

**DECOLONIAL VISIONS  
FOR THE APPOINTMENT OF A W3 UNIVERSITY PROFESSORSHIP  
FOR ART AND VISUAL CULTURES OF AFRICA  
AT THE INSTITUTE OF ART HISTORY OF FREIE UNIVERSITÄT BERLIN**

*We want and need a professor who knows the impact of colonialism in their body, [...]  
Who engages in theories that come from material realities, [...]  
Who understands what it means to study in an institution that is marked by a notion of Europe  
as having been always white, without positive representation of the colonized,  
and who understands it because it also affects their everyday life,  
Who works with a decolonial curriculum to undo historical racial injustices at the Academy,  
Who understands that we need to undo the legacy of racial injustice.*  
(Caceres I.; Mesquita, S., Utikal S. (Hrsg.), *Anti\*colonial Fantasies: Decolonial Strategies*, zaglossus 2017, p. 27.)

Dear President of Freie Universität Berlin – Prof. Dr. Günter M. Ziegler,  
Dear Vice-presidents – Univ.-Prof. Dr. Verena Blechinger-Talcott,  
Prof. Dr. Georg W. Bertram, Prof. Dr. Sven Chojnacki und Prof. Dr. Petra Knaus,  
Dear Dean of the Department of History and Cultural Studies – Univ.-Prof. Dr. Eun-Jeung Lee,  
Dear members of the appointment committee,  
Dear Director and Deputy Director of the Institute for Art History – Prof. Dr. Karin Gludovatz, Prof. Dr. Peter Geimer,  
Dear Diversity officer of the Department of History and Cultural Studies – Gabriele Rosenstreich,  
Dear womxns representative for the Department of History and Cultural Studies – Ellinor Friederike Trenczek,  
Dear Senator for Justice, Diversity and Anti-Discrimination – Dr. Lena Kreck,  
Dear State Secretary of Diversity and Anti-Discrimination – Saraya Gomis,  
Dear Senator for Science, Health, Care and Equality – Ulrike Gote,  
Dear State Secretary for Science, Research and Equality – Armaghan Naghipour,  
Dear Members of the Art History Institute,  
Dear fellow students, Dear allies, and supporters

We, students and former students of the study programs "Art History in a Global Context" and "Art History of Africa", are addressing you in view of the ongoing procedure for filling a new W3 university professorship for "Art and Visual Cultures of Africa" at the Art History Institute (KHI) of Freie Universität Berlin (FU). We are a group of BIPOC, and *white* individuals who are committed to the future of the course "Art History of Africa" and to decolonial and discrimination-sensitive approaches to teaching. This is our second letter. As the previous reactions from the university have been in no way satisfactory, we are now choosing the format of an open letter to place our demands.

As a reminder: The application presentations for the professorship, as mentioned above, took place in June this year. The position was advertised in January 2022<sup>1</sup> and will be filled by the summer semester of 2023. Currently, the appointment procedure is passing through the designated committees. With this letter, we want to, once again, outline our hopes for the appointment of the mentioned professorship. To this end, we will first portray the current situation at the KHI and especially the "African Art" department, as it is seen and experienced by many students.

## The Situation at the Art History Institute of FU Berlin

Students are strongly dissatisfied with the past and current situation in the "African Art" department. Registrations for the course have been declining for years. Numerous students have dropped out of the programme or have switched to other degree programmes or universities. According to students, the main reasons for this, among others, are:

- the teaching of predominantly Eurocentric- and *white*-produced knowledge about African and "non-European" societies and their cultural heritage: Scholars and authors from the African continent or with an Afro-diasporic background are strongly underrepresented in reading lists and the literature cited; postcolonial or decolonial research approaches are hardly considered or devalued;
- the lack of representation of BIPOC in permanent teaching positions: so far, BIPOC lecturers, if at all, are only employed as guest lecturers or in temporary W2 professorships;
- the manifold reproduction of racism by students and lecturers in everyday university life;
- the systematic abdication of responsibility by lecturers to exemplify and teach sensitive approaches to discriminatory content, terminology, and sources. Instead, the burden of responsibility for this task often falls onto students, especially those who are themselves affected by discrimination;
- the denial and disqualification of anti-racist and decolonial aspirations and struggles: For example, the commitment of activists and academics for the restitution of cultural belongings acquired in colonial contexts of injustice and violence, which are now held, inter alia, in German museums, was disparagingly labelled as "postcolonial populism" and declared irrelevant to the study of African art history;
- the repeated ignoring, trivialising, and denying of the lived realities, experiences, and agency of people who experience racism and other forms of discrimination.

For at least seven years, students have regularly expressed their displeasure and frustration about these circumstances – for example, in the yearly feedback session between students and the leadership and staff of the "Art of Africa" department at the end of each winter semester. So far, this criticism has unfortunately remained without consequences.

## New professorship as an opportunity for increased diversity awareness and decolonising

In view of this situation, we are delighted that the appointment of a new professor for "Art and Visual Cultures of Africa", presents a chance to initiate sustainable and future-oriented changes at the institute. We are all the more hopeful in this regard, as two of the three applicants who were invited to give sample lectures in June offer exciting and highly relevant perspectives on a level of content and methodology and, in two cases, also have biographical connections to the African continent.

The following candidates held presentations on 13.6.2022<sup>2</sup>:

**Prof. Dr. Adepeju Layiwola** (lecture: From Germany With Love: New Narratives Around the Benin Bronzes)  
Adepeju Layiwola is a Professor of Art History and teaches at the University of Lagos (Nigeria), where she acted as Head of the Department of Creative Arts until 2020. Her research focuses on historical and contemporary artistic practices in Nigeria, on memory culture and postcolonial continuities. Especially exciting from our perspective is Layiwola's proven expertise and long-standing scholarly as well as artistic engagement with the so-called "Benin bronzes". Given the newly reached agreement between the governments of the FRG and Nigeria on the return of cultural heritage from the Kingdom of Benin held in German collections, as well as the broader debates about colonial collections, this expertise suggests that a professorship occupied by Layiwola will actively contribute to current art-historical and memory-political discourses. Finally, there is hope that Layiwola's function as president of the Art Council of the African Studies Association (ACASA) would foster collaboration with teachers and researchers on the African continent.

**Prof. Dr. Bárbaro Martínez-Ruiz** (lecture: Ma Kisi Nsi: A Quest for Kongo a Sansala Art)

Bárbaro Martínez-Ruiz is an Art History professor at Indiana University Bloomington (USA). He is an acknowledged expert on African and Caribbean artistic, visual, and religious practices. Among other things, Martínez-Ruiz has taught at Stanford University (USA) and the University of Cape Town (South Africa). With his research focusing on Bakongo traditions of graphic writing in the Democratic Republic of Congo, in Angola, and the Palo-Monte traditions in Cuba and their connections, Martínez-Ruiz's expertise extends beyond the continent of Africa and includes African-Atlantic and diasporic cultures. Martínez-Ruiz's interdisciplinary research approach is particularly noteworthy, integrating African languages, among other things, as elementary components of his art historical research, thus opening up art history to new perspectives.

**Prof. Dr. Kerstin Silja Pinther** (lecture: "We Greet the Dress before we Greet its Wearer". Konzeptuelles (Mode-) Design in Nigeria)

Kerstin Silja Pinther was a Professor for African and Islamic Art History at the Ludwig Maximilian University in Munich with a research focus on urban architecture, art, and design in West and North Africa in the 20th and 21st centuries. Most recently, she has worked as a curator for modern and contemporary art in a global context at the Humboldt Forum and the Ethnological Museum Berlin. From 2010-2014 she held a junior professorship in the department "Art of Africa" at the FU Berlin. From our perspective, Pinther's anthropological-ethnological approach stands in a European and Eurocentric tradition of researching and discussing the African continent from the outside. This approach ties in with the work of the previous chairholder, whose life partner Pinther is. We are doubtful that appointing Pinther would bring about the desired and, from the point of view of many students, urgently needed reorientation of the focus area "African Art".

### **The Free University and Diversity**

The FU has publicly announced its commitment to diversity, internationalism, and anti-racism.<sup>3</sup> The university's "Diversity-Concept"<sup>4</sup> declares: "Freie Universität sees itself as responsible for acknowledging and promoting diversity and to recognise, reflect on and eliminate mechanisms of exclusion in a self-critical and power-sensitive manner. We strive to ensure equal participation for all and foster an appreciative teaching, learning, and working environment." On a staff level, this means, according to the FU, "increasing the representation of employees with migration history" (3.3), raising awareness of racism (3.4), as well as measures to "research barriers to entry in the recruitment of employees with migration history" (3.3.1).

The appointment of a new professor for the "Art and Visual Cultures of Africa" is an excellent opportunity to prove that these principles and declarations of commitment are more than mere lip service. Their implementation is vital concerning the aforementioned professorship, as the (art) history of the African continent in European institutions has been characterised by structures of "speaking-about" rather than self-representation<sup>5</sup>. In the face of current declarations of "dialogue with societies of origin", proclaimed in discussions about looted African and other "non-European" artistic and cultural heritage, we think it is time for change at the KHI. We demand that the FU take its own principles with respect to diversity and academic excellence – which must include an up-to-date awareness of global scholarship – seriously and demonstrate their application in this specific case.

### **Our vision - our demands**

Our vision for the focus area of "African art" is decolonial-oriented teaching and research that centres and takes into account African and Afro-diasporic perspectives and epistemologies, in which anti-racist and discrimination-sensitive language is practised and taught, in which global colonial-historical entanglements are acknowledged and investigated, in which Eurocentric academic traditions can be identified, reflected upon, and overcome, and in which the perspectives of those affected by racism are taken seriously. In our vision, everybody, especially BIPOC should be able to study and work at FU Berlin and the KHI without being at the mercy of colonial power structures and experiencing racist violence.

**We, therefore, call on Freie Universität Berlin to,**

1. take the voices of students seriously. The FU must ensure that the structures of teaching and research at the KHI and the FU generally are in line with current societal and academic demands to **critically confront and overcome colonial and racist bodies of knowledge**;
2. to ensure that this societal and academic demand to critically confront and overcome colonial and racist bodies of knowledge is taken into account in the process of filling the professorship "Art and Visual Cultures of Africa";
3. **to ensure that the university's commitment and duty, as a public institution, to increase the proportion of persons with a "migration history" among employees is adhered to** in the process of filling the professorship "Art and Visual Cultures of Africa", in accordance with § 7 of the Law on the Promotion of Participation in the Migration Society of the State of Berlin (Participation Act - PartMigG)<sup>6</sup>;
4. to see the appointment of a new professor for "Art and Visual Cultures of Africa" as an opportunity to set in motion **urgently needed structural and content-related changes in the study programs "Art History in a Global Context" and "Art History of Africa"**;
5. in the process of filling the professorship "Art and Visual Cultures of Africa, to ensure that **academic qualifications and conceptual innovation as decision-making criteria** take precedence over private relations to the previous chairholder and the structures and staff of the KHI;
6. to ensure that the **representation of BIPOC academic staff in the study program** is increased and consolidated in the long term;
7. to ensure that **anti-racist and discrimination-sensitive approaches to teaching** - at KHI and beyond - are prioritised, as required by the Berlin State Anti-Discrimination Act (LADG)<sup>7</sup>;
8. to live up to its self-proclaimed commitment to raise awareness of racism among employees - through a **structural, content-related and methodological reorientation of the focus area "Art of Africa"**.

We expect the FU to take a stand on our demands.

For enquiries, exchanges, expressions of solidarity, and support, please feel free to contact us at the following address: [dekoloniale\\_kunstgeschichte\[at\]systemli.org](mailto:dekoloniale_kunstgeschichte[at]systemli.org)

With kind regards,

Student Working Group for an Anti-racist and Anti-Colonial Art History

AStA – The General Student Committee of Freie Universität Berlin

---

<sup>1</sup> Ausschreibung / JOB "Professur, Kunst Afrikas / Professor, African Art History, FU Berlin", in: ArtHist.net, 06.01.2022 (accessed 10.10.2022): <https://arthist.net/archive/35611>.

<sup>2</sup> "Einladung zu Vorstellungsvorträgen für die Besetzung der W3-Universitätsprofessur für Kunst und visuelle Kulturen Afrikas", Abteilung Kunst Afrikas / Kunsthistorisches Institut / Fachbereich Geschichts- und Kulturwissenschaften, Freie Universität Berlin (accessed 10.10.2022): [https://www.geschkult.fu-berlin.de/e/khi/schwerpunkte/abteilung\\_afrika/abteilung/Termine/20220613\\_Vorstellungsvortraege-Kunst-Afrikas.html](https://www.geschkult.fu-berlin.de/e/khi/schwerpunkte/abteilung_afrika/abteilung/Termine/20220613_Vorstellungsvortraege-Kunst-Afrikas.html).

<sup>3</sup> "Antirassismus: Freie Universität Berlin – gegen Hass und Ausgrenzung, für rassismuskritische Diversity", Diversity, *Freie Universität Berlin*, 21.03.2022 (accessed 10.10.2022): <https://www.fu-berlin.de/sites/diversity/antidiskriminierung/antirassismus/index.html>;  
"Statement von Günter M. Ziegler zum Internationalen Tag gegen Rassismus 2022", Freie Universität, *Youtube*, 21.03.2022 (accessed 10.10.2022): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GJWvYp2EGFA>.

<sup>4</sup> "Diversity-Konzept der Freien Universität Berlin 2021-2023", Diversity@fu, Gabriele Rosenstreich, Diversity- und Gender-Controlling, Präsidium der Freien Universität (Hrsg.), Februar 2021 (accessed 10.10.2022): <https://www.fu-berlin.de/sites/diversity/index.html>; [https://www.fu-berlin.de/universitaet/profil/diversity/diversitykonzept\\_fu\\_2021-23.pdf](https://www.fu-berlin.de/universitaet/profil/diversity/diversitykonzept_fu_2021-23.pdf).

<sup>5</sup> "The main issue that pervades knowledge production today is that Africa is mainly spoken for and about by non-Africans. The struggle of African scholars in African universities and institutes to speak about, and produce knowledge based on, African realities and experiences are exacerbated by research collaborations with Global North scholars and by the structural, discriminatory gatekeeping practices of international journals." (Iroulo, L. C., & Tappe Ortiz, J., "Dear German Academia: What is Your Role in African Knowledge Production?", *Africa Spectrum*, 57(1), (2022), 72–82: <https://doi.org/10.1177/00020397221085982>).

<sup>6</sup> "Partizipation in der Migrationsgesellschaft", Beauftragte für Integration und Migration des Senats von Berlin (abgerufen am 10.10.2022): <https://www.berlin.de/lb/intmig/themen/partizipation-in-der-migrationsgesellschaft/>;  
Gesetz zur Förderung der Partizipation in der Migrationsgesellschaft des Landes Berlin (Partizipationsgesetz - PartMigG) vom 5. Juli 2021, Gesetze, Berliner Vorschriften- und Rechtsprechungsdatenbank, 2021 (accessed 10.10.2022): [https://gesetze.berlin.de/perma?j=PartMigG\\_BE](https://gesetze.berlin.de/perma?j=PartMigG_BE).

<sup>7</sup> Berliner Landesantidiskriminierungsgesetz (LADG), see in particular §11: "(1) Die Verhinderung und Beseitigung jeder Form von Diskriminierung und die Förderung einer Kultur der Wertschätzung von Vielfalt sind als durchgängiges Leitprinzip bei allen Maßnahmen der öffentlichen Stellen zu berücksichtigen. (2) Die öffentlichen Stellen beziehen bei Untersuchungen ihrer Aufbau- und Ablauforganisation sowie ihrer Geschäftsprozesse auch die Untersuchung auf strukturelle Diskriminierungsgefährdungen mit ein und implementieren geeignete Gegenmaßnahmen zur Erreichung der Ziele dieses Gesetzes." (accessed 10.11.2022): <https://www.berlin.de/sen/lads/recht/ladg/>.