



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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Exhibiting Korea / Teaser

The exhibition concept for the Humboldt-Forum follows a geographic structure. For the presentation of Korean culture the challenge is the fact that the Museum für Asiatische Kunst has a relatively small number of Korean artifacts at its disposal. The project "Exhibiting Korea" grasped this as an opportunity to take a different path: international artists with a Korean background were invited to enter a dialog with the objects present and to explore ways in which Korea can be exhibited at the same time as being highlighted within the new museum layout. The resulting works opened new perspectives on the collection and the museum and inspired fundamental reflections: on the objects themselves and their status as artworks, about the concept of cultural representation, as well as on the options of innovative working methodology in the museum.

Exhibiting Korea / Project Description

The Collection Context as an Opportunity

by Uta Rahman-Steinert

The Museum für Asiatische Kunst is home to only a small collection of objects from Korea: 130 artifacts in all. That is not a selection conducive to presenting Korean art in any where near an adequate way. In order to furnish the Korean voice with an appropriate presence within the polyphony of East Asian art, new solutions are being sought for the exhibition displays in the Humboldt-Forum. The fact that most of the objects are not necessarily representative simultaneously opens up an unexpected opportunity and allows for greater creativity in terms of presentation.

The planning for the Humboldt-Forum placed the works of Korean provenance very fittingly at the juncture between China and Japan. However, the Korea Gallery has such a close proximity to "China" that it could easily be perceived as a mere continuation by the visitor. For this reason, an identification of the Korean collection section seemed necessary. My experience, stemming from cooperation with artists in numerous exhibitions for the museum, led to the idea of also utilizing artistic expression here, in order to emphasize



Korea – not restricted to the collection's artifacts, but taking them as a jumping off point – through a special design of the space.

Linked to this idea was also the intention of offering a platform to the members of the source culture, to contribute their own interpretations to the presentation of Korean artworks and artifacts. In the initial phase the project was developed in cooperation with the Korean-born curator Shi-ne Oh, who is active on the contemporary art scene as exhibition designer and art consultant and at present lives in Berlin. With this cooperation the museum surrendered its interpretive authority and integrated experiences that, on the one hand, are rooted in the culture of origin, but on the other, also demonstrate an international background and thus mirror the reality of many contemporary but also historical biographies especially of artists who cannot be unequivocally attributed to a certain location.

Five Contemporary Voices from Korea and the World

For the project, Shi-ne Oh chose artists whose conceptional approaches can be summarized under the headings "Temporal Projections," "Historical Interpretation," and "Reconstruction of the Past." The themes named make a direct reference to the history of museum collections and the objects preserved in them, and can simultaneously create a connection to the reconstruction of the Berlin Palace and the particular history of the place.

In preparation, a workshop was held at the Museum für Asiatische Kunst in September 2014. It served as on-site research in Dahlem and familiarized the artists with the aim of the project, the Korean collection held by the Museum für Asiatische Kunst and the collections of the Ethnologisches Museum, as well as the plans for the Humboldt-Forum. The artists were asked to come up with a sketch of an idea for an experimental, salient "identification" of the Korean area in the Humboldt-Forum and, with their working examples, to show what art vocabulary they would use. The highly varied works being presented approach the question on very different planes.

Jaeun Choi developed an installation that in its referencing of classical image and song traditions exposes hidden layers of meaning: a darkened room is filled with the fascinating song of a woman's voice. Searching for orientation, the visitor's eyes fall on the subtly hung and lit image of a woman in Korean traditional costume, sitting on a veranda next to a lotus pond, holding a pipe and a mouth organ in her hand. The scene seems to be a visualization of the music. The reproduction of the painting by Shin Yun-bok (18th century), a master of realistic depictions of everyday life, references popular traditions and the life of simple folk shaped by Confucian values. To accompany the display, Jaeun Choi arranged a melody from the Joseon dynasty (1392–1910), which she reinterpreted with a poem she wrote herself on the state of the modern Korean nation. The work also creates an arc connecting it to the National Museum of Korea in Seoul where the original painting is kept.

The installation by Inhwon Oh, which until now has only been partially realized, creates a multilayered interpretation of an object from the museum collection and, at the same time, a reflection about the museum itself, due to several translation processes: the iconic representation of Mount Geumgang is initially made accessible via an audio guide, which interprets the painted paths through the landscape as directions for walkers. Led by this audio guide, different protagonists are planned to perform at different locations. The specific local circumstances will probably necessitate a creative interpretation of the audio guide, so that individual performative interpretations of the landscape occur. A multi-channel projection of the thus-created videos in the Korea gallery of the Humboldt-Forum aims to generate an atmosphere of movement for the visitors, allowing them to experience the mutability of spaces and the way we experience them. The art intervention connects the Berlin visitors' present to the museum and object history in a sensory, tangible way.

With his singular photographic technique, Jae Yong Rhee mounted different views of an object into a literally, as well as metaphorically, spatial and temporal multilayered image. Due to the fact that surfaces and contours become blurred, the photographs allow the association of shifts and movements that each object has gone through, and at the same time allow a comprehension of the depicted object in its very nature – freed of attributions, that have been imposed on each object throughout its history. What is museum scene setting, what is cultural connotation, and what does the true nature of things consist of? For the project Jae Yong Rhee photographed objects in the Korean National Museum in Seoul. The photographs are juxtaposed with works from the collection of the Museum für Asiatische Kunst and inspire you to think about the histories and practices that have distributed such objects throughout the museums of the world.

At first sight, Meekyoung Shin's object replicas made of soap, seem astonishingly authentic; only on closer



inspection does the surface seem too perfect and the marks of the production process, as well as those of centuries of use, are noticeably missing. In this way the vessels provoke questions of authorship, originality, duplication and forgery. Even more fragile than the originals, the vessels also do nothing less than raise doubts about the museum's fundamental function as conservator: specks of dust alone can damage the surface; cleaning attempts run risk of washing away the entire object. By counterposing her soap sculptures, copies of artifacts from different eras and regions, with objects from the collection, Meekyoung Shin blurs the boundaries between contemporary art and the so precious, as well as historically and regionally meticulously categorized artifact – an invitation to begin a dialog.

The sensitive images by MinHwa Sung, reduced to mere lines, are related in character to classic East Asian painting, but due to their subject matter – work tables in her studio – maintain an emphatic actuality. Only on closer inspection do they reveal varied references to tradition: still lifes showing “scholar's accouterments,” chaekgeori, were a popular image theme. The precious paper used also references a décor element of Korean handicrafts with its formal structure, consisting of arranged squares, as well as Sung's modern adaptations of the formats of scroll painting and standing screen. And finally, in the grain of the wooden tablets the artist sometimes uses, the bizarre mountain formations of East Asian landscape painting are referenced. For the space in the Humboldt-Forum MinHwa Sung has two suggestions: firstly the use of curtains or coverings made by Korean artisans for the windows and walls, and secondly the use of a standing screen as décor or room division, for the presentation of images and objects.

An Individual Form of Museum Work

Cooperation with the artists was highly inspiring and opened new vistas onto the collection as well as onto display and presentation options. The works bring preexisting collection objects and their history to life in a multilayered way. They integrate current, also international perspectives into the exhibition situation. In addition, an artist's perspective, which is of its very nature individual and selective, allows the public to develop their own personal access, one that lies beyond the limitations of didactically dictated concepts. However, the inevitable individual approach of the artists, unburdened by theoretical museum discussions, also harbors the risk that conservational issues or visitor-oriented interests remain unconsidered. The actual project's objective – to mark out the Korea gallery in the Humboldt-Forum with its own “identification” – will require an intensive and advanced exchange – for which the present project, together with this evaluation and reflection, serves as an ideal basis. It would be desirable to undertake a re-design of the Korea gallery at regular longer intervals of perhaps every two years, centered on a different artistic concept each time.

Uta Rahman-Steinert studied sinology and art history at the Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin and subsequently lived in Beijing for two years, where she studied Chinese art history at the Central Academy of Fine Arts. Since 1987 she has been curator for the East Asia collection at the Staatliche Museen zu Berlin (East) and, since the merger of Berlin's museums in 1992, has been working at the Museum für Asiatische Kunst.

Exhibiting Korea / Positions

Images and Imaginings of Contemporary Korea

by Birgit Hopfener

Traditionally, museums have always been assigned a representative function. The Museum für Asiatische Kunst in Berlin is no exception: conventionally speaking, its task is to convey a comprehensive and largely valid picture of Asia's artistic and cultural history, or to put it slightly differently, of a “culture of otherness.” But the idea of museums as representative institutions is a topic that is increasingly the focus of current debates and discourses concerning museums and curatorial practice. The primary critique is aimed at the inherent structural dichotomy in the perception of “our culture” as opposed to “foreign culture”; the assumption of a static and essentialist concept of culture; and the related idea that a specific, pre-defined cultural entity can be reproduced in its totality through certain representative objects and collections.

The “Exhibiting Korea” project in the Museum für Asiatische Kunst takes place in the context of this critical discourse. Rather than representing and legitimizing the conventional narrative of Korean art history, which itself is highly influenced by Confucian academic culture, curator Uta Rahman-Steinert aims to develop new



perspectives on Korean art, through cooperational projects with contemporary Korean artists, to find approaches beyond a folkloristic aesthetic. The idea is to find out how artifacts from the historic collection can be allowed to become polyphonic, and whether it is possible to re-examine and add new facets to the images that people tend to have of Korea. Key to the project is the idea of contemporaneity.

The five participating artists have taken on a quasi curatorial role in this exhibition, in that they have been asked to find ways of showing connections between Korean history and the present day. Uta Rahman-Steinert reports that this unaccustomed role caused some uncertainty amongst the artists, as they were unused to having this kind of responsibility and do not usually take on an interpretative function.

The completed works reflect the complexity of the task. They deal critically with the question of cultural representation, which, for these artists of Korean background in the context of the Museum für Asiatische Kunst, is a question that cannot be ignored. The installations demonstrate that contemporaneity is not something universal. Rather, it is polyphonic, influenced by specific biographies, discourses, geopolitical standpoints, histories and institutional backgrounds. While the expression of a specific individual contemporaneity is a central aspect of every work of art, this project adds another dimension: The artists' work is per se bound up with other forms of contemporaneity, particularly that of the museum and its visitors, and this connection means that their role cannot remain simply that of the artist but must inevitably take on aspects of curatorship. In this way their tasks include thinking about the expectations and prior knowledge of their audiences when choosing their themes, media and strategies, and providing a critical response to the "Asian Art Museum" as an institution and the methods and traditions used to collect and represent.

In his work "Memories of the Gaze: Relics," for example, Jae Yong Rhee uses strategies of temporalization to question specific conventions of seeing in the Museum für Asiatische Kunst. His photographs are created by layering different views of the same thing over each other, so that it becomes impossible to rely on stylistic, technical, material or iconographic criteria to define the photographed objects within space and time. Instead, the pictures take on an almost sacred aura. Jae Yong Rhee intends to use a similar process for the multimedia installation he is planning for the Humboldt-Forum, where he will project photographs of Goryeo celadon vessels onto white reproductions of the vases created by a 3D printer. In the context of the central themes of the Humboldt-Forum, the installation seems to demonstrate how the artifacts' significance for the viewer is dictated by conventions of perception. The spatial and temporal dichotomies of "our own," and "other," "traditional," and "contemporary," in relation to culture, which are all-pervasive in museums based on the Western Modern tradition, are also brought into disarray by the blurring effect that results from the projections. By deliberately questioning even his own perspective, Jae Yong Rhee manages to establish a way of seeing that is phenomenological rather than based on obviously personal perceptions. In this way, he also indirectly questions his own potentially representative function.

The complex installation "Passages" by Inhwon Oh uses a folding screen ("Geumgangsang Landscape," late 19th/early 20th century) from the Berlin collection of Korean art to reference a topos of Korean cultural history that was, and remains, of powerful significance, both religiously and politically. There is a very personal dimension to this work. During the Silla Empire (57 B.C. – 935 A.D.), Buddhism was the national religion and the mountain region of Korea was designated "Buddha Country." As such, it soon became the place that symbolized national religion, while at the same time its central significance for civilization per se was emphasized. To this day the mountains are a place of Korean national identity that goes far deeper than the relatively recent North-South partition. Nowadays, visitors to the Diamond Mountains, a popular tourist region (South Koreans were granted access in 1993), tend to come across not only holy shrines but also monuments to the former North Korean ruler Kim Il Sung. The Berlin screen shows topographic features and places of Buddhist worship in the area. Inhwon Oh, however, deliberately does not go into the subject of the cultural history and political significance of the Diamond Mountains in his work "Passages." Instead, he uses the topographic aspect of the imagery and its cartographic function as the basis for his examination of the screen. Informed visitors may view this decision to look at the Diamond Mountains from a secular, worldly perspective as a critique of nationalism. His translations, both in the written form and as recordings for the audio guides, reduce the conventional ways of describing this area to an abstract description of the mapped paths. In this way, they allow the visitor to create his or her own entirely new experiences. The videos shown on numerous screens in the Humboldt-Forum will show variations on possible ways of moving through landscapes. Overall, it would seem that Oh uses this method of showing the Diamond Mountains as a way of negotiating questions of identity on an abstract, theoretical level. At the same time, by involving the viewer of the planned video installation in multiple spatial and temporal perspectives, he also breaks with the basic museum structure that forces the viewer into a more or less passive role as a recipient of objects and their assigned meanings. Oh's performative concept, by contrast, involves the visitor in the active construction of meaning and identity.



The various works and sketches for the Korea Gallery reveal not only interesting and highly differentiated ways of approaching the task the artists were given, but also the very different contexts (of discourse, geography, politics and institutions) in which the artists are embedded. A knee-jerk reaction to the cooperation with contemporary artists in the Museum für Asiatische Kunst could be to criticize it from a post-colonial perspective, as the artists in this project are automatically reduced to the functional status of cultural representatives. Several approaches in "Exhibiting Korea" highlight this difficulty. Future exhibitions at the Museum für Asiatische Kunst could build on the current show to look more closely at potential research areas, rather than focusing on representational approaches or the way in which specific cultures are "branded." For example, the museum could take on an important role in contemporary transcultural art research, perhaps in the form of longer term, themed research programs. These could be used not only to plumb the depths of history, but also to illuminate the connections between different regional histories of art and anthropologies.

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Exhibiting Korea, Questioning Art – A Successful Experiment

by Stephan von der Schulenburg

The project "Exhibiting Korea" curated by Uta Rahman-Steinert poses a number of challenges. The collection, which includes only about 130 exhibits, is extremely small. Under these circumstances, it may have been worth considering integrating a selection of works on permanent loan from the extensive Korean collection, which comprises more than one thousand objects, housed in the neighboring Ethnologisches Museum of the Staatliche Museen zu Berlin. Although the issues of an art museum (such as the Museum für Asiatische Kunst), and those of an ethnological museum are distinct from one another, there are also overlaps, particularly with regard to these two collections. Additionally, in Korean culture, ceramics enjoy the same "fine art" status that calligraphy and painting do. Thus, in Korea – more so than in China and Japan – an interpretation of everyday objects is legitimate, even for an institution such as the Museum für Asiatische Kunst, which is otherwise considered an art museum. Anyway, the concept of handing the design of significant elements of the gallery for Korean art over to artists, in addition to the classic museum presentations, proved to be a meaningful endeavor, that definitely creates a special attention of the museum visitors.

It should be noted at this point that presentations of this kind enjoy a certain tradition. As early as 1993, Peter Noever invited leading contemporary artists, including Jenny Holzer and Donald Judd, to present the collections of MAK Vienna in new formats, a concept that attracted international attention. In recent years, ethnological museums, such as the Weltkulturen Museum in Frankfurt am Main, have repeatedly invited artists to work with traditional museum collections and reinterpret these in exhibitions. On the one hand, this represents a departure from tiring didactic exhibition principles, and, on the other hand, a break with the latent (neo-)colonial, European perspective. Whether this can really be achieved is a separate question, and long academic discussions about such exhibitions have at the very least demonstrated that such approaches do not always find unanimous approval, for when historical exhibits of a museum collection mutate into the requisites of an artistic presentation, they run the risk of losing their rank as masterpieces – a reputation sometimes acquired over centuries – and instead the works are degraded to 'accessories' in today's artistic experimentations.

However, when the Museum für Asiatische Kunst invited five Korean artists to develop – using the very limited museum inventory – a presentation form that enabled visitors to experience fundamental aspects of Korean art and aesthetics, this was a welcome attempt to allow the culture, the presentation of which is the main focus here, to speak with its own voice. The curators were also interested in employing the artistic vantage point to achieve a presentation form that, in a sense, is more in line with that of the visitors than the approach of the analytical scholar.

Significant is that, in accordance with many contemporary artists' biographies, the invited artists lived in



Korea, or had worked abroad for a longer period of time, some on site in Berlin; others had several residencies, e.g. in neighboring Japan or in Europe. Such a concept seems especially appropriate for (South) Korea, which, on the one hand, has a proud and ancient culture, and, on the other hand, is now an internationally closely networked, globally-oriented society that in many ways is more “modern,” fast-paced and visionary than the cultures of old Europe.

Given the dominance of contemporary issues in the way Korea is represented, it is worth considering whether the division of the country should be appropriately presented at least in the temporary exhibitions in the Korea gallery of the Humboldt-Forum. As a parallel presentation of artistic contributions from North and South Korea currently seems impossible given the existing political conditions, work like that of German photographer Dieter Leistner “Korea – Korea” (2013), which consists of comparable images of public and semi-public places in Pyongyang and Seoul (Frankfurt am Main/Berlin: Museum Angewandte Kunst & Gestalten Verlag, 2013), could serve as an alternative here.

Below are a few brief comments on some of the artistic statements presented in “Exhibiting Korea”:

MinHwa Sung’s inventory of objects in her studio is a surprising and quite successful reinterpretation of the traditional Korean chaekgeori painting genre in the visual language of contemporary art. The design suggestions made by the artist for the Korea gallery in the Humboldt-Forum, however, demonstrate that although artists participating in these kinds of exhibitions can indeed provide a refreshingly subjective perspective, they are often unfamiliar with the daily conservation challenges of a museum. For example, the artist’s proposal to present historical exhibits from the museum’s Korean collection on shelves of a chaekgeori-like three-dimensional folding screen would have to be significantly developed if it were to be implemented.

Jae Yong Rhee’s large photographs seemingly represent the sum of all possible angles of an object, thereby rendering its inner, spiritual quality tangible. This is perhaps enough for a piece of art to communicate. The additional, model-like arrangement presented by the artist on a flat screen in which a white object in a display case is equipped with a sensor that causes the surface to suddenly become decorated with designs when a visitor approaches it, seems somewhat artificial and mannered, at least in the initial visualization. One may recognize a Buddhist-like attempt here to make the illusionary nature of earthly existence tangible; yet, with its real art treasures, a museum is precisely the place that provides an impressive counterpart to our everyday life, which is increasingly dominated by virtual worlds.

Inhwan Oh’s Diamond Mountains arrangement has the appeal of using an unusual object from the Berlin painting collection as an impressive starting point for an artistic essay about the procedural nature of Taoism-influenced literati art of East Asia, in which wandering also signifies escapism. Even if its full implementation is still pending, this arrangement has the potential to be a successful symbiosis of historical art and new media. At the same time, the Diamond Mountains, which are situated in North Korea and thus are difficult to reach for most people, subtly touch on the reality of life of Koreans, which has been painfully characterized by the country’s division.

Regardless of the here formulated, at times critical footnotes, the overall arrangement of “Exhibiting Korea” is convincing if for no other reason than for the surprising variety of artistic positions. It was undoubtedly wise to consult a Korean-born and internationally well-networked curator for the selection of the artists. In this way, the academic point of view was expanded “from the museum’s inside outward” in a meaningful way to include an outside perspective, thereby achieving a refreshing and, in many ways, contemporary structure. If the Humboldt-Forum succeeds in presenting non-European cultures in a historically adequate, aesthetically pleasing form, whilst also doing justice to contemporary life in the long-term, this will be to a large extent down to the bold experiments of the Humboldt Lab Dahlem, which, in turn, can certainly be deemed a success.

Dr. Stephan von der Schulenburg studied art history, philosophy, German, Japanology and Sinology in Munich, Berlin, Tokyo, Kyoto and Heidelberg. He has been head of the Asia department at the Museum Angewandte Kunst in Frankfurt am Main since 1990. His published work includes pieces on Japanese painting and woodcuts, Chinese ceramics, as well as on contemporary developments in East Asian art. Von der Schulenburg has co-curated several exhibitions on Korean art, most recently “Korea Power. Design and Identity” (Museum Angewandte Kunst, Frankfurt am Main 2013).



Exhibiting Korea / Credits

A project in the framework of Probebühne 7, June 25 through October 18, 2015

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Jae Yong RHEE, "Memories of the Gaze," photo: Uwe Walter



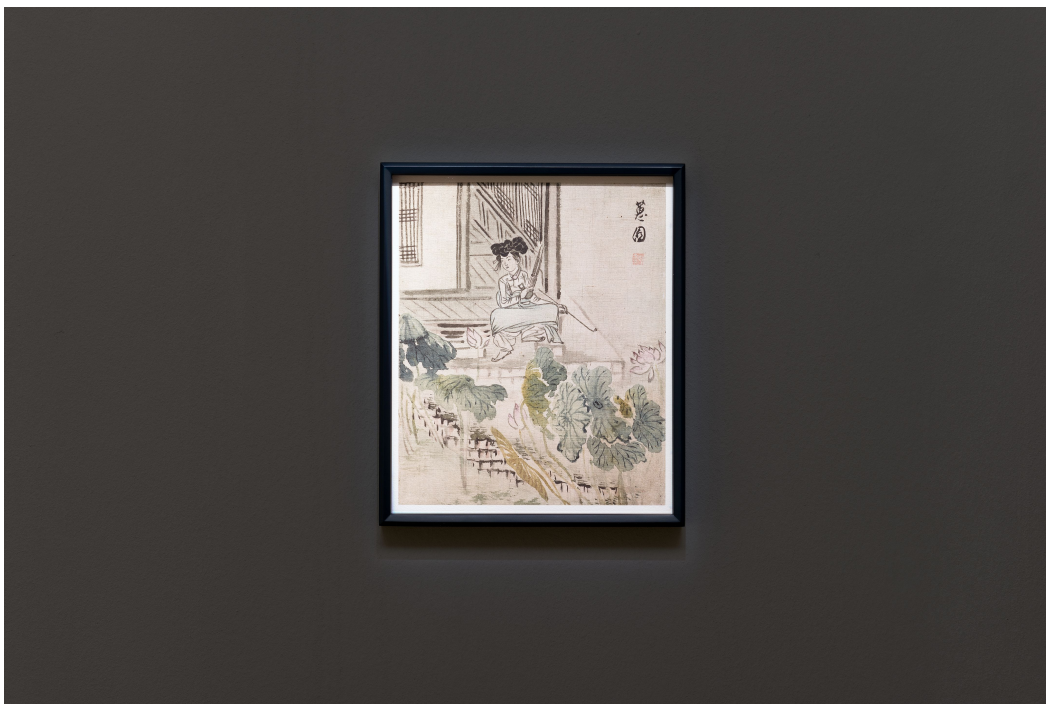
Inhwan OH, "Passages," photo: Uwe Walter



Meekyoung SHIN, "Translation," photo: Uwe Walter



MinHwa SUNG, "Carousel," photo: Uwe Walter



Jaeun CHOI, "Women by a lotus pond," the reproduction of the painting by Shin Yun-bok (18th century) serves as a visual representation of the sound installation, photo: Uwe Walter