

IMAN ISSA

HOW IS AN OBJECT CHANGED BY ITS CONTEXT?

Text by Iman Issa
Spike Art Magazine, Issue 66, pp. 110-111
Winter 2020

During the early days of the quarantine, I had many conversations with friends who objected to online platforms, describing them as an irredeemable compromise, a flat version of a nuanced phenomenon that cannot be levelled without inflicting some kind of damage to the original. I often agreed, saying that I too refuse to take part in the now ubiquitous online viewing rooms. But further reflecting on it, I find the temptation, to defend the exhibition space in relation to online platforms as the sight of a superior original confronted with a bad copy of itself, to be short-sighted. This is not necessarily in defence of online platforms but more to stress that the comparison itself is lacking and that the two platforms are, more accurately, unrelated. For to be able to compare the two platforms, one has to mentally separate the material on view in an exhibition from its habitat and imagine it offered again via different channels (channels deemed inferior in the case of online platforms). But can a clean distinction be adequately drawn between the material and the exhibition space that houses it? Or to ask the question more precisely: can a clean distinction be made between the material and the exhibition space, without a significant alteration of the very conception of both? Yes, we might end up with some form of an abstraction when drawing such divisions, but an abstraction, which I would think, relates very little to what we started with and can tell us close to nothing about it. It is also an abstraction that I imagine to be more slippery in its effects, and overwhelming and total in its alteration than a mere matter of losing depth or dimension.

During the course of my research on artefacts, I have often come across museological critiques attempting to rectify the colonial history of their collections by thinking of and treating historical artefacts as intact objects which have lost part of their essence as a result of being severed from their original habitat. Indeed an examination of the last twenty years of museological practices will yield many instances where art historians, museum directors, and curators took it upon themselves to remedy this purported gap between object proper and the museum as its new environment. The remedy might take the form of more elaborate

displays with carefully phrased historical information about use, function, and lineage, as well as the cultures from which these objects originated. In rare cases, the results have been illuminating (accidentally so, I would argue), but in most cases these practices have added little real knowledge while doubling down on the initial violence of appropriation. Assuming the relation between the object in the world and the one in the museum as a matter of a loss of depth implies that it would again be feasible to conceptually extract the object from its new surroundings in the museum and link it to its former self with “the higher resolution” that was in the outside world. But could it not be that once an object enters the museum, it becomes impossible to separate it from its new habitat without completely altering it, and that the far more poignant and less violent display is the one that takes this into account: a display that stresses the gap to the outside world as opposed to trying to eclipse it? Could it not be that objects in museums and those in the outside world live on parallel lines that never intersect, regardless of how similar they sometimes appear to be, and regardless of the numerous conversations in which they can both partake? I am more and more inclined to think so, leaving me with a strong sense, that despite its relatively long history, there is still much to learn about what an exhibition is and can do.

One of the first exhibitions I saw after the quarantine was *Hannah Arendt und das 20. Jahrhundert* at the Deutsches Historisches Museum in Berlin. The material in the exhibition, although numerous, was hardly new. There were television and radio interviews, many of which are available online. Oft-circulated quotes were pasted on the walls alongside familiar portraits, letters, notes, and book covers, all of which were displayed in an equally familiar narrative. Despite having encountered most of the material before, I must have spent over three hours in the show, curiously circling the material on view – listening, watching, reading – and then going over everything backwards once again, in case I had missed something. And walking out of the museum, I indeed had the feeling of having missed much and an immediate desire to repeat my visit as soon as the chance allows.

This experience made palpable to me what I might have intuitively known to be true, which is, that even at their purportedly most educational, exhibitions cannot be summarized in terms of the information they offer, nor reduced to the material they show. In fact exhibitions have little information to offer outside of an experience, in which the space, arrangement, light, smell, sound, temperature, and speed all figure.