

Comment Piece

Stealing (as) Art. Performances of Restitution from Mwazulu Diyabanza to Frankfurter Hauptschule

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ABSTRACT

Restitution, the returning of art works and objects collected under colonial regimes, still is a fictitious act. In the restitution debate, declarations of intent as made by the French president Emmanuel Macron in 2017 have been among the most radical acts so far – at least in politics. In pop culture and the arts, restitution has come to be imagined more and more radically in the recent past. In line with a more general trend of art activism, artists have also turned to enactments of restitution by symbolically stealing looted or colonialist art. In this comment piece, I analyze two different examples of art activism on restitution – actions by Mwazulu Diyabanza and Frankfurter Hauptschule. In my analysis, I address both aesthetic and ethical questions of positionality, artistic agency and the western gaze.

Keywords: restitution, activism, western gaze, ethical turn, art criticism

If restitution was an art genre, it would be fiction – at least for now. In the political discourse about restitution – the returning of artworks and objects collected under colonial regimes – declarations of intent as made by the French president Emmanuel Macron in 2017 have been among the most radical acts so far (Sarr and Savoy, 2019). Given the slow process, a new sense of urgency seems to emerge in pop culture and the arts. Restitution has not only come to be *imagined* all the more frequently and radically in the recent past, it is also slowly being moved towards the *doable* through performance and enactments, forms that stress the prefigurative potential of the arts (Serafini, 2018). In the successful Marvel movie *Black Panther* (2018), the practice of looting art was transferred to today's political imaginary and aesthetic, symbolically reversing the roles of oppressor and oppressed. In March 2020, the Congolese activist Mwazulu Diyabanza stole a funeral stake from the Musée du Quai Branly in Paris arguing that it was absurd that he needed to pay to see a piece of art that was stolen from his country of origin.¹ In October 2020, the German artist collective Frankfurter Hauptschule performance published the video 'Bad Beuys', in which three performers steal the German artist Joseph Beuys' sculpture 'Capri Battery' (1985) from an exhibition and bring it to the former German colony of Tanzania. While it is not the stolen objects that are returned, a German piece of art is re-located as an enacted reversal of the historical process, aimed at activating the German debate on restitution. In this comment piece, I would like to discuss these political actions of Mwazulu Diyabanza and Frankfurter Hauptschule to highlight some aspects of the current relationship between art and politics and how they show in the debate about restitution. Using a comparative approach, I employ a

¹ Mwazulu Diyabanza also staged several similar actions in other museums throughout Europe.

methodological mix of aesthetic and ethical criticism which Claire Bishop has reflected upon in her considerations about the ‘ethical turn’ in art criticism, i.e., the tendency to judge activist art by ethical standards only – at the expense of the aesthetic (Bishop, 2012).

Since a wave of global protest in 2011, including the artist-initiated movement *Occupy Wall Street* (McKee, 2016), art activism has become more common and even mainstream (van den Berg et al., 2019). Art activism takes on at least three forms: *activists* moving towards artistic ‘repertoires of contention’ (della Porta, 2013), *artists* becoming more directly involved in politics, and *artists* or *activists* addressing the institutional politics of the arts.² Mwazulu Diyabanza can be considered part of the latter group. He does not present his campaign as his artistic work but relies on artistic means to pursue a predominantly political goal. Frankfurter Hauptschule, on the other hand, is a group of artists who – at least in the work I study here – situate their political work *within* their art.³ Even though these are two distinct forms of art activism, both actions are not only united by a relationship to art, but also by an attitude of urgency that, I would argue, is characteristic for art activism across the three mentioned forms.⁴ In a similar line of reasoning, art historian and restitution expert Bénédicte Savoy described the action of Diyabanza as a ‘step to action’ (Deutschlandfunk, 2020) – thereby suggesting that the topic had been *imagined* sufficiently in the arts beforehand, and that there is now a sense of urgency to act.

Despite sharing an activist approach, the differences in how these two actions are articulated are quite striking. Diyabanza’s action was not considered art but theft, and he was fined 1,000 euros by a Parisian court. He used the attention for his case to accuse France of hoarding 90,000 objects of African cultural heritage in French museums. Diyabanza’s action can be seen as a campaign about art, that includes performative elements. However, he does not cling to the institutional realm of art, nor does he appear as an artist. He acts with a critical distance to the art system, drawing on media tactics. In contrast, Frankfurter Hauptschule’s ‘Bad Beuys’ is forwarded as art, and as such it has a complex relationship with its own object of criticism. Almost as a disclaimer that navigating this complexity comes with ambivalence, the video is dedicated to ‘Christoph Schlingensief, who did not always do everything right’ (Frankfurter Hauptschule, 2020).⁵ The video documents how Joseph Beuys’ sculpture ‘Capri Battery’ is brought to Tanzania by the artists, supposedly with the goal of displaying it in the ethnological museum Iringa Boma with the explanation that “under the colonial regime, art objects ... of Hehe leaders were stolen from Iringa and brought to Germany in ... numbers” (Frankfurter Hauptschule, 2020).

The video shows the act of stealing from the exhibition as imagined in generic gangster movies (wearing black masks, carrying torches). On their trip to ‘Africa’,⁶ the performers are shown getting on the plane wearing safari gear, relaxing during a massage at the airport, hanging by the pool upon arrival and having a party before travelling to the ethnological museum Iringa Boma the next day, where they hand over the artwork during a festive ceremony. The video abstains from spoken commentary, with Toto’s song ‘Africa’ playing in the background and producing an atmosphere of casual joy. A few weeks days after the publication of the video, ‘Bad Beuys’ turned out to be a staged theft and a media hoax – the ‘Capri Battery’ was found a few days later in storage at the theatre of Oberhausen.

What the action achieves is to show – and question – a sequence of clichés about ‘Africa’. In the video, Frankfurter Hauptschule exaggerates the western gaze to an extent that may productively detach the viewers from this way of seeing, ashamed of their intuitive literacy of the signs on display. In this line of interpretation, the video is a somewhat brutal compilation of Western rudimental knowledge about Africa. The peak of this may be the moment when one of the performers holds up high the Beuys sculpture, while standing on a cliff, referencing an iconic scene from the Walt Disney movie *Lion King* (Figure 1). If casually seen on social media however, which is where the work was distributed, the video was also smoothly consumable as it matches the conventions of the medium and does not offer any obvious break with its ways of seeing – exaggeration, I would argue, constitutes no substantial break in this case. As such, the video also reproduces many exotifying clichés of ‘Africa’.

² These forms can intermingle.

³ It seems important to state that both trends seem interconnected and non-hierarchical. In this piece, I am predominantly interested in artists turning to activism.

⁴ I should note that the designation *art activism* or *activist* is rarely embraced by the artists themselves. I use this designation as an analytical perspective that stresses the political act, well aware that this is a contingent perspective that does not serve as an absolute designation of the works and subjectivities analyzed.

⁵ Christoph Schlingensief was a German artist and theatre director who staged many political actions. The exhibition in Oberhausen, that the ‘Capri Battery’ was ‘stolen’ from, was dedicated to his work.

⁶ The destination ‘Africa’ – rather than Tanzania or the local destination – is a quote from the video caption.



Figure 1. Video still from “Bad Beuys”, Youtube Channel of the collective Frankfurter Hauptschule, October 2020

Having looked at the performative and aesthetic elements of these very different artistic approaches to restitution, I would like to consider some ethical questions. The urgency, or even the somewhat liberating impatience that unites the two projects, is based in the aesthetic gesture of *doing something*, that is, *enacting theft*, instead of bearing the length of the cultural and political processes within which restitution seems to be stuck. As such, both projects offer a concrete boost in imagination, offering viewers to be confronted with how it feels to see (ephemeral) change. Still, the politics of restitution are about giving more weight to African perspectives in the first place. This is linked to a broader debate about decolonizing art, in which questions of authorship and positionality are being raised. One key line of reasoning in this debate suggests that it does make a difference *who* makes art, i.e., who stages an act of restitution, from what position of privilege and at whose cost.⁷ Frankfurter Hauptschule holds a double privilege – as EU citizens, but also as artists operating with a special freedom. Their work is conceptualized as an act of solidarity, but especially its post-ironical approach to the topic seems based on a privilege someone like Diyabanza does not hold.

I do not aim to argue that there cannot be a pro-restitution artwork from a white art collective – on the contrary. It is especially white silence that holds back restitution from happening, which calls for acts of allyship by and with white people. While I explicitly refrain from criticizing the artists for their political identities, – an absurd track for art criticism that tends to flirt with an essentialist notion of culture – I do have to stress that their different backgrounds both as white folks and as artists make a crucial difference in their *approach* to restitution discourse, as well as in the *risk* of their actions. The performers of Frankfurter Hauptschule make art and are as such protected from legal consequences. Diyabanza acts in a real space, and *as himself* – thereby risking both fees and prison fines. What seems crucial in this distinction is that it is the very notion of art that privilege is hooked on: not fearing consequence, operating outside of social norms and certain legal frameworks.

While ‘Bad Beuys’ may be strong in ironically anticipating the absurdities of ethical art criticism (‘For Christoph Schlingensiefel, who did not always do everything right’) – the work does not offer a break with its own political conditions. This mainly shows in the narrative of restitution as reconciliation: it reproduces a white perspective of redemption and liberation from colonial guilt. Solidary activism needs to go further, it needs reflect its own positionality and the conditions of the artist’s perspective – not to comply with any standard of political correctness, but to get to the cultural grounds of what makes restitution meaningful and necessary.

⁷ To name two examples: the debate about the German translation of Amanda Gorman’s poem ‘The hill we climb’ in 2021 or the dispute about Dana Schultz painting ‘Open Casket’ at the Whitney Biennial in 2017.

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