



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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Pre-Show / Teaser

Prolog, launch, epilog – or simply Pre-Show: together with the artist Karin Sander, the architects Barbara Holzer and Tristan Kobler, created a lively welcome gesture for the Dahlem museum foyer. The installation “Identities on Display” was the result, consisting of 26 display cases. They were set up in a staggered formation, serving as glass cloakrooms. The overall impression was defined by the coats and possessions of the changing visitors, like a narrative of presence and absence, like an airlock between the exterior and the interior of the museum – and a trigger, to inspire a new way of seeing the presentation of the ethnological collections.

Pre-Show. Identities on Display / Project Description

The Foyer as an Experience

by Martin Heller

The very first event of the newly installed Humboldt Lab was a workshop that took place in Dahlem in June 2012. With the title “Asking Questions” it was concerned with subject matters that arose directly from the experience with the museums on site. Among the participating designers was Barbara Holzer from the office Holzer Kobler Architekturen. She was particularly intrigued by the large, empty and somehow inhospitable foyer, which visitors to the Dahlem Museums had to negotiate before they could decide whether to first visit the Ethnologische Museum (to the right) or the Museum für Asiatische Kunst (to the left).

This disparate entrance situation showed clearly that the foyer was organized very differently in terms of functionality in pre-unification times, when the Gemäldegalerie also belonged to Dahlem. At the same time the significance of such entrance areas came up in the discussion and, in general, the question of first impressions as an exploratory meeting. The opportunity for the museum to address essential emotions, and convey certain messages, to the as yet impartial and open visiting public was also addressed.



The Exhibition Before the Exhibition

Out of that emerged the “Pre-Show” as one of the first projects of the Humboldt Lab Dahlem. “Pre-Show” was an attempt to design a temporary installation that would greet and impress the visitor and be a first statement on behalf of both museums. It would also function as an adieu when they leave.

During the brainstorming process, an in-house workshop prepared by Holzer Kobler Architekturen for the museum management and a number of curators, played an important role. They discussed matters of content, as well as the didactic and scenographic possibilities available for such a project, in order to build a bridge between the daily life of Europeans outside the museums and the innumerable unknown “alien” cultures and time scales inside.

The workshop itself reflected related narrative elements from the fields of the arts and media (intro, trailer, titles, prolog, overture, teaser) and examined these, on the basis of examples, in terms of usability. The different justifications for such choices were discussed extensively: just as a pre-show in an amusement park or the overture in an opera function as obligatory introductions for all visitors, so do teasers and similar marketing instruments offer particular experiences that are disconnected from the real narrative for which they are signposts. Barbara Holzer and Tristan Kobler also showed artistic works in which similar interests are manifested – for instance in works by Olafur Eliasson, Mike Meiré or Karin Sander.

During the follow-up of this presentation, a whole range of themes and content issues came up, about what would be suitable as a joint and effective emblem for both museums. The longing for the unknown and “alien” belongs in there just as much as the wish, already to be made clear in the entrance hall, that in order to understand the Dahlem collections and exhibitions, every form of Eurocentrism has to be banished. Very quickly, though, it became clear that the museums wished to place their visitors at the center – a demand that also defines the Humboldt-Forum’s planning work.

Time Limited Exhibit: “Identities on Display”

From such preparation work Holzer and Kobler developed three concrete proposals for projects, out of which one of them won the clearest approbation by the Humboldt Lab management: an experiment that arose in collaboration with the artist Karin Sander and that was named “Identities on Display.”

The basic idea was extraordinarily simple: the visitors would be invited to deposit their clothing and bags, not in the usual cloakroom, that was almost invisible from the entrance area, but to place them in full public view, in glass cabinets.

For this purpose Holzer and Sander placed in the foyer 26 specially made lockers, over two meters high, with three sides made of transparent glass. A basic model was made for single visitors; another was designed for couples or small groups. But there were also lockers made especially for school classes or groups of children. The key in the lock could be removed by inserting a coin, which could be retrieved at the end of the visit.

Two complementary effects were in the foreground. The first was that the foyer was transformed from being a no-man’s-land to a kind of landscape, which made a rapid traversing impossible, and visitors, instead, were gently guided around the transparent hindrances. And the second effect was, that every visitor was obliged to make a decision to place their possessions on display, or to use the traditional cloakroom and remain anonymous, even before entering the actual exhibition space.

The reaction was, as expected, varied. Some didn’t understand the invitation or rejected it; some seemed to consider the new cloakroom lockers a result of building renovation work and accepted it without a second thought. If the weather was inclement or the museum was full, more jackets, coats, umbrellas and such had to be stowed, and the demand for the glass lockers was accordingly high.

As a rule, though, the public played the game with a great sense of fun. That can be seen from many examples, in the careful arrangement of their own items, which revealed an awareness of being exhibited. An awareness of their own identity as part of a heterogeneous group, with a similar motivation and led by a similar sense of enjoyment, based on a social group understanding, and they were happy to take their place in that context – without demanding special representation or a reward.



A Successful Experiment

It was this low threshold that made the “Pre-Show” so attractive. As recipients of the museum’s exhibiting and communication efforts, it provided the visitors with a representative corporeality, which manifested upon entry, and disappeared again upon leaving the Dahlem collections.

No more, but also no less. And it was amazing that after only a short time the installation by Holzer/Kobler and Sander had already lost its provisional character, and became accepted as a part of the museum itself, and above that, was involved in numerous events. The emptiness at the end of the “Pre-Show” left a number of colleagues with a small sense of loss, a sort of phantom pain, as if the museum had lost its visitors, although that was far from being the case.

Martin Heller is a member of the management board of the Humboldt Lab Dahlem and responsible for the conceptual content of the Humboldt-Forum.

Pre-Show. Identities on Display / Positions

The Museum Welcomes its Guests

The foyer as an extended exhibition space, personal possessions as museum exhibits and what it means to confront the public with itself: the architect Barbara Holzer, the artist Karin Sander and curator Monika Zessnik in conversation on the “Pre-Show. Identities on Display.”

Interview: Barbara Schindler

Along with Holzer Kobler Architekturen, you were asked to come up with a contribution for the Humboldt Lab. Was it clear from the outset where the focus would be in terms of content?

Barbara Holzer: The basic idea came about in June 2012 when we were invited by Martin Heller to the workshop “Asking Questions.” I was particularly interested in the theme of “entrances” in a museum context: how can one transport the visitor from their own daily world into other cultures and times, and, what significance do ethnological collections have today? As a result of our discussions I became interested in developing such an “entrance” or “pre-show” on this subject.

During its further development you began collaborating with Karin Sander. What led you to this?

Holzer: We enjoy collaborative work because, over and over again, it helps us discover new ways of reflecting things. Karin Sander and I have met on numerous occasions and I thought that this could be an exciting challenge for both of us. When I contacted Karin Sander she was also taken with the idea of a collaboration. That’s how we both began working on the project.

Could you reconstruct the moment when the idea took shape for a work in the foyer, involving the adaptation of the convention of the cloakroom?

Karin Sander: After we’d looked at the Dahlem collections we met in the foyer. It became immediately clear to us that this was the place that interested both of us the most. We spent a considerable time there, looked and observed. In terms of an artistic approach I wanted the activities that take place in the entrance area to be incorporated into the theme of the piece of work itself. Two visitors were what sparked off the idea for me: one was wearing pink rubber boots and a brown pullover, the other was wearing brown rubber boots and a pink pullover, and the items that they handed in to the cloakroom had also been chosen with care. Personal accessories are then encountered again in the secure exhibition space of the museum. However, there they come from other epochs and cultures, but they still have links to individuals, who are no longer present, but who are brought alive for us in connection with the collection. The context of this contemporary relationship interested me. The idea of confronting historical exhibits from all around the world with ones from today, was not immediately obvious, but came about solely through observation and in dialog, as a result of this complex situation.

The result was the setting up of exhibition cases in the foyer, which guests could use as their wardrobe. What



played a more important role for you: the playful interaction with the cases or the pre-empting of the exhibition cases and presentations that would be seen later in the museum?

Sander: To begin with, the showcases functioned like conventional lockers, but made of glass, so that everything placed in them became an exhibit. The work has the title "Identities on Display" and visitors reacted to this cross between utilitarian furniture and installational aesthetics by arranging their belongings in the glass cases in a conscious way. We thus indirectly created personal portraits of individuals as well as constantly changing "exhibitions" that are, together with their exhibits, related to the weather or season, but at the same time establish social, historical and cultural references.

Holzer: The exciting thing was that we had removed the exhibition cases that are normally found inside the museum and offered them to visitors so that they could exhibit their very own personal items. In this way we attempted to show the public that even in terms of their own lives today they are part of a broader historical arc. Perhaps visitors ask themselves: what will remain from today and how will we communicate our own culture tomorrow? Can one recognize the individual from the items left in the cases? What items give us information today about different cultures? What motivated us, was the idea of being able to turn that into an exhibition and to provoke a process of thought.

What interested you in the exhibition in terms of communication?

Monika Zessnik: When conducting visitor surveys I ask for age, gender, and perhaps educational background - it's more difficult in terms of interests. The longer "Pre-Show" ran, the more I realized what potential the project had, because it told us so much about the public itself. Because visitors didn't merely show what they had and were wearing, they also engaged in an act of putting themselves on display: in one case, for instance, only a hat was placed into the display case, or a toy pistol - well, I hoped it wasn't a real one! The project had a strong participatory character with unexpected outcomes - I liked that.

Could one say that such a participatory aspect is characteristic for your work?

Sander: Yes. My works attempt to provide a sort of framework, upon which the observer can build. To begin with, we had problems communicating how and what the work itself accomplished. The Humboldt Lab had great doubts, but we were convinced that the visitors would quickly comprehend how to utilize the work and how they could become part of it. What is fundamentally important to me is that the works can be understood without textual explanations.

Holzer: To leave classical didacticism behind - that's precisely what interested me as well. When the initial confrontation with a subject does not take place via a panel of text, but in a different way - via a direct experimental approach - and at the same time to work with strong images - that fascinates me too.

With the "Pre-Show," in contrast to other Humboldt Lab projects, you have not selected historical objects as your point of departure. Why?

Holzer: With "Pre-Show" we didn't want to point directly to the collections, but to open up a dialog space in the foyer. In essence, with this work, we are interested in the visitors' internal debate. In a subtle way we wanted to prepare them to think about the question of how cultures are exhibited in the museum and to sensitize them to the actual presentation of the museum's collections.

Sander: In the museums of Dahlem we looked at everyday objects that have come from very different places - jewelry, items of clothing. But then asked ourselves, what about the here and now? We have attempted to make the jump from there, from the museum visitor's point of arrival, to the objects that are actually exhibited in the museum. So there are, of course, connections established to the collections, but not specific ones to any particular object.

Zessnik: Basically, the work aims to provide an answer to the question that cultural history museums ask themselves, i.e. how can we present human culture without humans? And that's why I found that a very perceptive introduction or, as we called it, Pre-Show.

That prompts the question, how exactly did you arrive at the title for this Humboldt Lab project?

Holzer: It developed out of the subject matter of the two-day workshop held in June 2012. An exhibition needs a sort of "braking lane," a place of deceleration for the visitor, a space where they can become sensitized and adapt from their everyday lives to the museum visit. In museum terminology the word "prolog" is used a lot. We re-phrased it as "Pre-Show," because it's more open and has fewer museum-like or literary connotations. The glass exhibition cases, set at angles, become hindrances, acting as a brake, forcing the visitor to slow



down. That was very important to us.

Is “Pre-Show. Identities on Display” an installation which would work in places other than in this ethnological museum?

Sander: I think so. Every location has something special, and that determines the approach and the first deliberations. From there the path takes you to a specific work, which, even though it is created for a specific location, still has validity in terms of other connections beyond that. If it doesn't work on a general level, then – at least that's my experience – a piece of work doesn't function as a whole. “Identities on Display,” can therefore also be shown in other exhibition locations, but would have a very different resonance and its reception would take a different direction.

Holzer: This work raises the very general question for museums, of how one deals with entrance and working areas. For instance, the cloakrooms are always hidden and not visible from the entrance area. It is simply a question of purely functional areas. The project “Pre-Show” managed to question this convention. After all, even everyday things can be transferred into an experience and not only an examination of an Indian costume behind glass! We need a sort of “humus” for participative experiments, which museums can provide. In this way even the handing over of coats at the cloakroom can become a museum experience.

Together with Tristan Kobler, Barbara Holzer runs the architectural office Holzer Kobler Architekturen in Zürich and Berlin, which was founded in 2004. The international practice covers a broad spectrum from urban development to architecture, from scenography to the curating of exhibitions. Since 2010 Barbara Holzer teaches as professor at the Peter Behrens School of Architecture (PBSA) in Dusseldorf.

Karin Sander is a renowned German artist. Her work can be found in numerous museums: The Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), New York, Kunstmuseum Stuttgart and Staatsgalerie Stuttgart, Kunstmuseum St. Gallen, The National Museum of Art, Osaka, and others. Since 2007 she has held the chair of Professor of Architecture and Art at the ETH Zürich.

Monika Zessnik is curator for American ethnology and communications at the Ethnologisches Museum der Staatlichen Museen zu Berlin. Previously, she was curator for education at the Staatlichen Museen zu Berlin, director of communications at the Ibero-Amerikanisches Institut and co-ordinating project manager in the Haus der Kulturen der Welt in Berlin.

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

This interview took place in Berlin, in September 2014.

Pre-Show. Identities on Display / Credits

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Installation view "Pre-Show," photo: Jens Ziehe



Installation view "Pre-Show," photo: Jens Ziehe



Installation view "Pre-Show," photo: Jens Ziehe



Installation view "Pre-Show," photo: Andrea Rossetti



Installation view "Pre-Show," photo: Karin Sander