



Greeting

The Humboldt Lab Dahlem was a project of the Kulturstiftung des Bundes (German Federal Cultural Foundation) in cooperation with the Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz (Prussian Cultural Heritage Foundation). It developed new forms of presenting artefacts of the Ethnologisches Museum (Ethnological Museum) and the Museum für Asiatische Kunst (Asian Art Museum) of the Staatlichen Museen zu Berlin (National Museums in Berlin) in Dahlem for the planned Humboldt-Forum in Berlin-Mitte. The experiment began with the question of how objects accommodated in a museum can open up new perspectives on our globalized present. In its search for solutions, the Humboldt Lab Dahlem therefore collaborated with scholars, custodians, curators, and artists. The results were regularly presented in so-called “Probebühnen” during the opening hours of the museum. In this manner, the Humboldt Lab Dahlem provided stimuli for dealing with the current challenges of presentation and mediation that are also posed to other museums in Germany and Europe.

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Knight Moves / Teaser

Similar to the way that the knight moves to take the rook in chess, the Humboldt Lab Dahlem makes surprising moves under the label “Knight Moves.” They act as small, isolated interventions in the permanent exhibition and can be precisely employed. This method can be used to narrate the history of selected museum objects in a broader way and to simultaneously test current trends in presentation forms. The Knight Moves' display “Benin/Surinam” addressed the history of the object against the background of slave trading. “Purnakumbha” returned an object to its context by holding a real religious ceremony. And the “Mirror Ball Constellation” by the artist Theo Eshetu expanded the context of the museum by means of an everyday object that triggered a wide range of associations.

Knight Moves / Project Description

Playful Experiments in the Program Work

by Agnes Wegner

The start of the Humboldt Lab Dahlem project offered the opportunity for many intensive discussions between the curators of both museums, the Humboldt Lab staff and external experts. Topics included the order of the museum, coping with the history of the collections and possibilities of dispensing with the institutional prerogative of interpretation. How can this take place? How can one operate during the course of an exhibition with content- and design-related breaks and commentaries to generate multiperspectivity and dramaturgical tension—for example, through artistic or thematic interventions? This is where the “Knight Moves” came into play: With the aid of mobile displays and specified as Humboldt Lab interventions, they were inserted within the existing exhibitions in Dahlem as brief object dialogs. After a probing phase, the Lab direction selected the following participants: Andrea Scholz (then research assistant at the Ethnologisches Museum), Martina Stoye (curator at the Museum für Asiatische Kunst) and Theo Eshetu (video artist). The projects they proposed addressed crucial themes in the programmatic work of the Humboldt Lab.



“Knight Moves: Surinam/Benin” – Object Biography

Andrea Scholz had the idea to integrate an object from Surinam made by the Maroons around the year 1900 into the permanent Benin exhibition. This “Knight move” was meant to exemplarily demonstrate the interweaving between Latin America and Africa that evolved through the history of slave trade and comment on the Benin exhibition. Less is known of the actual usage of the selected object, a rod with the inventory number V A 13776, than of the circumstances of its acquisition for the collection: An entry on the historical index card of the collection notes a theft by the Herrnhuter missionaries in the Wanhatti station in eastern Surinam. In the “Knight Moves” display case, the rod was exhibited with this index card and a map. For the accompanying flyer, Scholz opted for short texts briefly outlining the historical circumstances and the history of the Maroons and the Herrnhuter missionaries. The “Knight Moves: Surinam/Benin” thus narrated both the violent history of slave trading and that of the object in the collection.

“Knight Moves: Purnakumbha” - Cooperation

This “Knight move” referred to the fact that many objects in the collection in Dahlem stem from religious usage that can no longer be experienced in their current presentation as pure art objects. Martina Stoye wanted to show in which way the objects are still components of lived religiosity today: She decided on a ritualistic installation with Purnakumbhas (“vases of abundance”), which can be found in numerous depictions in the museum. During Hindu ceremonies, images of gods are “animated” by temporarily setting up these vases in a festive act. They serve as a kind of charging station for the divine spark.

For planning and implementation, Stoye cooperated with the Sri Mayurapathy Murugan Temple in Berlin-Britz. Mr. Nadarajah Thiagarajah functioned as a worldly mediator between the curator and the Hindu temple priests and agreed to jointly install a ritual installation in the museum. Everything was discussed step by step: What the presentation should look like and how the direct juxtaposition of worldly and religious spheres should be spatially organized; how elements necessary for the ritual were to be treated that did not meet the museum’s conservational requirements; and how the cooperation was to be described by the accompanying flyer.

The exhibition ultimately consisted of two parts: The museum showcase with a selection of historical Purnakumbha depictions and the temporary ritual installation with ten sacred vases that were consecrated by the priest during the opening of “Probebühne 1”.

The intensive collaboration and the joint negotiation of the form of presentation of “Knight Moves: Purnakumbha” led to important insights on the side of the participants; the background of the installation was explained in the accompanying text.

“Knight Moves: Mirror Ball Constellation” - Commentary

Theo Eshetu was a guest of the DAAD Artists-in-Berlin Program and worked on a video installation dealing with the return of the Axum obelisks robbed by Benito Mussolini from Rome to Addis Ababa. For this reason, Eshetu was highly interested in the new conception of the collection presentation in the future Humboldt-Forum. With “Knight Moves: Mirror Ball Constellation”, he proposed integrating an object not belonging to the museum into the collection. “What belongs in a museum? A mirror ball!” For him, it was a suitable means to reflect upon questions pertaining to concepts of art and culture, to the foreignness and classification of objects in ethnological collections.

The irritation intended by Eshetu was discussed in a complex way by the expert colleagues: Does the mirror ball evoke exoticism? Shouldn’t it be embedded more strongly in content-related terms and, for example, make reference to the local forms of club culture in Papua New Guinea?! What was really conspicuous in the “Mirror Ball Constellation” was the poetry of the points of light, which many viewers associated with the starry sky over the South Seas.

Small Interventions, Large Fields of Action

In their function within the work process, the three “Knight Moves” can be evaluated as a success. They allowed testing participatory forms of work, gauging thematic fields in the Lab and granting room for internal critique. All three also succeeded in interrupting the actual narrative of the permanent exhibition and providing exciting impetus. The design of the respective installations differed greatly from the other areas of the permanent exhibition: It had to be conspicuous. All three projects revealed that the complexity of the themes cannot be represented by an object installation alone: Accompanying texts on flyers appeared to be an



adequate solution and were therefore made available here, as well. The three “Knight Moves” formats offered different possibilities of perception and interpretation. As deliberately brief dialogs, they formed a welcomed opposite pole to the lengthy discussions arising in the plans for the Humboldt-Forum. The “Knight Moves” project is to be continued in the frame of the Humboldt Lab Dahlem.

¹ Cf. *Zeitschrift für Ethnologie*. Vol. 138, 2013.

Agnes Wegner has been the managing director of the Humboldt Lab Dahlem since July 2012.

Theo Eshetu has been active in media art since 1982. His work often revolves around the relationship between African and European cultures. Eshetu has exhibited at the Baltimore Museum of Art and the Smithsonian Institute, Washington DC. He has also taken part in the exhibitions "Snap Judgments" (curated by Okwui Enwesor), "Equatorial Rhythms" at the Stenersen Museum in Oslo, "Die Tropen" at the Martin Gropius-Bau, Berlin, "GEO-graphics" at the Bozar Center for Fine Arts in Brussels, and at the Venice Biennale in 2011. His videos have been screened at numerous film festivals, with awards in Berlin and Italy. In 2012 Theo Eshetu was a guest of the DAAD Artists-in-Berlin Program.

Andrea Scholz studied ethnology, sociology and Romance studies in Bonn and conducted research in Mexico (2004) and Venezuela (2007–2009). The theme of her dissertation was the recognition of indigenous territories in Guayana/Venezuela and was published in 2012 under the title "Die Neue Welt neu ermessen". In the course of her field studies, she has dealt with the material culture of the Guayana region. In addition to her work on the planning process of the Humboldt-Forum and for the Humboldt Lab Dahlem, Andrea Scholz is engaged with ethnographies from South America.

Martina Stoye is curator of South and Southeast-Asian art at the Museum für Asiatische Kunst in Berlin. Her engagement with the art of South Asia dates as far back as 1985. After working for five years in a freelance capacity for the Haus der Kulturen der Welt, she took up a post as lecturer on Indian art history at the Freie Universität, Berlin, from 1995 to 2001. Funded by the Gerda-Henkel-Stiftung, she subsequently conducted research into Buddhist Gandhara art and in 2007/08 worked on a major Gandhara exhibition for the Kunst- und Ausstellungshalle in Bonn. Over the years, she has led numerous art-based study trips to India. She has served as curator at the Museum für Asiatische Kunst for Indian and Southeast-Asian art since 2008.

Knight Moves / Positions

The Three Knight Moves

by Richard Price and Sally Price

In June 2013, we had the pleasure of being taken on a tour of the Suriname Maroon collections in the reserves of the Ethnological Museum Dahlem – hundreds of objects, most of them familiar from our examination of other museum collections throughout the world, but also some objects that we'd never encountered before. During our visit, we were introduced to the museum's “Knight Moves” presentations within the Humboldt Lab Dahlem – three installations specially designed to pique curiosity, and inspire reflection.

Hyper-Modernity Meets Tradition

As anthropologists, we found Theo Eshetu's “Mirror Ball Constellation” particularly evocative in a visual sense. Of the three “Knight Moves” installations, this one struck us as coming closest to a work of “contemporary art” and in that sense it's the least explicitly intellectual. For us, the visual reflections evoked the firmament, the multitudinous stars that Pacific Islanders used (and still use) to navigate between far-off specks of earth. We immediately thought of the marvelous opening chapter of Greg Dening's “Beach Crossings”¹, which recounts “the most remarkable voyage of discovery and settlement in all human history”, 2000 years ago, when a double-hulled canoe (much like those in the exhibition) left a cluster of islands in the Western Pacific (today's Samoa, Tonga, and Fiji) and more than 6000 kilometers later landed in what we now



call the Marquesas, all the while following the stars – the Matariki (the Pleiades), Na Kao (Orion's brightest star), and Ana-Muri (The Follower of the Pleiades). At the same time, the Mirror Ball evoked the present, reminding us of the development of parts of Polynesia, such as Tahiti, where state-of-the-art discothèques (apparently a particularly common reading of Eshetu's installation) and the traditional world of double-hulled canoes, navigated by the stars, rub shoulders in a hyper-modernity still marked by memories of the pre-development past.

Reintegration into the Original Context

Martina Stoye's "Purnakumbha" effectively realizes an exhibitionary strategy that has been deployed with excellent effect in various museums since the 1980s – taking artworks normally displayed as individual objects, completely outside of their initial context, and reintegrating them to form the kind of altar on which they were originally used. Such altar installations have become common in U.S. museums featuring Mexican art; indeed some Mexican(-American) contemporary artists, such as Amalia Mesa-Bains, have made altars a personal specialty². And displays of African and diasporic African arts have also presented ritual ensembles in the form of richly embellished altars; see, for example, the "Face of the Gods" exhibition in New York³ or the "Sacred Arts of Haitian Vodou" exhibition in Los Angeles⁴. This type of exhibit, which plays a double (aesthetic/religious) role, encourages a view of the ingredients as religious objects rather than isolated art objects to a degree that might be frowned upon in France (on the grounds of violating the principle of *laïcité*) but, from our own perspective, it represents a bold step forward. For us – non-specialists on India – knowing that the "Purnakumbha" has been installed here with the assistance of representatives of the Hindu temple in Berlin adds greatly to our appreciation of these objects. For anyone who believes that culture matters, and that the participation of people from the cultures on display is often essential to the respectful presentation of objects, this innovative exhibition greatly enriches the experience of viewing the individual objects themselves.

Questions on Dealing With Collecting History

Andrea Scholz's "Surinam/Benin" is the most cerebral of the three "Knight Moves" installations. It also falls most decisively within our own orbit as specialists on the Maroon societies of Suriname, and thus merits more detailed commentary. In a necessarily small compass, the object and its text, taken together, engage two crucial issues in contemporary museology that are sometimes intentionally avoided as being "too negative" – how to deal with collection history and how to deal with colonialism. As readers of Sally Price's "Paris Primitive"⁵ (2008) will know, these two issues caused deep divisions during the planning stages of the Musée du Quai Branly in Paris, with anthropologist Maurice Godelier arguing for the inclusion of information about both collection history and the realities of the colonial relations in which much of the collecting was embedded and the other members of the planning committees arguing that such contextualization interfered with the aesthetic experience and should therefore be avoided. After Godelier was forced out of his role in the museum, decisions were made that, in effect, banished all such information from the finished project.

In "Surinam/Benin", the curator Andrea Scholz begins by interrogating, insofar as possible, the museum's acquisition record itself and uncovers a (quite typical but normally unacknowledged) tale of colonial violence as part of the act of collecting. It recalls starkly the very different case in which Michel Leiris's description (in "L'Afrique fantôme", 1934) of how he stole a ritual object from a shrine during France's Dakar-Djibouti expedition of the 1930s⁶ was expressly avoided by the Quai Branly museum, which quoted his text about collecting the object, but left out his vivid description of his criminal act. By placing the theft of the Ndyuka ritual object by the German Herrnhuter missionary within its time and place, by giving voice to its historicity, Scholz performs an exemplary act of enlightened museology, with its attention to the complexities and ethical dilemmas of the colonial past.

The village of Wanhatti (today called by Ndyukas "Agiti-ondoo"), where the object was collected, is now the largest of the Ndyuka villages along the Cottica River of Suriname. Along with nearby villages, it was founded soon after the emancipation of slaves in coastal Suriname in 1863 - Ndyukas had been free since their 1760 peace treaty with the Dutch crown but never really felt free to settle on the coast until after general emancipation. Franco-Brazilian photographer Pierre Verger took strikingly evocative photos of nighttime 'kumanti' rituals in Wanhatti in 1948 that would nicely complement this small exhibit⁷. And it might be useful for museum visitors to know that the Cottica Ndyuka villages were devastated by government military incursions during the Suriname Civil War (1986-92). Nevertheless, Wanhatti/Agiti-ondoo remains the largest of the Ndyuka villages that still exist in the Cottica region, with close to 600 descendants of the people whom the German Herrnhuter missionaries tried so hard to convert during the 1890s.



¹ Greg Denning: *Beach Crossings: Voyaging across Times, Cultures, and Self*. Philadelphia 2004.

² Kristin G. Congdon und Kara Kelley Hallmark: Amalia Mesa-Bains, in: *Artists from Latin American Cultures: A Biographical Dictionary*. Greenwich CT 2002, S. 181–183.

³ Robert F. Thompson: *Face of the Gods: Art and Altars of Africa and the African Americas*. New York 1993.

⁴ Donald J. Cosentino (Hg.): *Sacred Arts of Haitian Vodou*. Los Angeles 1995

⁵ Sally Price: *Paris Primitive: Jacques Chirac's Museum on the Quai Branly*. Chicago 2007.

⁶ Michel Leiris: *L'Afrique fantôme*. Paris 1934.

⁷ Richard Price et. al.: *Verger, un pont au dessus de l'Atlantique*. Cayenne 2009.

Writers, researchers, teachers, and lecturers, anthropologists Sally and Richard Price often work collaboratively (on a wide range of ethnographic topics). Sally Price writes more on aesthetics and museums, while Richard Price focuses more on ethnographic history and human rights. Since the mid-1960s, they have been learning and writing about Maroons, descendants of rebel slaves throughout the Americas (but particularly in Suriname and French Guiana). Their geographical interests cover Afro-America, from Brazil to Toronto. For many years, they have served as book review editors for the world's oldest scholarly journal on the Caribbean, the "New West Indian Guide". They divide their time between Martinique and Paris.

Knight Moves / Credits

A project of the Probebühne 1, March 14 through June 23, 2013

Purnakumbha

Concept: Martina Stoye in cooperation with the Sri Mayurapathy Murugan Tempel (Berlin Hindu Mahasbhai e.V.); contact: Nadarajah Thiagarajah

Design: Günter Krüger, Renate Sander

Restoration supervision: Toralf Gabsch

The Mirror Ball Constellation

Concept: Theo Eshetu

Design: Günter Krüger, Ralf Lücke

Restoration supervision: Leonie Gärtner

Surinam / Benin

Concept: Dr. Andrea Scholz

Design: Günter Krüger, Renate Sander

Restoration supervision: Helene Tello

Knight Moves / Imprint Documentation

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Note for the PDF print version: all links can be accessed on the respective subpages of www.humboldt-lab.de.



Installation view "Knight Moves: Purnakumbha," photo: Jens Ziehe



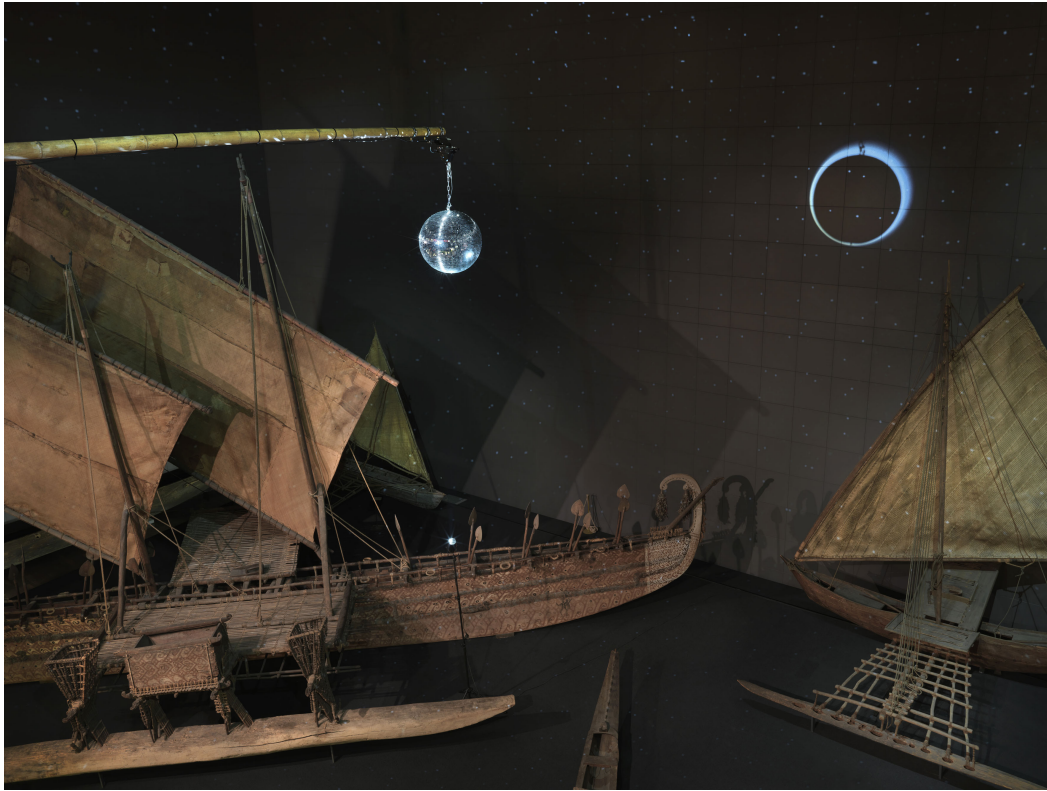
Installation view "Knight Moves: Purnakumbha," photo: Jens Ziehe



Purnakumbha ritual at the opening of the exhibition, held by Sri Mayurapathy Murugan-Tempel (Berlin Hindu Mahasabhai e. V.), photo: Sebastian Bolesch



Installation view "Knight Moves: Surinam/Benin," photo: Jens Ziehe



Installation view "Knight Moves: Mirror Ball constellation," photo: Jens Ziehe



Installation view "Knight Moves: Mirror Ball constellation," photo: Jens Ziehe