**Moving Spaces**
Enacting Dance, Performance, and the Digital in the Museum
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# "Animated Words, Will Accompany My Gestures"
## Seismographic Choreographies of Difficult Heritage in Museums

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**Abstract** This chapter offers an ethnographic analysis of two choreographic projects – *The Sysmograph* (2019) by Pélagie Gbaguidi, which addressed the Venetian Museo del Manicomio. La follia reclusa in the context of the Ultrasanity symposium in Venice and the planned contribution of Dorothée Munyaneza on the Marseille ethnographic collections in the framework of a symposium during Manifesta 13 (2021). Both choreographies are analysed as performances that sense and mediate traumatic pasts, object agency, and the continuation of modern legacies in museums. The objective of this contribution is to open a discussion on the possibilities of choreographies and dance not as illustrative practices, but as mediating, embodied, translated investigations of active matter, difficult heritage, and the traumatic pasts inscribed in museological narratives, objects, and spaces.

**Keywords** Difficult heritage. Choreography. Museum. Colonial legacies. Venice. Marseille.

**Summary** 1 San Servolo, Museo del Manicomio, 2019. – 2 Mediating Objects, Theatrical Museums. – 3 The Ethnographic Collections in the Former Almshouse, Vieille Charité, Marseille. – 4 Learning from Seismographic Choreographies.

## 1 San Servolo, Museo del Manicomio, 2019

> My contribution in this special day of collective awakening will be to make visible as a sysmogram the non-visible areas of pain traces, to communicate them to you on a visible support #writing# morse# so that together we can connect to our own sensitive areas.
> (Pélagie Gbaguidi)

I found myself, together with twenty or so artists, psychiatrists, and neuroscientists, on the Venetian island of San Servolo, a short boat ride from the famous canals of the city of Venice. This was during the opening days of the 2019 Venice Biennale for Contemporary Art. The island of San Servolo is a loaded space, walled, reformed, odd;

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a former psychiatric clinic and mental asylum in and yet outside of the city of Venice that instituted the "profound relation [...] between madness and confinement" (Foucault 2009, 217), creating the 'abominable', the 'abnormal', and neutralising the generative potential of mental diversity. This is a place that was designed for the unwanted, the sick, the mentally troubled, the homeless, those who had been marginalised and constructed as other. The island of San Servolo is the former site of a Benedictines' convent, and in 1725 it became a psychiatric hospital for Venetian nobles. In 1797, Napoleon's government decreed that those considered mentally troubled were to be interned at San Servolo, a procedure followed by both the Austrian and Savoy reigns. In 1978 the Basaglia law, or Law 180 as it was known, was passed, which saw a shift of mental care into the community with the aim to deinstitutionalise psychiatric practice.

Consequently, the hospital on San Servolo was abandoned, and patients moved to other institutions, such as the Palazzo Boldù. While the island has in recent years become the site of the Venice International University, a satellite of Ca' Foscari University of Venice and the Venice Academy of Fine Arts, and home to the Venetian Metropolitan Services, the memories of the old mental hospital and its patients are conserved with many objects within the wings of the Museo del Manicomio di San Servolo – La follia reclusa, the asylum museum that opened in 2006. What is more, the seat of the foundation and the archives of Franco and Franca Basaglia are also housed on the same site, the legacies of which are not without contestation in Italy.[1]

Museums such as the Museo del Manicomio present an awkward history, a "difficult heritage", in Sharon Macdonald's terms (2009), for they not only preserve a problematic past but also ask the visitors to position themselves in relation to them. Basaglia's reforms were pervasive and affected generations of families and professionals across Italy, making its concrete archiving and musealisation on San Servolo a focal point of an immense legal, ethical, and political seismic shift (De Cunto 2014). The museum and its collection are a matter of concern and a prism that emanates a controversial historical shift, which can be less easily reconciled with an affirmative view on the present, as many parts of the nearby Venetian islands and their internationally celebrated museums and exhibition spaces may suggest. The proximity on the island of the asylum museum, and the altogether antipodal position embodied in the Basaglia Foundation become concrete and controversial locations from which to reflect on questions of justice, violence, and social reform.

The symposium that brought us together on the island was organised by the Berlin-based arts space SAVVY Contemporary as part of their longer-term project *Ultrasanity*, which addressed healing possibilities afforded by anti-psychiatric forms of care (Ndikung, Agudio, Krugman 2021).[2] In one

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1 Museo del Manicomio. La follia reclusa (`https://museomanicomio.servi- zimetropolitani.ve.it/ilmuseo/`). The museum catalogue provides a comprehensive history, documents, and evidence of the site's transition (Accordi 2007).

2 The event was a collaboration between SAVVY Contemporary and the Association of Neuroesthetics (AoN) Berlin, curated by Elena Agudio. It formed part of a larger-term research and exhibition project in multiple chapters in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Morocco, Italy, and Germany by the arts space SAVVY Contemporary. See `https://savvy-contemporary.com/en/projects/2019/ultrasanity/`.

**Figure 1** Installation of *Sysmograph*. 2019. Colour Charcoal on paper. *Ultrasanity* exhibition at SAVVY Contemporary, Berlin. Courtesy of the artist. © SAVVY Contemporary

of the wood-and-glass pavilions purposely built to expand the island's activities, listeners had gathered for a series of talks and performances. In the early afternoon, we listened to Jazwant Guzder, psychiatrist and head of child psychiatry at the Jewish General Hospital (McGill University, Canada), who explored the relationship between drawing and therapy. Guzder, a close friend and colleague of the late Fred W. Hickling, Jamaican pioneer of community-engaged mental therapy, was one among several speakers to draw on the legacy of Basaglia and the field of deinstitutionalised psychiatry that so clearly marked the site of the event.

Guzder formed part of the circle of chairs. While she was talking, next to her, almost like any other audience member, the Dakar-born Belgian-based performer Pélagie Gbaguidi began what she describes as "seismographic choreographies". Sensing, feeling, giving gestures to words, she followed the talk and its narratives of trauma, healing, and drawing. Initially, her body rested calmly on a chair, her hands moving a thread, holding it in the air. Accompanying Guzder's talk like a gestural commentary, Gbaguidi then moved to take a set of felt pens and charcoal sticks to start drawing on A4 paper sheets, which she subsequently ripped out of the book and let glide onto the floor. After the talk, the floor was covered in red, black, and white drawings. She writes herself of the drawing that it invites to "probe the vibrations", providing participants with exemplary tools – "writings, cut-outs (of shapes from the museum's objects)" – which would be used throughout the day to create "an improvised mapping of our collective excavation" **[fig. 1]**.[3]

3 https://www.pelagiegbaguidi.com/publications/symposium-ultrasanity-58th-biennale-di-venezia-10/.

Gbaguidi describes herself as a "contemporary Griot". In doing so, she takes reference from the West African tradition of (traditionally) a man who, in her words, questions the individual as he or she moves through life by absorbing the words of the ancients and modelling them like a ball of fat that he places in the stomach of each passer-by with the ingredients of the day.[4] Gbaguidi understands her work as "an anthology of signs and traces on trauma", which she enacts through the mediating role of the Griot.

The second part of her performance, which she called *The Sysmograph*,[5] slowly led the symposium participants out of the dedicated seminar space into the open space of the island, walking towards the garden. Standing around a tree, she sought to conjure up the voices of the ghosts of former residents of the islands, but also the more-than-human spirits. She then 'followed the voices' and in doing so accompanied the spirits and also the participants, across the islands – passing by the local chapel, and other landmarks of the islands (doors, thresholds, gates), into the permanent exhibition of San Servolo's Museo del Manicomio, to find out "why these spirits are still screaming so loudly".[6] In this commissioned choreography, Gbaguidi walked through the corridors and rooms of the museum, guiding participants in the symposium, in order to effect a "collective awakening" as she puts it. Her body, in her understanding, mediated "the non-visible areas of pain" in order to "trace, to communicate them".[7] Evidently, the museum showcased visible areas of pain and trauma, such as nineteenth-century instruments of painful treatment and inhumane incarceration, including chains, handcuffs, and straight jackets, but also tools used "to cure mental illnesses" (Accordi 2007), such as electroshock machines. Gbaguidi's choreographed movements appeared calm and composed, but as she walked through the museum corridors, her body, when coming across disturbing objects, occasionally erupted and reacted, like a seismograph that responds to a trigger, "moved by energy",[8] as she puts it. Her movements were described as 'fluid' by one of the participants. In her understanding, the corporeal response attuned not just with the affective energy of the instruments and objects, but also the ancestral and afterlife presences of those that had been incarcerated on the island. For Gbaguidi, her choreography translates and mediates important areas to render them visible through her body. She affirms: "[t]o link and unlink, like animated words, will accompany my gestures, my thoughts to create spaces of co-existence".[9]

In the following sections, I will contextualise and analyse this understanding of the body of the female performer as a translating medium engaged in seismographic investigations of difficult heritage.

4 For an expanded self-description of the artist, see: https://www.pelagiegbaguidi.com/about-us/.

5 https://www.pelagiegbaguidi.com/artists/the-sysmograph/.

6 Personal comment by the artist during the symposium.

7 https://www.pelagiegbaguidi.com/publications/symposium-ultrasanity-58th-biennale-di-venezia-10/.

8 Cf. fn. above.

9 Cf. fn. above.

## 2 Mediating Objects, Theatrical Museums

The relationship between different types of performance (theatre, dance, choreography) and exhibition spaces (museums, galleries) is marked more by porosity than distinction. In *Art Beyond Itself* (2014), Nestor Garcia Canclini analyses the history of modern and contemporary art as one that reveals the essentially modern character of institutional critique, arguing that any form of transgression of modern institutional spaces undergirds the institution and its modern character. Whilst the white cube and modern art museum can thus be seen as achievements of artistic autonomy – a marked feature of modern art –, the reaction *against* their institutional confines does not constitute a breaking with that legacy. In fact, Claire Bishop's *Artificial Hells* (2012) and earlier writings on relational art (Bishop 2004) in which she criticises the pseudo-utopian ambitions of Nicolas Bourriaud's curated and thus-coined relational aesthetics (1998), underscore this argument. The didactic, and often undemocratic involvement of participatory performances in museum spaces, does not reveal a utopian horizon, as suggested by Bourriaud, but recreates spectator-performer boundaries that often inhibit the open-ended nature of such "exhibition experiments" (Basu, Macdonald 2007). In that sense, museums are themselves "theatrical" in their set-asidedness of experience (Davis, Postlewait 2003). They comprise performative scenographies, with their captions, paths, and narratives, which more often than not purport participation and interaction whilst rigidly guiding interpretation and experience (Lidchi 1997; Tinius 2015). Furthermore, we know what great labour museums invest in the artifice of standstill and conservation, thus working against the idea of immobility and passive materiality (Rubio 2020). Quite on the other side, bodily habitus and techniques form archives and repertoires of national (Mauss 1973) and cultural memory (Taylor 2003). The shift of curatorial practice, since the 1990s, to understand exhibition-making in the expanded curatorial field as the literal "staging-ground of the development of an idea" (Rogoff 2013, 45; Tinius, Macdonald 2020) pushes us to understand the limited prism of Western institutional and disciplinary compartmentalisation of performance and museums. This brief summary serves as a background to my discussion on the role of choreographies in engaging with museums and exhibition spaces. I furthermore take a cue from two sets of discussions on materiality and museums to address the potential of seismographic choreographies for our understanding of critical heritage and exhibition-making.

First, I consider materiality and objecthood as agentive, mediating, and pulsing. This draws on Science and Technology Studies, in particular the elaboration of Actor-Network-Theory (ANT), which has allowed an understanding of mediation, translation, and implication of objects, affects, and human beings. It seeks to overcome an asymmetry in the empirical study of technologies, science, and the natural world. Instead of proposing an intersubjective analysis of human interaction, such as Bourdieu's *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (1977), it seeks to resituate social scientific writing by proposing an understanding of agents, or actors and networks as a sequence of associations. This is based on a redefinition of a range of terms, such as 'the social', 'an account', and 'interaction', aiming to enable a more complex, more localised, less imposed analysis of science, knowledge, and the world.

Actors, or agents, are defined in ANT, not in terms of agency, but as *mediators* for associations, as objects among other objects (Latour 2005, 128).

In *On recalling ANT* (1999, 18), Latour, therefore, describes the new position of the actor as 'interobjectivity'. It is in this sense that one can consider a biology textbook, for example, an actor because "of the new active role given to the gene" (Latour 2005, 10) in constituting knowledge, discussion etc. Or, in the context of this chapter, a caption underneath a museum object, as an actor in mediating colonial and postcolonial reckoning with violence. Rather than defining actors as having a particular quality, like being human, having agency etc, Latour posits that an actor is only an actor if it makes a difference, if it creates an association (130). In other words, ANT considers actors as networks of mediators, as precarious "network effects" (136). Networks are the traces between these mediations, which are made visible by them, for which one can account. Interestingly, the account a scientist writes, one that traces the moves of actors, who mediate between further actors, is yet another such network. A network is both what is being described, and, in doing so, what describes another network.

This understanding of agency in networks is relevant for understanding the more-than-affective performativity of museum collections. Not only the charged objects behind the vitrine windows act upon visitors, but the vitrines themselves mediate knowledge (or bias) about the use and abuse of objects. Likewise, museum corridors, books, posters – the entire three-dimensionality of an exhibition – act upon each other, creating not-always-evident spheres of association for 'seismographic choreographies' that trace them.

The second body of literature on which I draw takes such a complex understanding of agents, mediations, and networks into the realm of difficult heritage and awkward politics. For, we may ask, who has the power to cut or create such networks and associations, besides curators? As Strathern puts it in her critique of ANT, the claim that the very "power of such analytical networks is also their problem" (2005, 484), namely that they do not have a limit except where they are forcibly cut or extended. Interpretation is one such cutting of a network of associations, as well as interior design, visitor flows, accompanying literature that are also all acts of cutting networks of possible associations. Thus, the associations of actors and networks within museums (captions, artefacts, vitrines, texts, architecture etc.) are not neutral and flat, but activated, placed, used, and arranged by curators and designers as well as users alike. They are, in other words, curated in manifold ways, and it is the force and effect of insensitive curatorial arrangements that are at stake in the seismographic choreography of Gbaguidi.

What Latour did for materiality has been a long-standing interest in the curatorial engagement with the agency of art. Alfred Gell posited that we should consider traps closer in their relationship to artworks, because they *implicate* – or hook (Felski 2020) – a subject. As Gell writes

> this trap is a model as well as an implement. In fact, all implements are models, because they have to be adapted to their user's characteristics, and so bear their imprint. (1996, 26)

While Gell's theory of agency sought to understand the "implication" of spectators (1998), he remained in a particular kind of relational mode bound up in visuality and materiality (Le peuple qui manque in Von Oswald, Tinius 2020). The seismographic performances of Gbaguidi and Dorothée Munyaneza go beyond visuality to reflect on affect, history, and emotional trauma.

The question that arises is: what happens if the relationality is not just between any particular abstract artwork and a disinterested viewer anymore? If, as Macdonald writes, we conceive of a relation between a "difficult heritage", that is, a heritage "recognised as meaningful in the present, but that [is] also contested and awkward for public reconciliation" (Macdonald 2009, 1) and "communities of implication" (Lehrer 2020, 289). As Michael Rothberg (2019) and Erica Lehrer have argued, we ought to understand those affected by the display of difficult heritage as potentially anonymous but related and implicated in communities or subjects. In such a way, as I have analysed in the context of colonial-era artefacts exhibited in an archival space in Germany (Tinius 2018), the mediation and the network created between a spectator and an object depends starkly on between whom and how this encounter takes place. The way we are 'hooked' or attached to artworks, objects, or artefacts, is, in other words, a consequence of the person's particular identity and positionality, but also of how such a relation is curated. The questions 'who sees what?' and 'which trigger warnings are attached to racist descriptions?' are, after all, part of the three-dimensional narrative of a museum exhibition.

Curator Bonaventure Soh Bejeng Ndikung, whose own practice engages in forms of curatorial expansion from object-centred work to a consideration of fields, networks, and forms of implication, has put forward a series of essays that complicate this relationship (2021). He asks: what happens if we consider the body of the visitor of a museum as a multiple, dividual, assemblage of experiences, sedimented, and scarred? What if, in other words, we consider museums' visitors as corporeal museums? In an unpublished conversation I conducted with Ndikung and Chris Dercon (9 July 2018), Ndiking elaborated on this understanding by saying that "first and foremost, the self is the museum, the body is the museum – that being which carries and disseminates knowledge". For that reason, he continues,

> whenever I get into the museum, the museum is a museum and can only be a museum in relation to what I bring with me: it is always in relation, in movement, in negotiation. (Personal comment by the artist during the symposium)

Then, considering that difficult heritage and awkward objects are relational problems, meaning, they activate different responses depending on who and how one encounters them, every visitor to a museum space is to some degree a seismographic mediator of experiences. It is noteworthy, however, that analyses of the Western history of the spectator in a museum (Sansi 2014; Kemp 2015) – even the attempt of a participatory reversal, as discussed by Bishop – have overstated the agency of the spectator in distancing, detaching, or relating, at the expense of the mediating function of inscribed traumatic histories.

Writing of ethnographic collections, Ndikung argues that

> many Western museums and institutions wrongly and forcefully harbouring many so-called 'objects' from the non-West do not understand, or have not fully recognised, that most of the so-called 'objects' have never been and will never be objects. (2019)

This position reveals not merely a misunderstanding of the traditions of their making, he writes, but a process tied up with the imperial modern "de-

humanization and objectification of humans from the non-West" (Ndikung 2019). Drawing a parallel line between the way that objects have been detained as artefacts and humans as slaves, he suggests that

> understanding these so-called objects as subjects necessitates a radical shift from Western understandings of subjecthood, personhood, and community. (Ndikung 2019)

This shift towards understanding the subjectivity of objects, for him, implies three aspects in particular: first, a reckoning with the ancestral logic of objects – "not representations of ancestors […] rather […] as incarnations, embodiments or personifications of our ancestors" (Ndikung 2019). Second, an understanding that some of what is commonly understood as an object possesses subjectivity as ritual entities, and, as such,

> contain the possibility for healing, mediating between (wo)men and gods, and conscious of the dynamics of communities as they protect individuals in society. (Ndikung 2019)

Third, he argues that we need to take into account the drastically different understandings of art when considering objecthood and subjecthood. In reference to Gloria Anzaldúa (1987), he points out that many art objects are not made to validate themselves as autonomous objects of art, but to validate humans, thus not separated or independent of those to whom they refer. Ndikung's elaboration of the radical and complex shifts necessary to reckon with the subjectivity of objects in collections implicates not just the viewer and the object, but also the role of the curator as caretaker of these relations (Ndikung 2021).

This section presented a series of possible pathways to understanding museums as theatrical, choreographed spaces, and to reconsidering curating objects as a form of mediation that considers the subjectivity of matter. It serves as an introduction to my second case study and another practice of seismographic choreography, namely Dorothée Munyaneza's planned address of the ethnographic collections of the MAAOA in Marseille's Vieille Charité. The performance in Marseille serves as a comparative field site to the island of San Servolo: both sites are marked by their modern history of othering, and the subsequent musealisation of modern universal epistemologies that enshrined the dichotomies between 'normal' and 'abnormal', 'Western' and 'non-Western'.

## 3 The Ethnographic Collections in the Former Almshouse, Vieille Charité, Marseille

> The body is a bearer of memory. It is my body that moves, sings. It is not simply acting out pre-constructed phrases, but finding its memories – beginning in my ribs, between my thighs, in my head, reverberating and echoing off the walls.
> Dorothée Munyaneza

On the occasion of a symposium on repair, reparation, and restitution and during a scorching September afternoon, we had set up a roundtable in the courtyard of the Vieille Charité with Dorothée Munyaneza, British-Rwandan dancer, singer, and choreographer.[10] She responded with the above quotation to a question I had asked her about the role of the body as a mediating seismograph, and her response framed the conversation with the director of Marseille's public museums, Xavier Rey, and the philosopher and curator Barbara Cassin. Originally, I, and the two other curators of the event, Alya Sebti and Nikola Hartl, had commissioned Munyaneza to work with the ethnographic collection of the MAAOA (le Musée d'Arts Africains, Océaniens et Amérindiens), housed on one side of the former almshouse where the symposium took place. A historic building, charged with a history of isolation, quarantine – and its modern institutionalised form – not too dissimilar to the first context I described on San Servolo. Unbeknownst to us at the time, the planned performance was later cancelled due to the risk posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. Rey had invited Cassin to curate an exhibition of moving, migrating objects (*Objets Migrateurs*, then planned to take place between 17 June-10 November 2021 in the Vieille Charité), which they elaborated as a response to the international claims and calls for restitution hotly debated in France at the time. The roundtable was kicked off by a performance put together by Assia Zouane and Estelle N'Tsendé, who form part of the Marseille-based activist group *Les Lunettes Décoloniales*. The situation was tense, since the group had recorded and broadcast voices from citizens of Marseille, who articulated a candid desire for the restitution of African heritage from French ethnographic collections back to the continent. The presentation created an intense atmosphere, not only because they had decided to 'perform' their intervention at the outset of the panel just days before, but also because their charged and accusatory tone, and the clear voices they let us listen to, contrasted with the intellectually composed and defensive tone of Rey and Cassin, who spoke of 'dialogue', 'reflection', and 'involvement', but not of return, restitution, and redress **[fig. 2]**.

Munyaneza's choreography envisaged a tracing of the subject-object threshold of the ethnographic collections. Her explication of what it means to choreograph such an encounter within a museum that she knew from several previous private visits echoed both Gbaguidi's elaboration of her choreography and Ndikung's thoughts on objects and subjects. Objects, Munyaneza explained, "bear the memory of stories" (in Manifesta 2020).[11] When

10 This event under the title *Tracing Fractures* was co-curated with Nikola Hartl and Alya Sebti, who had invited us to propose this symposium in the framework of the 2020 Marseille Manifesta 13. The entire programme is documented and can be watched in French with English subtitles on the webpage of Manifesta 13 (`https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y687p1GW5CM`).

11 The roundtable with Munyaneza's statement (2020) that can be found on the page of Manifesta 13 begins from 1′50″45‴ onwards with a presentation by *Les Lunettes Decoloniales*, which


**Figure 2** Image from the *Tracing Fractures* Symposium and roundtable with Dorothée Munyaneza, Barbara Cassin, Xavier Rey, and Jonas Tinius (from left to right) in the courtyard of Vieille Charité, Marseille. The MAAOA halls are on the left. © Vost Collectif

we arrive in museum spaces, she goes on, "we are loaded with stories […] As a Rwandan woman living in Marseille, I have accumulated stories, and I encounter objects loaded with stories", she said (Munyaneza in Manifesta 2020). Especially when these stories – of theft, loot, colonial violence – are evidently associated with pain, she considers her choreographies a form of 'encounter' with these stories and their relation to the objects. As she put it, and I am citing here from the roundtable:

> They [the objects in the collection] are frozen behind walls and considered as no longer inhabited. Interacting or inhabiting these spaces, which are themselves inhabited, is a dialogue […] a living communication […] a political gesture, a social gesture, a cultural gesture. (Munyaneza in Manifesta 2020)

More than being just a seismograph in the sense of the griot practice as articulated by Gbaguidi, Munyaneza considers the encounter between her and the objects, her performance and the audience, as a kind of contagion: it "contaminates or interferes with the bodies of those who witness that moment" (Manifesta 2020), she said. Nevertheless, this contamination necessitates a sensing body. Similar to the 'body as museum' proposed by Ndikung, she considers the body as "bearer of memory", which is "reverberating and echoing" in relation to space (Munyaneza in Manifesta 2020). Expanding on the seismographic notion I elaborated with view to Gbaguidi's performance, Munyaneza describes the act of relating to objects as "a way for me to di-

opened the conversation with recorded statements on restitution in Marseille and provided an important backdrop for the conversation.

gest, to chew on something, and to share it afterwards" (Manifesta 2020). She puts it even more concretely by speaking of her body as "an instrument that I master – and that I also do not control […] letting other things come out, which manifest themselves" (Manifesta 2020).

However, Munyaneza's elaboration of the sensing and seismographic activity of the body is not directed solely at documentation, or tracing, but rather at elaborating a future-oriented situation. In her words, "even though I come loaded with memories, I produce for a future" (Manifesta 2020). Recalling an experience of visiting the MAAOA with her son's school class, she ponders that her activity is directed at transmission: "the question of this transmission is to trace and leave traces, which can be done in one visit, or even in one hour" (Manifesta 2020). Considering her own body as an "instrument" and as "weapon", in her view a critical choreographic approach "opens doors to spaces that were impassable, uninhabitable for bodies like mine" (Manifesta 2020). As such, her choreographic engagement with objects bearing a difficult past expands the traumatic tracing already elaborated by Gbaguidi to think about the 'displacement and questioning of privileges' that she addresses when walking through a Western ethnographic museum. She states that "[i]f my body allows that […] I can bring the street into these galleries and kids can look at their history, the history of their ancestors" (Manifesta 2020).

The symposium in Marseille took place against the backdrop of an increasingly polarised conversation on the restitution of African heritage from European museums. While the question of whether to restitute looted artefacts and human remains from former European colonies – particularly on the African continent – is far from a recent conversation (Savoy 2021), several events had preceded the symposium that charged the air on the day itself. President Emmanuel Macron's 2017 plea to restitute proven looted artworks from French national collections, and the subsequently commissioned report on restitution by Felwine Sarr and Bénédicte Savoy (2018) had fuelled pan-European calls for the 'decolonisation' of European heritage institutions, in particular museums (Grechi 2021). In the run-up to the symposium, rumour had it that the symposium caused stir and nervousness, since it was the first of its kind to address restitution on the actual grounds of one of the city's museums.

What is more, on 30 July, just over a month before the event, the activist Mwazulu Diyabanza and three other men who form part of the *Multicultural Anti-Spoliation Front* had entered the MAAOA. They forcibly removed a ceremonial spear made of ivory from the display, before they headed for the exit. The activists were stopped, the object returned to the museum, and the group was charged, and subsequently acquitted a few months later. But the echo of their actions remains. In fact, Diyabanza's prolific social media commentary on ongoing court cases for similar acts in France and the Netherlands continue to resonate and circulate. His actions appear simple, yet they are forceful interpellations of audiences (both present during the actions and later viewing his live-streamed performances) and objects as well as questions of justice and the prefigurative role of museum activism. On that day in late July, after Mwazulu and his group dislodged the spear and walked through the courtyard in Marseille, he found himself confronted by security; instead of letting the arrest become a petty situation of a blocked action, he turns left and addresses the visitors in the café: "Are you complicit in crimes against humanity perpetrated by the Occi-

dent?". His whispers to the objects ("we bring you home"), and his address to the public authorities ("what has been stolen cannot be stolen back!") are prefigurative gestures and reflections on justice (UDC 2020). His actions had charged the museum as a site of confrontation and negotiation of ethical positions; the form-giving function of collections in a future-oriented battle of planetary justice have been shifted into the courtyard and towards the viewer (Tinius 2021).

Rey and Cassin were aware of the watchful eye of those visitors who followed the actions; those who had been aware of Diyabanza and the restitution report. The audio collages by *Les Lunettes Décoloniales* that preceded the roundtable, and the broadcast recordings of Marseille's inhabitants and their stark rebuttal of public attempts on behalf of heritage institutions to defuse arguments for restitution, elevated Munyaneza's statements. Her description of an anticipated choreography acted like a calm seismograph of the tensions underlying the difficult heritage of the ethnographic collections in Marseille and other European cities more generally. Munyaneza's imagined performance was charged with additional significance: a repair, a reconnection to the objects as agentive relational subjects with a past, a landscape to be sensed with the choreographer as a seismograph of past pain. The catalytical function became most evident when an audience member accused the idea of a participatory room in the proposed exhibition by Cassin and colleagues, in which the public gets to curate their own thoughts on restitution, as 'genius and coward' at the same time. Genius, the audience member explained, because it allowed the divesting of responsibility and involvement of 'the public'; coward, because it acts as a fig leaf for the otherwise avoided stance on restitution.[12]

## 4 Learning from Seismographic Choreographies

These two performances – one that took place, and one that was planned but remained unrealised – are an example of what I call 'seismographic choreographies' that mobilise the body of the performer as a medium for the sensing of energies. Like a 'seismograph', these bodies react to the unseen, unheard, or untouched, and mediate between the spectators and the "non-visible areas of pain" that they experience kinaesthetically.[13] I reflected on the corporeal sensing of such areas of pain through mediation and object-agency, but also addressed how this can be thought of as a way to think about the notion of the 'implicated subject' or community, as elaborated, among others, by Erica Lehrer (2020) and Michael Rothberg (2019), in the context of colonial and post-Holocaust reckoning with difficult heritage.

I worked through a brief contextualisation of these choreographic examples to trace the ways in which museums with sensitive or difficult collections can be accessed or activated. I am particularly interested in seeing choreographic, conceptual, and reflexive positions such as those by Munyaneza and Gbaguidi not in sharp contradistinction to curatorial confrontations of difficult collections. Instead, I understand them as proposals for

12 This exchange is documented in the video of the event that took place in the frame of Manifesta 13.

13 https://www.pelagiegbaguidi.com/artists/the-sysmograph/.

how to engage with the legacies of objects, the subjectivities with which they may be imbued, and the possibilities of engaging with them. I chose two contexts where modern institutions, and their collections, posed concrete problems – past trauma (psychiatric incarceration and colonial loot) – and offered concrete situations of painful narratives to the choreographers. By linking the work done by Gbaguidi and Munyaneza through their mediating bodies to critical reflections on implicated communities of past trauma and multidirectional memory, I hope to contribute to an understanding of performance and choreography as investigative, troubling, and interrogative practices in the field of museums and European heritage.

The comparative aspect of my participant observation underlined how the two choreographers conceive of their bodies as tools or instruments, not just in a personal or artistic quest, but as a cultural, social, and political gesture (UDC 2020) towards global reconciliation and ethical repair. Even though Munyaneza's performance was eventually not realised, I worked with her then still anticipating reflection on the choreography, analysing how she conceived of her work as a seismographic and transformative tracing of the possible, multiple, and intergenerational implicated subjects of a past pain inflicted by the European imperial project. In this sense, one comparative heuristic for the two performances is how the choreographers "deployed" their bodies as "tools and weapons", to cite Munyaneza's statements during the Marseille roundtable, to act as seismographers of a past still sedimented, and of an agency in the presence of objects, which remain in museums of madness and anthropology. While Gbaguidi emphasised, in the context of the Venetian asylum museum, possibilities of healing and 'collective awakening', Munyaneza explicitly spoke of her body moving in the context of an ethnographic collection as a 'weapon' or a 'tool' which became an entrance to impermeable and impenetrable spaces to bodies marked as other by a normative western museological narrative. The seismographic choreographies thus both created what I may call 'scenarios of problematisation' in which exhibition spaces are rendered as prisms, problems, situations, and potential crime-scenes to be activated and analysed through artistic work. On the Venetian island of San Servolo, Gbaguidi's performance explicitly aimed at a form of social healing, a process of corporeal reflection of unease; in Marseille's Vieille Charité, Munyaneza's choreography was a political gesture of cultural grasping, opening, and access. In both contexts, the museums epitomised the universal modern gesture of collections – to collect, preserve, and display – thus carrying with them into the present the burden of an imperial past and a normalising discourse on mental troubles. Gbaguidi and Munyaneza's corporeal conversation and seismographic choreographies offered a glimpse at how we can analyse difficult heritage and artistic-curatorial work productively together. In both contexts, seismographic choreographies become ways to "rehabilitate to subjecthood" (Ndikung 2019) collections of objects thought long dead.

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