

# A New Museum Order: Representing the Lasting Legacy of Raw Materials: A Conversation with Roger M. Buergel and Sophia Prinz

Maarten Vanden Eynde

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In the framework of the 2nd Commodity Frontiers Initiative Journal with the theme of ‘Stimulants’ I could not have wished for a better-suited match to interview than Roger M. Buergel and Sophia Prinz from the Johann Jacobs Museum, which owes its existence to the coffee and cacao trade, but more importantly is unique in its endeavour to lay bare the intrinsically interwoven histories of commodities. The museum is dedicated to the global interdependencies of our life-world that become especially clear when tracing the history of important trade goods and their transport routes.

**Maarten Vanden Eynde:** *What intrigued me most about the statements that feature on the website of Johann Jacobs Museum, and more particularly in the research section about Raw Materials, is the part about the influence of the distribution of scarce resources on human history. It introduces the importance of cocoa and coffee, but also gold, crude oil, rubber and rare earths, as storytellers or protagonists in a story. ‘Telling these stories is one thing’ it states. ‘Being able to interpret them is another matter entirely. And yet that is exactly what our exhibitions aim to do: use raw materials as a guide for deciphering how our modern world works.’ Could you elaborate on how these materials, or the objects and documents that are used to tell their story, communicate, or how they are aided within the museum to speak about their previous life, use and importance?*

**Roger M. Buergel / Sophia Prinz:** Curatorially speaking, the first thing to do is to turn the material, be it opium, coffee, rubber or diamonds, into something strange. You want to induce people to digest the material’s presence, apart from any idea, or even promise, of narrative. There are some devices we tend to borrow from post-conceptual installation art, e.g. highlighting a material in its obstinate being-thereness. If you can make people ask in front of a piece of rubber: ‘What the hell is this?’ then you have already achieved something. The second

thing to do — again, curatorially speaking — is to keep the momentum, the sense of slight irritation that encroaches upon you as a visitor if the museum refuses to tell the truth, to explain, to enlighten you, whatever. You share a space with, say, a piece of natural rubber (caoutchouc), and next you see in a corner of the gallery a tiny photograph (black-and-white, dating back to the era of King Leopold’s plunder) of a Congolese whose skin is almost covered with rubber. Or you encounter a small screen with a movie by Melanie Smith about contemporary Fordlandia: images absorbing jungle life that has reconquered the by now ruined factories and facilities brought by Henri Ford to the Amazon Rainforest in the late 1920s. Visiting the exhibition and contemplating the different objects, you are hardly overburdened with information. But you are fed bits and pieces that tickle your imagination of the big picture. On it goes to the next gallery where you get more bits and pieces. This, in a nutshell, is our curatorial method. There is hardly a story or only of the shaggy dog-variety. There is no clear timeline, no authorial categorial framework (departments of „South America“, “Islam” or „Modernity“, for example), although with some luck you might stumble into a department for “rubber”.... Essentially, there is a mere constellation of things, a constellation of objects and texts

that even may appear contingent, but calls in any case for the visitor's sensory and intellectual collaboration.

**MVE:** *Isn't this constellation of things, or the breadcrumbs that are left throughout the exhibition, still semi-consciously curated though? Or do the cross-references, narratives or historic links reveal themselves after the fact, after the opening of the exhibition? If you take coffee or cacao for instance, which are very much related to the history of Johann Jacobs Museum, I can imagine that there are too many objects, documents and photographs to show all of them at once. So a selection needs to be made, and by making that selection, one is already assembling the pieces of a complex puzzle that hopefully will be made whole by the visitor.*

**RMB/SP:** The Johann Jacobs Museum has no collection proper except for a few pieces to which we will come back in a minute. All our exhibitions on global trade and the migration of form are based on loans or collaborations with artists. But to answer your question about the curatorial process first: yes, curating is no dreamwork, the choices are made deliberately and sometimes intuitively too. This said, you cannot plan, control or determine how people look and relate to objects or constellations of objects. Some people will prefer a sense of direction, a kind of museological order imposed by the institution (allowing them to walk from the "19th century" to the "20th century, for example). Other people might actually like to get lost — as in Venice where getting lost gives you a chance to discover something new. In short, there is play at work in curating and the visitor has to accept it, which in turn implies that his or her "will to know" gets curtailed severely. Fundamentally, the exhibition experience is an aesthetic experience — a type of experience that forces you to reflect upon your expectations and assumptions as well as on your habitual modes of perception and understanding. Aesthetic experience paves the way for a more nuanced understanding of one's own role in the world. The ground is slippery though... While the Johann Jacobs Museum is indeed connected to coffee and cocoa — the endowment of the Jacobs Foundation of which Johann Jacobs Museum forms a part,

was generated by a coffee brand (Jacobs), while the Jacobs Holding is a majority shareholder of Barry Callebaut<sup>1</sup> —, there is no collection worth its name except for a few pieces.

There is a coffee pot, for example, that was commissioned by the VOC in Jingdezhen around 1700. While the model, including the decorative design, came from Dutch craftspeople, it was up to Chinese potters and porcelain painters to turn the pot into something real. But what do you do as a Chinese painter if you cannot identify a Dutch windmill? You have never seen a windmill in China, and thus you render it as... a flower! In other words, the pot is both a result of global trade between China and the West, and the carrier of a brilliant cultural misunderstanding. This is the kind of story you can tell but, perhaps, you also want to talk about the blue colour and the cobalt from which it was derived...

**MVE:** *Given the complex nature and intertwining history of the wide variety of raw materials, how does the museum facilitate the surfacing of these embedded stories, taking in account the often contradicting memories or emotions that are connected to them? How do you include multiple perspectives for instance, or a 'heterogeneity of voices' when talking about the same historic event? How do you display contradictory temporalities?*

**RMB/SP:** The Chinese cobalt for potters in Jingdezhen came from Persia, and was paid for with silver the Spanish extracted from mines in South America. Today's cobalt comes from the Democratic Republic of the Congo and drives batteries. The piece of rubber mentioned above allows you to connect the ecology of the plant with the first telegraph cable between Europe and the US. We think that these phenomena are less contradictory than complex. They appear contradictory only if you insist on a certain order of knowledge. True, museums, being both brainchild and Western treasure troves of the long 19th century tend to reproduce this order. This is one more reason for wanting to get rid of them, as in the "Mobile Worlds" exhibition, but more to that later.

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<sup>1</sup> Barry Callebaut is among the world's largest cocoa processors and chocolate manufacturers, with an average annual production of 2.1 million tonnes of cocoa & chocolate.



«A Season in Shell» by Zbeng Mabler, Johann Jacobs Museum 2013/14, installation view, courtesy JJM.

The „multiple perspectives“ you are claiming should in our view be part of the museum’s *modus operandi*. There is for sure an emphasis on multiple perspectives, participation and diversity in today’s museum world, but this emphasis tends to remain exterior to the exhibition form. It is a political marketing ploy, nothing more. If an institution is truly interested in multiple perspectives, it has to leave the curatorial comfort zone and start undoing the institutional architecture, including its power structure. For instance, you have to invent ways of working on eye-level with miners in Kivu<sup>2</sup> and also with Glencore<sup>3</sup>-traders, knowing fully well that such a method (if improvisation is a method) won’t guarantee an outcome. As a rule, curatorial work becomes interesting at the point at which the exhibition-form is not treated as a given. Collaboratively, with the

Kivu-miners and the Glencore traders, you have to invent a way of dramatizing the material, cobalt or coltan, for example. Then you stand a chance to arrive at multiple perspectives. In other words, multiple perspectives won’t happen if they are not built in from the beginning—an integral part of the project’s texture.

**MVE:** *This sounds almost ‘too good to be true’, being able to include such a variety of voices in the making of the exhibition, but is this already in practice an actual part of the Johann Jacobs museums modus operandi, or are you referring to museums in general? If you are indeed talking about the Johann Jacobs Museum, could you give some examples of successful outcomes of this improvisation method, implementing these ‘multiple perspectives’ and letting them solidify in the final outcome?*

<sup>2</sup> Kivu was the name for a large region in the Democratic Republic of the Congo under the rule of Mobutu Sese Seko that bordered Lake Kivu. It included three sub-regions: North Kivu, South Kivu and Maniema, corresponding to the three current provinces created in 1986.

<sup>3</sup> Glencore is an Anglo-Swiss multinational commodity trading and mining company supplying metals, minerals, crude oil, oil products, coal, natural gas and agricultural products worldwide.

**RMB/SP:** We can talk only about our own work but, of course, many colleagues share similar ideas. More importantly, many artists like Allan Sekula for example, were after this type of improbable encounter. It is tough so because the attempt to engage communities or individuals with completely different mindsets can be quite frustrating, even though the outcome might prove fruitful. But there is no alternative if you want to reach a level of curatorial formalization that is not determined by the visible or invisible confines of institutional architecture (the written or unwritten rules of how to do things).

The term „successful“ is a double-edged sword too. If you work with fragile people, migrant teenagers from the Middle East or Africa with no residence permit, for example, you might be able to achieve something. But there is nothing you can or want to show, because you need to shield the teens from the authorities. Still, working with these teens is extremely enriching as they both know and understand a lot about, say, gold mining in Ghana, piracy in Somalia or the Chinese presence in Africa. They are your experts albeit not in the official sense of the word. And they are your audience too.

**MVE:** *Coming back to the modus operandi of museums, is this also relating to the 'new museum order', as proposed in the exhibition "Mobile Worlds or the Museum of our Transcultural Present" that took place in The Museum für Kunst und Gewerbe Hamburg (MKG) in 2018, in which the traditional departments such as 'antiquity' and 'modern', 'European' and 'Asian' or even 'art' and 'non-art' were merged in order to represent society's transformation as a result of globalization? There was hardly any contextualisation of the exhibits on display, and interpretation was left largely to the visitor. Can you talk a bit more about this approach and the way in which it was perceived?*

**RMB/SP:** *Mobile Worlds* followed a slightly different track than what we do at Johann Jacobs Museum. The Museum of Arts and Crafts Hamburg (MKG) has an encyclopedic

collection similar to the V&A<sup>4</sup>. This type of museum was a fruit of the World Exhibitions, even literally, as its founding director went on shopping sprees to Vienna in 1873 and Paris in 1900.

The challenge was to come up with an exhibition model that would do justice to some global political entanglements of the 19th century, between Western powers and Japan, for example, or between Europe, the Caribbean and Brazil, and the African West Coast. Differently put, could we make objects reveal certain political patterns or layers while involving the visitor in the exhibition's compositional moves?

The visitors were not completely left on his or own; there was a catalogue. Still, you want people to have a chance of making their own moves and do their own imagining and thinking. Alois Riegl, the eminent Viennese art historian and contemporary of Freud, talked about „attentiveness“. If you neutralize the intellectual and aesthetic challenges or explain away the problems, you condemn people to consumerism. They become dull rather than attentive. To give you an example from *Mobile Worlds*, look at this football.

The football was displayed suspended in a vitrine, referencing Jeff Koons' *One Ball Total Equilibrium Tank* (1985). Art people would get it and make the link to a post-Duchampian discourse on art and ontology. Other people would just be happy to encounter a football, children certainly. The football is even signed —by Pelé (or Edson Arantes do Nascimento), one of the greatest players of all time. Some visitors will become sentimental about the 1970s and, perhaps, share their memories. If you look closer at the signature, you realize that Pelé was drawing a spiral. What could be the meaning of the spiral?

A few steps away from the football you encounter a bowl from Bahía (the Brazilian North-East), a loan from the Lina Bo Bardi<sup>5</sup>-collection of folk art. There is a spiral on that

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<sup>4</sup> The Victoria and Albert Museum in London is the world's largest museum of applied and decorative arts and design, as well as sculpture, housing a permanent collection of over 2.27 million objects. It was founded in 1852 and named after Queen Victoria and Prince Albert.

<sup>5</sup> Lina Bo Bardi (1914-1992), born Achillina Bo, was an Italian-born Brazilian modernist architect who devoted her working life to promoting the social and cultural potential of architecture and design.



*Football, signed by Pelé», from the Docker's Museum by Allan Sekula, at «Mobile Worlds» (2018), Museum of Arts and Crafts Hamburg, courtesy M HKA, Museum of Contemporary Art Antwerp, Belgium.*



*Installation of coffee paraphernalia on the wall of Johann Jacobs Museum, courtesy JJM.*

bowl, too. In fact, the spiral is a deeply ingrained motive in Afro-Brazilian decorative patterns. Next you encounter a piece of West African-textile with a spiral-pattern, and next to it a photograph by Guilherme Gaensly that was shot at the port of Santos. It shows carriers with heavy sacks of coffee on their backs, ready to bring them on board of a ship destined for Hamburg. Slowly but surely the few coffee beans spilled under the football start to make sense. You draw the connection between African textiles, the slave trade, plantation colonialism, coffee, the port city of Santos and FC Santos, the club of Pelé. In our view, this is the way to show coffee beans in an exhibition that addresses global trade, the museum's colonial heritage and Western fictions of planetary order.

**MVE:** *Is the experience of the visitor in the museum mainly visual, i.e. through the reading of text or the viewing of illustrations or images? Or is there also a focus on other senses, like hearing, smell or touch?*

**RMB/SP:** With Zheng Mahler from Hong Kong (an artist and anthropologist-couple) we staged an exhibition in 2013 that basically consisted of 2 tonnes of Abalone-shells. „A season in shell“, this was the exhibition's title,

addressed the low end of global trade between China and Africa, featuring a Somali trader who shipped the Abalone from Somaliland via Zurich to China. As you will guess that this was complex project, containing infinite layers, and logistics (shipping animal products, and so on) was nightmarish. Precisely because of its nightmarish character, it was also revelatory and entertaining. The shells, when they arrived in Zurich and were brought to the gallery, smelled like hell. After a couple of hours, the offices had to be evacuated. In other words, sensual experience matters a lot, but it would be naive to attribute it a critical function *per se*. Curatorially speaking, the difficulty lies in organizing or articulating a sensual experience like smell, and to use the senses in order to challenge perceptual habits.

**MVE:** *Thank you Roger M. Buerger and Sophia Prinz for your time. I think we touched upon some vital issues of exhibition making and the possibilities of objects to communicate complex interrelated stories about commodity frontiers. I would love to hear more about it, but we reached the limit of our word count, and I smell some fresh coffee being brewed somewhere... Time for a break!*



*Chinese blue and white 'Europa and the bull' coffee pot, Kangxi (around 1700), courtesy JJM.*



Roger M. Buergel is the founding director of Johann Jacobs Museum in Zurich. He curated «Mobile Worlds» with Sophia Prinz at the Museum of Arts and Crafts Hamburg (2018), «Suzhou Documents» with Zhang Qing at the Suzhou Art Museum (2016), «Garden of Learning» at the Busan Museum of Art in South Korea (2012), and was Artistic Director of documenta 12 (2007).



Dr. Sophia Prinz is a Cultural Theorist and Cultural Sociologist, she is head of research at the Johann Jacobs Museum and currently Fellow at the Hamburg Institute of Advanced Study (HIAS). She has been visiting professor for Theory of Design at the Berlin University of the Arts (UdK) between 2018-2020. Her research focuses on practices of perception, theory of exhibition and the global entanglement of social and material forms.



Maarten Vanden Eynde is a visual artist and co-founder of the artist run initiative Enough Room for Space. His practice is embedded in long term research projects that focus on numerous subjects of social and political relevance such as post-industrialism, capitalism and ecology. Since 2020 he is a PhD candidate at the UiB / University of Bergen in Norway focusing on material traces that could represent human presence on Earth in the far future.

\*All photos provided by the author.

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