

# Ways of Seeing: A New Museum Story for Planet Earth

## By Grace Ndiritu

In the second of her series of artist texts, Grace Ndiritu considers different modes of re-animating and engaging with the world of “dead matter” established by Western ways of seeing. In particular, she focuses on the role of museums as shared spaces to reflect on consciousness and the welfare of all beings – audience, building, community, objects, patrons and staff – within them. The artist shares her experiences in accessing “deep” or “geological time” through shamanistic practices, and explains how her findings might inform a future vision for places where art is created, encountered and shared.

– Editors

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For a long time, I have been disturbed by the limited and polarising way that Western philosophy has separated the human mind and spirit from the body. This dichotomous way of thinking affects everything: from the way governmental policy is created, global markets are managed, and peace and security issues are tackled to the food we eat and the way we interact with art. The urgency of our current ecological crisis means that it should no

longer be a question of *if* objects have a soul, but what we can do to heal this split in our thinking – preferably, before it destroys our environment and our shared cultural future.

The Western tendency to see the world as a “dead” place – and to see the Indigenous peoples who use traditional ecological knowledge to communicate with Nature and her objects (natural or crafted) as playing “make-believe” – causes us to consume endlessly and pollute carelessly. Because if we think Earth is a dead planet, why care for her (it)? Even today, most non-Western cultures still believe that objects have a soul. This belief is called animism.

“As we have been born countless times, it follows that we have had countless mothers. Thus, there is not a single being we meet who, over the incalculable expanse of beginnings time [sic], has failed to be our mother.” (1)

If you visit the Ancient Egyptian galleries at the British Museum in London on any given day, you may not realise that the objects on display are unhappy. They no longer feel special, but objectified – in the true sense of the word – because of the cultural and energetic violation that has been enacted upon them through being exposed to endless photographs of tourists and other museum visitors. These objects were never meant to be seen by a single ray of sunlight or looked at by millions of keen Museumgoers. Hence, they feel like they are being robbed of their agency, with no rights of their own. As such, they want to be free.

How do I know about this? I have listened to objects by accessing different states of the mind and consciousness in 35 years of artistic and spiritual practice.

Over the last decades, I have been fascinated by and engaged with the idea that objects are alive and, therefore, should be able to have a life of their own. For it isn't just the objects at the British Museum that are depressed and angry; the *Kaiget Totem Poles* (c. 1850–1867) at musée du quai Branly in

Paris are equally fed up. They want to stand tall outside, feeling the sun on their surfaces, allowing rain to penetrate them and to fulfill the purpose for which they were created; they want their lives and their souls back.

And how am I aware of this?

By asking the objects themselves.

Ontology is the philosophical study of existence. Object-oriented ontology (abbr.:OOO) puts objects at the centre of observation. Its proponents contend that nothing has a special status and everything exists equally: plumbers, DVD players, cotton, bonobos, sandstone, as well as Harry Potter, for example. In particular, OOO rejects the claim that human experience rests at the centre of philosophy, and that objects can be understood by how they appear to us. Rather than relying on science alone, OOO uses speculation to characterise how objects exist and interact.

Instead of taking this approach, Museums place the material value of their art collections above the “psychological” welfare of the objects within them through exhibiting them continuously. Sometimes collections are installed without movement and without the objects leaving the claustrophobic walls of the Museum for up to ten years. Museums ignore the “mental” health (e.g. to relate with the natural elements of rain, wind and sunlight) of their objects by radically altering their spiritual evolution and therefore our collective destinies. This, in turn, begins to affect our relationship to them and to ourselves, since we, as audiences, no longer have enough space to think or breathe inside institutional spaces. The Museum as “shopping mall” destroys the sacredness of these important cultural spaces.

Through the inflation of shopping stores within their architectural walls, Museums have primarily become sites for the consumption of culture and entertainment. The decline of public spaces – e.g., museums, parks, libraries and churches – as spaces for quiet contemplation additionally destroys our

ability to relate to objects, spaces and each other. We now find ourselves at a dangerous tipping point of no longer being able to fully concentrate and appreciate the exhibited artworks themselves. Living life, creating art or exhibitions by always making rational decisions (e.g. ticking funders' boxes) is not really living or curating, either.

Museums are one of the last few publicly shared spaces that have the ability to encourage new "ways of seeing" and thinking about consciousnesses.

They allow us to escape modern urban life and the daily deluge of advertising, news feeds and social media by acting as an outlet for non-rational being. We cannot fully develop as human beings if we just rely on what shiny black screens and art markets tell us. Cut off from nature and our own spontaneous creative thoughts, we start to experience a life of disease and our souls begin to ache.

Synchronicity and beauty can only happen in art spaces when we release control and give ourselves over to a higher power (history). Therefore, this higher power must be aligned with a deeper intelligence and provide a safe space (Museums) for us to switch off our left brain (logical thinking) and access the highly undervalued right brain (creative thinking).

In contrast to what these spaces have become, most of the artworks inside Museums were created within spaces of contemplation (for instance, in artist studios in Ancient Rome, medieval Europe or even today). Thus, having an experience through nature or art that isn't mediated by social media, the news, documentation or educational wall texts releases viewers from the capitalist, materialist treadmill, momentarily bringing them back to their real creative Self.

This is what Buddhists call "Attention versus Distraction": "Nothing is more important to meditation [viewing art] than the quality of attention. In mindfulness meditation [viewing art], we are doing more than just

concentrating. The point is to concentrate on something useful, but to do it requires high quality attention. Between the rise of mindfulness practices in America and the rise of the Internet and a host of distractions; Attention [sic] has become the centre of a cultural debate about what we are doing with our minds.” (2)

This is exactly what the artists in the Australian Kimberley region (50,000 BCE) and our ancient brothers and sisters around 30,000 years ago at Chauvet-Pont-d’Arc Cave in France knew. They were cultivating high quality states of attention to create and view art, rather than being distracted by the mundane chores of surviving. These “avant-garde” painters understood that by stopping the mind through meditation, physical pain, shamanic journeying or ingesting certain plants, a gap in consciousness would open up and light would fall through the mind’s dusty book covers. They knew by practicing non-rational methodologies like shamanism in their “studios” and “Museums”, they could communicate something profound to us that would last throughout time; for generations to come. Through painting by firelight and sharing these works with their communities, they were telling us something important about the usage of different states of consciousness which are essential for making and viewing art.

This is what I propose for the caves of art today: all Museums – antiquities, modern and contemporary – should invest in re-organising their collections to open up new “ways of seeing” objects and their spaces. Hence, by re-circulating the energy of the objects through re-orientation, we can change the way Museums collect and display objects to maximise the “aliveness” of the collection and the audiences that look at them.

For example, cultural data banks in Mali are made up of cultural objects (art objects and those used for ritual ceremonies) collected by local villagers, housed within a space that they can easily access. This allows them to

interact with these objects in the original manner they were designed, proving that intimacy and familiarity breeds understanding between the audience and the “souls” of these objects. By enhancing the object’s lifetime, the welfare of the communities that use them is simultaneously improving.

What I am proposing should not merely be stored away as anthropological investigation into animism, or the lineage of a type of Western art – similar to the works of André Breton (1896–1966) (3) and his usage of the mind’s different states to Surrealist effect. Nor should it be understood as just a political stand against neoliberal attitudes taking over Museums, sublimating all creative freedoms. It is all of that and more: it is an energetic stand to ride this wave and a way to reverse the damage already done.

By “influencing the influencers” (for example, sponsors and patrons) through my practice of shamanic performances, rational Western audiences have an opportunity to access “Deep Time” (4) and can begin to create a new Museum story: one in which the Museum is seen as a geographic marker, and all objects within it can be re-anchored within a larger creation story of planet Earth and the universe at large.

Using ancient shamanic tools such as the medicine wheel, shamanic journeys and trance possessions to access “Deep Time” – geological time – within the Museum context, a new vision of Museums can be born, reflecting the recent artistic, scientific and technological renaissance taking place on Earth.

This coming-of-age story for Museums finally growing into adulthood is a rite of passage which all cultural spaces will need to go through in order to survive the effects of late capitalism. The free-market policies of all governments today, and especially those that encourage both Museums and the art and artists within them to be funded and co-opted exclusively by corporations, needs to radically change.

Collectively writing a new Museum story for planet Earth means that cultural institutions would have to implement policies that look after the welfare of all beings (audience, staff, building, community, patrons and objects) and not just the humans that own them.

But why this emphasis on interconnection or “inter-being”?

“If you are a poet, you will see clearly that there is a cloud floating in this sheet of paper. Without a cloud, there will be no rain; without rain, the trees cannot grow; and without trees, we cannot make paper. The cloud is essential for the paper to exist. If the cloud is not here, the sheet of paper cannot be here either. So, we can say that the cloud and the paper inter-are. ‘Interbeing’ is a word that is not in the dictionary yet, but if we combine the prefix ‘inter-’ with the verb ‘to be’, we have a new verb, inter-be.” (5)

“The observation that we ‘inter-are’, while true and poetic, is not really the most important element of ‘interbeing’. The important part is the realisation that there is no independent self that the perception of self, of ‘me’, of ‘mine’ is an illusion. Awareness that ‘I’ am made of ‘non-I’ elements leads to the understanding of non-self and it is the realisation of non-self that brings an end to suffering.” (6)

In my own life I have witnessed these states of mind. During a meditation retreat in India in the year 2000, I fell through time and space and saw that I was part of everything. I was created out of the exact same stuff as the room I sat in, the computer I wrote on, and the tree blowing outside the window, and I realised that we were all just one big mass of vibrating energy (something scientists now name “Unified field theory”). I had accidentally caught a glimpse of the known universe dissolving before my very eyes, and noticed that everything was in fact made up of subatomic particles, or “kalapas” (7), as Buddha called them. I began to experience the world like a movie I was in while simultaneously watching it. I was both the observer and the observed,

and this was a testament to the power of meditation. My world appeared to be non-linear as the past and future collapsed into the present, creating a type of timelessness. Everything that was going to happen and had ever happened was happening right now. I was left in a holographic version of parallel lives happening at the same time: there was an “I” in Los Angeles hanging out with friends in 2017; there was an “I” in Kenya crying as a child because my mother was still in England; there was an “I” in India, laughing because of the extra strong joints we were smoking; there was an “I” breaking up with my Dutch boyfriend in Amsterdam in 1997. All these “selves” coexisted in the same moment.

Who was to say who the real “I” was? For the first time, I saw that life was constructed like a projection. And Buddha, all those years ago, was absolutely right.

Now, Museums are being called into action to write a new chapter in their long history by working with the “aliveness” of objects and their visitors, rather than relying on a materialist, consumerist dead object logic. To conclude, Albert C. Barnes – founder of The Barnes Foundation – knew well that re-educating the people on how to interact with art would prolong the life of objects, bringing a new episode into art history. His outspoken criticism of public education and contemporary Museums led him to create his own foundation in 1922. There, a mixture of hand-crafted items, ancient artifacts, furniture and paintings of different ages allowed visitors a direct relation to the collection without the interposition of curators’ thoughts. Barnes created the foundation not for the benefit of art historians but for the students and the viewers. The old Museum story that he criticised was based on fear and competition between the Museums themselves, the collectors and even the objects. The “blockbuster” exhibition entitled Treasures of Tutankhamun, which opened at the British Museum in London in 1972, for instance, is an



example of such an old “Museum story.” Sadly, blockbusters of this nature still occur today within the same Museum in exhibitions such as *Egyptian mummies: exploring ancient lives* (2020-21).

What is needed now is a powerful change in our awareness of art objects themselves and our relationships with them. Manifesting a collective psycho-spiritual awakening of the audiences’ consciousness and the way we “see” objects would fundamentally change art history and Museum collections. By connecting the a(A)rt we produce as humans today with the reasons why a(A)rt and a(A)rt objects came into existence in the first place, we will finally be able to close the superficial chapter on a(A)rt as consumerism and entertainment; jointly writing a new Museum story for planet Earth.

**GraceNdiritu** is a British-Kenyan artist whose artworks are concerned with the transformation of our contemporary world. Her works including *The Ark: Center for Interdisciplinary Experimentation*; *COVERSLUT©*; and the performance series, *Healing The Museum*, have been shown around the world since 2012. Ndiritu has been featured in *TIME* magazine, *The 21st Century Art Book* (London: Phaidon, 2014), *Art Monthly* and *Elephant* magazine. Her work is housed in museum collections such as The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, The British Council Visual Arts, London and The Modern Art Museum, Warsaw. Her writings have been published in her critical theory book *Dissent Without Modification* (Bergen Kunsthall, 2021), Whitechapel Gallery's series: *Documents of Contemporary Art Anthology* (2006–ongoing), *Animal Shelter Journal*, *Semiotext(e)* The MIT Press, *Metropolis M* and *The Oxford University Press*.

*\*Deep Time, Earth, Museum and Nature are deliberately capitalised in this text contribution.*

## Endnotes

1. Geshe Kelsang Gyatso, *Understanding the Mind*, (Tharpa Publications, 2002)
2. Michael W. Taft, [Attentionvs. Distraction](#), 2011 (accessed 24 September 2021)
3. Breton, as one of the founders of surrealism, saw “found” things and everyday stuff as central to their movement: by recombining and presenting them in unexpected ways, they could give access to the desires and urges of our subconscious. Breton enthusiastically described a found “slipper spoon” in his book *Mad Love* (1937) in which marked an acknowledgement of the innate power of things, a viewing of objects as possessing an inner essence. See: [ObjectsThat Speak for Themselves](#) (accessed 27 September 2021)
4. *Deep Time* refers to the time scale of geologic events (accessed 24 September 2021)
5. Thich Nhat Hanh, *The Heart of Understanding*, (Berkeley: Parallax Press, 1988)
6. Alexis Vasilikos, [Receptionof self](#), 2017, more information (accessed 24 September 2021)
7. Kalapa or rupa-kalapa (from Sanskrit rūpa “form, phenomenon” and kalāpa “bundle”) is a term in Theravada Buddhist phenomenology for the smallest units of physical matter, said to be about 1/46,656th the size of a particle of dust from a wheel of chariot, in: Jack Kornfield, *Living Dharma: Teachings of Twelve Buddhist Masters*, (Boulder: Shambhala Publications, 1996)