



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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Enchantment / Beauty Parlour / Teaser

All artifacts presented in the Ethnologisches Museum have a cultural practice as their source. How can we make these contexts and the aesthetic practices embedded therein more tangible for museum visitors? As a prototype for a section of the Africa exhibition area in the Humboldt-Forum the project “Enchantment / Beauty Parlour” dedicated itself to the communication of the Swahili concept of beauty. According to the aesthetic of the Muslim coastal societies of East Africa, a reception situation was to be created, that appealed to the senses synaesthetically, and permitted a direct experience. The stage designer Dominic Huber designed a walk-in beauty parlor for the purpose; functioning at once as stage set, sculpture and enchanting space. With the aid of a complex range of music, lighting, film, scent, as well as the audio narration of the beautician Maimuna Abdalla Said Difini the visitors became a part of a preparatory wedding ritual.

Enchantment / Beauty Parlour / Project Description

Narrative Spaces in Museum Pedagogy

by Paola Ivanov und Andrea Rostásy

The aesthetics of the Muslim coastal societies of East Africa (“Swahili”) combine all senses – sight, hearing, touch, smell, taste, kinesthetic sense – while also addressing the spirit. These aesthetics are particularly apparent in the female sphere of Swahili culture, in which the internal and external, spiritual and physical beauty and purity are realized in the production and presentation of the bride’s aesthetic perfection.

As a prototype for a section of the future Africa exhibition area in the Humboldt-Forum, the project “Enchantment / Beauty Parlour” focused on how aesthetic principles and practices – in the context of which the artifacts of the East African Swahili Coast were and are embedded – can be made more perceptible for museum visitors. How, in this process, can one critically reflect on the theoretical fundamentals of representation of non-European worlds of experience in European ethnological museums and on the associated problems with such a translation? And: Is it possible to experience, through the immersion in scent,



music, color, shine, haptics and movement, this enchantment as it is described in Mombasa, Lamu and Zanzibar as an effect of beauty?

The concept and goal of “Enchantment / Beauty Parlour” was to create a situation of reception that appealed synesthetically to all the senses and facilitate an unmediated visitor experience. The director and scenographer Dominic Huber, who was in charge of the project’s conception and realization, transferred a familiar theatrical concept, so-called “narrative spaces,” to the museum. He developed an experimental installation, which would immerse the visitors in a subjective narrative, and his team constructed a hyper-realistic, fully-equipped beauty parlor, which resembled something between a private ambiance and a beauty salon on the street. Advised and assisted by Paola Ivanov, curator of the Africa collection at the Ethnologisches Museum and project organizer, and by Jasmin Mahazi, a specialist in Swahili culture and literature, fabrics, materials, utensils, colors and scents, songs and poems were selected. Dominic Huber developed the narrative – initially in written interviews – together with beautician Maimuna Abdalla Said Difini, who is from the Swahili coast. These interviews formed the basis for film recordings made directly in the beauty parlor in the museum during a second production phase. Via a sensor, the film, lights, sound and scent were set in a sequence of events triggered by the visitors.

Enchantment on Demand

“Enchantment / Beauty Parlour” was a free-standing installation, which, with its clearly recognizable exterior wooden construction and transparent covering, rendered it both sculptural and set-like. Singing, street noise, birdsong and the sound of ocean waves could be heard issuing from within. Walking around the structure, you could discover a concealed entrance, with the words “Beauty Salon” written on the door. A lamp signaled if the room was vacant or occupied. An icon indicated that taking pictures was prohibited. Anyone – which is unusual in a museum – who wished to individually engage in a seven-minute exploration of the work, separated the curtain in the doorway and stepped into a waiting room, which was furnished with a stool, pictures, a mirror and a wooden sign with the Swahili greeting “karibu” (welcome). On a small shelf there was a radio, from which a woman’s voice greeted the visitor, whom she instructed to select a language via a switch on the wall and to enter the salon, which looked to be in business, but just happened to be empty. Maimuna’s voice then commanded the visitor to sit down in the styling chair. In the meantime, a look around revealed a paper rosette made of bills, a pack of gold masks and flower adornments. The room suddenly came to life. The light changed and became colorful, scenes of a Swahili wedding appeared on the TV, a fan began turning, a woman sang an old song and the smell of perfume filled the air. On the large, semi-transparent mirror screen above the styling tables a projection of Maimuna appeared. Next to her emerged the silhouette of a woman, who seemed to be sitting in the same salon chair as the guest, and whose image seemed to melt into the visitor’s own mirror image. The beautification process began.

With Maimuna and the stories she told during the treatment, the guest was able to immerse him or herself in an environment that is unfamiliar to most: the beauty practices and wedding rituals of the Swahili coast of East Africa. Maimuna told of her childhood, of her decision to become a beautician and of the meaning of a song that could be heard playing in the room. After just seven minutes, the enchantment – Maimuna’s gift to the foreign guests – was over. With her final words echoing in one’s head, “May you succeed in everything and take care of your marriage,” the visitor left the room through another door and found him/herself in a kind of vestibule between the salon’s wooden exterior wall and the transparent covering. In six display cases inserted into the wooden structure, objects were presented as in a dresser or a drawer. They needed no auratization, because they were displayed in their context of use, and thus conveyed their cultural context as well. Some objects for beautification, such as ankle bracelets and sandals made of silver or combs made of ebony, came from the collection, while other things, such as kanga wraps or lush rhinestone jewelry, had been recently acquired in Lamu or Mombasa. At the end of the curved corridor, the visitor re-entered the normal museum space and looked out onto the terrace in the garden outside.

Non-stop Participation and Interpretation

“Enchantment / Beauty Parlour” demonstrated that the “narrative spaces” format has great potential for the mediation of cultural practices. The salon was a sculpture, set and seduction; it irritated and it addressed all the senses. Those who dared enter allowed themselves to be engaged for seven minutes. That this time period could be condensed into an intense experience was thanks not only to the richly detailed salon fittings and the virtual appearance of Maimuna, but also because the visitor was directly addressed as a guest and as Maimuna’s customer for beautification. These media-driven interactions, which included scent, light and sound, enchanted many visitors.



The intensity and reflexivity of the exclusive, individual visits were based on the fact that visitors were offered a deliberately subjective presentation and experience rather than a museum-typical (pseudo) objectivity. Whether the intimate dimension of beautification or its spiritual significance was well received by all guests cannot be answered. It was apparent from the audience's reaction, however, that the presentation did not clearly enough relay the fact that the herein privileged insight into the culture of Swahili was a valuable "gift of beauty." In museums – in contrast to more theatrically oriented narrative spaces – actors are not present to interact with the visitors and direct the staged experience along clear lines. In this context, during the development of the project it was discussed whether the inside of the beauty parlor should only be accessible to women, as is usual on the Swahili coast. Ultimately the decision was made to conform to the museum context and make the installation accessible to all visitors.

With its move into Humboldt-Forum and, thus, its permanent presentation, "Beauty Parlour" will have to reconsider these aspects, as well as the demands of accessibility for a greater number of visitors, which conflicts with the one-person mode of presentation. However, it certainly already represents an enrichment and expansion of exhibition practice.

Dr. Paola Ivanov has been the curator of the Africa collection in the Ethnologisches Museum since 2012. Andrea Rostásy is a visual artist and media curator.

Enchantment / Beauty Parlour / Positions

A Museum for the Future

by Hudita Nura Mustafa

Sensory Saturation, Multiple Media and Personal Narrations Asserting the Vitality of Muslim Cosmopolitanism

The installation "Enchantment / Beauty Parlour" presents a very ordinary place, a beauty parlor, which you think you know. But then you don't. At once theatre set and Cabinet of Wonders it provokes your curiosity. As you circle its unfinished exterior, you hear sea waves, traffic and gentle singing. Something different is in the air – a smell, a sound, a stage set, an exotic culture? The pink door tells you it's a 'Beauty Parlour' and a lilting female voice welcomes you with karibu.

Scaffolded on the sweet scent of perfume and poetry, the narrative space of "Enchantment / Beauty Parlour" conveys the key aesthetic principles of Swahili culture, beauty (uzuri) and purity (usafi), through sensory saturation and personal narrations of Swahili women. It tells stories through multiple media but allows personal exploration and discovery. Five portraits of Arab movie stars decorate the entry hall. Then your eyes move over overflowing shelves. These include iconic museum objects of the Muslim world such as perfume jars, vases and boxes, pages from the Koran. There are also modern fashion accoutrements such as false hair, lace dresses and veils, henna and nail polish. Distinctly Swahili floral sachets adorn the room. Bright color accents of pink paint, green dresses and blue chairs enliven the visual display. The exaggerated, hyper-real quality of the space ironizes museum authority and the 'real' display cases of authentic, catalogued artifacts are literally 'holes in the wall' outside.

The installation strives for cultural translation of a key dimension of a Swahili life world that forms the backbone of art, religion and the self. Its content, form and pedagogy largely succeed and significantly innovate dominant museum representations of African and Islamic societies. The substantive content is both appealing and strategic as it asserts the vitality of Muslim cosmopolitanism and the central role of women as social and ritual actors. Swahili culture is forged from centuries of trade, cultural hybridity, and intermarriage along the Indian Ocean coasts of Africa, South Asia and the Arabian Peninsula. It provides a rich counterpoint to stereotypes of repressive African and Islamic societies.

The critique of imperialist museum histories and innovative curation are underway. In the Humboldt Lab Dahlem exhibitions at the Ethnologisches Museum, "Object Biographies" and "Provincializing Europe" (part of the project "EuropeTest") projects exemplify this work. It is less clear how museums can shape public culture and intercultural pedagogy given heightened contemporary struggles over representation. In



European media, classrooms and public debates Muslim persons and societies are often stereotyped as violent others. European Muslim communities need their own cultural memory and founding narratives within national social fabrics. Signs of attention to this matter include the recent show at the Pergamon's Museum of Islamic Art of an Afghan refugee painter's work in relation to calligraphy. The "ONE GOD - Abraham's Legacy on the Nile" exhibit at the Bode-Museum celebrated the co-existence of Christian Coptic, Muslim and Jewish crafts, art and societies in medieval Alexandria. Inspired by "Enchantment / Beauty Parlour," I also offer some strategies.

A Model of Hospitality

Hospitality, as an ideal for collaborative curation, strives towards the dialogic and generous sharing of cultural knowledge. In terms of content, it highlights the place of the domestic sphere in intercultural encounter.

Through the words of Swahili women, visitors learn that the bride's metamorphosis epitomizes the cultivation of purity through practices and conduct of beauty. Most importantly in the busy installation, as you sit in the styling chair, a 'talking mirror' reflects back not your image but a video of Maimuna Difini who recounts her choice to become a hairdresser, the details of bridal preparations, and Swahili values. A Mombasa beautician and project collaborator, in the video she is styling a European tourist. A television screen shows a wedding ceremony in which a bride is presented to her husband, then family. She wears many lace dresses and veils, rich make-up and perfume, and sculpted hair. Her skin is brightened by sandalwood and her hands intricately painted with henna. These videos are supplemented by a soundtrack of Taarab wedding music, ocean waves, traffic and a traditional poem. In this sung poem a mother advises her daughter to pursue the beautiful conduct of piety, self-sacrifice, respect for others, as well as adornment and marriage. Once invited into this elaborate female world, unknown to most museum visitors, you choose – enchantment, dismissal or insistent prejudice.

But is this only a beauty shack, a playground of exotic aestheticized difference? Islamicate sensoria are connected to both social and spiritual strivings. The project as it stands does not sufficiently convey the interdependence of personal beautification, moral conduct, piety and purity. For instance, Oud perfume is used for luxury dress, conjugal seduction, cleansing homes as well as for prayer. God is beautiful and loves beauty, the scriptures say. Background information could explain the strategic use of beauty in social mobility through women's economic activity in fashion, in marriage alliances, in divorce, women headed households or by those of slave origin status aspiring to noble worlds. That is, beauty and its contexts cover the range of connective and disruptive processes of community life, both affirming and challenging social order.

A Model of Performance

With regard to curatorial practice, the theatrical narrative space of "Enchantment / Beauty Parlour" disrupts and ironizes indexical, didactic museum authority with diverse strategies of representation which 'upstage' the few display cases. This plurality allows exploration of how objects and images are used in context; perhaps visitors should be allowed to use objects with limits.

The dispersed quality of spatial arrangement is a counterpoint to the static hierarchy of value in museum displays, which visitors often do not understand anyway. Furthermore, here 'native informants' do not simply perform their rituals or tell life histories as visual adjuncts to object display. They greet, sing poetry, tell their lives to, teach and advise the visitor. The plurality of objects and media, some of which speak, smell and move, displace catalogue cards and encourage a participatory audience.

A future version could include space for visitors to socialize, many more styling seats, use cameras, albums or magazines, try on dresses or hairstyles. It could also include even more 'talking mirrors' or windows with videos that display different aspects of beauty in social life from women's marriage engagement parties to Eid celebrations (major religious celebrations) to street scenes.

A Model of the Archive

Providing a space to make history – and so imagine a future – is perhaps the most critical contribution of a museum to public life. While it does not exhibit papers, it documents cosmopolitan histories on various scales: regional, urban, family and personal. For instance, luxury perfumes such as Oud or sandalwood are imported



from Arabia and India. Lace cloth comes from China or Saudi Arabia. Cameras were once colonial machines of objectification but are now fully localized for the purposes of individual and family histories.

The collaborative process itself between disciplinary experts and Maimuna, a practitioner, opens up questions about the purpose of commemorating a still evolving popular culture.

For refugees, for instance, personal objects and photographs are precious currency of remembrance. Building a community narrative through objects and commemorative spaces offer a path to belonging and a future. These actions require skill and time, not just emotion. Basic facilities such as touch screen information desks can provide visitors with background information and paths of engagement through the African and Asian museums. Potential themes include gender and family, work and status, empires and nations, or luxury trade. Object-based themes could follow, for instance, sandalwood through exhibits on Swahili beauty, Asian art and oceanic history. There should be the option of recording and emailing one's pathway.

In sum, in addition to its richly elaborate, enjoyable presentation of Swahili culture, the "Beauty Parlour" offers numerous strategies to resituate African and Islamic cultures, and their women's worlds, as living traditions in museum spaces.

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The Aesthetic of Atmospheres

by Steffen Köhn

The Installation "Enchantment / Beauty Parlour" as a Designed Space of Perception

In "The Predicament of Culture" the historian James Clifford sketches a history of ethnographic modes of representation, using the example of two Paris museums – the Palais du Trocadéro and the Musée de l'Homme – and the very different exhibition practices of each of them. The (older) Trocadéro represented something akin to a richly stocked curiosity cabinet, evoking alien worlds through dioramas and costumed mannequins, presenting its collection of items as objets d'art, free of context, and thereby serving the interests of the Parisian bohème and their proclivity for exoticism. (Picasso for example completed studies for his "art nègre" here, which was to lead, in the end, to Cubism.) In contrast, the Musée de l'Homme, which replaced the Trocadéro after 1937, was dedicated to the idea of a universalist ethnographic humanism. Committed to public education and scientific rigor, the museum offered not only research laboratories but also study collections in which mankind and its culture could be contemplated "holistically," in order to make the foreign comprehensible.

The Musée de l'Homme soon set the benchmark for ethnological museums worldwide, in which the artifact collections were now largely structured taxonomically according to geographic region and cultural difference (and within the represented cultures, classified and presented according to clearly delineated central themes like religion, economics etc.). Nevertheless, in a programmatic essay for its opening, the writer and ethnologist Michel Leiris could not resist indulging in a nostalgic reminiscence of the recently demolished "Troca." In his essay, Leiris warns of the two great abstractions, science and art, which, in the new museum concept, are invariably construed as opposites.

"Enchantment / Beauty Parlour" transgresses this rigorously guarded separation light-footedly, and dares to create an immersive, scenographic experiential space. While a scholarly exhibition paradigm does not envisage collection artifacts evoking concrete images or moods, the installation created by Dominic Huber counters this. His installation dramatizes its theme – the aesthetic aspect of Swahili culture – as a multisensory aesthetic experience in which objects from the ethnographic collection, contemporary everyday objects, the use of video, sound, a dramatic lighting concept and even the introduction of odors, evokes an almost synaesthetic relationship. Very unlike the dimly lit corridors of the Trocadéro with its chaotically arranged exotica and the musty smell of sweet decay, repeatedly described by Picasso, here the observer moves through an exhibition arrangement, which has internalized the lessons of the "Crisis of Representation" and the "New Museology."



Huber and curator Paola Ivanov enlist a clearly crafted hyperrealism as a counterpoint to an “ethnographic realism” with its dilemmas and blind spots (the constructed scholarly authority, the unchallenged epistemological status of its analytical categories and its knowledge systems, rooted in colonial history). Not for a moment does the installation give the impression of trying to simply replicate a genuine East African beauty parlor. Instead, each carefully chosen element in the interior of the installation (the neon lamps, plastic chairs and make-up utensils) contributes towards an atmospheric condensation of the evoked lifeworld while the external shell confidently demonstrates its scenery-like character.

This hyperrealist mode of representation can be perhaps best described by Gernot Böhme’s concept of an “aesthetic of atmospheres.” For Böhme atmosphere is neither the state of a subject nor the characteristic of an object, but rather something that results in the relationship between the two: the mutuality of the given reality of the person perceiving and of what is perceived. Atmosphere cannot thus be traced back to a single object, but must be understood as an environment, that is characterized by the assembly of individual objects. The role of the object is therefore not simply one of a mere bearer of semiotic meaning (as is the case in ethnographic realism) but is constituted by its own aura and material presence. Böhme differentiates here between two highly influential concepts in German philosophy “Realität” (the ‘factual fact,’ the catalogable characteristics of an object) which we appropriate through recognition, and “Wirklichkeit” (the ‘actual fact,’ its appearance as such) which is appropriated by us through our perception.

In this sense, “Enchantment / Beauty Parlour” is not an attempt to replicate a cultural reality, but an orchestration of atmospheres, a staged, modulated space, which gives the visitor an immersive synaesthetic experience of an aesthetically foreign world. For the contemporary ethnological museum the creation of such spaces of perception offer unlimited opportunities in terms of the presentation of their own collection artifacts, which, according to Böhme, are inexhaustible: there are no boundaries to the potential ‘Wirklichkeiten,’ of which they could become part.

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Enchantment / Beauty Parlour / Credits

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Installation view "Enchantment / Beauty Parlour," photo: Jens Ziehe



Visitors at the opening, photo: Jan Windszus



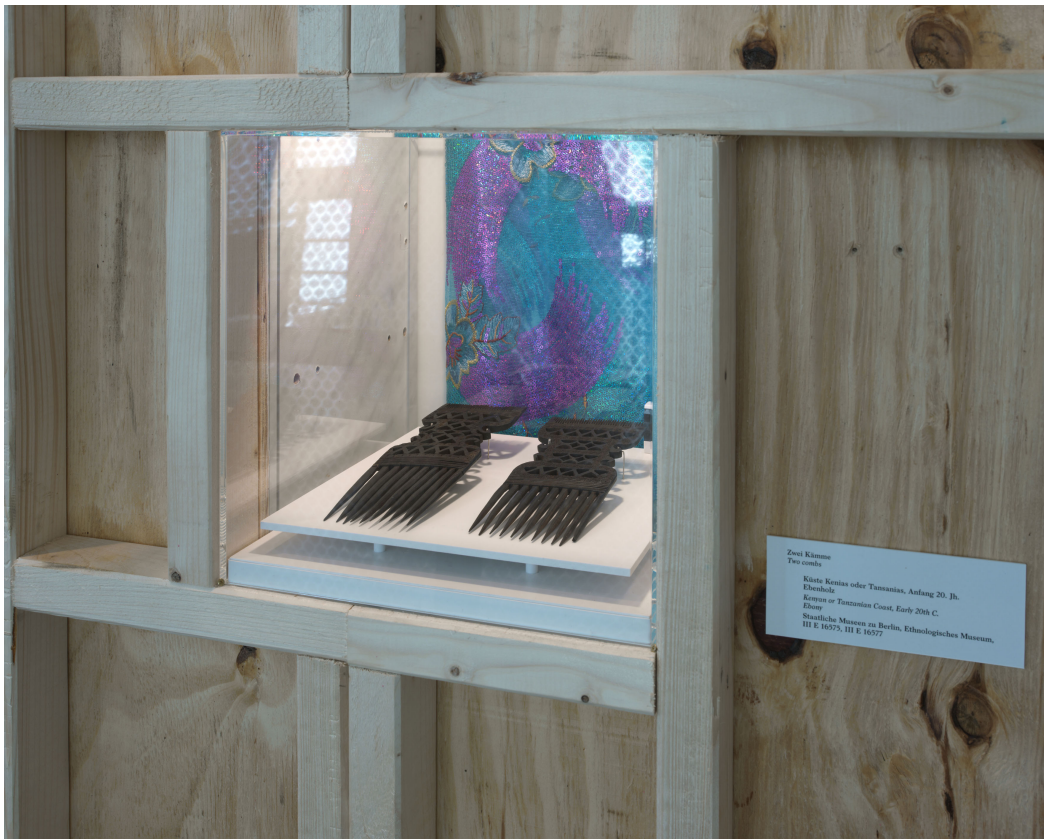
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