

"New Relational Ethics" in Art History and Archaeology (online, 14–15 Nov 25)

Leuphana University Lüneburg / Queens College, CUNY, New York (online), Nov 14–15, 2025
Deadline: Aug 31, 2025

Vera-Simone Schulz

Drawing inspiration from the influential 2018 report by Felwine Sarr and Bénédicte Savoy, "The Restitution of African Cultural Heritage: Toward a New Relational Ethics", this workshop seeks to extend the urgent conversations it sparked beyond the domain of critical museology into the broader fields of art history and archaeology. The Sarr and Savoy report catalyzed a reckoning within European museum systems and beyond, challenging the histories of collections as well as the legal and institutional conditions under which African cultural heritage has been circulated. Yet its call resonates far more widely. It calls for a fundamental epistemic shift, one that moves away from extractive and transactional logics of ownership, toward relationality, reciprocity, and repair at the center of scholarly and institutional practices. This proposed shift demands a radical reorientation of how scholars, curators, and institutions engage with objects, communities, histories, and each other. Their intervention foregrounds an ethical horizon in which restitution is not an endpoint, but a starting point for imagining new forms of knowledge-making, scholarly and institutional responsibility, and transnational solidarity.

While critical museology has become an important arena for addressing the colonial entanglements of collections and for experimenting with collaborative and community-based practices, the implications of a relational ethics extend beyond the museum space. In art history and archaeology, disciplines historically implicated in the extraction, classification, and aestheticization of cultural objects, a relational ethics necessitates rethinking not only what we study, but also how we study it, and with whom. It challenges the autonomy of scholarly inquiry when that autonomy is predicated on unequal access to objects, archives, or sites, and when it reproduces hierarchies of knowledge between the Global North and South, or between academic and non-academic actors.

In this light, a new relational ethics might be understood as a critical and generative framework that reorients disciplinary methodologies around accountability, dialogue, and situated engagement. It demands attention to the social lives of objects and sites, to their embeddedness in living communities, contested histories, and affective attachments. It calls upon scholars to recognize the limits of their interpretative authority and to cultivate practices of listening, co-creation, and long-term commitment. This does not imply a retreat into relativism, but rather the development of more reflexive, transparent, and responsive forms of knowledge production – ones that acknowledge asymmetries of power while working to mitigate them.

In archaeology, this ethical shift resonates with long-standing debates on Indigenous sovereignty, heritage rights, and the politics of excavation. Increasingly, archaeologists are confronted with the imperative to forge equitable, and long-term partnerships with descendant communities and to reckon with the afterlives of colonial fieldwork, moving beyond extractive field models toward forms of collaborative stewardship and co-authored interpretation. Similarly, in art history, relational ethics destabilize the disciplinary privileging of objects abstracted from their histories of displacement and instead foreground questions of transcultural dynamics, mobility, provenance, and restitution not as technical matters, but as ethical and political concerns. Furthermore, ecologies and issues of sustainability take center stage.

Importantly, such an ethics does not operate only retroactively, as a mode of repair for past injustices, but also prospectively, shaping the conditions under which future research is undertaken. It compels us to consider the relational infrastructures of our work – the funding bodies, institutional affiliations, research collaborations, and publication practices that underpin scholarly authority (and how it is constructed) – and to imagine ways of reconfiguring these toward more just and inclusive forms. How can our methodologies, citation practices, field engagements, and pedagogies foster more inclusive, accountable, and dialogic modes of knowledge production? How might we reimagine art history and archaeology not simply as critical disciplines, but as caring, relational, and world-building practices? Together, we aim to sound out the contours of a new relational ethics – one that acknowledges the enduring legacies of colonialism while affirming the possibility of more just and inclusive futures.

We invite proposals for 20 minutes presentations for this online workshop by art historians, archaeologists, heritage scholars, museum professionals, artists, curators, as well as cultural practitioners whose work engages with these themes. Proposals can address topics across epochs and geographies. Presentations in creative formats or non-traditional formats are equally welcome.

Please send us abstracts of max 300 words and a brief bio to Robert Nyamushosho (Queens College, CUNY) robert.nyamushosho@qc.cuny.edu and Vera-Simone Schulz (Leuphana University Lüneburg / Kunsthistorisches Institut in Florenz, MPI) vera-simone.schulz@leuphana.de by August 31, 2025. Kindly also let us know from what time zone you would most likely participate in the online workshop.

Reference:

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