



## 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.

**Hortensia Völckers**

Artistic Director

Kulturstiftung des Bundes

**Prof. Dr. Hermann Parzinger**

President

Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz

## Funny Thought / Teaser

The foyer of the Humboldt-Forum will house a spatial installation comprised of many different parts, referencing the historical art and natural history collections of the Berlin Palace. The office Focus + Echo has taken on the task of translating this baroque presentation of knowledge into the 21st century. Inspired by the essay “Drôle de Pensée” (funny thought) by Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, who had sketched out the idea of such a chamber of wonders as a combination of archive and imaginative space for the communication of art, architecture and science, the office developed a digitally generated three-dimensional space. Built-in sensors enabled the public to view objects, move them, enlarge them or reduce them in size. The image motifs, consisting of single particles, bring to life the “theatre of nature and art” as a unique Humboldt Lab installation.

## Funny Thought / Project Description

### An Interactive Experience of Baroque Pictorial Worlds

by Andreas Pinkow

A spatial installation comprised of many different parts is planned for the foyer of the Humboldt-Forum. The installation largely focuses on two historical points of reference: the art and natural history collections from the Berlin City Palace of Prince-Elector Joachim II from the 16th century, (kurfürstlich-königliche Kunst- und Naturalienkammer), and Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz who founded the Royal Brandenburg Society of Sciences (Kurfürstlich-Brandenburgische Societät der Wissenschaften) in 1700, which referenced the aforementioned historical collection.

The installation is distributed in 42 niches over three floors of the open galleries that encircle the building. The presentations in these niches are playful references to exhibits from the ethnological collections, but also raising questions on the nature of collecting as such, and about methods and forms of appropriation. In this way, references to exhibits, event programs and the founding concept of the Humboldt-Forum can be



experienced directly in this spatial presentation.

In his 1675 published text entitled “Drôle de Pensée” (funny thought) Leibniz describes this historical collection – the *Kunstkammer* (cabinet of art) – as a lively, entertaining, and completely new interplay between forms of natural science collection, research, entertainment and communication. The planned installation is based on the principle behind the *Kunstkammer*, whose intellectual dimensions encapsulate the founding principles of the Humboldt-Forum: comparative perspectives on art, architecture and natural sciences that reveal new inter-relationships and highlight the global relationship between Germany and the rest of the world.

The thought behind the transmission of text as an interactive presentation for the Humboldt Lab, was to illustrate the Humboldt-Forum’s idea of ‘pars pro toto’ in a spatial experience beforehand. For this purpose we successfully developed and submitted a project idea that was subsequently commissioned by the Humboldt Lab.

### **Swiping, Morphing and Other Interactive Navigation Methods in Digital Spheres**

Different aspects of seeing played a fundamental role for both Leibniz as well as the *Kunstkammer*. For this reason, the Humboldt Lab project “Drôle de Pensée” should break with usual modes of seeing and allow visitors new perspectives on this historic world of pictures. New digital spaces have been created to find a fitting reflection of Leibniz’ joy at surprising discoveries in a plethora of interests, across numerous disciplines.

The bold ideas that were occurring to Leibniz were accompanied by parallel scientific discoveries in the 17th century: the telescope and the microscope had just been invented – being able to view the stars or magnify the smallest particles were groundbreaking developments. To stimulate the imagination of present-day visitors, the exhibition team took drawings from this period and transformed them into three-dimensional formats: spaces gained depth, figures gained volume and objects were infused with detail. Processes that were only roughly described in the original images were brought to life with animation.

To make the newly created pictures accessible, we used common digital navigation techniques: intuitive zooming in and out, leafing through pages and so on. The visual surface was affixed to the front of a 3 x 3 meter cube, whose wooden frame was covered with transparent gauze. A circular projection area appeared to allow a view into the interior of the cube. In actual fact, the inner space was generated in real time – much like a computer game – that reacted to visitors’ movements. With the distortion of perspective one was given the impression of a window. In the depiction of the inner space of the cube the little pixels appeared to be floating around before continuously re-forming for each new presentation of historic picture images.

The visitors were then encouraged to discover images through simple hand movements, allowing them the surprise of each generated effect. For example, a stretched out arm functioned as a flashlight to illuminate the relevant historic *Kunstkammer* object. Or different mussel shapes – as seen on various historic paintings – could be morphed into each other with a swiping movement. As an increasing number of different themes were discovered, the multi-perspectival interplay of the animations increased. To assist visitors with their interactive options, a short film showing the different functions was located right next to the cube.

A high-performance computer was necessary for the technical realization of the cube, while specific software had to be developed. This computer rendered both the simulation of the inner space of the cube and the images made up of individual particles in real time, and continuously re-combined them using a random generator. A camera over the display captured the movements of the visitors to calculate the exit point for the three-dimensional appearances 1:1 to the visitors’ positions in front of the screen. The visitors’ gestures were transposed into control commands to present different animations reactively. Atmospheric sound effects accompanied the movement sequences.

A glossary had been developed to help visitors understand the themes of the installation in the most straightforward way possible. The glossary contextualized both the terms concerning the digital representation of historical pictorial worlds, and the terms used by both Leibniz and in the historic *Kunstkammer*, while connecting them with contemporary aspects of the Humboldt-Forum.

### **Computer-Aided Applications for New Insights**

The multi-optional access to content and the non-linear storytelling methods were deliberate, but required a



fairly high degree of curiosity from the audience. Visitors willing to engage, could experience Leibniz' exuberant joy in experimentation and discover multi-dimensional elucidations. The possibilities for research-interaction particularly offered a young and technically able target group new access to historical material, while 'museum fans' and trade professionals experienced familiar motifs in a new context. An unplanned side effect was that visitors seemed more interested in watching others using the "Drôle de Pensée" than doing it themselves. In this way, the space in front of the installation became a kind of stage.

The Humboldt Lab project "Drôle de Pensée" represents the *Kunstkammer*, as one part of 42 presentations in the foyer of the future Humboldt-Forum. The development process involved a large team of academics, media artists, programmers and scenographers who all worked without specific result expectations. This was especially the case since the technically involved break with usual modes of viewing and a very technically detailed development of unique and innovative gesture commands went hand-in-hand. The test runs were able to provide an increasing number of new options in presentation and perception. The result, shown in Dahlem, was only one of many realization possibilities and has the potential for more complex navigation structures, as well as more narrative-based variations in the future. One thing is certain: this unconventional approach to historical pictorial worlds and the direct invitation to an audience to interactively navigate it carries a lot of potential.

*Andreas Pinkow is the creative director of "Focus + Echo." The office for concept and scenography specializes in dramaturgy, exhibition as well as media design and storyboard development for exhibitions, museums and innovative large-scale projects.*

## Funny Thought / Positions

### A Utopian Installation on Times and Spaces

by Peter Funken

More than 300 years after Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz' "fantastical" texts were published, Andreas Pinkow shows how the idea of a world-exhibition may have looked and functioned, in his installation "Funny Thought," utilizing aesthetic and technical tools of the 21st century. It is a digital homage, in which images and fantastical worlds of the 17th century can be explored interactively.

As though viewed through an oversize microscopic eye we look into a three-dimensional space, affording us insights into complex layers of depth when we move in front of this installation. The latter is meant literally, because only when the visitor actually moves hands, arms or the entire body, in reaction to the images, giving gestural instructions, does the screen content move and change, resulting in ever new layers and levels in the projection. Once one enters the game, it is like being pulled into an event that begins perspectively but soon disintegrates in order to rearrange itself into a new form.

But what are we, when we enter the "Wunderkammer" ("Chamber of Wonders") of the 21st century and deliver ourselves into its hands? Travellers in space and time, or actually part of the artwork, a more or less intelligent prosthesis of the image machine "Funny Thought" which, via digital technology and back projection, illustrates how the world was being imagined toward the end of the 17th century? Are we mere appendages of a fascinating game, or virtually god-like creatures, freed of the limitations of physics? As an active party, one will certainly find oneself in a process of realization. Because in addition to the continually newly generating image-worlds of the projections, the exhibition also offers written orientation in the world of knowledge since Leibniz: on the wall adjacent to the projection machine there is a large information board. Here is an index of relevant keywords, thematizing the future Humboldt-Forum project, as well as its prerequisites in terms of the humanities and natural sciences. The alphabetically ordered keywords begin with "Akademie der Wissenschaften" and end with "Work in Progress." The terms elucidate the Leibniz universe as well as the Humboldt-Forum project or the Humboldt Lab in the Dahlem Museums. The index lists and connects basic research terms coined since Leibniz and Humboldt – for example the terms "Travel," "Collecting," and "Curiosity," – with significant figures from the early Enlightenment, as well as countries (e.g. "China") and scientific methods ("Experiment," and "Correspondence"). The core of the index consists of the historical "Drôle de Pensée" as draft plan for an enlightening and joyful utopia.

With its interactive installation and index, the exhibition team connects the scientific and popular ideas from



the past to the future of the Humboldt-Forum. The historical utopia "Funny Thought" as future-orientated idea of the late 17th century serves as the reference point. And in this technically advanced and aesthetically convincing installation it is given an appropriate contemporary representation. In the interface between the historical and the contemporary, a new perspective for the future is opened up, where perhaps a more holistic view of the world, art and the sciences is again possible – a new form of the universal – which Leibniz, in his time, still had at his disposal.

*The Berlin-based author Dr. Peter Funken has been working as an exhibition concept developer since 1983.*

## Funny Thought / Quote

“The presentations could, for example, be a magic lantern (one could begin with that), as well as flights, artificial meteorites, all kinds of optical marvels, a representation of the heaven and the stars. Comets. A globe like that of Gottdorf or Jena; fireworks, fountains, vessels of strange shapes, mandrakes and other rare plants. Extraordinary and rare animals. The Royal manège. Mythical animals. The royal horse race automaton. Prizes. Recreations of acts of war (...) Extraordinary concerts. Rare musical instruments. Talking trumpets. Hunt. Lusters and imitation jewels. The presentation could at any time be combined with a number of tales or comedies. Theater of nature and art. Fighting, swimming. Extraordinary tightrope dancers. Salto mortale. Demonstration of how a child can lift a heavy weight with a single thread. Anatomical theatre. Medicinal herb garden. Later also a laboratory. Because in addition to the public presentations there will be special ones, like those of small calculating machines and others, paintings, medals, libraries. (...)”

*Quote from: Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz: Drôle de Pensée, touching on a new kind of REPRESENTATION <or rather: Palace of Games> September 1675, translated into German by Horst Bredekamp, in: Horst Bredekamp, Die Fenster der Monade. Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz' Theater der Natur und Kunst, Berlin 2004; translated from the German into English by Galina Green.*

## Funny Thought / Credits

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**Concept and Design:** Andreas Pinkow and Anette Dittel (Focus + Echo, Berlin)

**Art historians:** Eva Dolezel, Robert Felfe

**Media production:** Daniel Franke (We are Chopchop, Berlin) together with Martin Backes, Jacob Kirkegaard, Denny Koch, Marc Tiedemann and Christopher Warnow

**Graphics:** Barbara Dechant

**Translation:** Richard Toovey

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**Editor:** Barbara Schindler

**Assistance:** Carolin Nüser

**Translation:** Galina Green

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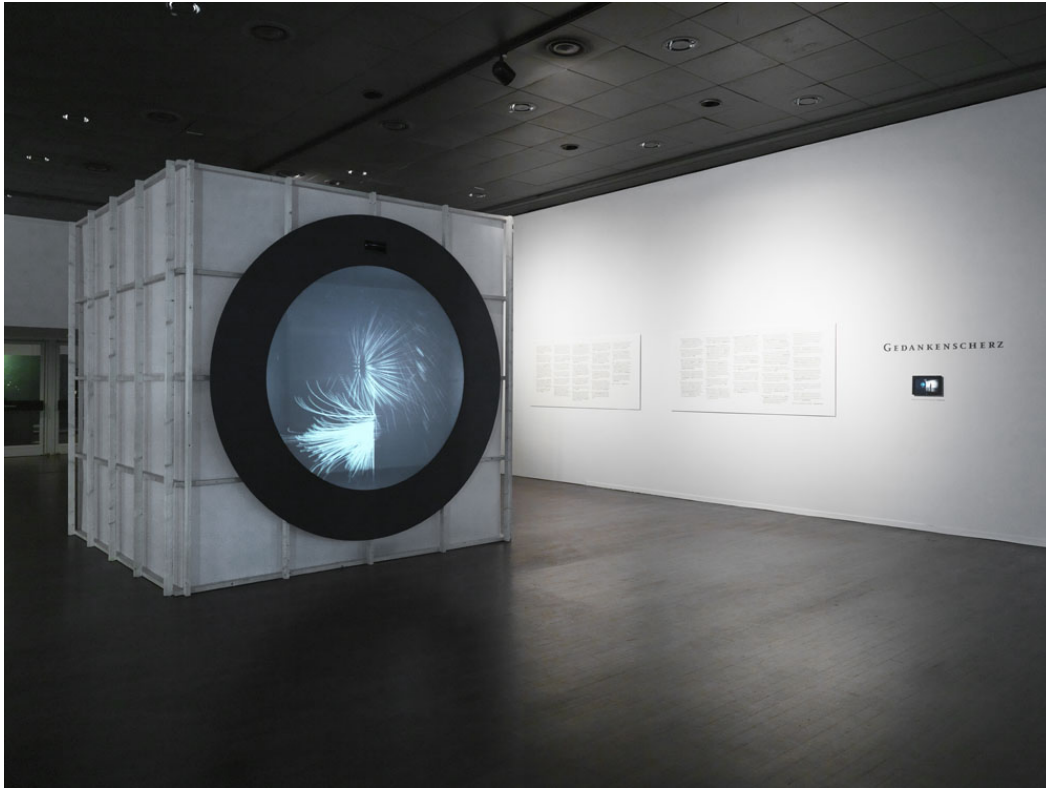
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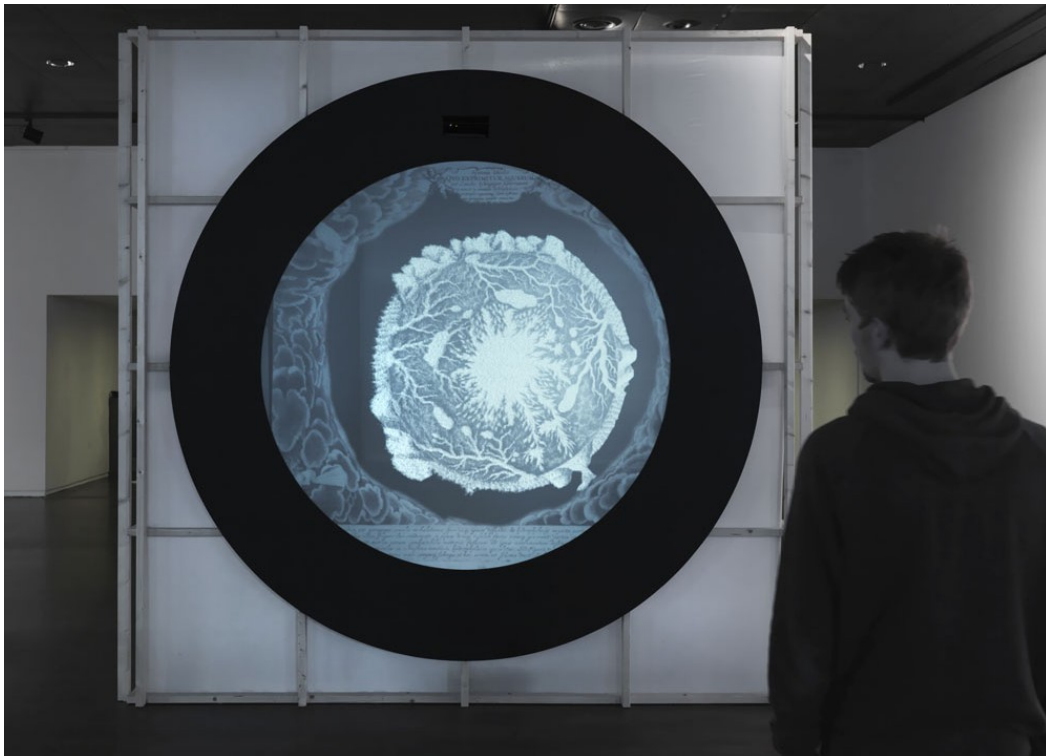
Installation view "Funny Thought," photo: Jens Ziehe



Visitors at the opening, photo: Sebastian Bolesch



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