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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EuropeTest / Teaser

The focus on the "European" or "extra-European" museum collections suggests that the world can be ordered according to regions. But the division of the world into "regions," "cultural spheres," or "ethnic representations," is outmoded and is based all too often on colonial techniques of hegemonic order. Modern presentations of collections point to the commonality of history and on reciprocal influences – whether in the production or the presentation of objects. But how can the implicit Europe in the non-European collections be made visible? And what role can the demonstration of transcultural interrelationships play in the Humboldt-Forum? "EuropeTest" approached these questions with exhibition interventions in the Ethnologisches Museum and in the Museum für Asiatische Kunst.

EuropeTest / Project Description

Europe – a Powerful Fiction

by Helmut Groschwitz

The starting point for the exhibition intervention "EuropeTest" is a blank space. The persistent focus on the "extra-European" collection, to be presented in Berlin-Mitte according to the concepts of the Humboldt-Forum, creates a division between "us" and "the others" that gives rise to discomfort. Does Europe really play no role in the Humboldt-Forum? In terms of the manner in which the acquisitions were made, in the forms of knowledge generation and in its presentation, "Europe" is deeply embedded in the ethnological collections and objects. Even when the exhibitions purport to represent the "alien," the "distant," the "other," in essence it is the "European" perspective that is made visible. So the question should be: How can "Europe" be integrated into the extra-European exhibitions; how can the "implicit Europe" be represented in the exhibits?

As a precursor to "EuropeTest," the teaser project "Why not?" was launched in October 2014. Objects from all three Dahlem Museums, as well as several objects on loan, were placed in unexpected places between the permanent exhibitions' artifacts, and created a dialog with them: provocative, complementary or contrasting.

A transgression of collection boundaries that raised interesting questions, but in its sparse implementation also provoked head-scratching and cried out for further elaboration.

"EuropeTest" is the product of this further development: a collaborative project, with curators from all three Dahlem Museums contributing ideas. For Probebühne 4, six theme islands were created, and placed at different points throughout the Ethnologisches Museum and the Museum für Asiatische Kunst. In order to designate this space clearly as "joined in" and at the same time to avoid disturbance to the interior architecture, the islands were marked out by turquoise floor indicators and front panels. In view of the numerous objects and approaches, only a few central aspects of the project are mentioned in the following.

Exposing Constructs, Revealing Instrumentalizations

Europe is no fact, but a powerful and effective fiction. Neither geographically, geologically, nor historically, symbolically or culturally can Europe be considered a unified entity: "Europe" is present throughout the world not only politically. But the underlying constructs, discourses and instrumentalizations can be revealed and unmasked. The theme island "Making Europe(s)" makes this visible by using, in one example, varied maps of Europe, which all show a different Europe – better: some possible Europes. The "Europe in our heads" is illustrated by means of a "growing cabinet" as well as a pinterest board. Throughout the duration of the exhibition, objects or photos that represent personal concepts of "Europe" can be added or photos posted.

Collection history and object biographies show that the delineation of borders in the museums and collections, as well as the categorization of objects, do not correspond to any inherent order of things. With changing political mores and organizational changes, boundaries have often shifted – and they continue to be negotiable. "Europe Collected" illustrated this fact with various artifacts whose designated place had changed several times within the Dahlem Museums. A timeline illustrates how "European" and "extra-European" collections were integrated, then newly categorized.

The talk of "extra-European collections" suggests that the world can be ordered according to region. But the division of the world into regions, "cultural groups" or "ethnic representations" is outdated. They are often based on hegemonic colonial techniques, which served as a legitimization for intervention. For a contemporary approach to the collections therefore, it is crucial to demonstrate their entangled history: the common and interwoven histories, an equality in terms of the historicity of cultural forms as well as of transcultural influences and connections. There is no such thing as European cultural history (whatever demarcation one would use to define it) without relations, cultural contact and cultural exchange beyond Europe – and the reverse. In the exhibition these interconnections could be discerned in the "Little Box of Relationships" for example: an ivory box from the 16th century, decorated by Ceylonese ivory carvers with motifs from a French book of hours, which was a diplomatic gift to the Portuguese, who were being courted as new players in the field of trade and relations in the Indian Ocean.

It was a colonial technique to keep cultural narratives separate. We are now faced with the task of reconnecting the narratives and writing a common history. Thus "Provincializing Europe" juxtaposed a statue of the cultural hero Chibinda Ilunga, who served to legitimize the rule of the Chokwe in Central Africa during the 19th century, with the reproduction of a painting of Napoleon. Placing these two images alongside each another is an attempt at illustrating how the history of African societies is enmeshed in global developments and does not represent some "timeless, traditional culture." Modernity is not a European product, but came about through the expansion of worldwide relations of exchange as a collaborative project on a global level – which brought about significant changes and crises in a number of regions of the world. Such complex interconnections require, however, further creative additions in order to adequately communicate the multi-layered contents.

On a further level of reception the museum visitors had the opportunity to download an app developed especially for the museum called "BorderCheck" showing the "borders" between global regions that are represented in the different departments of the Ethnologisches Museum. At each "border" you could test and improve your knowledge on borders and migration with quiz questions.

EuropeTest – and now?

One paradox was embedded in "EuropeTest": It persistently asked for something that doesn't exist: namely the distinguishability between Europe and extra-Europe. With this aim different approaches were taken, to make "Europe" visible and to establish connections between world regions within the "extra-European"

collections – and vice versa! The potential that lies in the combination of European and extra-European ethnographics became very clear. But it also showed that merely creating a physical dialog between objects offers the viewer barely options of decoding what is seen. What is crucial is the contextualization, the making-visible of links by using further media or exhibits. But as epistemic confrontations, the object juxtapositions are certainly suitable as starting points for a debate.

Without European ethnographics, the colonial differentiation between "us" and "the others" would only deepen further in the Humboldt-Forum – which is diametrically opposed to current academic and museological discourses. Reflections on museum-historical thinking, the disclosure of the mode of acquisitions as well as former research assumptions are inevitable. Equally, the historical backgrounds of (European) concepts like "Europe," "primitive people," "ethnicity," the arbitrary differentiation between "art," and "culture," must be critically reflected on and deconstructed. Just as ethnological museums once underpinned the colonial perspective, the Humboldt-Forum can now help to revise this dominant gaze.

If the Humboldt-Forum wishes to meet its goals of being contemporary and promoting participation, then relationships, influences and parallels will need to be revealed. Categorical counterparts and the interconnections of a common history need to be shown. This will require the prerequisite objects from Europe. They are available in Berlin's museums, primarily in the Museum Europäischer Kulturen. Which is why we need to set up an unbureaucratic system of exchange and collaborative presentations. The use of exhibition interventions is quite suitable as an appropriate solution when it comes to "supplementing" Europe, but it also requires the necessary space in the permanent exhibitions, funds for infrastructure and the involvement of all future participants in the ongoing planning.

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EuropeTest / Positions

Europe as an Archipelago

by Christoph Antweiler

A Critical Exhibition Tour Around the Theme Islands of "EuropeTest"

My task was to assess and throw scientific light on interesting aspects of the "EuropeTest" project, based on my own expertise. I do this relatively unencumbered, because I made the conscious decision not to gather any information about the project beforehand, and neither did I know what the curators' goals were, nor how much had been budgeted for the exhibition.

In this respect I represent one position, but adopt two perspectives. On the one hand I comment as a cultural anthropologist, on the other I take the view of a layman with an interest in anthropology. My own field of research is not Europe, but rather Southeast Asia, but I read widely on European ethnology. I am interested in museums and popular-scientific anthropology; I enjoy visiting museums privately and have already been to the Dahlem Museums five times. I am a member of the Humboldt-Forum's international advisory board and so am broadly aware of the challenges it faces. I am also aware of the current discussion around the Humboldt-Forum but only to the extent that it has been reported in the press.

To begin with I would like to convey my first impression, concerning, above all, the formal appearance and orientation. I spent four hours in the Ethnologisches Museum and concentrated solely on "EuropeTest" – well, apart from ten minutes in between with the Polynesian boats, which is a must for each visit. A flyer explains that "EuropeTest" is marked turquoise in the exhibition rooms. There is no audio guide.

The basic idea behind "EuropeTest" is to supplement the usual museum inventory with various thematic "islands." Great idea, but the complex structure is nowhere explained clearly. The archipelago stretches from large islands, via concentrated island groups and a dispersed sub-archipelago, all the way to the remote outlier. The orientation system is a real challenge here: there are terms like "Lab," "Probebühne," "theme island," the enumerated Probebühnen, theme-island letter-coding, all topped off with aestheticized scribbles on signs and flyers. The letters themselves are missing on the theme islands, but then are used in the museum

map to denote other things. The offer of special guided tours with trained museum staff, on the other hand, is wonderful because the visitors can decide the direction in which the tour should go and which themes they are interested in.

Content-wise, the core message of interlacing cultural spaces is conveyed well. Here, history and the present are in equilibrium. The perspectives on offer, "Europe from outside," "Europe from above", "Europe from below," are straightforward and easy to understand for a lay person. The concept of Europe as a construct is well explained. Various world maps succeed in transmitting the different perspectives appropriately. The idea of Europe as a plural – "Making Europe(s)" is good, but could have been illustrated in a more tangible way. The same goes for the image of the parade of European loaves of bread in the Japanese Minpaku Museum, where it could have been made more tangible. What is shown is a museum perspective from outside. But why show a mediocre photo and no real loaves? Why not show rice as an Asian foodstuff or Sushi as a Berlin Japan indicator?

Without a guide, it only gradually becomes clear to what extent "EuropeTest" is orientated on the European inventory of the Berlin museums. The visualization of the timeline as a river with tributaries is good, but leaves unanswered whether that is meant purely as a metaphor or whether it actually serves as a timeline for the years when inventory was added or withdrawn from the European collections. In "Making Europe(s)" interesting figurines have been placed in the cabinets but the information on them is as paltry as the old and venerable presentation of Mesoamerican archeology in the large room next door. Why are small Colon figures shown, instead of the impressive ones from the South Seas department? The baby slings exhibited under the title "Carried to Europe" are a wonderful illustration concerning relations between Europe and extra-European cultures, but the message remains nebulous. Why is the evergreen bestseller by Jean Liedloff, which half of all parents have on their bookshelves, not exhibited? In this way the connection could be made between personal experiences of alternative child rearing methods.

What conclusions do I draw and what are my suggestions? Folklore and ethnology enrich one another in a museum. The idea of combining inventories of European and extra-European cultures within the same architecture should be taken on board. In this way, theme islands could be displayed logically and reciprocally: non-European theme islands in the European presentation, European in the extra-European collection. In "EuropeTest" the variety of curatorial presentation formats ranges from descriptive or essayistic-playful implementation, to the "border-crossing" app. That is exciting – test passed. I would, however, recommend working with a clear didactic approach. Where exoticized human zoos are concerned, one should, for example, show a picture of a modern-day theme park in China's Yunnan, where replicas of Neuschwanstein Castle and the Eiffel Tower are placed directly next to traditional houses from Chinese minorities. I would have liked to see a little more text on the exhibits. The panel texts should be formulated in short sentences and, in terms of content, should be less reliant on meta-information. The idea of flexible guided tours is a very good one and should be firmly anchored in the budget plan for the Humboldt-Forum. My dream would be a content-based training for museum staff, so that they could provide spontaneous information, as in the Tate Modern. To summarize: Europe must be part of the Humboldt-Forum!

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Non-Europe is not a Place

by Klas Grinell

Berlin is a city in Europe. Germany is a European country. Europe is in the West, we say. But east and west really only make sense as directions from where we stand. Earth is a globe that floats in space and has no center. Non-Europe is not a place.

In recent history, the last couple of hundred years, a few European powers managed to put themselves at the center of history, economy and science. This was a brief moment in the cultural life of man. Still, we live very much in the shadow of this period, with many of its results deeply affecting global relations: postcolonial injustices, industrial ecocide, scientific Eurocentrism. Europe drew maps, divided earth into continents and civilizations, collected information and objects, and created museums in order to understand in what ways Europe was more advanced than other cultures. This was identity formation, conquest and a European superiority complex – no open attempt to understand the cultures of the "Others."

The category of non-Europe only makes sense if the subject of attention is Europe. Continental and civilizational categories are European and only make sense from a European perspective. This should be openly stated, not only as a "EuropeTest" intervention but as an initial explanation stating why there are sections of Asian art, African or American ethnography. The objects on display were not produced within those categories. European men collected them from their specific cultural situations to create those broad categories.

Africa, Asia, America, and Oceania are categories that only exist because of European colonial history. For example: Africa as a landmass relates to different systems of exchange via oceans and lands. It has never been a unit per se. The "EuropeTest" exhibition shows this clearly. It could be taken further; the landmass of "Africa" is three times larger than "Europe," even if this fact is not visible on the Eurocentric Mercator map projections most often used. China is four times larger than Greenland, Asia more than four times larger than Europe. The global North is some 50 million square meters, the South is twice that size.

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From the Knowledge Perspective of the Present

by Wolfgang Kaschuba

Not only the objects of ethnological collections, but also the idea of collecting itself is a deeply European construct. Its purpose was once to register, map and represent the "world of the others," often in the interests of colonialism. The future Humboldt-Forum must attempt to historicize and deconstruct this "genetic" defect in a conceptual way. The Humboldt Lab can serve as a decisive corrective in this process: its reflections and interventions can, on the one hand, critically interrogate these Eurocentric perspectives, and, on the other hand, track the European interconnectedness within global and "world cultural" contexts. Especially in Berlin, at this symbolic location of German as well as European ruptures that led to new historical and world views, this is a particular obligation.

The ethnological collections certainly provide enough points of reference for such an intellectual re-vision: with regards to cartography and ethnographic inventories, to documentary as well as iconographic pictorial traditions, ethnic as well as religion-based communal idols. And above all with regard to the multifaceted patterns of "other cultures," from the oriental bazaar to the African kraal. Here it invariably concerns outstanding analyses of historical objects as well as case-study style references to contemporary topics. The illuminating perspective on it though must be developed from the present stage of media development and knowledge as well as be "read" anew in opposition to the customary logics of collecting.

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Only Intervention Can Provide an Answer

by Schoole Mostafawy

What do interventions signify for the expansion of permanent exhibitions?

If Europe does not wish to see itself accused of intellectual frailty, it must confront the experiences of non-western societies, with their political, intellectual and cultural traditions. Only intervention can be the answer to the global crisis in social, political and ecological terms; only through them will cultural exchange become credible. The origins of our dynamic world, the exchange of goods and ideas, the development of hybrid cultures and changing identities have already been exhaustively explored. The question now is: do we, as a museum, want to continue to cultivate the Eurocentric world view or, by re-positioning, confront socio-political reality? A consistent conceptual change in terms of the ensemble, the public and the content-related agenda is necessary.

What role do our entangled history and transcultural relations play in the communication of transregional

cultural links?

Transcultural, dialog-based and multi-perspectival approaches for the museums of Europe will ensure a new significance for the future. The Humboldt-Forum should be able to play a pioneering role in this. At a time when museum collections continue to be divided into different subject categories, according to scientific specialization (a continuation of the "art and curiosities cabinet"), we need to search for new paths. A new way of dealing with one's own collection history should be found, just as with the (post)colonially-tainted projections, by bringing their motives and intentions into focus. Considering the increasingly intercultural composition of Europe's communities, it is vital to use the potential of the collections to build transcultural bridges, demonstrate the interlocking aspects and to point out the phenomenon of reciprocal perceptions of foreignness. The European hierarchy of arts, tiered into fine, applied and everyday art, should be broken down accordingly, and also circular historical approaches adopted by other cultures (as developed for example in the 14th century by the Tunisian-born historian Ibn Khaldun) should be allowed to contribute to the concept. Phenomena like the waves of neo-orientalism and even neo-primitivism, arising in the European as well as the Islamic realm in the 21st century, can thus be readily explained.

A new museum epistemology should recognize the opportunities for communicating an historical anthropology, which, despite all diversity and its own cultural modes of expression is also a reminder of the commonality of humanity-embracing themes.

How can the collections – which are in the main historical - be utilized in terms of confronting contemporary issues?

By presenting the collections in the context of their collection history. Europe needs to question its own narcissistic universalism, just as, vice-versa, Asian countries should examine why, in the past, they subsumed the European world view without offering any resistance and set up their own collections on that basis. The construct Europe must make way for a critical cosmopolitan tradition whose basis was created before the takeover by American ideology. In this process, transparency and contradiction, with regards to collection strategies, amongst others, will be the foundation for success.

In order to present cultures literally at eye-level with each other, historical artifacts should be juxtaposed with those of contemporary artists from different cultural origins. Because only contemporary art can be called truly international, due to the fact that it is rooted in a common artistic vocabulary.

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EuropeTest / Credits

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Making Europe(s): Léontine Meijer-van Mensch, Elisabeth Tietmeyer, Sarah Wassermann
Europe Collected - Adolf Bastian, Rudolf Virchow and the Ethnological Collections Dahlem: Helmut Groschwitz
Carried to Europe – The (Re-)discovery of the Baby Sling: Jane Redlin
Little Box of Relationships – Early Forms of "Globalized" Art: Raffael Gadebusch, Alberto Saviello
Provincializing Europe – the Afrocentric Gaze: Paola Ivanov, Concept in cooperation with Peter Junge
The mountains, not near, not far... – Comparison of 17th-century landscape drawings from the Netherlands and China: Holm Bevers, Ricarda Brosch, Annkathrin Hoppe, Uta Rahman-Steinert, Klaas Ruitenbeek
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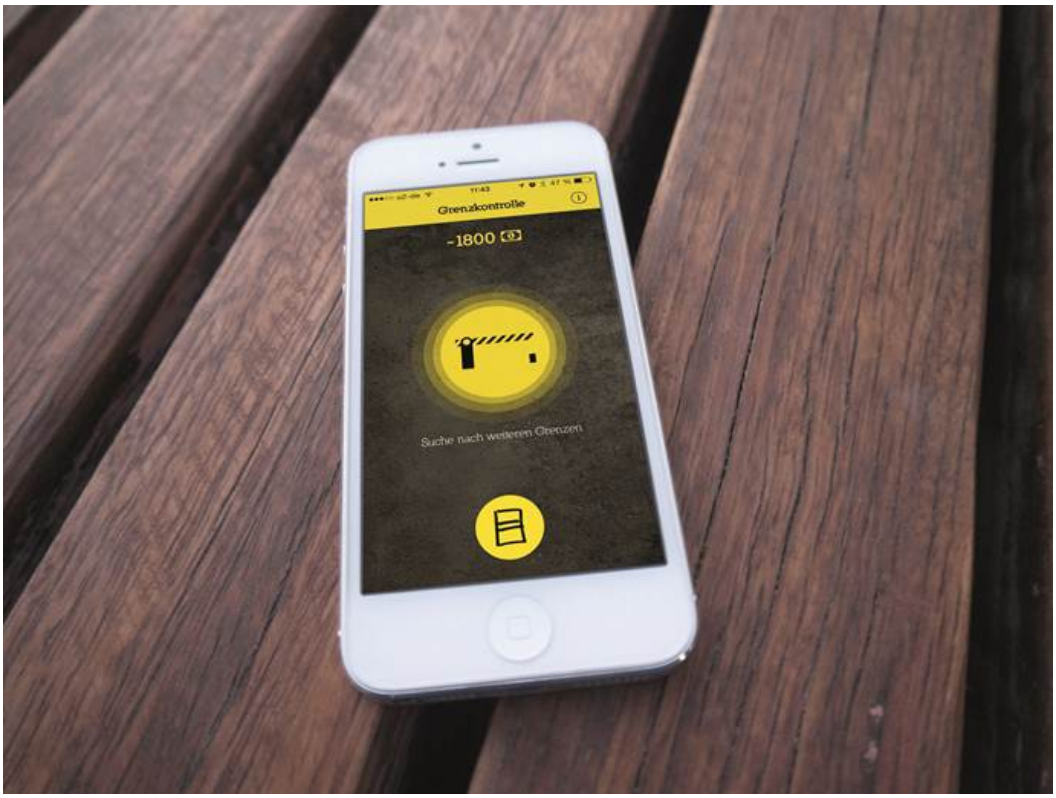
Theme island "Europe Collected - Adolf Bastian, Rudolf Virchow and the Ethnological Collections Dahlem," photo: Jens Ziehe

Theme island "Provincializing Europe – the Afrocentric Gaze," photo: Jens Ziehe

Theme island “Carried to Europe – The (Re-)discovery of the Baby Sling,” photo: Jens Ziehe



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Theme island "The mountains, not near, not far... – Comparison of 17th-century landscape drawings from the Netherlands and China," photo: Jens Ziehe