

'The Savage Hits Back' Revisited: Art and Global Contemporaneity in the Colonial Encounter

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INTRODUCTION

Departing from the statement that the discipline of art history – with its still functioning Eurocentric bias in times of global perspectives – is in crisis, the conference 'The Savage Hits Back' Revisited: Art and Global Contemporaneity in the Colonial Encounter' organised by Anna Brus, Joseph Imorde and Erhard Schüttpelz (University of Siegen) turned towards German anthropologist Julius Lips (1895–1950) and his work *The Savage Hits Back* (1937) for some answers.

In a time of colonial contexts and 'salvage anthropology', many artists, art historians and anthropologists alike mainly perceived the then so-called 'primitive art' as expressions of 'pure' authenticity and pre-modern, non-contemporary 'Otherness'. Eighty years ago, Julius Lips was already attempting to dismantle this misplaced concept that saw the 'primitive' as isolated and distant from the rest of the world. His seminal work created a new perspective. In *The Savage Hits Back*, he inverted the 'colonial gaze' by examining visual expressions of the colonial encounter in 'non-European' art by presenting a worldwide kaleidoscopic view of Indigenous depictions of Europeans. He asked his readership to perceive these images as mirrors that offer great potential for European self-reflection. Thereby, Lips brought attention to transcultural entanglements in colonial contact zones.

The conference set out to re-assess Lips's approach and the representational objects on which he drew, asking how their academic study has further developed since his book's original publication. The event took place over the course of two days; the first day was primarily dedicated to the (ambivalent) figure of Julius Lips, his academic writings and his particular approach to interpreting 'non-European art', situating him in the field of history of knowledge and science. The second day broadened its focus, taking up Lips's approach in *The Savage Hits Back* and bringing it into a contemporary context by analysing specific historic and contemporary art works within current academic discourses.

DAY ONE

The conference started off with Christopher Pinney (Anthropology and Visual Culture, University College London) who argued forcefully for a renewed and critical understanding of Lips that highlights the colonial and anti-colonial ambiguities of his pioneering book. The seemingly antagonistic German anthropologists Julius and Eva Lips and Leo Frobenius shared a certain fame in the US. The Lipses were especially prominent as anti-Nazi and anti-colonial actors not only through *The Savage Hits Back* but also through Eva Lips's autobiographical report *Savage Symphony*. Challenging these demarcations, Pinney described Lips as an ambivalent figure who 'changed trains' many times in his career. Furthermore, Pinney showed that both Lips and Frobenius investigated similar issues but came to very different conclusions. Where Lips found colonial mimicry and the evidence of political experience, Frobenius saw only colonial mimesis and the shallow imitation of the 'admired' coloniser at work. However, according to Pinney, Julius and Eva Lips's 'objectification' was deeply rooted in conventional anthropological understandings of material culture that could be traced back to disciplinary forerunners like Friedrich Ratzel.

Matthias Krings' (Anthropology and African Popular Culture, Johannes Gutenberg Universität Mainz) presentation extended Lips's approach to the wider field of historic and contemporary cultural practices in Africa. Krings investigated African representations of the European 'Other' as spirits in rituals of possession trance via an ethnographic film (*Nigeria*, 1990). He took the example of the West African Babule spirit to show that the images of Europeans contain an undoubtable reference to Lips's artworks even though they are materially less fixed. They originated in the same context – the colonial encounter – and thus they indeed share the same realist mode of representation. However, in contrast to Lips, Krings argued that these representations most certainly have a very specific function *within* the African spiritual communities – that is to represent the powerful force of the (former) colonisers and to appropriate their particular capacities and potentials for West African individual and/or communal needs.

Anna Brus (Locating Media, University of Siegen) argued that by drawing from various disciplinary sources around 1900 – the debate about 'world art', German *Kulturkreislehre* and primitivist exhibitionary practices – Lips radically inverted these approaches in his book *The Savage Hits Back*. Through empathic interpretation of the objects' representations as caricature, he read 'non-European' art as a 'contemporary' and 'critical' art through which the 'Others' were simultaneously looking back at their colonisers and thereby subverting colonial power. To test Lips's often contested approach to humour, Brus traced back the object-biography of a Yoruba sculpture from Hamburg to Lagos. She showed how this kind of artwork, produced in the interplay between an Indigenous actor and his Western clients, negotiated the experience of alterity and reflected the mutual cultural attributions. Shed in this light, figuration and realism, rather than humour, became a mode of cross-cultural communication. Artworks like this Yoruba sculpture are part of a shared modernity, and they simultaneously confront the modernist heritage through the deconstruction of binaries like 'traditional' and 'modern'.

Cora Bender (Media Anthropology, University of Siegen) focused on the contribution of Julius Lips and his wife Eva to the Ethnography of Native Americans, while connecting the couples' academic endeavours with their biographical circumstances. At a time when it was still not commonplace, the Lipses went on field trips to Eastern Woodland communities, seeking direct encounters. These experiences not only fed into their academic work, but also strongly influenced their sense of self during a difficult personal phase in which they lived in exile in the US. They studied Native American resistance in the face of colonial aggression and transferred some of the ideas and strategies found there onto their own situation. Benders talk left the impression that – in a somewhat inverted way – the Lipses actually, at least partly, did what was proposed in *The Savage Hits Back* – they took the cultural expressions of 'the Others' as a mirror and used it for self-reflection.

The conference's first keynote delivered a smooth passage between the two emphases of the conference. Zoe S Strother (African Art, Columbia University, New York) took Lips's thesis as a starting point, asking if and how viewing colonial and contemporary African Art through his lens can still be analytically valuable today. She offered a close reading of a few powerful objects, eg an ivory tooth, carved with scenes of slavery and a Yombe staff from the Congo. Strother aimed at re-assessing Lips's thesis, that the Europeans were the audience for these representations – and she came to the conclusion that Lips was partly right. These objects were indeed very often made for Europeans, but they were also co-authored by these very Europeans, who wished to see themselves represented in a certain way. Nevertheless, African suffering at the hands of European colonisers and African characterisations of 'everything which was wrong with Europeans' likewise found their way into these depictions, often in a satirical way, which was usually undecipherable for the object's European recipient. Strother took these questions of authorship and humour also into the contemporary realm (eg by drawing on the works of Sammy Baloji) and argued for a multi-faceted network-model in characterising an artist's work with its multiple influences. Ultimately, both her

presentation and the following discussion alike posed questions concerning representation and power asymmetries: Who defines what 'local' art is? Who can be heard? Who is in charge of representing whom? And here, the figure of the curator – who, even in a 'globalised' art world, is still predominantly 'white' – came forward as a powerful (culture) broker.

DAY TWO

The first speaker of the second day, Michael Harbsmeier (Culture and Identity, Roskilde University), extended the conference's disciplinary focus on visual culture towards the field of literature. Through Lips's concept of the inverted gaze, he analysed a variety of subaltern accounts by Indian travellers in the late nineteenth century, which provided an exceptionally concrete and vivid understanding of subaltern perspectives in the colonial context, while simultaneously perceiving, lamenting and affirming their subaltern position. The travel writings were created for a divergent readership. Not only were they a form of legitimation of the journey aimed towards an Indian audience in times when travelling over the oceans was not thought to be appropriate for a Hindu; but furthermore, they were also written with an English readership in mind. Utterances of critique were thus subtle and the authors' own subaltern position in the colonial encounter remained unchallenged.

Like Kring's study, Nii O Quarcoopome's (curator, Detroit Institute of Arts) research was based on fieldwork and oral history with a specific historical and regional scope: He discussed 150 years of interactions with Europeans in Ewe visual culture (Coastal West Africa). Underpinned by a rich body of images, Quarcoopome analysed Ewe leaders' appropriation of different pieces of European material culture as emblems, hats and icons of European heraldry as well as a variety of other motifs. This appropriation of European imagery had multiple purposes and changed over time; it served to establish, re-affirm or to subvert power relations, not only with regards to the colonisers but also particularly within the competitive field of West African societies. Quarcoopome stressed that there existed not only multiple African perceptions of the Europeans, but also different Europeans. Consequently, he argued that the case of the Ewe people cautions against the over-simplification and generalisation that Lips's universalist approach might suggest.

Joseph Imorde (Art History, University of Siegen) took the audience into the heart of an early twentieth-century conflict in Germany between supporters of an institutionalised, Eurocentric art history and a new emerging group of people who advocated for a global art history. Their mission proposed a paradigm shift in approaches to analysing art – away from expert knowledge, produced in institutions, towards 'empathy as method' for everyone with an aesthetic sensibility. Seeing empathy as the universal tool to deal with all art was also Lips's approach, as Anna Brus had argued earlier. These scholars aimed at popularising global art through inexpensive publications which mainly consisted of black-and-white, object-only images, presented for solely aesthetic appreciation. In the following discussion, the question of legacy arose; has empathy as a method for a global art history failed? Imorde claimed, that these serial sequences of images were actually the basis from which early 'global art historians' like Aby Warburg and Carl Einstein developed the very methods on which we still draw today.

Michael Rowlands' (Anthropology, University College of London) in-depth, but somewhat opaque lecture looked at both sides of the colonial encounter. He started off with asking why, while Africans were eager to 'take the outside in', Europeans demonstrated such an antipathy towards Africans who appropriated European behaviour and artefacts. In line with current debates on the 'ontological turn', Rowlands saw a radical difference in the conceptualisation of what constitutes an object and a subject as the basis of the problem. He stated that in European thinking, subjects (God, Christ etc) show themselves through objectification, while in Africa, things have always already

had the potential of a subjectivity which only needed to be activated. This ritual activation in consecration he called 'the African drama of the object'. For his argument, Rowlands chose the Minkisi – Congolese power figures – as paradigmatic examples: they are already imbued with powers coming from elsewhere, from the ancestors, or more precisely from the land of the dead. With the colonial encounter, this 'elsewhere' was no longer only the wild area of the bush or the river as abodes of the ancestors – it was also the far-away cities of the Europeans. Powers drawn from these spaces are also represented in manufactured luxury goods like Mercedes cars and designer clothes. So while Europeans wanted to keep their 'radical Other' (like a mask representing Africa in a European museum), Africans wished to absorb the new activism of new objects from this new Kingdom of the Dead – the European city. Their open display of cars, fashion etc demonstrated personal success via appropriation of the forces of this new invisible world of the dead.

Gerald McMaster (Indigenous Visual Culture, OCAD University Toronto), himself an Indigenous North American art scholar, reversed the 'colonial gaze' through a vast panorama of material culture from all Indigenous areas of Canada and the North of the United States. He thereby carved out various Indigenous visual strategies in representing Native encounters with the European 'Other'. As part of an on-going research project with the aim of creating a representative overview as well as an Indigenous interpretive frame for Native American visual representations of Europeans, McMaster has already visited more than forty museums and collections in Europe, Canada and the US. Once again, it became clear how poorly developed the field of study for these representations still is. In this regard, Lips's work, even if published almost eighty years ago, still seems timely.

Towards the end of the conference, Ann Stephens (Senior curator, Sydney University Museum) presented a view of the sporadic encounters with Lips's work in Australian art from the late 1980s to the present. Through various examples, she asked whether art history today can look as if 'through native eyes', just as Lips challenged collecting practices in the twentieth century. Stephens presented artists like John Brack, who actually appropriated in his own work entitled *The White Man* (1987) and some of the images found in Lips's publication. She also showed very recent artistic positions like the work *Untitled (TII)* (2015) by Daniel Boyd presented at the 56th Venice Biennale. This work is a stark monochrome canvas, which might appear abstract, but is in fact a visual representation of historic 'stick maps' that seafarers on the Marshall Islands used to navigate the ocean. These kinds of artwork led Stephens to formulate an important question: How does one translate non-Western values in Western art spaces and expose the contradictions and antagonisms of a 'globalised' world?

The second keynote by Suzanne Preston-Blier (Fine Arts, African and American Studies, Harvard University), which concluded the conference, was a true tour de force of analysis of the many-faceted influences in Pablo Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J. R. M.)*. As has been demonstrated by feminist art historians before, she deconstructed the reading of Picasso as the artist who produced a paradigm shift in European art by his mere 'genius'; she did so by strongly rejecting the widespread myth that Picasso had been inspired by the direct encounter with African and Oceanic art in the Trocadero. Instead, she rather looked at images of objects and 'race types' in books, especially in anthropological literature. Picasso also drew on a hierarchical tree model of cultural evolution – and this is precisely what Preston-Blier saw in *Les Femmes d'Alger*. On the canvas, Picasso visualises a colonial regime of the gaze, artistically mapping out a scientific evolutionary model by hierarchically arranging the five women according to their skin colour. Like Imorde's and Rowlands' presentation, Preston-Blier's connection to the overall theme of the conference remained somewhat vague; it was most visible in her academic practice of a global art history, of which Lips can be seen as one of the intellectual forefathers.

CONCLUSION

Firstly, the conference organisers must be thanked for bringing this field of study, which seems to have attracted more interest only in recent years, to wider attention for a predominantly German academic audience. The interdisciplinary outline of the conference enabled a multi-perspective view on the objects in question. From producer's meaning to the reception of objects in European art, the talks combined ethnological, art historical and media historical views.

According to these multi-perspective views, Lips's thesis, that these representations of Europeans were ironic mirror images, now seems overly simplistic. Just as social relationships are complex, so are their representations. From today's point of view, many of these objects can no longer be summarised under one interpretation, but instead need thorough historical, sociological and ethnological analysis.

Unfortunately, due to a very tight conference program, a final summarising discussion of the multi-faceted inputs did not take place. A recapitulation and synthesis of the presented case studies, which situated the subject of the inverted gaze in different regional and historic contexts, would have been very fruitful and could have discussed what can be learned today from Lips's work for the purposes of an art history with a global endeavour as well as for actual museum practices?

Lips achievement of fostering a new and self-conscious perspective on global art – framing them as coeval works resulting from entangled social, economic, cultural and political processes of encounters in colonial contexts, rather than representing distinct, closed off, coherent cultural monads – seems to be more important than ever as the idea of such a 'cultural authenticity' still remains powerful today in both (some) museum displays as well as in the 'globalised' field of the arts. In the latter, it still shapes mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion of 'non-European' artists.

The conference showed quite clearly – once again – that there is a long way to go in decolonising art history and establishing a widespread appreciation of 'global art'. Lips's book title, and thus the conference title, could have been a good incentive also on an academic structural level to – as Gerald McMaster jokingly said – let 'the savage him/herself hit back' and integrate Native/Indigenous/African scholarly voices into the conference. One would have wished for more 'non-white', 'non-Western' positions. In the discussions, the question of who has the power to represent whom came up repeatedly, mainly referring to artists, curators and biennales. But it could have also turned to the conference itself. Even after more than thirty years of the 'crisis of representation' in anthropology – which also affected art history – one still has to make the effort to go beyond the well-trying and established networks in order to gain a truly global perspective in both academia and exhibition practices alike.

The conference *'The Savage Hits Back' Revisited: Art and Global Contemporaneity in the Colonial Encounter* took place at Rautenstrauch-Joest-Museum, Cologne, Germany, from 12–13 February 2016.

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