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From Egypt with Love: A Mudbrick, the Ecology of Storage, and the Museum Otherwise

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ABSTRACT The logics of colonial extraction and epistemic control continue to persist in contemporary museum practices, especially in the spaces of its storage. Focusing on objects withdrawn from public view, stored in museum storages and closed collections, in this paper, I argue that storing is not a neutral act of protection, but a continuation of extractive technologies and an active form of governance that shape relations of value, knowledge, and power. Through the case of a mudbrick from Egypt, part of the storage collection of the Archaeology & Coin Cabinet, Scholss Eggenberg, Universalmuseum Joanneum, in Graz, Austria, this paper examines how the act of storing produces specific temporalities, epistemological absences, and ontological suspension.

Museum storage practices are often legitimized through discourses of universal care and preservation "for humanity," yet they reproduce mechanisms of control and exclusion. Deciding what is worth saving, exhibited, and repatriated, and what remains invisible and inactive is inherently about law, authority, and power. Legal and institutional frameworks protect objects by placing them under regimes of preservation and care, yet this same protection removes them from circulation, public visibility, and the networks that connects them to living histories, practices, and societies.

The condition of objects in museum storage resembles what plant biology describes as *deep dormancy*, where seeds remain viable yet inactive, awaiting the conditions necessary for germination. In this framing, stored objects are not merely withheld epistemologically, but ontologically suspended, held in a state of potentiality. Their removal from circulation reveals an ambivalent condition: while deeply entangled in broader colonial legacies as well as histories of violence and inequality (Basu, 2024; Vergès, 2024), these objects may also open latent futures, allowing us to reimagine storage not as an endpoint, but as a living interface where past extractions intersect with present urgencies and possible reparative futures.

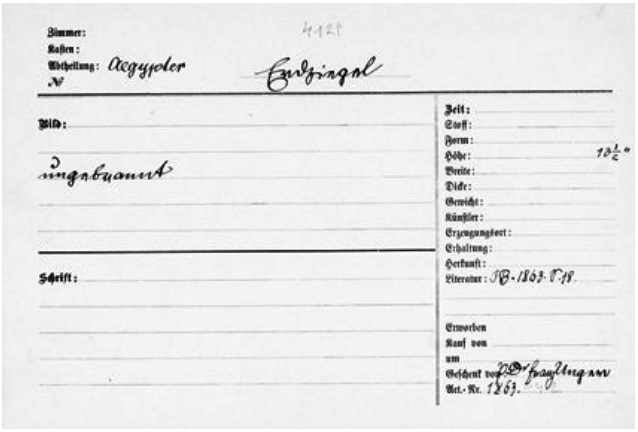
Key words: museum storage, isolating, deep dormancy, decolonial museology, museum otherwise.

1. Introduction

A single mudbrick, modest in dimension, fragile in material, yet dense with layered histories, traversed the political landscapes of nineteenth-century Egypt and Europe to arrive in Graz, Austria, in the 1860s. Its journey was arduous and slow. In a letter accompanying the shipment, the sender apologised for the three years it had taken to collect the mudbricks (Unger, 1866:34; Bezić and Filipović, 2025). These were years of relentless accumulation, as European museums feverishly expanded their collections through practices deeply entangled with imperial ambitions, extractive economies, and the production of global hierarchies of knowledge. More than 160 years later, a mudbrick was transferred from one of the storage spaces of the Archaeology and Coin Cabinet Department/Universalmuseum Joanneum in Graz and placed in the office of the chief curator (Figure 1). Whether it is one of the three bricks mentioned in the correspondence cannot be established with full certainty. The accompanying note simply reads: *Egypt, Franz Unger, 1863* (Figure 2). Yet it is precisely this archival incompleteness that makes the object so revealing. Tracing its possible trajectory and the divergent paths of extraction, movement, dissolution, and withdrawal from public access shows that these histories do not belong solely to the past but remain entangled with present infrastructures of care and control.

Figure 1.
Inv.-Nr. 4129, clay brick, "Egypt". Photo: Universalmuseum Joanneum, Department Archaeology & Coin Cabinet, Archive.

Figure 2.
Index Card, Inv.-Nr. 4129. Photo: Universalmuseum Joanneum, Department Archaeology & Coin Cabinet, Archive.



Behind the rhetoric of care and universal access, museum routines of collecting, storing, and displaying have long reproduced colonial ways of seeing and knowing (Bennett, 1995; Stoler, 2009; Azoulay, 2019; Basu, 2024; Vergès, 2024). What appears to be technical backstage work is deeply political: it shapes what becomes visible, what is shown, and what remains hidden (Macdonald, 2002). Curatorial excess is folded into polished narratives, while absences are justified through the language of accountability and access, leaving most objects in opacity (Macdonald, 2002:247-48). Objects in the museums, most of which will never leave the confines of drawers and crates, are, following Riggs (2020), part of the ongoing exercise of Western scientific sovereignty over the object. Such ownership operates as a structuring force (Derrida, 1996; Stoler, 2009; De Cesari, 2019), through which institutional values, exclusions, and priorities are actively managed; through which decisions about what may appear, endure, or remain seen or unseen are made (Domínguez Rubio, 2020); and through which acts of archiving, preserving, or withholding are masked as care for the future, while reproducing unequal distributions of authority over objects and their possible lives (Menozzi, 2024; Vergès, 2024; Merryman, 2006).

Due to the lens remaining on what ultimately becomes public, it leaves the fate of the far greater proportion of objects largely unexamined, those that never enter the exhibition space of the museum nor have ever been part of circulation[1] (but see Brusius and Singh, 2018; Kersel, 2015). Storage, as I use it here, is not simply a neutral condition of keeping objects safe. It is an active institutional arrangement through which objects are sorted, stabilized, withdrawn from some relations, and inserted into

[1] On museum displays and traveling objects see Driver, et al., 2021; De Cesari, 2017; Joyce and Gillespie, 2015; Chambers et al., 2014; Moser, 2010; Karp et al., 2006;

others (Domínguez Rubio, 2020; Azoulay, 2019). In this sense, storing is also a practice of isolating: a way of managing proximity, access, and epistemic authority. This paper takes up that blind spot by shifting attention from the politics of exhibition to the ecology of storage, understood as the uneven field of relations, separations, and dependencies through which objects are kept, known, and made to endure (but see also Thiemeyer, 2018).

In this paper, I focus on the movement between exhibiting and storing to foreground the labour, decisions, and exclusions that shape what could be, as well as the potential to be otherwise (Tomić and Sekulić, 2018; Bezić, 2018; Bezić and Filipović, 2025; Povinelli, 2016). This movement(s) unfolds in storages, depots, warehouses, and other places designated for storing "things" left out from the museum's shelves. These, I argue, are not resting places, but sites of struggle, where preservation is never simply secured but continuously produced through maintenance, classification, and legal regulation, and where the architecture of permanence is undermined by the biology of decay. They form a restless, dynamic, and mostly invisible infrastructure in which climate control, databases, conservators, insurance, and laws are constantly re-sorted and recalibrated (Stoler, 2009:32-33; Domínguez Rubio, 2020). This is the choreography I track through a single Egyptian mudbrick, towards the museum otherwise.

The movement of protocols, people, and institutional values coexists with another kind of movement: that of dormancy. In biology, the concept of deep dormancy describes a survival strategy in which seeds remain viable yet inactive, suspended until the right environmental cues trigger germination (Baskin & Baskin, 2014; Bewley et al., 2013). This state of latency, while seemingly inert, preserves potential across years or even centuries. Dormancy here is not stasis but continuity, a practice of survival that resists erasure and asserts futurity. Set against this framework, the condition of things and objects outside of view/stored away can be understood as a very different kind of dormancy: not a self-directed latency, but an epistemic suspension shaped by institutional infrastructures of care and exclusion, in which potential is preserved while access remains tightly controlled. From this perspective, places for storing things and objects appear not only as a colonial residue, but also as sites where ethical futures are unevenly managed.

Objects are not simply dormant in storage; they are rendered dormant through institutional arrangements that regulate access, visibility, and use, as well as their ability to act, relate, and transform (Barad, 2007; Tsing, 2015; Reeves, 2018). Critical theory has long warned against taking such conditions at face value. Foucault reminds us that visibility and invisibility are produced through regimes of classification and spatial technologies that organize what can be seen, touched, or known (1977:135-169). What is held apart is shaped by protocols that determine not only what counts as knowledge, but who may touch, study, or narrate the object; which objects are allowed to circulate; which narratives are authorized; and which futures become imaginable

(Haraway 1991:183-201). In this sense, storage is not simply a storage condition but an achievement that must be continuously maintained through gloves, boxes, lists, humidity control, and institutional memory (Latour, 1987; 1999).

A growing body of scholarship has begun to approach museum storage not simply as a backdrop to exhibition, but as a political, spatial, and epistemological site (Thiemeyer, 2018; Brusius and Singh, 2018). If earlier work in anthropology and museum studies traced how museums produce value, authority, and asymmetrical forms of access through display, collecting, and acquisition (Clifford, 1997; Bennett, 1995; Karp and Lavine, 1991; Macdonald, 2002), then storage can be understood as the quieter but no less consequential continuation of these processes (Delbourgo, 2018; Reeves, 2018)[2]. It is never merely technical: storage is one of the institutional spaces in which colonial inheritances, affective investments, and epistemic hierarchies are materialized in decisions about preservation, access, and worth.

On the other hand, while things and objects stored in museums are deeply entangled with histories of extraction and violence, they may also become part of alternative temporalities and reparative possibilities (see Azoulay, 2019). Places of storage are not an endpoint, but a contested terrain where past appropriations intersect with present urgencies and future claims (Vergès, 2024). Nor are they an elsewhere, but the immanent potential within every order to be unsettled and remade. In Povinelli's terms, "the otherwise" lies precisely in such derangements and rearrangements of the given (Povinelli, 2014; 2016). For a "museum otherwise" (Harrison and Sterling, 2021), this means approaching exhibitions, catalogues, and storage itself as sites for cultivating alternative arrangements, ones that make room for decay, repair, mourning, and more-than-human relations (de la Cadena, 2015; Kohn, 2013). Such a shift would require the museum not simply to preserve objects, but to remain accountable to the damaged, unfinished, and unequal worlds through which they continue to endure. It is within this ambivalent space that I place the story of a single mudbrick from Egypt: an object shaped by extraction, and isolation, and yet still capable of entering new relations, new readings, and new forms of institutional attention.

In recent years, some museums have begun to stage their storages, making visible the vast "invisible" holdings of their institutions. Yet such gestures, too, require scrutiny (Delbourgo, 2018; Reeves, 2018). What forms of transparency do they afford, and what do they obscure? How do we move beyond simply exhibiting what was once isolated, to critically interrogating the very logics that render objects collectible, controllable, and suspendable in the first place? This article is inspired by Paul Basu's questions:

[2] On storage as an active regime rather than a neutral condition of safekeeping, see also work on art freeports, where secrecy, restricted access, and suspended circulation are integral to value production, Post and Calvão, 2020. Although museum depots differ significantly from freeports, this literature is useful for thinking about storage as a political and spatial arrangement rather than a merely technical one.

"What do we keep? What do we discard?" (2024:81). My investigation, therefore, engages these questions to investigate storage as the key ecology through which the futures of objects are shaped: not merely a technical condition of preservation, but a dense arrangement of relations, affects, institutions, and material constraints that governs how objects are kept, withdrawn, accessed, and made to endure. By tracing the trajectory of a single mudbrick and the heterogeneous bodies and mediations through which it is maintained, e.g. human, bureaucratic, legal, technological, and material, I show how storage both stabilizes and limits relational possibilities, while also holding within it the dormant potential of a museum otherwise (see Povinelli, 2016).

Infrastructures of movements

The mudbricks arrived from Saqqara to Graz in the 1860s, addressed to Professor Franz Unger, then director of the Botanical Gardens in Graz, whose scientific work was closely tied to the Joanneum museum's beginnings and broader Enlightenment mission[3]. The museum's ultimate goal was to transform the inhabitants of Inner Austria into "better people, morally and materially happier citizens through intellectual development and the refinement of the heart" (Göth, 1861:31)[4]. The institution's holdings reflected this ambition, incorporating mineral and astronomical instruments, herbarium specimens, agricultural tools, coins and antiquities, machines, seeds, books, and an archive. It was, as Göth noted, a model to be imitated at every such new foundation (Ibid.: 32). These foundational logics of collection, classification, and improvement continue to shape institutional practices today, including the mechanisms of isolating examined in this article.

It was most likely in the fall of 1862, that Julius Franz, a German-born "architect in Cairo," trained in Vienna, finally broke free from the capital's paperwork and travelled south to Giza under the threat of a khamsin, the hot desert wind that made such journeys difficult and uneasy. "In the company of Bedouins," he returned carrying two whole mudbricks and a fragment from the half-height of the mud-brick pyramid of Dahshur before most likely stumbling back to Saqqara for the night. His covering letter, quoted verbatim in a paper read at the Imperial Academy of Sciences in Vienna, gives the texture: months of delay, an ill-timed sandstorm, the practicalities of extracting and packing the pieces (Unger, 1866:33-36). At the time, Egypt, nominally part of the Ottoman Empire, was undergoing significant modernization under Khedive

[3] The history of the Universalmuseum Joanneum in Graz offers a telling example of how Enlightenment-era pedagogical ideals were embedded in the formation of early public museums. It was founded in 1811 as a comprehensive educational institution grounded in scientific knowledge and public instruction (Göth, 1862:31; Modl and Peitler, 2016).

[4] To achieve this vision, the Joanneum had to evolve from a site of passive display into a fully realized educational institution as a polytechnical and scientific centre, encompassing areas such as chemistry, botany, technology, mechanics, and agriculture (Göth, 1862:31).

Ismail, including the expansion of rail networks, intensified archaeological exploration, and preparations for the eventual opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 (Marsot, 1984; Reid, 2002). European powers were increasingly embedded in Egypt's administration, trade, and antiquities extraction, through the newly established Antiquities Service (Colla, 2007; Reid, 2002). Franz's trip to Saqqara must be read against this backdrop of imperial mobility and scientific collection. The route he took was typical for 19th-century visitors: from the pyramid fields, one would sail north via felucca or dahabīyah to Būlāq, Cairo's river port and customs zone, where antiquities and specimens were processed for export (Hagen and Ryholt, 2016; Mitchell, 1988). The flow of objects from Saqqara to Graz was part of a broader imperial logistics of circulation, of both knowledge and materials, enabled by expanding infrastructures and justified through the language of science, modernity, and progress (Riggs, 2020; Çelik, 1992).

The Nile-mudbricks, like almost everything and everyone in those years, travelled out through Alexandria and onto an Austrian Lloyd steamer bound for Trieste with onward rail to the Habsburg interior. Regular Trieste–Alexandria sailings were well established by the 1850s and 1860s, marketed (not without pride) as the fastest link between Egypt and Central Europe. One contemporary account describes Thursday departures from Trieste and Monday dawn arrivals at Alexandria (Ismail and Gabriel, 2011, xxxiv). After unloading in Trieste, bricks like these would have joined the imperial mailbags and specimen crates snaking up the Südbahn: through the Karst, up and over the already-famous Semmering (opened 1854), and onto the 1857-completed seaward arm of the Southern Railway that stitched Trieste to Vienna, with Graz on the Styrian leg, turning a Mediterranean port into a same-week neighbour (Kreuzer, 2006).[5]

And Julius Franz did not just send objects, he stayed in touch. The very fact that his Dahshur field letter appears in the Vienna Academy's Sitzungsberichte shows him writing into Viennese scholarly circuits from the start. Decades later he was still corresponding with Austrian academics: a surviving letter from Cairo, 24 January 1901, to the linguist Hugo Schuchardt mentions Sakkara and museums, evidence that Franz kept one foot in Egyptian administration and another in Austro-German scholarship (Franz-Pascha, 1901). That persistent Vienna–Cairo axis is also visible in the way his formation and output were remembered: trained at the Academy of Fine Arts Vienna and long embedded in Cairo's modernization, he later regretted publicly the damage of traditional houses and medieval monuments to realize Parisian boulevards through medieval quarters in Cairo (Pflugradt-Abdel Aziz, 2013)[6]. The mudbrick in the storage is quiet about all this.

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[5] Semmering opened in 1854; the Trieste link followed in 1857, giving a continuous Trieste–Vienna–Graz corridor that nineteenth-century shipments rode routinely.

[6] Vienna-based collections today still preserve drawings tied to his Egyptian commissions (Universität Wien Library, 2024)

Once the mudbricks arrived, Professor Unger dissolved one of them in water to reveal a world previously unseen. Long before flotation became standard archaeological practice, Unger soaked Egyptian mudbrick until it dissolved into slurry, then poured the mixture through nested sieves to recover what the mud retained (Unger 1866)[7]. What emerged was not just building residue but a compressed archive of entangled lifeways: teff grains marking a quiet but striking Ethiopia–Egypt botanical link (Ibid.:46); wild "rice" (*Leersia oryzoides*), no longer found in Egypt (Ibid.:45); a thread of linen, a twist of sheep's wool, and a single grain weevil (Ibid.:42-43): all evidence of domestic, agricultural, and wetland worlds converging in the act of making a brick. While species like *Phalaris paradoxa* appear unchanged after millennia, the surrounding weed flora reads as a diasporic field (Ibid.:43-46), plants on the move with people, carried by cultivation and trade. In this sense, the mudbrick becomes a point of convergence between ecology, empire, and epistemology, a very material site, where questions of origin, movement, and stasis are not only botanical but very political. Unlike the remaining mudbrick, where seeds endure in a state of waiting, those recovered through dissolution survive only as inscription in the published article (Unger, 1866)[8].

Like many objects acquired during the high tide of imperial expansion, the remaining mudbricks passed from the mobility of extraction and transport into the stasis of institutional storage. Our mudbrick that now dozes in a storage carries, in other words, forced histories and travels, and all the unnamed laborers who safely moved it from its location to the curiosity of the scientist. And yet, like most objects that end up in a museum "are made into testaments of fixity and not of circulation, though complex processes of circulation and displacement are what is most important about them" (Appadurai, 2017:407). Never exhibited[9] and absent from public narratives, the mudbrick in the storage remains a material witness to the layered geographies of 19th-century colonial infrastructure: Nile riverboats, Mediterranean steam lines, free ports, and mountain railways, all operating in concert to deliver imperial holdings from the edges of empire to its cultural repositories. Its value quickly diminished once Unger's soaking and sieving had yielded their results; no longer singular, it became just another residue stored away. And yet, paradoxically, that same mudbrick can be made to fill an entire museum: in its slurry reappear fields of barley and wheat, threads of linen and

[7] These and other seeds he collected and analyzed became the empirical foundation for his early evolutionary thinking, developed years before Darwin's *On the Origin of Species*. By tracing morphological continuities and variations across living and fossil plants, Unger argued for the gradual transformation of the plant world over deep time. This vision took visual form in his lithograph series, where he mapped botanical history as a continuous unfolding, anticipating later evolutionary theories that would dominate the natural sciences (Collins, 2022).

[8] During a visit to the Geology and Palaeontology, Natural History Museum/Universalmuseum Joanneum in Graz, we were informed that the present whereabouts of the seeds recovered by Prof. Franz Unger from the mudbrick remain unknown (pers. comm., Martin Groß, scientific officer).

[9] pers.comm., Daniel Modl, Chief Curator of the Prehistoric and Early Historic Collection, Archaeology and the Coin Cabinet/Universalmuseum Joanneum, Graz, Austria.

wool, marsh ecologies, insects, and Ethiopia–Egypt connections. Around it gathers the colonial infrastructures that enabled its travel: Lloyd's steamers on the Mediterranean, the new railways across Egypt, imperial customs storage, and the Habsburg museum eager to receive it, together with the longer history of labor regimes that first formed in ancient Egypt. The brick is thus both expendable and inexhaustible: once stripped of value, yet also capable of unfolding entire ecologies and empires.

Figure 3. Mudbrick in the office of Archaeology and the Coin Cabinet/Universalmuseum Joanneum in Graz (photograph by Matthias Ferrari)

In 2025, the long dormancy of this mudbrick was interrupted. Within the framework of the Summer Course 2025 at the Institute of Contemporary Art (IZK), TU Graz, *From Egypt With Love: In Pursuit of Mudbricks and Seeds*, attention returned to the whereabouts of the Dahshur mudbrick that Unger had described and noted he was prepared to entrust to the then Joanneum Museum in Graz (1866:62). In response to that inquiry, a mudbrick was located and moved from storage to an office for inspection (Figure 3), briefly opened to the possibility of sampling, and then withdrawn from it. It was subsequently carried into the museum building and placed in a box, with gloves set beside it (Figure 4): newly visible, yet only through the careful staging of conservation. Soon after, it returned to storage. What this brief choreography makes visible is not simply institutional caution, but the situational production of value itself. As anthropologists of value have long shown, value is not an intrinsic property of things, but something made in movement, mediation, and regimes of attention (Appadurai, 1986; Myers, 2001). Objects acquire strength as they pass through different social and institutional relations, taking on distinct statuses across their trajectories (Kopytoff, 1986). Here, the mudbrick moved, however briefly, from dormancy to relevance, from inert remainder to fragile object of concern. Its value was not discovered so much as enacted in real time, through retrieval, handling, hesitation, and recontainment as forms of value transformation (Munn, 1986).

Figure 4.
Mudbrick in the Archaeology Museum, Schloss Eggenberg, Graz, with accompanying publications by Prof. Franz Unger (photograph by Ana Bezić)

If, as Stoler has argued, colonial archives are not inert repositories but "generative substances with histories", records of uncertainty, anxieties, and "epistemological worries" that produced as much as they described (2009.:1), then mudbricks and seeds it carried, too, must be read as part of this unstable archive of empire. Both were inscribed within classificatory regimes that sought to stabilize knowledge: the brick as a fragment of built order, the seed as a cipher of botanical essence. Yet their material itineraries reveal the disquieting excesses of these categories. Shipped, stored, misplaced, or repurposed, they resist the neat grids of intelligibility imposed upon them. The politics of storage, whether of paper documents in kilometers of archives or of bricks and seeds in museum storages and scientific collections, rests less on securing permanence than on managing unruly matter, on containing what might otherwise trouble the imperial conceit of order (Stoler, 2009; Tsing, 2015; Haraway, 2016). In this sense, mudbricks and seeds register what is "not written": the fragility of taxonomies, the constant reactivation of matter in new colonial and colonial configurations, and the ways in which storage sites themselves become monuments to uncertain governance and to the precarious promise of knowledge as control. This story of the mudbrick, its geography of movements, reveals not only the didactic aspirations of early museology but also the emergence and continuation of an institutional logic that prized accumulation, classification, and pedagogical control.

How much politics is in the storage?

In 2019, during its 34th General Assembly in Kyoto, ICOM passed a resolution on "Measures to safeguard and enhance collections in storage throughout the world"[10]

[10] https://icom.museum/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/Resolutions_2019_EN.pdf

urging action to improve storage conditions for museum collections worldwide. It emphasized that storage facilities, often housing up to 99% of a museum's holdings (Buck & Gilmore, 2010:21; ICCROM, 2011), require dedicated funding and infrastructure to ensure their long-term preservation "for present and future generations" (ICOM, 2019:2). The resolution reaffirmed the role of museums, libraries, and archives as guardians of heritage, highlighting their importance in advancing human rights. Yet this crucial intervention into the backstage life of museums was largely eclipsed by the contentious debates around redefining what a museum is or should be (see Thiemeyer, 2020). At the same meeting, the clash over ICOM's museum definition became a proxy war over the sector's purpose.

The 2019 draft, never adopted after the Kyoto vote was postponed, marked a radical break after roughly five decades in which the core ICOM definition (framed in 1974 and only lightly amended through 2007) had barely shifted:

> "Democratising, inclusive and polyphonic spaces for critical dialogue about the pasts and the futures. Acknowledging and addressing the conflicts and challenges of the present, they hold artefacts and specimens in trust for society, safeguard diverse memories for future generations and guarantee equal rights and equal access to heritage for all people. Museums are not for profit. They are participatory and transparent, and work in active partnership with and for diverse communities to collect, preserve, research, interpret, exhibit, and enhance understandings of the world, aiming to contribute to human dignity and social justice, global equality and planetary wellbeing." (International Council of Museums [ICOM], 2019, as cited in Katz, 2019)

This proposed language repositioned the museum as a site of social justice, repatriation, and planetary care, far removed from its traditional object-centred focus. However, it will turn into an ideological rift with the organization. Supporters argued that museums are not neutral and already operate from explicit values; critics called the draft overly political, vague, and heavy on jargon, and worried it sidestepped core functions. The row became emblematic when François Mairesse, a member of the committee, resigned from the drafting group, arguing that "A definition is a simple and precise sentence characterising an object, and this is not a definition but a statement of fashionable values, much too complicated and partly aberrant."[11] At the same time, the debate unfolded amid intensifying activist pressure on museums, from the #MuseumsAreNotNeutral[12] movement, to decolonial protests like the Whitney/Kanders campaign[13], to climate actions targeting fossil-fuel sponsorship at the British

[11] https://www.museumsassociation.org/museums-journal/news/2019/08/22082019-rift-over-icom-definition/?utm_source=chatgpt.com#

[12] https://artstuffmatters.wordpress.com/museums-are-not-neutral/

[13] https://news.artnet.com/art-world-archives/forensic-architecture-triple-chaser-whitney-biennial-1544911?utm_source=chatgpt.com

Museum, amplifying demands that definitions reckon with power, ethics, and accountability rather than optics alone.

After intense controversy and delays, a revised, more consensus-driven definition was finally adopted in Prague in 2022. It reads:

> "A museum is a not-for-profit, permanent institution in the service of society that researches, collects, conserves, interprets and exhibits tangible and intangible heritage. Open to the public, accessible and inclusive, museums foster diversity and sustainability. They operate and communicate ethically, professionally and with the participation of communities, offering varied experiences for education, enjoyment, reflection and knowledge sharing." (International Council of Museums, 2022)

This new definition retains the core museological functions of collecting, preserving, researching, and exhibiting while adding commitments to inclusion, sustainability, and community engagement. Yet, compared to the 2019 draft, its value-forward register is muted: accessibility is affirmed but without a rights guarantee; "transparency" and "active partnership" drop out; and the explicitly "polyphonic" and "critical dialogue" framing is absent. For many opponents in 2019, the abiding fear was politicization, museums drifting from professional institutions into overt political actors, plus the legal vagueness such language might introduce. The irony was hard to miss, while opponents warned a values-driven definition would "politicize" museums, the Whitney/Kanders 2019 flashpoint showed politics were already in the boardroom[14]. After staff and artist pressure, including withdrawals, Kanders resigned[15], underscoring how claims of "neutrality" are inseparable from governance and funding.

If politics show up in definitions and boardrooms, they are built into walls and workflows in a less visible way: storage. These discursive shifts have done little to clarify the epistemological or infrastructural status of storage and depots. The very spaces that house, isolate, and "preserve" collections remain materially and conceptually peripheral to the museum's self-understanding. Whether displaced to off-site facilities, co-located with archives and private repositories, or reorganized under initiatives such as ICCROM's RE-ORG[16], storage persists as an opaque zone of governance, where care is braided with control and visibility with erasure. Not least, museums routinely

[14] Vice Chair Warren B. Kanders owned Safariland, whose tear-gas canisters were documented in Forensic Architecture & Praxis Films' Triple-Chaser investigation (using ML to detect Safariland "Triple-Chaser" grenades in images from protest sites, including the U.S.–Mexico border and Israel/Palestine). https://www.praxisfilms.org/shorts/triple-chaser?utm_source=chatgpt.com

[15] https://www.nytimes.com/2019/07/25/arts/whitney-warren-kanders-resigns.html#

[16] https://www.iccrom.org/programmes/re-org

display only a minute fraction of their holdings, often cited at 1–5%. In this light, storage reads less as neutral safeguard than as policy: objects are kept in storage rather than returned.

Would our mudbrick be better off with the 2019 definition? The text of the definition acts as a guideline to follow rather than a binding mandate: it can reframe priorities and authorize different practices, but it does not by itself move budgets, rewrite risk protocols, or open locked doors. Its emphasis on equal access, participation, and critical dialogue would give stronger discursive grounds to argue for de-isolating the brick, visible storage, co-curation, even shared stewardship. But unless those principles are translated into concrete institutional change, storage continues to determine what the object can be, who can encounter it, and whether it remains locked away. In short: the 2019 definition offers leverage, not a key.

A recent Styrian case crystallizes how storage operate as techniques of suspension and isolation by which provenance, law and political possibility were negotiated differently and objects may be granted different futures. The federal Art Restitution Act was adopted in 1998 for Austria's federal museums and collections as the legal basis for returning objects in federal holdings that were acquired during the Nazi regime and not yet restituted[17]. At Joanneum, its in-house working group began in April 1998[18], and on 14 March 2000 the Styrian regional parliament passed a regional constitutional law governing the return of questionable acquisitions from Jewish ownership[19]. What began as a provenance inquiry into acquisitions from Jewish property 1938–1955 later developed into a broader practice of return. In 2014, for instance, the Archaeology museum restituted to the Republic of Slovenia archaeological finds and coins excavated between 1941 and 1945 in present-day Slovenian territory under wartime occupation[20].

Unlike objects that travel under formal restitution frameworks, the so-called "Faustina," after nearly 55 years in the depot, was transferred in 2020 following ten years of deliberation and inquiry through a process that reframed the object less as a politically charged return than as an administratively resolved transfer. A Roman marble female portrait head dated ca. 175–190 CE and documented in the Museum of Apollonia (Susah, Libya) until WWII, resurfaced in 1967 in the Kaiserwald near Graz, was acquired for the Landesmuseum Joanneum for 7,000 Schilling, and entered the Archaeology & Coin Cabinet's holdings as the "Kopf vom Kaiserwald." After renewed provenance research, the Styrian commission ruled in 2020 that this was not a for-

[17] https://www.ris.bka.gv.at/Dokumente/BgblPdf/1998_181_1/1998_181_1.pdf
[18] https://www.museum-joanneum.at/en/knowledge-and-networking/restitution
[19] https://lootedart.com/MFEU4498720_print;Y
[20] https://archaeoregion.at/en/interarch-styria/

mal NS-era restitution case[21], under the Austrian *Art Restitution Act* (1998/2009) and recommended a diplomatic "gift." On 4 March 2021, the Universalmuseum Joanneum formally handed the marble head to Libya's ambassador in Vienna (Libya Observer 6.3.2021)[22]. The object's itinerary—museum record → wartime disappearance → provincial forest → decades in storage → diplomatic return—makes visible how "return" is less a rupture than a continuation of the same techniques of suspension: visibility rationed, custody maintained, and the terms of circulation defined by institutional authority.

Legally, restitution and gift are not the same. Restitution presumes a recognized prior wrong and a superior claim to the object, while gift is a voluntary transfer by the current legal owner. In that sense, to name the handover of the Libyan head a "gift" rather than restitution is not merely rhetorical: it preserves the authority of the present holder even as the object changes hands. If legal terms such as "restitution" and "gift" govern the conditions under which objects may leave the museum, terms such as *depot*, *storage*, *warehouse*, and *reserve* govern how their staying is understood. The Slovenian coins and *Faustina*'s trajectory suggests that storage is not opposed to movement, but one of the conditions through which movement is governed. If return itself can operate as a managed form of circulation authorized, delayed, and diplomatically framed, then the depot must be understood not as a terminal repository, but as part of the infrastructural regime that organizes the uneven mobility of museum objects (Kopytoff, 1986; Karp et al., 2006; Nesbith and Cornish, 2021).

Already in the 1930s, Clarence Stein described museums as "dynamic warehouses" where objects, like people, were constantly in flow (Stein, 1939 as cited in de Silva, 2022). This dual logic of safeguarding and circulating remains crucial today, as storage is arranged not only to preserve but to facilitate loans, exchanges, and even commercial gain. De Silva notes that in this system museums also act as borders (2022.: 83-110): packed objects move across national frontiers under strict conditions, often sealed and not to be opened until they arrive, their circulation premised on trust between institutions rather than on visibility to the public. Storage, then, is simultaneously about containment and controlled passage. Yet circulation remains profoundly uneven. Some objects travel repeatedly, appearing in exhibitions worldwide, while vast

[21] *NS-Restitution case"* refers to objects that were looted, confiscated, or otherwise wrongfully acquired during the Nazi era (1938–1945) and which are subject to restitution under the Austrian *Art Restitution Act* (1998/2009) Since the early 2000s, Austrian museums have been legally and politically required to conduct provenance research on their holdings, especially regarding possible Nazi-looted art. At the Universalmuseum Joanneum, a dedicated *Provenienzforschung* (provenance research office) was formally established in 2003. https://www.museum-joanneum.at/museum-fuer-geschichte/entdecken/kulturhistorische-sammlung/restitution

[22] https://libyaobserver.ly/art/after-more-seven-decades-head-st-faustina-statue-back-home-libya#google_vignette
https://www.wissenschaft.de/geschichte-archaeologie/faustina-kehrt-in-ihre-heimat-zurueck/

amounts, like Unger's mudbrick, remain in deep dormancy, preserved yet excluded from the flows that animate the museum.

Architecture of isolation

From the nineteenth century onward, museums established a new form of legitimacy that set them apart from private collectors, antiquarians, and the cabinets of curiosities by transferring objects into storage. Whereas earlier collections often sought prestige through accumulation on display, museums professionalized the act of withholding. Objects in storage were not abandoned but placed "on hold," their invisibility justified by the promise of future study or display. This logic created a distinction: private cabinets revealed their owners' wealth and taste, while museums grounded their authority in practices of restraint, conservation, authority, and care.

Modern division between display and storage dates to the mid-19th century (see Rapacki, 2023). In 1864, John Edward Gray of the British Museum argued that most specimens should be withdrawn from public view and preserved in cabinets, so as not to "overwhelm" or expose them to the "ignorant curiosity" of the masses (Ibid.). This Victorian logic of separation, deeply entangled with the swelling of collections through colonial extraction, set the stage for a structural bifurcation between curated exhibitions and hidden reserves that still defines museums today. By the late 19th century, institutions like the Smithsonian had formally adopted the model of selective display alongside storage for study and preservation. Rapacki (2023) shows how this infrastructure of concealment hardened over the 20th century: storage was increasingly professionalized and restricted to researchers, even as some curators experimented with "study collections" that invited public browsing[23]. Storage constitutes the museum's epistemic core: a system that manages excess through classification and latency, sustaining the fiction of future activation to justify present exclusion.

The 2019 ICOM Resolution on collections explicitly calls for funding storage infrastructures to ensure long-term care of objects "for present and future generations" (ICOM, 2019.:2). Furthermore, ICOM distinguishes between on-site and off-site *storage*, a distinction that, while seemingly administrative, is underpinned by a spatial logic that architectures access itself. On-site spaces, architecturally embedded within the museum's program are adjacent to curatorial offices, conservation labs, and exhibition infrastructure, where objects remain proximate, visible, and potentially mobilized. *Off-site*, by contrast, denotes repositories, sometimes established several kilometres away from the main building, designed around warehouse typologies and

[23] E.g. like Pontus Hultén at Moderna Museet in Stockholm when, in 1974, he opened one of the museum's storage units as an on-site display that was inspired by André Malraux's *musée imaginaire*. Such attempts blurred the line between archive and display but remained exceptional.

logistical protocols[24]. This spatial separation is not incidental. It enacts a hierarchy of attention and care, where distance becomes a method of deferral, and architecture operates as a gatekeeping mechanism. In this sense, the distinction between on-site, and off-site indexes not just geography but the politics of institutional legibility and latency.

Another form of separation occurs when objects that once belonged together such as seeds, fossils, or artifacts are dispersed into different storage departments. This is not only because their materials require distinct environmental conditions of storage, but also because disciplinary boundaries and specialized research interests enforce divisions (Carman, 2005:66-68). Of the three mudbricks sent in the 1860s, one was dissolved for analysis; one sits today in the storage of Archaeology & Coin Cabinet/ Universalmuseum Joanneum's; the third's whereabouts are uncertain. The seeds extracted from the dissolved sample, however, live elsewhere. They are catalogued under a Geology & Palaeontology department, governed by different keys, thresholds, and climate logs so that what began as one artefact now persists as two administratively distinct holdings. Long before any exhibition, the object has already been sorted by walls, workflows, and names. As Phillips (2019.:329) observes, while such procedures function as technologies of preservation and organization, they simultaneously fracture the original coherence of collections and obscure the more holistic, multidisciplinary approaches of earlier fieldworkers.

Even as the museum definition stalled, the ICOM General Assembly in Kyoto adopted a joint resolution, "Measures to Safeguard and Enhance Collections in Storage Throughout the World," urging risk reduction and improved storage conditions (Kreplak & Mairesse, 2021). The resolution urged museums to reduce risks and improve storage conditions globally, recognizing storage as a critical site of heritage preservation. Yet the findings of the accompanying survey by Mairesse and Thébault (2024) present a more sobering picture. Here is the summary of their survey: while nearly 80% of museums report having on-site storage and 44% maintain off-site storage (often far from the institution), a majority struggle with overcrowding, infrastructure degradation, and inadequate documentation systems. Over one-third of museums report serious space limitations, with many relying on facilities not originally designed for long-term storage. A third of institutions maintain incomplete inventories, and some lack any structured documentation at all (Ibid.:27). Smaller museums are particularly affected by these shortcomings, including lack of equipment, trained staff, pest control, and environmental stability. Access remains highly restricted: while some institutions are experimenting with visible storage and public tours, most use stored collections exclusively for research or occasional loans. Only about half of museums allow limited access to storage via written requests, and a third, particularly large insti-

[24] E.g. The Smithsonian institute's storage was installed outside of Washington, while those of the Tokyo Science Museum some 80 km from the capital (see Mairesee, 2021).

tutions, cannot guarantee any access at all (Ibid.:43). Paradoxically, this retreat from visibility comes at a moment when museums are rhetorically embracing participation, inclusion, and transparency. Despite slow improvements reported over the past decade and a relatively optimistic professional outlook, storage remains materially precarious and epistemically peripheral. Preventive conservation is routinely undermined by unstable humidity, poor maintenance, and restricted funding (Ibid.:50). Fewer than half of institutions offer researchers access to storage, and only 10% engage the public through visible storage or open tours (Ibid.:32). Most collections in storage are used primarily for research and occasional exhibition loans, suggesting that storage remains largely inaccessible and conceptually invisible even as museums increasingly frame themselves in terms of inclusion and accessibility (Mairesse and Thébault, 2024; Kreplak and Mairesse, 2021).

This disjunction reflects an unresolved contradiction at the heart of contemporary museological discourse. While ICOM's evolving definitions of the museum gesture toward participatory and democratic futures, most institutions continue to operate according to a more traditional model focused on accumulation, conservation, and heritage management. According to the 2021 survey, nearly 75% of professionals believe storage will remain central to institutional identity, though one in four believe public programming will increasingly take precedence (Mairesse and Thébault, 2024:46). Most also anticipate climate change will dramatically affect storage management (Kreplak and Mairesse, 2021).

What emerges is a panoramic but uneven image of museum storage: materially indispensable, but conceptually underdeveloped. The storage continues to function as an epistemological backstage, where objects are suspended from circulation and rendered invisible under the guise of care. These spaces embody unresolved tensions between access and control, preservation and marginalization, visibility and withdrawal. As institutions confront mounting environmental, financial, and ethical pressures, the politics of isolating, manifest in the architecture and logic of storage, demand renewed critical attention. They are not simply technical challenges, but structural features of how museums govern the past and condition its afterlives.

In the past three decades, the proliferation of museum contents has increasingly confronted its own limits, as museums struggle to store the vast quantities they continue to accumulate (Morgan and Macdonald, 2018; Kersel, 2015). The "curation crisis" (Bawaya, 2007; Childs, 1995;) names the growing gap between the continual production and acquisition of material and the institutional capacity to document, conserve, store, and interpret it responsibly. What is at stake is not only an excess of objects, but also of associated documentation such as diaries, maps, photographs, plans, and records that likewise demand space, labor, and long-term care. If storage can be understood as a form of suspended germination, objects held in reserve as latent potential,

then practices of disposal expose the limits of this promise. Not everything stored will sprout. As Brusius and Singh note (2018:13), museums are often confronted with the sheer excess of their collections, leading to practices such as deaccessioning, redistribution, or even the refusal to collect further material (see also Kersel, 2017:273). In this light, storage appears less as a neutral act of care than as a selective ecology, in which some objects are cultivated while others are quietly allowed to wither. Disposal marks the moment when the fiction of indefinite preservation breaks down: objects once deemed worthy of collection are reclassified as surplus, their futures foreclosed. Like seeds that fail to germinate, they remain as traces of potential that will never be realised, revealing the museum not as a stable archive of the past, but as a site of ongoing selection, exhaustion, and loss.

Dormancy on display

The recent turn to *open depots* and *visible storage* reframes the excess of "things" as spectacle and a gesture towards more inclusive museum practices: rows of standardized shelving, barcodes, climate telemetry, and conservation work made legible to visitors (Crenn, 2021; Thiemeyer, 2018). As Thiemeyer (2022) argues, depot exhibitions were shaped by the protest cultures of the 1960s and 70s and the growing mistrust of museums as manipulative instruments of power. By placing objects in stripped-down settings, without overarching narratives or interpretive mediation, visible storage promised transparency, shared authority over collections, and participatory access. It was framed as a democratic intervention that aligned with the cultural politics of the era, including UNESCO's 1976 call for inclusive and participatory museum practices[25].

The emergence of visible storage coincided with broader disciplinary shifts toward institutional reflexivity, already a central concern within anthropology. This was not simply a museological development, but part of a wider intellectual and political reorientation taking shape across the 1970s. Shaped by decolonization, feminist critique, and growing discomfort with anthropology's implication in structures of power, the reflexive turn challenged the idea of ethnography as neutral description and redirected attention toward interpretation, positionality, and the conditions under which knowledge is produced (Hymes, 1972; Geertz, 1973; Nader, 1972; Turner, 1974; Foucault, 1970; Bourdieu, 1977; Ortner, 1974; Rosaldo and Lamphere, 1974).

This shift also transformed how museums were understood. No longer seen as spaces of preservation and education, museums increasingly came to be understood as sites of power, representation, and contested authority (Clifford, 1988; Marcus & Fischer, 1986). The recognition that ethnographic knowledge was always situated, mediated,

[25] https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000114038.page=145

and implicated in broader systems of colonial and epistemic control began to unsettle curatorial norms (Asad, 1973; Fabian, 1983). Museums, particularly ethnological ones, came under scrutiny given their classification systems, display strategies, and storage practices followed the same extractive logics critiqued in fieldwork (Karp & Lavine, 1991; Stocking, 1985; Pearce, 1992). In this context, innovations such as visible storage and open depots, first introduced in the 1970s, were not just technical responses to spatial constraints but were framed as institutional gestures in an attempt to respond to demands for transparency, shared authority, and institutional self-critique (Thiemeyer, 2018; Shelton, 2006). Yet, as later critiques by Indigenous scholars and museum theorists have shown, these attempts often reproduced older structures of control under a new aesthetic of openness (Simpson, 2001; Phillips, 2003). The reflexive turn thus not only changed the way anthropologists wrote about others, but also how museums began to stage themselves as reflexive institutions, revealing their inner workings while still holding tight to their regulatory frameworks and archival power (Bennett, 1995; Clifford, 1997).

This broader rethinking of museum authority soon found concrete expression in curatorial practice. In line with anthropology's growing self-critique, several museums in the early 1970s began to reconfigure their exhibitions and curatorial strategies to foreground transparency, self-critique, and visitor access. One of the earliest and most influential examples was the Museum of Anthropology (MOA) in Vancouver, which reopened in 1976 with an architectural design and curatorial concept centred on visible storage, offering access to thousands of objects previously hidden from public view (Thiemeyer, 2020; Phillips, 2011:285). Similarly, institutions like the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford and the Tropenmuseum in Amsterdam began rethinking the authority of their typological or colonial displays, initiating curatorial interventions that acknowledged their problematic legacies (Gosden and Larson, 2007; Wintle, 2013). In Washington, D.C., the growing pressure from Native American communities in the 1970s led the Smithsonian Institution to begin revising its approach to ethnographic objects, laying the groundwork for the later foundation of the National Museum of the American Indian (Lonetree, 2012). These shifts, whether through open depots, visible storage, or critical re-narrativization, reflected a wider disciplinary move toward reflexivity, transparency, and eventually, collaboration, even if the logics of control and isolation often remained intact beneath the surface of reform. Although MOA framed visible storage as democratization, Indigenous communities often found it inadequate. Objects with colonial provenances and sacred meanings were presented in "warehoused" rows, and behind glass, an arrangement curator themselves admitted was inappropriate and that symbolic recognition cannot replace meaningful repatriation (Cunningham, 1999:51-52). What appeared as openness, then, did not necessarily unsettle the museum's deeper structures of authority.

This tension reveals the deeper ambivalence of institutional newfound practices. Even as it invites critical self-awareness, it often reproduces the very logics of epistemic con-

trol it seeks to challenge. In the case of MOA, Indigenous communities have raised concerns that visible storage maintains institutional authority over what can be seen, handled, or interpreted (Cunningham, 1999). Objects may be made visible, but their meanings remain suspended, severed from the social and ceremonial contexts that give them life. In some cases, sacred or sensitive materials were displayed without proper consultation, violating Indigenous cultural protocols, and reinforcing colonial hierarchies under the guise of openness (Todd, 1992; Roy, 2006). Such gestures of transparency, Phillips has argued (2011; 2019), do not necessarily translate into Indigenous access or sovereignty over collections. Instead, they often aestheticize control, producing an illusion of shared stewardship while preserving the museum's legal and epistemic grip on the archive. In other words, visibility altered the optics of access while leaving the protocols of control largely intact.

This tension echoes broader critiques from Indigenous scholars, artists, and curators who have challenged the limits of reflexive museology. The problem is not only how objects are displayed, but whether Indigenous voices are empowered to determine their visibility, interpretation, and potential repatriation (Nicolson, 2013). While institutions like MOA have taken steps toward more collaborative models, the logic of isolation and dormancy persists within the storage. What appears as participatory access may in fact further entrench the museum's protocols of care and control. In this sense, visible storage reveals the double bind of reflexivity: it offers a critical mode of self-representation, yet often remains bounded by the same colonial infrastructures it seeks to expose.

For example, new depots[26] such as the Vitra Schaudepot, the British Museum's BM Arc near Reading, Hong Kong's M+, and MVRDV's Depot Boijmans Van Beuningen in Rotterdam stage visibility through climate-controlled architectures that visitors can peer into, often via guided tours, glass walls, or choreographed illumination. Here, storage is aestheticized as a visitor experience, a commodified spectacle of accumulation. Rapacki (2023) argues that while these spaces claim transparency, they continue to limit access, reinforcing the contradictions at the heart of the museum: the simultaneous obligation to preserve, collect, and educate while concealing the overwhelming bulk of their holdings. London's V&A East Storehouse goes further by institutionalizing activation rights as a managed service. The museum invites visitors to "Order an Object" and to book supervised close-up access while simultaneously displaying conservation-in-action and the telemetry of care. This hybrid of access and choreography is paradigmatic of the contemporary storage: dormancy is not abolished, it is performed and rationed through procedure[27], re-emerging not as open access but as curated spectacle.

[26] While *storage* dominates much anglophone museum discourse, *depot* remains a standard museum term in several continental European traditions, where it names both a practical repository and, increasingly, a distinct exhibitionary and conceptual space (Corona, 2024).

[27] https://www.vam.ac.uk/info/order-an-object

What these visible storages expose, then, is not genuine accessibility, but the persistence of a paradox: storage, once hidden to protect collections, now becomes a public attraction, staged through glass, guided tours, and curated encounters. But this visibility does not abolish isolation; it merely reshapes it into a controlled form of access keeping the vast excesses of colonial and capitalist accumulation untouchable (see Reeves, 2018). How to begin to think of this excess?

Across the museum sector, storage collections have moved from infrastructural backstage to a calibrated, sometimes spectacular frontstage. The move matters because storage is not a void between acquisitions and exhibitions but a regime of managed dormancy. In other words, a set of protocols (climate, risk, cataloguing, access) that decide how objects may live in the present and what futures are possible for them. Recent scholarship urges us to treat storage as an object of critique and subject of research, not just logistics of how things are in the vault (Brusius and Singh, 2018). This politics of visibility has a lineage. Tony Bennett's (1988) classic account of the "exhibitionary complex" shows how museums put publics and their objects into ordered visibility that disciplines and educates. Open depots and visible storage finesse that old logic: they promise transparency while keeping the object in a suspended state, present yet still regulated. Visibility is not the opposite of control; it is one of its instruments. The mudbrick makes this plain: one object on view, two regimes of access: its seeds circulate as natural-history specimens, its body resting in the archaeological depot.

In Southeastern Europe, open depot programs have made the politics of dormancy unusually explicit. The Museum of Yugoslavia's *Otvoreni depo* invites publics to handle and discuss relay batons ("štafete") under curatorial guidance[28]; the Historical Museum of Bosnia and Herzegovina's Open Depot casts storage as an "open and unfinished story" about socialist and wartime collecting. Both foreground the state histories and institutional labor that made these stores, while keeping activation bounded by house rules[29].

In 2017, the Museum of History, one of sixteen museums of the Universalmuseum Joanneum[30] opened its vaults with the explicit aim of making its holdings visible and accessible, inviting the public to explore the breadth of the Cultural History and Multimedia Collections. The gesture both reveals and regulates. Roughly 2,000 of the 35,000 objects are displayed within a raw, industrial aesthetic that performs radical transparency: "showing the hidden." Yet this curated fragment remains firmly under institutional governance: the vast majority of objects stay isolated in deeper storage;

[28] https://muzej-jugoslavije.org/exhibition/figure-secanja/?utm_source=chatgpt.com
[29] https://muzej.ba/otvoreni-depo/
[30] The Universalmuseum Joanneum in Graz comprises sixteen museums, with approximately 21,000 m² of exhibition space and 11,000 m² of storage distributed across twelve buildings scattered throughout the city.

contextualizing narratives, especially around provenance and colonial extraction, remain absent; and the depot aesthetic often neutralizes critical interrogation. What emerges is the dual logic of isolating and exhibiting: control presented as openness, objects suspended in ontological dormancy, and reparative futurities deferred.

What does this mean for an artifact like the mudbrick I have attended to in this article? First, deep dormancy is double: the brick's material dormancy (fragile composites, organic inclusions) meets museological dormancy (stabilization, risk management). Second, every proposed intervention such as rehydration test, micro-sampling, 3D imaging becomes a negotiation over who may wake the object and under what protocols.

Finally, the ethical turn to care helps name the ambivalence here. In the storage, care is not only an ethic but a technology that authorizes some forms of activation (handling sessions, imaging) and withholds others (destructive testing, uncontrolled circulation). Thinking with Puig de la Bellacasa on *matters of care* (2017) helps us see how maintenance practices, monitoring humidity, barcoding crates, compose a moral order around stored things, one that our mudbrick must enter to be studied at all.

Open depots promise democratic oversight, but they also normalize an imperial gaze: the object appears as inventory first, heritage second. For research on perishable, soil-rich materials like mudbrick, open storage clarifies the asymmetry between *seeing* and *doing*: the public may view the mudbrick, yet the power to sample or even touch it is held by protocols that transform potential inquiry into a request workflow. In that sense, open depots do not dissolve dormancy; they perform it by displaying care while rationing activation.

Afterword

On 11 September 2025, the French archaeological depot in Gaza, housing hundreds of cubic meters of material from sites such as the fourth-century Saint Hilarion monastery, was evacuated under threat of bombardment. When the strike warning arrived, decisions about what could be removed, what would remain exposed, and who would bear the risk of evacuation revealed with particular clarity that isolation is a practice of governance, one that adjudicates value, futurity, and loss. Like seeds in deep dormancy, these artefacts were suspended between viability and erasure, their survival contingent not only on conservation protocols but on the violent infrastructures of war. In this sense, Gaza makes clear that the museum otherwise is not a hypothetical proposition but an urgent material reality, inseparable from the precarious conditions that shape cultural heritage today and the everyday lives of human and more-than-human communities (Tsing, 2013; Haraway, 2016; Escobar, 2020).

If museums are to respond to contemporary planetary crises, the question is no longer only how to conserve objects for the future, but how to reorganize storage, cataloguing, and access in the present so that they become infrastructures of relation rather than mechanisms of separation. This means activating what Basu calls the pluriversal affordances of storage and curation, treating catalogues, conservation, and access protocols as levers for reconnection rather than mere administration (Basu, 2021:46-47; 2024:89-91). It also means, as Henderson insists, recognizing that conservation cannot "opt out" of inequality, and asking not only how long things can be kept, but for whom they are kept and what kinds of relations they enable in the present (Henderson, 2020:195-206). Such a shift would require challenging entrenched hierarchies and designing forms of co-stewardship, consent-based access, and situated use, even where this entails measured risk, tactile engagement, or periodic activation rather than inert preservation (Henderson, 2020;204, 206; Vergès, 2024, xv, 151). It also requires moving away from the accumulation principle so deeply embedded in museum practice. As examples from Japan and Brazil suggest, some institutions already present themselves as museums without being organized around permanent collections at all (Morishita, 2010; OEI and Ibram, 2016). However provisional or utopian this may sound, moving toward a museum otherwise requires unlearning extractive habits and reorienting museum practice toward collective well-being and mutually enhancing relations with the Earth and its others (Escobar, 2020, xi; Alexandroff, 2021:22).

Long dormant in storage, unexhibited and unknown to general public, the mudbrick from Egypt was brought back into circulation through research and teaching. Yet this renewed attention did not open the object to deeper material engagement. On the contrary, its new visibility prompted new forms of caution: retrieved from storage, temporarily placed in an office for inspection, and briefly considered for microsampling, the mudbrick was ultimately placed in a box, accompanied by gloves, and made available only for observation. It was recast not as a sample to be worked with, but as a fragile object under care. In its movement, it became more visible but less materially accessible. What was reanimated was not free encounter, but a tightly choreographed relation that reaffirmed the museum's authority over how, when, and by whom knowledge may be made.

Unlike the mudbrick, which is housed in one of four storage facilities of the Archaeology and Coin Cabinet Department/Universalmuseum Joanneum (Universalmuseum Joanneum, 2014:15), the seeds Unger extracted may still be found one day in the storage facilities of the Department of Geology and Palaeontology of the Natural History Museum/Universalmuseum Joanneum. In the archaeology ledger the mudbrick remains a cultural artifact tied to provenance and context, while in geology and palaeontology the seeds are recast as botanical specimens, indexed by taxon and taphonomy. What began as one assemblage of mud, seeds, fibres, labor, environment, and route now persists as administratively distinct holdings. In effect, compartmental-

ization isolates the very assemblage that gave the find meaning brick/seed/land/labor/route holding each element in deep dormancy and making it legible to one discipline while illegible to others. There is often an attempt to repair the separations embedded in museum and disciplinary classifications working to re-establish context, restore historical specificity, and reveal interconnections across objects and collections. In anthropology, efforts to re-establish context often take the form of tracing the entangled biographies, regimes of value, and contact histories through which objects moved before they were stabilized as museum categories (Thomas, 1991; Clifford, 1997; Myers, 2001; Harrison et. al., 2013). Yet these efforts are frequently undermined by the very architecture of the museum itself, particularly the spatial and bureaucratic divide between storage and display and, at times, that divide has doubled as a machinery of disposal (Delbourgo, 2018:45). Differentiated storage systems not only enforce disciplinary boundaries but also produce material absences, certain objects simply fall between categories, uncollected, unexhibited, and effectively erased and discarded. As Phillips notes, such procedures function as technologies of preservation and organization, but they also fracture the coherence of collections and obscure more holistic, multidisciplinary ways of knowing (Phillips, 2019). The result is not only material division, but epistemic separation: what was once a single object with layered histories of its arrival come to inhabit different departments, taxonomies, and futures.

If Enlightenment universalism rests on what Escobar calls an "ontology of separation" (2020, xv), museums continue to materialize that logic by dividing culture from nature, humans from nonhumans, and objects from the relations that once gave them meaning. Storage is one of the key sites where this logic is secured, as objects are preserved precisely by being isolated from the ecologies, substances, and histories that made them possible. In this sense, the museum otherwise does not begin in the gallery, but in storage. It begins in the places where collections sleep, where authority is quietly organized, and where the conditions of access are set. To rethink the museum otherwise is not to add another program or architectural gesture, but to redistribute authority, risk, and attention in the very spaces that have long remained hidden. The task, then, is not simply to make storage visible, but to rework it from a technology of isolation into a relational practice. In this sense, Latouche's ethical call to "do more, and do better, with less" (2009:55) is useful not as a museum program per se, but as a critique of institutional logics organized around endless accumulation, expansion, and managed excess. Reimagined otherwise, storage might enable the mudbrick, the seeds, and the wider more-than-human worlds with which they are entangled to travel together again, across departments and beyond the protocols that have long kept those relations apart.

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Izvorni znanstveni rad

Iz Egipta s ljubavlju: Blatna opeka, ekologija skladištenja i muzej općenito

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Sažetak

Logike kolonijalne eksploatacije i epistemološke kontrole nastavljaju da opstaju u savremenim muzejskim praksama, naročito u prostorima njihovih depoa. Fokusirajući se na predmete povučene iz javnog pogleda, pohranjene u muzejskim depoima i zatvorenim zbirkama, u ovom radu tvrdim da pohranjivanje nije neutralan čin zaštite, već nastavak ekstraktivnih tehnologija i aktivan oblik upravljanja koji oblikuje odnose vrednosti, znanja i moći. Kroz primer jedne blatne opeke iz Egipta, koja je deo depoa Archaeology & Coin Cabinet, Scholss Eggenberg, Universalmuseum Joanneum u Grazu, Austrija, ovaj rad ispituje kako čin pohranjivanja proizvodi specifične temporalnosti, epistemološke odsutnosti i ontološku suspenziju.

Muzejske prakse skladištenja često se opravdavaju diskursima univerzalne brige i očuvanja „za čovečanstvo", ali istovremeno održavaju mehanizme kontrole i isključivanja. Odluke o tome šta je vredno čuvanja, izlaganja i restitucije, a šta ostaje nevidljivo i neaktivno, suštinski su pitanja zakona, autoriteta i moći. Pravni i institucionalni okviri štite objekte stavljajući ih pod režime očuvanja i brige, ali ih ta ista zaštita istovremeno uklanja iz cirkulacije, javne vidljivosti i mreža koje ih povezuju sa živim istorijama, praksama i društvima.

Stanje objekata u depoima nalikuje onome što se u biljnoj biologiji naziva dubokim mirovanjem, gde semena ostaju održiva, ali neaktivna, čekajući odgovarajuće uslove da proklijaju. U ovom okviru, pohranjeni predmeti nisu samo učinjeni epistemološki nevidljivim, već ontološki suspendovani, zadržani u stanju potencijalnosti. Njihovo uklanjanje iz cirkulacije razotkriva jednu vrstu ambivalencije: iako duboko isprepleteni sa širim kolonijalnim nasleđem, kao i istorijama nasilja i nejednakosti (Basu, 2024; Vergès, 2024), ovi objekti mogu otvoriti i latentne budućnosti, omogućavajući nam da skladište promislimo ne kao krajnju tačku, već kao živo mesto sustreta u kojem se prošle ekstrakcije ukrštaju sa sadašnjim hitnostima i mogućim reparativnim budućnostima.

Ključne riječi: muzejsko skladištenje, izoliranje, duboko mirovanje, dekolonizacijska muzeologija, muzej općenito.