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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Museum of Vessels / Teaser

More than 38 percent of the objects in the Dahlem collections are vessels: this fact prompted Nicola Lepp, Nina Wiedemeyer and Ursula Gillmann to issue a new version of object biography. They consigned the role of narration to the media and, in addition to a large presentation of artifacts, they included three film installations and a sound installation. In this way, the "Museum of Vessels" went beyond a straightforward presentation of objects and opened up for the public a new way of looking at fish baskets, cups, jugs, pottery shards, bottles or vessel sculptures, as well as providing instructions for possible use. The Humboldt Lab project deliberately went beyond the cultural-geographic chronological organization of the collections and brought the comparative cultural aspects of the objects to the fore in a new way.

Museum of Vessels / Project Description

Understanding Vessels

by Nicola Lepp

The basis for this experimental Humboldt Lab project arose out of an observation that came about during the workshop "Asking Questions" in June 2012: namely, the fact that in the Berlin-Dahlem museums which are in the focus of the Probebühne – the Ethnologisches Museum and the Museum für Asiatische Kunst – a great number of all the exhibited objects are vessels. Made of clay, bronze, gold, silver, glass, wood or other organic materials, vessels are present here like no other category. To be exact, they constitute 38 percent of all exhibits as a count later revealed.

The project "Museum of Vessels" took its impetus from the realization of how ubiquitous these vessels are, taking the simple fact of their presence in the exhibition rooms of the museum as an amazing occurrence, in order to open up the question: why is it that so many vessels are on show here and what in fact is a vessel? And what do vessels have to do with culture? The current presentations with their cultural-geographic

approaches and systemization provide scant pointers in response to such rather more phenomenological than ethnologically-inspired questions. The vessels, like all other objects, are presented here as tangible evidence and as artifacts of "other" cultures. And this (testified) access, that forms the basis of most European collections of non-European cultures, is so powerful that it hinders the formation of other perspectives and interpretations – because objects are seldom simultaneously comprehensible in several logical systems.

A Cultural Theory Approach

The aim of the experimental exhibition was to explore other perspectives on vessels from outside disciplinary approaches. The experts' view, which is visible behind the current presentations, was confronted with a broad cultural-theoretical and transdisciplinary perspective. The vessels from the individual cultures were placed alongside a culture of vessels in order to explore whether a broader perspective could provide an extended understanding of the objects in the museum. At the same time, it was vital to grapple with the institutional self-perception that is the basis for the presentation of artifacts in the museum. Because every system developed in the museum and every classification of objects necessarily involves a narrowing down and thus a reduction of complexity. With respect to the collection presentations in the Humboldt-Forum, the question to be asked was whether new perspectives could enrich the cultural geographical system, counteract it and expand on it, and if yes, which ones.

We – the curator Nina Wiedemeyer, the designer Ursula Gillmann and I – were inspired by the discourse which, for some time, has determined the international theory of things and examines, for example, how objects pre-determine human activity. The vessels in the current presentation in Dahlem have completely forfeited this praxeological dimension. That's why, for the Humboldt Lab exhibition, we wished to develop approaches for presenting vessels not only as artifacts, evidence and relics, but also as agents of human action and thought. The central thesis was that vessels are a form of social media and that using vessels promotes community. For what would happen if the vessels no longer existed? Could culture itself exist without vessels? Accidentally, and somewhat unexpectedly, basic questions about the objects in the Dahlem collections themselves arose out of an initial and fleeting observation of the abundance of the vessels themselves, as well as a direct discussion about the objects within their museum arrangement. The cultural-geographic arrangement here no longer made no sense and was therefore abandoned in this Humboldt Lab experiment.

The Experimental Exhibition: a Trial Arrangement about Exhibiting per se

Instead, the "Museum of Vessels" took the multi-cultural object "vessel" as the point of departure for its exploration. The introductory text reads: "A vessel is a tool for holding, containing and dispensing of materials. It stores foodstuffs or human remains but also time and labor. It is just as suited to the exchange of goods as it is to the forging of connections, for example with gods or magical forces. Vessels are probably among the oldest means of exchange between humans. They are suited as hardly any other object to making visible the characteristics of human beings as a result of intermixing and migration beyond the concept of "whole" cultures.

For the exploration the Humboldt Lab exhibition adopted two different formats: one lying outside the regular, and primarily object-based, exhibition module presentation of the collection in the upper foyer that we called the "Gefäßzentrale" ("Vessel Center") as well as four media installations as interventions which we placed at different sites in both museums. The film medium played a central role in all the installations. The static nature of the objects was systematically accompanied by the logic of moving image and sound, in order to find out how far these time-based media were capable of visualizing the interconnection between objects and human activity.

The vessels, arranged on a central platform in the "Vessel Center" were grouped according to differing cultural-theoretical questions and observations. The initial question was: what is a vessel really, and what organizational systems and ways of describing them are there? The perspectives ranged from vessel typologies (vase, jug, pitcher, cup, amphora etc.) to borderline cases (do fish baskets or sieves count as vessels?) to the anthropomorphization of vessels, which is evident in many cultures (aesthetically as well as linguistically – "neck," "lip," "belly" of a vessel, or "he's a crackpot,") down to different usage descriptions (vessels for...). Text played an important role in the "vessel center," not only as a descriptive label on the objects themselves, but as a medium for exploration, consideration and questioning. Which is why text appeared as an exhibition layer in its own right, in large format and script embedded in the scenography. Finally we showed excerpts of ethnological films that portrayed activities such as handling, storing, transporting or dispensing and so

illustrated the social significance of vessels for the community ("Vessel Activities").

Individual aspects of the vessels were examined in greater depth by means of four interventionist media installations: their abundance in the museum, their fragility, the interiors of the vessels, and their function as a medium of giving. Thus in the installation "Gießen_Schenken" ("Pouring_Giving") for example, vessels from the Moche culture were filmed being used and handled in order to examine their pouring qualities and the sound they made. For this re-enactment, vessels were deliberately chosen from the archaeological collections of Mesoamerica, where knowledge about their actual use has been lost. The four installations intentionally undertook cultural-theoretical investigations also using artistic methods, in the conviction that artistic approaches can enrich the research of objects. These interventions opened up surprising, in part speculative, but most certainly new, perspectives that would otherwise not have been possible from the vessels in static museum displays.

Just like the concept, the design of the "Museum of Vessels" was an experimental arrangement on the theme of exhibiting per se. The design approach utilized the classic repertoire of museum presentation techniques – with pedestals, frames and display cases. The simplest of interventions and adjustments examined how we can change our perception of things due to the design of the presentation. Even the movement of the visitors in the room was a systematic aspect of the mediation: in the "vessel center" with its transparent glass surfaces, every adjustment of the positioning changed the arrangement to something different – foreground became background and the addition and positioning of text and object shifted, resulting in new thematic constellations and modes of perception.

Invitation to Transgress

The Humboldt Lab experiment was not concerned with a "right" or a "successful" project, but rather with the exploration of possibilities that would allow us to go beyond the narrow framework of disciplinary systems in our museum landscape, and at the same time open up the traditional definition of objects as evidence and artifacts, as they are still largely determined by museum operations to this day. The project should be understood, at the very least, as a plea for a partial breakdown of disciplines in museum work. Only in this way can questions be raised that not only concern the others but us as "others" too.

Ursula Gillmann, exhibition designer and museum studies specialist. Since 1989 she has been developing and organizing exhibition projects with the atelier gillmann and the arge gillmann schnegg. She has been professor of exhibition design at the Hochschule Darmstadt since 2009. Significant previous projects include Wege zur Welterkenntnis (Basel, 2009); Berge – eine unverständliche Leidenschaft (Innsbruck, 2007); PSYCHOanalyse (Berlin, 2006); Alltag – eine Gebrauchsanweisung (Vienna, 2003); Unten und oben. Zur Naturkultur des Ruhrgebiets (Essen, 2001).

Nicola Lepp is a Berlin-based expert in cultural theory and exhibition designer. Since 1995 she has been developing themed exhibitions at the interface between science and art and works on alternative forms of exhibiting and curating. Significant projects include: GRIMMWELT Kassel, 2015; Arbeit. Sinn und Sorge, 2009/2010; PSYCHOanalyse, 2006; Der Neue Mensch. Obsessionen des 20. Jahrhunderts, 1999. From 2001 to 2007 she was deputy professor at the Fachhochschule Potsdam for the course on cultural work; currently she is acting professor for cultural representation and promotion; she has had numerous lectureships and has published work on museum and exhibition theory.

Nina Wiedemeyer is an arts and media scholar. Since 1998 she has been working as an author and curator for museums and exhibition practices, including for prauth (exhibition project: Sinn und Sorge, Deutsches Hygiene-Museum Dresden, 2009/2010) and with the exhibitors. Since 2012 she has been working at the Universität der Künste Berlin in its post-graduate program "Das Wissen der Künste" with a project on the marginal history of knowledge in the field of arts and crafts. Most recent publication: Buchfalten: Material, Technik, Gefüge der Künstlerbücher, Zürich/Berlin 2013.

Museum of Vessels / Positions

Object Biographies Narrated Anew

How contradictory can the staging of presentations be, when are new interpretations permissible and what does it mean to be a custodian of museum objects? The curators Uta Rahman-Steinert, Peter Junge and Martin Heller, one of the Humboldt Lab directors, on the installation "Museum of Vessels."
Interview: Barbara Schindler

Let's start with the film "Gießen_Schenken" ("Pouring_Giving") which was part of a larger media installation. In the film one sees how a pre-Columbian vessel is filled with water and then emptied. How have you, as a museums expert, interpreted the activities shown in connection with one of your objects?

Uta Rahman-Steinert: I thought that was the most successful installation of the exhibition because it had a significant aesthetic appeal and endowed the vessels with a different aura. It made a difference as to whether I had the object simply sitting in a display case or whether I can see it being used – that didn't work equally well in all the installations, but in this case it did.

Peter Junge: I agree that was the most successful part of the project, although I am generally very skeptical towards it. But I don't think it demonstrates the use, because we don't know what it was – the pottery was probably a burial object or a musical instrument. What it does show is an additional interpretation, a possibly other dimension of the object. And I think that's good; the idea of doing something with the object that probably no one has ever done before: picking it up with black gloves and pouring distilled water through it. So it is a completely artificial situation (in pre-Columbian Peru there was certainly no distilled water); it becomes fascinating because it attains an aesthetic form.

Rahman-Steinert: The video achieved what an intervention must be able to: it has redirected the attention of the visitor to this object, and they have perhaps taken a closer look than they normally would when walking along a row of display cases with similar objects. Here something different was happening.

Martin Heller: I have to agree. It is significant that this video intervention more than any other is repeatedly brought up in a positive way in our planning talks. It doesn't bring a natural environment into play: the aforementioned synthetic quality results in the vessels that are shown suddenly becoming something more than just museum artifacts.

Can you think of other interventions that similarly engendered a new perspective on the objects or brought them alive in a different way?

Rahman-Steinert: There was also the "clatter" in our gallery with Chinese ceramics. That irritated the public extremely and resulted more in a defensive reaction. That intervention did not lead to a positive viewpoint towards the exhibits but, instead, was considered a disturbance and intimidated the visitors.

Heller: That was the display cabinet with the seemingly precariously tipping vase – I think the striking image alone would have been enough.

Rahman-Steinert: Yes, it would have been enough. Just the mere sight made me wince when I saw for the first time that the vase was about to tip over.

Heller: Vessels always evoke a certain sense of fragility and with it their possible destruction – the shards are somehow always present in your head. You could pick up on that as a theme in various ways, but the clattering was too much, because it contradicted the image – and that was a shame.

Junge: It reduced it to a gag...

Rahman-Steinert: ... to entertainment, which isn't necessarily a bad idea. Where fragility is concerned, for a precious object that is something threatening. Because that is certainly something that happens in a museum: someone trips and the artifact is broken.

Junge: If you are serious about the topic of fragility then that necessitates increased respect for the object, showing how amazing it is that these few remaining artifacts still exist and are important and precious objects from a specific historical era. A flowerpot from the Chinese corner store, which you can buy for 10 euros, is not. It may also come from China but you would never put it in this exhibition. And that's where the presentation reveals a certain hypocrisy.

Heller: I don't agree. Like many others, my first reaction was one of laughter. Not all of us are experts! The classic museum situation was robbed of its drama in several ways, and that is always a healthy thing.

In the Humboldt-Forum a systemization according to regional aspects is planned. Could a cultural-geographic and cultural-historical, less closed narration, like the comparative object exhibition "Museum of Vessels" have a place there?

Junge: The exhibition areas in the Humboldt-Forum will be roughly organized according to regions, but within these regions themes will be represented. So we won't be presenting "Life in Cameroon" or "Swahili Folk Traditions"; that would be a restriction of perspective. The alternative is not to break regional boundaries and create multi-cultural exhibitions instead – museums have been doing that for 100 years. In every exhibition we are bringing together objects that were never together in real life: a Bamanan mask from Mali in Africa was never found next to a Congolese figurine – that only happened once they became museum objects. That's why museums, especially in the 1980s and 1990s, had themes like the bride, men's clubs, seafaring, – or now vessels as with Nicola Lepp – exhibits from all over the world. That's nothing new for a museum because that's exactly how objects have been presented in a museum.

The concept of a thematic exhibition may not be new, but in its variety, as well as in its medial and design approach, it has created something new for Dahlem.

Junge: In its medial design it appears fresh and new in Dahlem, but I don't see it as a new approach.

Heller: Perhaps it is something else that is relevant. There are several Humboldt Lab projects that almost everyone liked. For example the Purnakumbha ritual [1] – which was nothing new in the sense that other museums had included similar religious practices; I saw that in Australia on several occasions. What is decisive is that the people involved in the Lab trials during the planning process for the Humboldt-Forum have hopefully generated positive friction and cooperative encounters. Perhaps an outsider will see better what is missing in the present Dahlem exhibitions. For example there are hardly any films, hardly any sound installations, no video commentaries. To begin working with these elements in the Lab is not new but it makes sense, in the context of these objects, in this situation, with these colleagues – that is the decisive aspect of this process.
As a longstanding museum person it is exactly the aspect you mentioned before that interests me, Mr. Junge – the fact that most of the things with which we work, wouldn't under normal circumstances ever be juxtaposed, apart from in a museum context. The confrontation with this new reality is one of the significant motors of the Humboldt Lab. We are concerned with the web of connections that exist, and happily with differing results, with experimentation. That's the only way that something like "Pouring_Giving" can come about. The attempt to introduce film into the vessel exhibition has, as a secondary step, led us to the in-house film archives being cataloged and thus made accessible. That is also nothing new, but it was a necessary step, in order to even achieve the position we are in today of thinking about whether this or that room in the Humboldt-Forum could be used to show film documentation as a complement to the objects.

Rahman-Steinert: Of course the museum is an abstraction and it brings things together that in "nature" or in their place of origin would not have been. Our strength and what's special to the museum is that we bring things together, and through confrontation make visible the different developments, perspectives and philosophies. And precisely this new insight was not present in the wild mix of "Vessel Center". Many visitors found it difficult to orientate themselves. The labeling was not so easy to comprehend, so all that was retained was a general perception of abundance, without looking at the individual objects. I would consider it a successful juxtaposition if I learn more about the individual items that have been brought together.

Junge: I was not sure if "Vessel Center" was an installation or a "Museum of Vessels," thus an encyclopedic statement. For me this is what remained an unresolved discrepancy.

Rahman-Steinert: And the exciting question behind the entire project was: how did the abundance and diversity of vessels here in the museum come about in the first place? In the end that hasn't really been

answered. For East Asia for example that is a central issue, because in the earlier rituals, vessels assumed a much greater role, comparable to the status of a painting in the West or in Europe. Those are completely different concepts of "world" and that was not really visible amidst all this diversity.

Have further questions been raised or insights been gained through these installations and the accompanying communicative process?

Heller: Significant differences were revealed in the attempt to gain insight into what these objects actually represent – for the respective culture of origin, for the collection, for each and every one of us personally. Western history of art knows numerous assemblages of the most diverse objects – for example by the Surrealist movement, where they presented objects from the Hopi, daily objets trouvés and their own works of art, all in the same exhibition.
In an ethnological context this automatically raises resistance. Many colleagues, in my opinion, have a biased sense of responsibility towards "their" cultures. That's why, at any price, they want to prevent "wrong" impressions being created and attempt to protect the museum's artifacts by drawing clear boundaries. But in this way any kind of fun or playfulness gets lost. For me it would be a great achievement if this sense of playfulness could be regained by the Humboldt-Forum – whilst still acknowledging the responsibility of the custodian for the objects and retaining respect for the artifacts.

Junge: There is this attitude that you have described: you stand up for "your" culture. But I believe that we've come further than that. I have, for instance, organized an exhibition "Weltsprache Abstraktion" ("World Language Abstraction")[2] in which I presented a picture by Paul Klee alongside a piece of Kuba textile from Congo. We played with that. Sometimes you have to have the confidence to overcome the thoughtfulness of the ethnologists and to juxtapose things that have nothing to do with each other in terms of their origin or history.

Rahman-Steinert: I like the fact that we are "custodians" of the objects in order to make them more accessible to the visitor, and that is why we have to search for different ways of accomplishing that goal.

Heller: That is easier of course with changing exhibitions – in the Humboldt-Forum however we are dealing with permanent exhibitions. And to come back to the video installation "Pouring_Giving" for a moment: I am convinced that it would continue to hold its ground in a permanent exhibition. The Humboldt Lab is looking for and finding these qualities, and for that that we need an approach that is often intricate and then again more open, to achieve a continual state of critical analysis.

[1] *"Springer: Purnakumbha" by Martina Stoye, Probebühne 1*
[2] *"Weltsprache Abstraktion. Gestalt, Magie und Zeichen," Ethnologisches Museum Dahlem, 2006*

Martin Heller is a member of the management board of the Humboldt Lab Dahlem and is responsible for the contextual concept development of the Humboldt-Forum.

Dr. Peter Junge studied ethnology, sociology and history in Marburg and Berlin. Between 1980 and 1991 he was director of several projects on the documentation of German colonial history at the Übersee-Museum Bremen. From 1991 until 2001 he was curator of the African collection there and later director of the ethnological department. In 2002 he came to the Ethnologische Museum in Berlin, where he was curator of the African collection until 2014 and then director of the department of communications.

Uta Rahman-Steinert studied Sinology and the history of art at the Humboldt-Universität, Berlin, subsequently spending two years in Beijing where she studied at the Central Academy of Fine Arts. Since 1987 she has been research associate for the East Asia collection at the Staatliche Museen zu Berlin (East) and, since the amalgamation of Berlin's museums in 1992, she has held a position at the Museum für Asiatische Kunst.

Barbara Schindler works in the field of cultural PR. Together with Christiane Kühl she supervises the online documentation of the projects for the Humboldt Lab Dahlem.

The interview took place in July 2014 in Berlin.

Museum of Vessels / Credits

A project of the Probebühne 1, March 14 through May 12, 2013

Curator: Nicola Lepp
Co-curator: Nina Wiedemeyer
In cooperation with: Ursula Gillmann, scenographer, atelier gillmann
Graphics: Trinidad Moreno Design, Philipp Landgraf
Assistant: Henriette Keppler
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Translations: Laurie Schwartz
Exhibition assembly and art handling: zehnpfennig und weber
Media technology: EIDOTECH
Restoration supervision: Hildegard Heine, Lena Lang

Media installations
Vessel Activities (film installation): found footage montage from ethnographic film material, editing: Anna Henckel-Donnersmarck, 13 min loop
Pouring_Giving (film installation): direction and editing: Anna Henckel-Donnersmarck, camera: Daniel Möller, sound: Hannes Marget, 8 min loop
The Emptiness of Vessels (1) (film installation): direction and montage: Moritz Fehr, camera assistant: Marcel Dickhage, three films of 1.30 min duration; Part 2 (sound installation): concept and composition: Moritz Fehr; programming: Benjamin Voßler
Vessels in Peril (sound installation): direction and montage: Stefan Matlik, sound: Christian Mias

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Museum of Vessels / Imprint Documentation

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“Museum of Vessels: Vessel Center,” photo: Jens Ziehe

“Museum of Vessels: Vessel Activities,” photo: Jens Ziehe

“Museum of Vessels: The Abundance of Vessels,” photo: Jens Ziehe

“Museum of Vessels: Vessels in Peril,” photo: Jens Ziehe

“Museum of Vessels: Pouring_Giving,” photo: Jens Ziehe

“Museum of Vessels: The Emptiness of Vessels,” photo: Jens Ziehe

“Museum of Vessels: The Emptiness of Vessels,” photo: Jens Ziehe