

# **U. F. O. S in the archive**

## **The Dark Secret of the Rautenstrauch-Joest Museum**

*A comment by Yuna-Lee Pfau*

### **What are UFOs?**

The archive of the Rautenstrauch-Joest-Museum contains a collection of more than 3000 artefacts, which are referred to as unidentifiable found objects - UFOs for short.

In this context, “unidentifiable” means that the essential information of the objects is completely missing or only partially present.

Without information, such as: country of origin, place of origin, year of creation, purpose and materiality, the objects cannot be used for ethnographic scientific work and are therefore initially unusable for museum operations.

But what exactly is happening now and in the future with these UFOs? Are they nothing but physical matter, doomed to mold in the archives of the museum?

And if so, how and why did they come into the possession of the Rautenstrauch-Joest Museum?

### **Where do they come from? Origin of UFOs**

The first UFOs were probably handed over to the museum as part of the gigantic legacy of the “world traveller, collector” and self-proclaimed ethnographer, Heinrich Joest.

While he successfully pursued his own mission of ethnographic scientific work throughout his life, namely to trade/harvest as many objects as possible from the cultures he encountered on his travels, there were also some UFOs among his dated souvenirs.

It must have been hard for him to keep track of such a conglomerate of over 3,500 objects. In addition, generous donations of private collections followed over the years, many of which remain unidentified to this day. And while the museum has faced the challenge of creating a form of conservation order for precisely this ever-increasing collection, of categorizing and sorting it, the unidentifiable objects also had to give way to order.

And so came the UFOs, those objects that were categorized solely by their uncategorization.

## **What's next? The Subversive Power of UFOs**

The label imposed on these outsider artifacts as a result of the methodology of ethnographic knowledge production also creates a potential to examine and question this methodology on a theoretical, practical and poetic level in the current decolonial discourse.

In their seemingly unidentifiable nature, the UFOs remind us that the methodology of ethnographic knowledge production must be understood literally as a form of production.

This means that all objects extracted from their original cultures and realities (violently or not) are systematically filtered through the social reality of Western hegemonic ethnography/social sciences and transformed into context-specific artefacts. And only in this form are the artefacts usable for European ethnography and its museum operation.

The objects that can be seen today in the permanent exhibition of the RJM, for example, tell a coherent story. They tell about the diversity of the world's distant cultures and evoke exotic adventures in the minds of visitors. In the meantime, of course, the museum also reflects, in a controllable framework, the engagement with its own history and the general colonial history of Europe. In such a way that the broad spectrum of the majority society feels addressed to learn to critically deal with (usually) their own colonial history, but also to be entertained.

The image depicted by the objects in the RJM exhibition is thus still shaped by an institutional narrative that can transform itself at will and move with time. However, it remains immanently and inevitably a picture drawn by and for the German/European population. In view of the German bureaucratic mentality, the debate about the *raison d'être* of ethnographic institutions, such as the Rautenstrauch-Joest Museum, is likely to progress slowly or not at all.

If one reduces the critical view to the partial question of whether and how to exhibit the products of the colonial era in an ethnographic institution, then at least in this respect the UFOs have the right to be part of the conversation. The UFOs are like small pebbles that get stuck in the cogwheels of ethnographic knowledge production. There is an immanent subversive force attached to them, which may be able not only to complete the image of the museum and its history, but to tear it apart. In a lot of little snippets. A multitude of views and realities, a chaos that an ethnographic institution as we know it may no longer be able to grasp.

Exhibiting the UFOs could mean that the museum would not be able to provide its supposed knowledge.

It would be an opportunity to expose the restrictions of ethnographic work and, last but not least, to confront the colonial traits in the methodical filtering process that objects from non-European cultures undergo in order to become artefacts of a European narrative.

## **Afterword**

This text is a free, non-scientific commentary, written as part of the exhibition “Not allowed to rot” of the Leaky Archive project by the Rautenstrauch-Joest Museum.

The commentary is a counterpart to the satirical video work of the same name by Yuna-Lee Pfau, which was also created and shown in the exhibition.

The information critically presented in the text was taken primarily from interviews with the museum employees of the Rautenstrauch-Joest Museum.

Secondarily, the text refers to scholarly sources on the subject of archiving in ethnography.

## **References**

Carl Deussen, member of the research project “Wer ist Joest?”  
funded by: Fritz Thyssen Foundation, Museumsgesellschaft RJM e.V.  
Interview on 25.05.2023

Dr. Fabiola Arellano Cruz, Head of Education and Communication, Museum Service RJM  
Interview on 17.08.2023

Christian Meyer. Problems of archiving and secondary use of ethnographic data.  
published in: Hollstein, Betina and Jörg Strübing (eds.) 2018): Archiving and Access to Qualitative Data. RatSWD Working Paper Series 267. Berlin

Miraj Rasool. Rethinking the ethnographic museum. Downloaded from Brill.com 04/10/2023  
04:44:00PM via free access

<http://www.rautenstrauch-joest-museum.de/Geschichte>, seen on 05.09.23