

ALICE HERTZOG Conservation as Restitution

conserve

in conversation with

Denise
Bertschi



Kathrin Leuenberger, 2024

Conservation freezes time. Museums do this in chilly vitrines and depots. In 1897, British troops attacked the kingdom of Benin in present-day Nigeria.

They ousted the king, burned down the capital and looted thousands of royal artefacts from the palace. In Europe, the objects were sold on the art market. In 1940, Benin artefacts also entered the collection of the Ethnographic Museum at the University of Zurich.

Now Nigeria would like them back. Ethnographic museums are experts in arresting time, preserving objects in immaculate conditions, and retarding their natural deterioration so that generations down the line may learn from them. What does it then entail, for a museum to shift from collecting and preserving, to deaccessioning and restituting?

ALICE HERTZOG

is director of the Ethnographic Museum and Professor for Social and Cultural Anthropology at the University of Zurich. Informed by postcolonial perspectives, her current work focuses on the circulation of contested cultural heritage and the restitution of the Benin Bronzes. Alice is an alumna of D-ARCH and is committed to collaborative methodologies that strengthen the interface between the museum and the city.