that “religions have always intermingled and borrowed from each other.” On view is imagery of the Virgin of Guadalupe and a Thai Buddha. This constellation may inspire by contesting static conceptions of religious purity, but the display ignores

the fact that religious practices nowadays are often misunderstood and provoke intolerance. A narrative that would engage with these issues, without proposing a universalist solution in advance, could possibly incite visitors to actively question their own preconceptions and dogmas.

Within the theme "activism," an eminent topic to contemplate untranslatability, similar narratives are constructed. The exhibition text states:

Many indigenous communities and peoples have to fight to stop companies, government bodies and other dominant groups from infringing on their rights and taking or destroying their land. These activists use every means at their disposal, both traditional and modern, and combine social media with ancient art and pop culture with traditional dress.

Here you see two powerful examples. Palestinian rapper Shadia Mansour sings her uplifting lyrics clad in traditional dress to demonstrate her engagement with the Palestinian cause. And as a token of their forgiveness for crimes of the past, Aboriginal artists presented a work of art to the Dutch government, in a gesture of moral heroism.²⁷

What visitors are not prompted to think critically about when encountering this display, however, are the actual conflicts that the works discussed relate to. Instead, they are both somewhat depoliticized and turned into expressions of an abstract but nonetheless universal human battle—in the context of which proposing "forgiveness" as a gesture of moral heroism also becomes rather tainted.

It should be emphasized, however, that not all thematic groups in *Things That Matter* obstruct a contemplation of untranslatability. Interestingly, this is where universalism is replaced by an unresolved question. The theme about "cultural appropriation," for example, forces visitors to reflect on a relevant theme by asking, "Is it acceptable to adopt elements of a culture that isn't yours?" Examples here span from Beyoncé's appropriation of Desi culture to modernist notions of "primitive art." Untranslatability is explored and notions of "difference" are explicated; the central text here challengingly asks the visitor to take marginalization and power imbalances into account when thinking about the ethics of cultural appropriation. However, this pavilion is also where the pluritemporal self-reflexivity of the first floor displays seems to be most absent—out of all the numerous examples provided, not one mentions the institute's own acts of cultural appropriation.

The pavilion on climate change also engages with pressing matters in a thought-provoking manner. Just like in the cultural appropriation section, *difference* is contemplated in the climate change pavilion, both in terms of cultural perspective and socioeconomic situations: "Some countries build dykes to hold the rising sea. But what if there is no money or knowledge for flood defenses?" The pavilion then only shows imagery from the Marshall Islands, illustrating



Fig. 7. Installation view of the "belief" pavilion, *Things That Matter*, Tropenmuseum, 2018. Photo: Sarah-Dona Manev. Courtesy of Kloosterboer Decor bv.



Fig. 8. Installation view of the "cultural appropriation" pavilion, *Things That Matter*, Tropenmuseum, 2018. Photo: David Vroom. Courtesy of the Tropenmuseum.

the struggle to preserve culture in the context of increasingly unlivable circumstances. Strikingly, it might be exactly within this thematic grouping, where trans-historical and trans-geographical universalism is replaced by specificity in those respects, that *Things That Matter* is able to not only inspire by proclaiming sameness but also provoke critical thinking.

Conclusion

Since the beginning of this century, many have spoken of a “crisis” of the ethnographic museum.²⁸ The 2012 announcement of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to discontinue funding the Tropenmuseum in Amsterdam can be related to such a crisis. What followed for the museum was a process of reinvention; a search for *relevance* in a globalized present, a time in which the core practices for which the museum was built are considered to be largely outdated. Accordingly, the Tropenmuseum of the present—part of the new National Museum of World Cultures—wants to engender a sense of togetherness with universal themes and engage critically and self-reflexively with colonial pasts.

The 2016 decision of the Ministry of Culture, Science, and Education, accompanied by words of praise for the “new” Tropenmuseum, to structurally continue funding the institute can be considered an indication that this process of reinvention has been successfully completed. However, what a closer look at the contemporary collection displays of the museum also makes clear is that the dual task that the Tropenmuseum has set for itself is complex, and that this process is certainly still unfolding. The geographical displays on the first floor provide a nuanced, self-reflexive, and pluritemporal account of the institute’s collection. But this display is also deeply uncertain. It represents culture while simultaneously deconstructing the representational strategies that are deployed, creating an unresolved discrepancy not only between text and image but also between the institute’s original objectives and its current circumstances.

The exhibition *Things That Matter* provides an alternative to this focus on deconstruction by exhibiting objects from the collection as results of universal human urges. This could inspire visitors, but in order for this exhibition to engender the togetherness that it aims to propagate, it might also need to move beyond utopian harmony to contemplate temporal, cultural, as well as socio-economic differences, and to negotiate the uncertain realms of untranslatability. Together these two exhibitions are not so much complement to each other, but establish a dynamic of divergent modes of meaning-making under one roof. While a text on the first floor criticizes the universalist claims of structuralist anthropology as Eurocentric, the ground floor seems to celebrate similar universalist claims to find common ground as a means to bring about a sense of togetherness.

I argue that common ground constitutes a beginning, and not an end, for critically reflecting on the ways we want to shape our future together. In this respect the two approaches to displaying the permanent collection discussed in this article could learn from each other. As seen in the geographical displays on the first floor, the ambiguous nature of certain contemporary artworks is able to contribute to this criticality and to question the very notions of representation and interpretation in which museums are grounded. Such critical, contemporary artworks would be a welcome addition to an exhibition like *Things That Matter*, in order to confront the “deeper neocolonial legacy” of the twenty-first-century museum that Boast so convincingly addressed.

Luuk Vulkers studied art history at the University of Amsterdam. His interests span from ethnography in contemporary art practice, museology, and German postmodern art, to the emerging field of Animal Studies. Currently he is completing a Research Master’s thesis on the oeuvre of Rosemarie Trockel, an artist that he admires greatly, and working as editor for *Simulacrum* magazine. In addition to his academic pursuits, Vulkers works at a contemporary art gallery in Amsterdam.

1. See, for example, Mary Bouquet, “Het negentiende-eeuwse openbare etnografische museum,” in *Kabinetten galerijen musea*, eds. Ellinoor Bergvelt et al. (Zwolle: Waanders Uitgevers, 2005), 203–232; Koos van Brakel and Susan Legêne, eds., *Collecting at Cultural Crossroads. Collection Policies and Approaches (2008–2009) of the Tropenmuseum, Bulletin 281* (Amsterdam: KIT Publishers, 2009); Daan van Dartel, ed., *Tropenmuseum for a change! Between past and future. A symposium report, Bulletin 391* (Amsterdam: KIT Publishers, 2009); Susan Legêne, *Nu of Nooit. Over de actualiteit van museale collecties* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2005); Geke van der Wal, ed., *125 Jaar verzamelen*, exh. cat. (Amsterdam: Tropenmuseum, 1990).
2. In 2017 the initiative *Decolonize the Museum* was invited to analyze the display of the Tropenmuseum in order to dismantle colonial narratives persisting in this display, and a publication on the importance of language in processes of meaning-making in the museum was made the same year, together with several individuals and organizations. See Wayne Modest and Robin Lelijveld, eds., *Words Matter* (Amsterdam: Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen, 2017), accessed December 29, 2018, <https://www.tropenmuseum.nl/nl/over-tropenmuseum/words-matter-publicatie>.
3. *Things That Matter*, Tropenmuseum, accessed March 20, 2019, <https://www.tropenmuseum.nl/en/whats-on/exhibitions/things-matter>.
4. *Things That Matter* is expected to be on view for five years. *The Afterlives of Slavery* will be followed by a more extensive exhibition in 2021 on histories of slavery and colonialism.
5. For seminal studies in this context, see Mieke Bal “The discourse of the museum,” in *Thinking about Exhibitions*, eds. Reesa Greenberg et al. (New York: Routledge, 1996); Tony Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum: History, Theory, Politics* (New York: Routledge, 1995); Eilean Hooper-Greenhill, *Museums and the Shaping of Knowledge* (New York: Routledge, 1992).
6. Robin Boast, “Neocolonial Collaboration: Museum as Contact Zone Revisited,” *Museum Anthropology* 34, no. 1 (2011): 67.

7. This effort is embedded not only in Mieke Bal's mode of semiotic exhibition analysis, but also in similar analyses of ethnographic displays by Murat Aydemir and Michael Bachmann. See Murat Aydemir, "Staging Colonialism: The Mise-En-Scène of the Africa Museum in Tervuren, Belgium," *Thamyris/Intersecting* 19 (2008); Michael Bachmann, "Ambivalent Pasts: Colonial History and the Theatricalities of Ethnographic Display," *Theatre Journal* 63, no. 3 (2017).
8. The geographical exhibits feature 1,755 objects from the collection, *Things That Matter* features 209, and *The Afterlives of Slavery* only 27.
9. See, for example, "Vertrouwen in Tropenmuseum is terug: vier jaar subsidie is binnen," AT5, accessed December 25, 2018, https://www.at5.nl/artikelen/156250/tropenmuseum_nu_definitief_terug_van_weggeweest; "Volkenkundige musea fuseren maar houden drie locaties," *NRC Handelsblad*, April 3, 2014, accessed December 26, 2018, <https://www.nrc.nl/nieuws/2014/04/03/volkenkundige-musea-fuseren-maar-houden-drie-locaties-a1426057>.
10. "Op de verschillen na, hetzelfde: mens," Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen, accessed December 20, 2018, <https://www.tropenmuseum.nl/nl/over-het-tropenmuseum/missie>.
11. Ibid.
12. Wayne Modest, introduction at the event "Angela Davis, Public Dialogue: Radical Solidarity and Intergenerational Coalitions," Tropenmuseum, Amsterdam, May 13, 2018, accessed 20 December 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LBYwhXrgZcc>.
13. Van Brakel and Legêne, eds., *Collecting at Cultural Crossroads*, 10.
14. Ibid., 6; Legêne, in Van Dartel, ed., *Tropenmuseum for a change!*, 8, 12–22, 32–37.
15. In this context, sequential approaches to time are also inherently political for Olivier. See Laurent Olivier, *The Dark Abyss of Time: Archeology and Memory* (New York: AltaMira Press, 2011), 10, 89–92.
16. Legêne, in Van Dartel, ed., *Tropenmuseum for a change!*, 16–19.
17. Laurent Olivier, "The past of the present. Archaeological memory and time," *Archaeological Dialogues* 10, no. 2 (2004): 211.
18. As archeologist, Olivier emphasized materiality more than I do in this concise outline.
19. For more information, see Koos van Brakel et al., *A Passion for Indonesian Art: The Georg Tillmann (1892–1941) Collection at the Tropenmuseum*, exh. cat. (Amsterdam: Ro, 1990).
20. Legêne, in Van Dartel, ed., *Tropenmuseum for a change!*, 18. Interestingly, Michael Bachmann argues that the visual power of the "dramaturgical logic of naturalism" in the dioramas of the Tropenmuseum's *Colonial Theatre* implicitly reaffirms a Western perspective: "The inversion only works if the object of the gaze mirrors (and thus brings into being) its subject." Bachmann, "Ambivalent Pasts," 307.
21. Exhibition text featured in the geographical exhibit on the first floor of Tropenmuseum, Amsterdam, visited on December 20, 2018.
22. Aydemir, "Staging Colonialism."
23. Ibid., 98.
24. For all exhibition texts, see "Perskit Things That Matter," Tropenmuseum Amsterdam, accessed 30 May, 2019, <https://www.tropenmuseum.nl/nl/over-tropenmuseum/pers/perskit-things-matter>.
25. Sarat Maharaj, "Perfidious Fidelity: The Untranslatability of the Other," in *Art of the Twentieth Century: A Reader*, eds. Jason Gaiger and Paul Wood (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003).
26. Ibid., 297–304.
27. For all exhibition texts, see "Perskit Things That Matter," Tropenmuseum Amsterdam, accessed 30 May,

2019, <https://www.tropenmuseum.nl/nl/over-tropenmuseum/pers/perskit-things-matter>.

28. See, for example, Mirjam Shatanawi, "Contemporary art in ethnographic museums," in *The Global Art World: Audiences, Markets and Museums*, eds. Hans Belting and Andrea Buddensieg (Berlin: Hatje Cantz, 2009), 368.