

C& x Académie des Traces

'Open Storage': An Idealised Image of Museums?

Ariane Théveniaud examines how the museography of 'open storage' actively constructs and disseminates an idealised perception of museums.



"Open storage" display, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Museum für Asiatische Kunst / Stiftung Humboldt Forum im Berliner Schloss / Photo: ©Alexander Schippel

By Ariane Théveniaud
26. March 2025



On my first visit to the Humboldt Forum's African collections exhibition, I was intrigued by the "open storage" display cases that punctuate the spaces. The cultural artefacts, classified according to the name of the person responsible for the expeditions during which they were taken, are displayed in such large numbers that they create the illusion of a museum storeroom for visitors. Beyond the numerous debates surrounding the museum's creation, the example of "open storage" showcases at the Humboldt Forum provides me with a compelling entry point for examining how this form of scenography actively constructs and disseminates an idealised perception of museums.

The concept of displaying storage rooms is not unique to the Humboldt Forum. Since the beginning of the 21st century, several museums have adopted this approach with the stated aim of displaying a greater quantity of artefacts, following the example of the Übersee Museum in Bremen, a pioneer in this field. These displays take a variety of forms, from recreating a storeroom within the exhibition space, as at the Humboldt Forum, to the creation of actual storage areas visible to the public, such as the glass tower at the Musée du quai Branly – Jacques Chirac in Paris, where all the musical instruments from the collection are kept. Designed over six levels and housing almost 10,000 instruments, the tower runs vertically through the museum, allowing visitors to move around it. Visible storage operates on the principle of transparency, with the museum revealing what is usually hidden behind closed doors. Despite being kept at a distance by glass walls and dim lighting due to conservation standards, visitors can still observe traces of museum practices: a label tracing the cultural artefact within the museum, a tie holding an unstable item that is at risk of becoming detached or lost, and possibly staff working on the collections, although these visible spaces are generally not used as daily workplaces.



Übersee-Museum Bremen. Photo: Matthias Haase.

These types of presentation focus mainly on the sheer quantity of items on display. Objects are placed on high shelves, creating an impressive visual effect on the public. The displays are often highly aesthetic, as seen in the Nass-Sammlung at the Museum für Naturkunde in Berlin or the Ceramics Galleries at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London. In a way, this museography contributes to constructing a romanticised past, rich in imagination, evoking the cabinets of curiosity or 19th-century exhibitions, a period when presentation and conservation were closely linked. In the first half of the twentieth century, as collections grew and museums found it impossible to display everything, the spatial separation between exhibition galleries and museum storerooms emerged. The storeroom became a place designed by and for the museum's scientific staff. Collections were classified according to institution-specific systems. Despite attempting to abolish the division of spaces, visible storages reproduce these classification methods, as seen at the musée du quai Branly, where the instruments are arranged according to organological criteria established by Western specialists in the 20th century. Unlike traditional exhibition spaces, where the cultural artefacts are accompanied by informative texts for visitors, visible storage areas generally provide minimal information about the objects they contain. As a result, the public cannot grasp the underlying classification systems that shape their perceptions. No museum is arranged arbitrarily, the objects displayed in visible storerooms serve a curated purpose, just like those in the exhibition galleries. Access to the collections is therefore always mediated by museography, even within storage areas.



Nasssammlung, Berlin. Photo: Carola Radke

This invisibilisation of the museum's curatorial choices is even more pronounced in storerooms staged as part of an exhibition. Not all the museum's cultural artefacts are housed there. These spaces are constructed representations, while the majority of the collections remain in actual storerooms. The objects on display have therefore been selected and, for the most part, preserved in the same way as in traditional exhibitions. Their condition does not reflect the troubled trajectories experienced by cultural objects during their museum life, material traces of which are sometimes visible in the real storages. Every museum professional knows that the history of collections is not linear; it has been shaped by events that have impacted the materiality of objects since their acquisition, such as water damage, infestation, periods of neglect, or conservation work. While the storeroom cannot be considered a neutral, hermetically sealed space, neither is it static, as museum standards have evolved throughout the 20th century. However, visible storage rarely reveals these traces of history.

For so-called ethnographic collections, these displays are particularly ambiguous. While revealing the vast quantities of cultural artefacts brought back by European empires during the colonial period, they simultaneously enhance the museum's value by emphasising the number of objects it possesses, while rarely explaining to visitors the conditions under which they were acquired. Museum labels on visible storage often highlight the preventive conservation methods used to ensure the artefacts' preservation. Since the last quarter of the 19th century, the argument that museums are the only institutions capable of ensuring the material preservation of objects has been used to justify relocating cultural property from non-European populations. However, it was precisely the use of collections within museums that led to the development of new conservation standards. At a time when a country's ability to preserve cultural property in museum conditions is often a prerequisite for restitution, exhibiting storage spaces can be seen as a means of legitimising the Western museum model and its approach to conservation.

This text was created as part of the collaboration between C& Magazine and the Académie des Traces.

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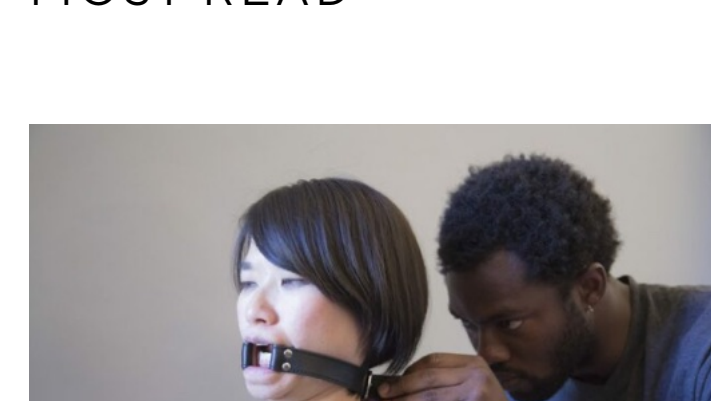
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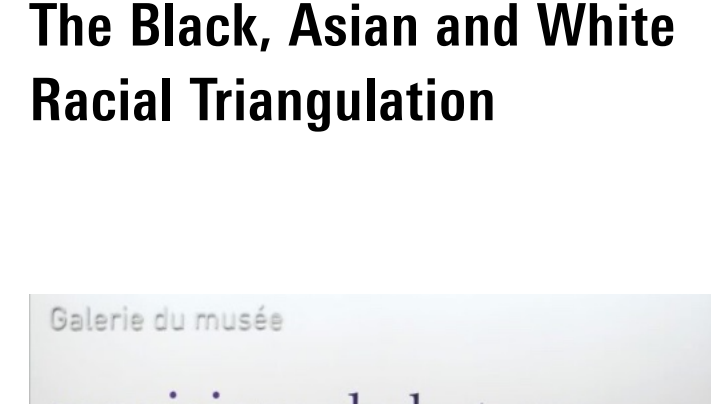
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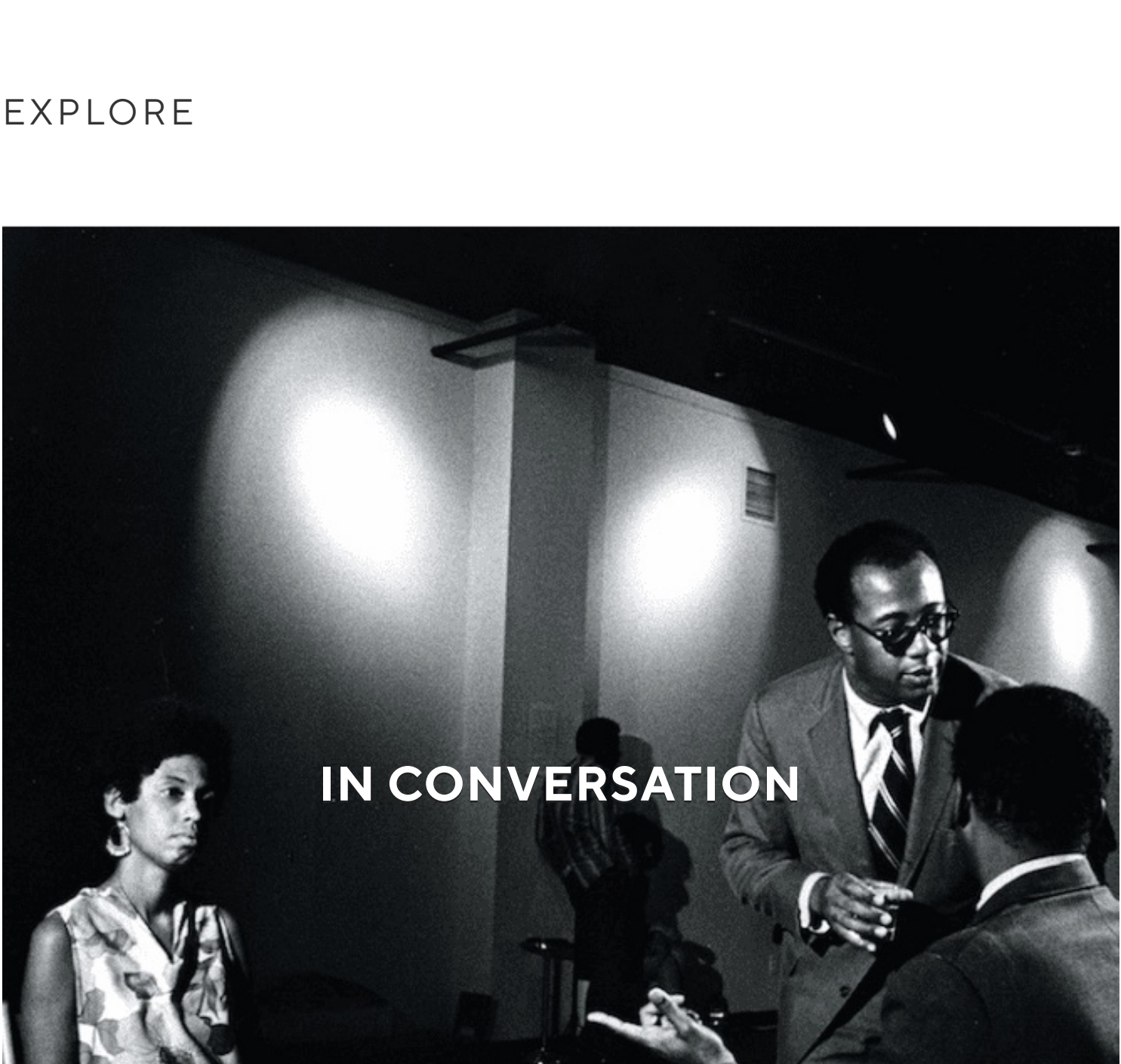
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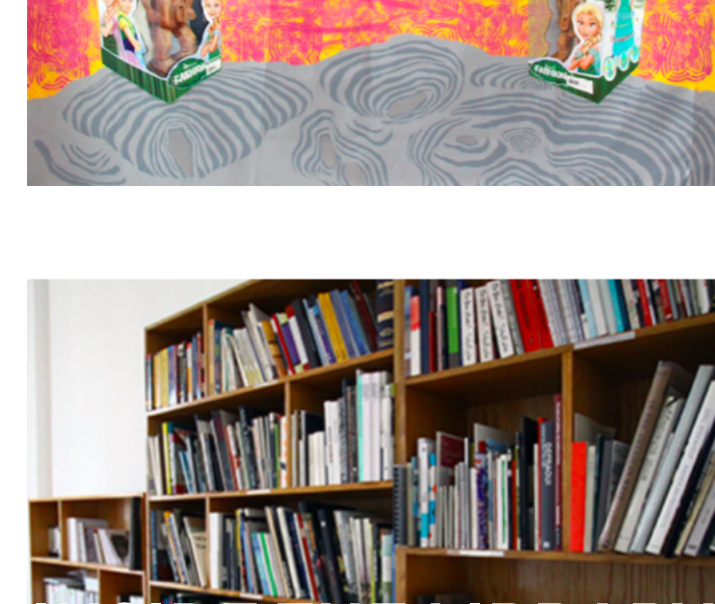
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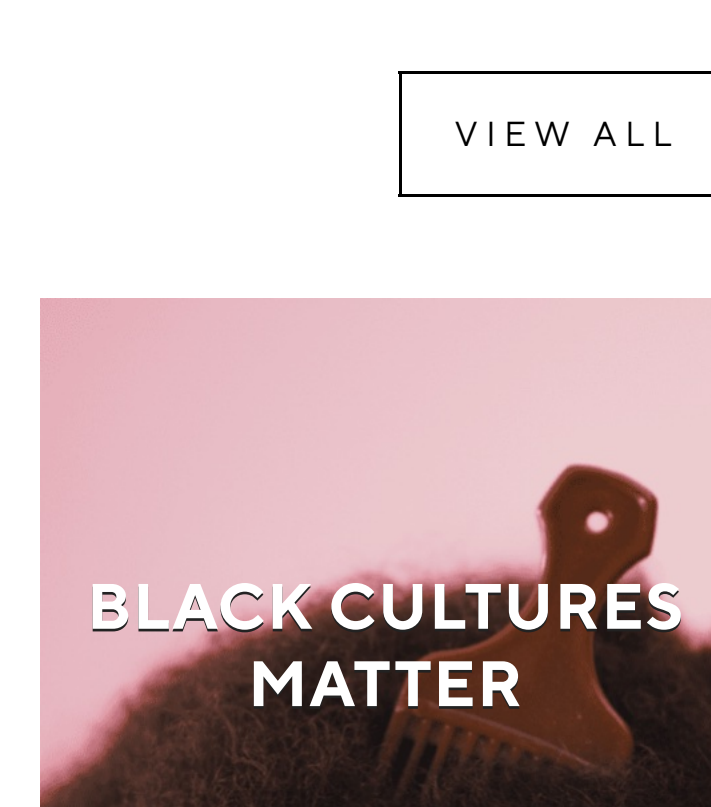
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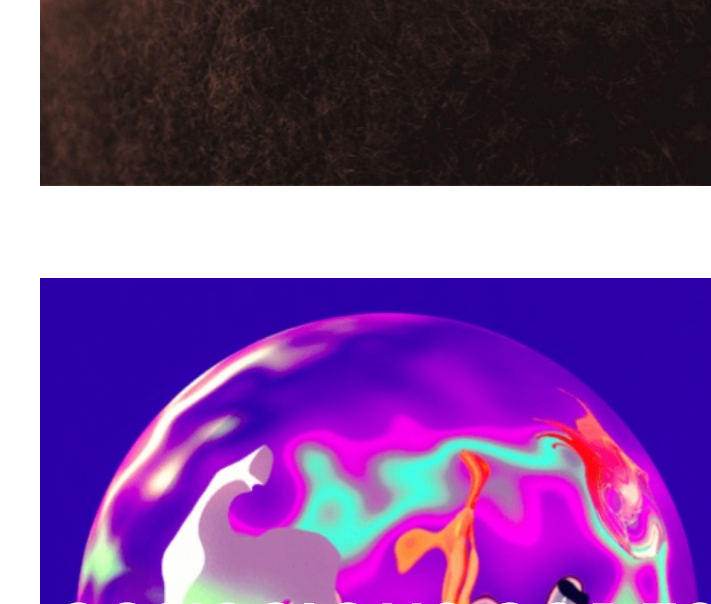
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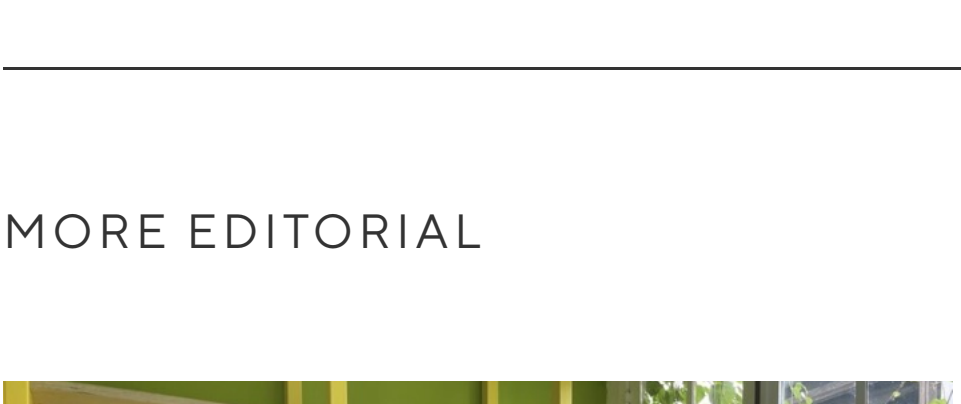
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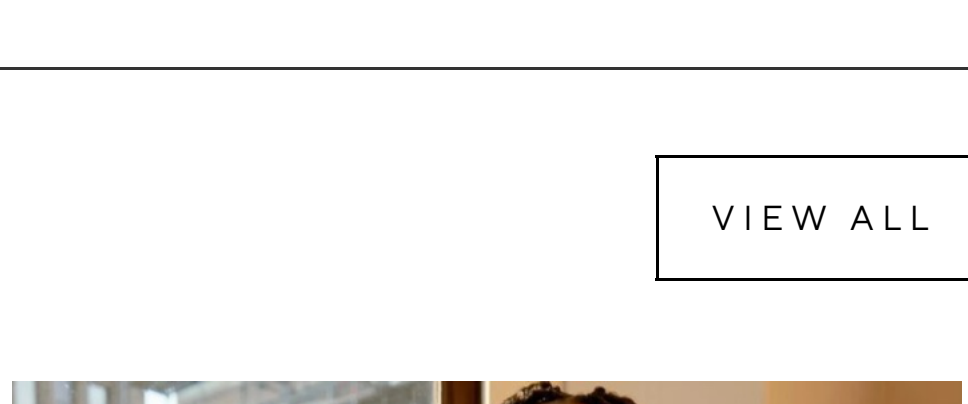
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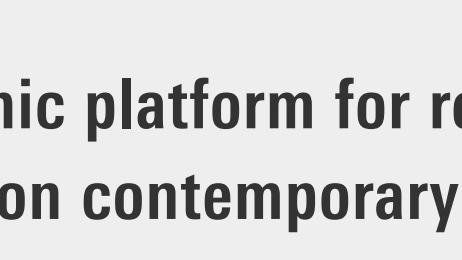
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