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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Game of Thrones / Teaser

"Game of Thrones" featured the mise-en-scène of a Chinese Emperor's Throne from the collection of the Museum für Asiatische Kunst (Kangxi Period, 1662-1722). Konstantin Grcic, Kirstine Roepstorff, Simon Starling, and Zhao Zhao presented different contexts for an exhibition arranged into a seemingly absurd juxtaposition of four throne rooms. Thus, the experiment distanced itself from a reconstruction of architectonic relationships; instead, it referenced the various levels of the historical artifact to create associative experiences in a contemporary context. The project ventured to take an unusual approach toward the trappings of power of a land that has long been reduced to its exoticism in Europe and inquired into the potential of scenic interpretation in the museum.

Game of Thrones / Project Description

by Angela Rosenberg

The exhibition "Game of Thrones" dealt with experimental artistic forms for presenting historical artifacts and the possibilities for exhibition architecture, design, and scenography. Three international artists and a designer working alongside each other engaged with an outstanding ensemble from the collection of the Museum für Asiatische Kunst, Berlin. The Chinese imperial throne and its accompanying screen, products of the imperial workshops in the Kangxi era (1662–1722), were at the center of Konstantin Grcic's, Kirstine Roepstorff's, Simon Starling's, and Zhao Zhao's deliberations. The artistic experiments of "Game of Thrones" moved away from reconstructing architectural palace details toward explicitly substantive spheres of reference. In the context of the Humboldt Lab, the idea was to create modes of access to the exhibits that would facilitate sensuous, associative experience and discursive spaces that reach into our present. These were made accessible as models in an almost absurd-seeming juxtaposition of four throne rooms. The setting for these imaginary throne situations was four abstract, original-size replica throne ensembles. These functioned as placeholders for the actual throne, which could not be moved for conservational reasons. Named after George R.R. Martin's bestselling fantasy novel "A Game of Thrones," the project adopted an unusual approach to the insignia of power of a country that has long been reduced to exoticism in Europe,

and simultaneously inquired into the potential for scenic interpretation in the museum.

Background Research

The exhibition was preceded by a research phase that addressed the presentation of Chinese imperial thrones in palaces, museums, and collections. Within the context of the exhibition a selection of textual and image materials documented the architecture and design of imperial palace complexes in China, and their following traditional, canonical models – few of which, however, have been preserved as originals at their original locations.

While palaces in China or big film productions give an ostensibly authentic picture of Chinese throne rooms, it is hardly possible to convey such historical architectural contexts in a museum. Instead, thrones are often presented in bare, neutral approximations to the imperial context. Presenting the Chinese imperial throne at the Museum für Asiatische Kunst, Berlin, was also not unproblematic, since its architectural surroundings at its original location no longer existed.

Artistic Implementation

The artistic interventions by Konstantin Grcic, Kirstine Roepstorff, Simon Starling, and Zhao Zhao treated precisely this question as the occasion to ponder the possibilities for alternative throne-room architectures and to develop approaches that open up new interpretive and educational possibilities for museums. Each of the artists' and the designer's individual proposals created alternative ways of seeing the museological object. Their four distinct approaches – analytic/minimalist, provocative/emotional, poetic/narrative, conceptual/atmospheric – treated the throne as an insignia of power, as the center of absolute power, or staged it as a symbol of violence and injustice. Focusing on different aspects such as shape, design, setting, history, and symbolism, they facilitated diverse paths of access to the historical object, opening a kaleidoscopic view of history that establishes contact with the present.

"migong"

Konstantin Grcic is an industrial designer who designs products often described as reduced and minimalist. He combines this formal rigor with humor, acuity, and elegance. His design presentation of the throne consisted of a walk-in labyrinth based on the angular scroll pattern of the throne ensemble. Grcic took this ornamentation often found in Chinese art as his point of departure, to create a kind of "safe space", referencing the nested structure of Chinese palace architecture. Numerous buildings and courtyards or administrative hurdles had to be passed in order to reach the emperor. The presentation of a throne in a museum is not dissimilar. Grcic's installation titled "migong" (labyrinth) confronted viewers with an obstacle that signaled authority, created order, decelerated – and emphatically bade them to join the line. The gesture pointed toward the hierarchical structures of the imperial palace no less than the furnishings of public places, not least of museums. It passed ironic and critical comment on the metaphor, often overworked in the museum context, of creating "broad access" to the exhibit.

"Daughters of the Immortal Mother"

The artist Kirstine Roepstorff works with the principle of collage and utilizes wide ranges of source material and reference systems. The light objects in her installation "Daughters of the Immortal Mother" referred to the image program of the Berlin throne ensemble, and brought out the "media" quality of lanterns. Originally invented in China and banned during the Cultural Revolution, lanterns in China are not just decorative in function. Hung outside houses, variously colored and furnished with written characters, they can signal death, birth, or other social events. With a framework of steel, wood, or bamboo, and covered with ribbons or paper, Roepstorff's objects not only cast light in the room, but also shadows. The artist was inspired by figurative motifs from Chinese mythology – phoenix, dragon, tortoise, and tiger – following the Chinese doctrine of the five elements that explores the laws of dynamic processes such as becoming, transformation, and decay. Roepstorff's lanterns produced a dramatic interplay of bright light and harsh shadow that not only illuminated the throne ensemble but also animated and complemented the various figures depicted in it.

"Screen Screen"

In his art Simon Starling engages with natural and cultural processes of change. He introduces artifacts from different spheres of science, culture, and art history into unexpected relations with each other. In his video installation "Screen Screen" Starling confronted the throne with its own depiction. The artist showcased its rich inlays and the way they reflect and alter light. His installation also addressed the arrangement of throne and screen, mirroring it in the relation to video projector and projection screen, as well as in the mutual interdependence of their effects. The film sequence explored in close-up the artisanal finesse of tiny details of the throne and screen. Hardly perceptible to the unaided eye, its geometrical structures call to mind the pixels of computer images. The analogy points to surprising correspondences between the historical objet d'art and current media technology, but also between traditional and modern techniques of picture production in China, no less than their worldwide everyday impact. The installation was accompanied by classical Chinese music interpreted and played on the qin, the oldest traditional Chinese string instrument, by the contemporary musician Liang Mingyue.

"Waterfall"

The thematic, formal, and media variety of Zhao Zhao's artistic work is an expression of the artist's critical stance toward Chinese politics. To question the construction of established meanings, he challenges social reality and its ideological conventions no less than cultural stereotypes and the dominance of various, mainly European, art-historical categories. In Zhao Zhao's installation "Waterfall" the imperial throne was immersed in a torrent of red wax that hardened into picturesque shapes. By concealing the assumedly artistic form of the throne in a gesture suggesting physical violence, the artist simultaneously renders transparent his own and his artistic context's critique of this relic of the Chinese monarchy. The artist's thoughts on the subject, along with reactions and commentaries from members of the public in China, were available in the exhibition as string of blog entries, to be read on a monitor. The artist's blog, partly in English translation, enabled Berlin museum visitors to participate in the lively and controversial debate around the museum artifact and its treatment. The dynamics of this democratic exchange contrasted markedly with the seemingly frozen motion of the red wax, which gestured, on the one hand, at the imperial past and its structures of violence, on the other, at the stagnation besetting the current Chinese regime's democratic efforts.

A Filmic Approach

A further approach to institutionalized imperial power and the celebration of the emperor was realized by the artist and filmmaker Daniel Kohl. He took samples from historical movies as a starting point, selecting sequences that depicted Chinese throne rooms in the Forbidden City. Deconstructing the narrative flow of the films as well as the spatial settings of the film images, he sampled short sequences and recomposed them to a puzzle-like, virtual 3D-space. Titled "babao suipian" (mixed snippets), his looped collage of moving images made the filmic gaze directed at the potentates on their thrones itself its subject.

In conclusion, the exhibition "Game of Thrones" made strikingly evident, how experimental artistic formats can enrich the presentation of a distinguished collection object, not only formally but also with regards to content. This way the exhibition provided seminal research, in theory and practice, for the conceptualization of the new design for the future throne room at the Humboldt-Forum, which will be designed by the architect Wang Shu.

Angela Rosenberg is an art historian, curator, and writer. A central theme of her work is the structuring of collections and the possibilities for interdisciplinary exhibition projects. She has been publishing regularly for museums, collections, and magazines on contemporary art, in particular the Berlin art scene, since 2000.

In addition, the documentation compiled by Angela Rosenberg for the project "Game of Thrones" as well as the symposium "Remembering as a Constructive Act," can be downloaded here as PDF. The online publication is also recorded in the German National Library catalog (URN: urn:nbn:de:101:1-201403172737).

Documentation "Game of Thrones" / "Remembering as a Constructive Act" (PDF)

Game of Thrones / Positions

Model of / Model for: Functionality and the Exhibition

by Jörn Schafaff

The four screens and the thrones before them are painted either gray or white. They are lifesize replicas of a pair of objects from the collection of the Museum für Asiatische Kunst, Berlin. Their monotone coloring emphasizes their distinction from the originals. They aim to convey no naturalistic impression but to bring out particular features – outline, shape, size, volume. They suffice to convey the shape of the originals and an idea of the space that the screen and throne would take up were they to be presented. For this is the issue that the "Game of Thrones" addresses: How might the ensemble be adequately presented and what aspects should be taken into account?

To answer these questions, a designer and three artists were invited to engage with the pieces and to apply their insights to one of the replicated ensembles. The research material put at their disposal also forms the prelude to the exhibition. An illustrated wall text in an anteroom informs visitors about comparable ensembles and their placement in Chinese palaces, in collections and museums. An art-film-collage by Daniel Kohl takes a look at throne rooms in Hollywood movies. In the windowless exhibition hall itself, visitors are met by a cruciform exhibition architecture and four almost square rooms of identical size. The movable walls reach neither to the ceiling nor to the sidewalls of the hall, so that they seem a bit like stage flats. This in turn brings out the stage-like character of the four exhibition spaces for which the four presentation scenarios were developed. While the designer Konstantin Grcic and the artist Kirstine Roepstorff primarily addressed the structuring of the space, the artists Simon Starling and Zhao Zhao dealt with the exhibits themselves.

The model character of the scenarios is immediately apparent. On closer consideration, though, the exhibits themselves, the fact that they are fourfold, and the square exhibition space raise the question as to what model exactly is being presented in the "Game of Thrones." This is not least a result of the ambiguity of the concept of a model. "In general usage," as John Miller for example remarks, "the word model means, alternately: an example to be emulated, an ideal, a simplified representation, a particular version of a product, and, ultimately, a person who poses for art, fashion or advertising."[1] Even if we restrict ourselves to the meaning of a "simplified representation," classification is still no easy matter, because, as Miller goes on to state: "As a simplified representation, the model has the virtue of comprehensibility. It may represent things as they are, as they might be or as they should not be."[2] Which of these aims is or are being addressed by the exhibition scenarios ultimately remains ambiguous. The gray or white replicas are models of the original items in the collection; but they do not illustrate the complexity of the originals for visitors in the way that, say, architectural models exemplify architectural structures. In a certain sense they are not important, serving primarily as stand-ins upon which the potential reality of artistic treatments can be tested out. This is the chief focus of attention. But do they have any model function at all? If so, then to represent things "as they might be." Yet it is not clear what exactly the four scenarios represent. They are certainly not practical suggestions for some future presentation of the imperial throne at the Humboldt-Forum. In particular Zhao's wax-covered variant is out of the question on conservational grounds. Are we dealing here with specific suggestions for an artistic intervention? This would be a curious anticipation of a future that does not yet exist and that is entirely undecided. The logic of intervention requires an already existing situation; but the only definite thing about "Game of Thrones" is the objects and the spatial situations described above, where the latter clearly relate to no specific rooms, least of all to any future spatial arrangement at the Humboldt-Forum. So the question arises whether the four presentations are model scenarios at all.

What exactly does "Game of Thrones" show visitors to the exhibition? A possible answer would be that the effect of both the individual contributions and of the exhibition as a whole unfolds at the level of commentary. Grcic's, Roepstorff's, Starling's, and Zhao's installations comment on aspects of the exhibits under consideration, for example in regard to their historical function of representing power. Further, they comment on the principle of museum presentation itself. The red wax with which Zhao has covered the model throne and partition recalls blood, but also the color of the Chinese national flag. Together with a blog that he set going, his work can be seen as a call for contemporary contextualizations of artifacts and against their reduced presentation as aesthetic objects. In Simon Starling's case the video projector which he has placed on the throne assumes the position of the emperor. By confronting the exhibits and the projected film the placement turns into a comment on the power of media communication. The video shows details of the screen that visitors to the exhibition – who are usually kept at a distance from the exhibits – would otherwise not be

able to see. At the same time, the detailed close-ups undermine the idea of a discrete object that can be grasped in its entirety. Roepstorff hangs lanterns based on traditional Chinese models in the exhibition space, apparently favoring an atmospheric approach while at the same time setting the throne in a further cultural context. On top of this, the illumination brings out the fact that viewers are not simply confronted with exhibits, but that, together with them, they are joint participants in a presentational situation. Similarly the barrier-like elements with which Grcic has furnished the space: Their labyrinthine arrangement regulates viewers' movements, making one aware of one's physical presence, so that a relation between imperial power and the institutional power of the museum can be experienced bodily.

All things considered, what the four scenarios particularly bring out is the relativity of all museum presentations. Taken as a whole, the exhibition can be grasped as a call to make this relativity the conceptual foundation of future presentations at the Humboldt-Forum. This would further involve recognizing and giving prominence to the fact that every endeavor to bring a culture closer by exhibiting its objects entails depriving these objects of their cultural context. The multiple abstractional measures that detach the scenarios from any direct relation to reality seem to hint at a danger – namely, that scenographic attempts to bridge museum displacements inevitably threaten to obscure the cultural, social, and political implications of collecting, ordering, and presenting. From this point of view, the function of the exhibition "Game of Thrones" is less to provide models of future presentational practice (nor in relation to the inclusion of artists) than to call to mind the challenges to which those involved with the conception and planning of the Humboldt-Forum must rise.

[1] *John Miller, "Modell / Model," in Jörn Schafaff, Nina Schallenberg, Tobias Vogt (eds.), "Kunst-Begriffe der Gegenwart: Von Allegorie bis Zip," Walther König, Cologne: 2013, 193–197, 193.*

[2] *Ibid., 194.*

Dr. Jörn Schafaff works on the Collaborative Research Centre 626 "Aesthetic Experience and the Dissolution of Artistic Limits" at the Freie Universität, Berlin. His special interest is the situativity of artistic displays. From 2009 to 2011 he took part in developing the "Cultures of the Curatorial" course at the Hochschule für Grafik und Buchkunst in Leipzig.

Game of Thrones / Credits

A project of the Probebühne 2, June 18 through October 27, 2013

Curator: Angela Rosenberg
Research assistant: Nadia Pilchowski
Exhibition construction: Nadine Ney, Günter Krüger
Model construction: Werkstatt für Theaterplastik, Berlin
Media support: eidotech, Berlin
Graphics: Renate Sander
Film collage: Daniel Kohl
Translation: Karl Hoffmann
Content and organizational support: Winfried Bullinger, Lars-Christian Koch, Uta Rahman-Steinert, Klaas Ruitenbeek, Ching-Ling Wang, Albrecht Wiedmann
Production of Zhao Zhao's installation: Dipl.-Ing. Klaus-Peter Klenke, Buchal-Kerzen, Reetzerhütten; Susan Si, Beijing; Martin Weber, ATND, Berlin

Konstantin Grcic: "migong," 2013
mixed-media installation
mdf (model throne, screen, dais), galvanized steel tubes, tube connectors, mirror
variable dimensions
courtesy Konstantin Grcic

Kirstine Roepstorff: "Daughters of the Immortal Mother," 2013
mixed-media installation
mdf (model throne, screen, dais), various materials (light objects)
variable dimensions
courtesy Studio Roepstorff, Berlin

Simon Starling: "Screen Screen," 2013
mixed-media installation
mdf (model throne, screen), HD video projection with sound
variable dimensions
length: 6:24 min
camera: Christoph Manz
production and editing: Annette Ueberlein
music: "Tien-feng-huan-pei" (The Sound of the Jade Jewelry that Fills the Heavens), "Liang-xiao-yin" (Merry Evening), played by Liang Mingyue (qin), "Yangguan san die—Parting at Yangguan" (recorded 1975), ed. Artur Simon, 2002, in cooperation with the department for Musikethnologie, Medien-Technik and Berliner Phonogramm-Archiv, Ethnologisches Museum, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin – Preußischer Kulturbesitz, Wergo SM 1706 2
courtesy Simon Starling; neugerriemschneider, Berlin

Zhao Zhao: "Waterfall," 2013
mixed-media installation
mdf (model throne, screen, dais), paraffin wax, red pigment, computer, monitor screen
variable dimensions
courtesy Alexander Ochs Galleries Berlin | Beijing

Daniel Kohl: "babao suipian," 2013
DVD, color, without sound, loop
length: 3:23 min

Game of Thrones / Imprint Documentation

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Chinese Emperor Throne, © Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Museum für Asiatische Kunst, photo: Jens Ziehe

Konstantin Grcic, "migong," photo: Jens Ziehe

Kirstine Roepstorff, "Daugthers of the Immortal Mother," photo: Jens Ziehe, © VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2015

Simon Starling, "Screen Screen," photo: Jens Ziehe

Zhao Zhao, "Waterfall," photo: Jens Ziehe

Visitors at the opening, photo: Sebastian Bolesch