



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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Talking Knowledge / Teaser

During the professional life of a museum curator, a wealth of knowledge is accumulated that cannot be passed on only through academic texts or in the shape of exhibitions. The project “Talking Knowledge,” communicates this wealth of knowledge at the same time as tying it into the oral history tradition. A curator, shortly before his retirement, is accompanied by a film team and together they wander through the exhibitions and the museum depot, following his narratives. This Humboldt Lab project resulted in 27.5 hours of film material and an extensive narration on the subject of 180 artifacts in the North America collection curated by Peter Bolz. Beyond that however, this is a contemporary document, to which other museums, institutions and the public will have access in the future.

Talking Knowledge / Project Description

Every Object has its Story

by Janina Janke

The idea for this Humboldt Lab project arose during a so-called fireside chat in autumn 2011, when the Humboldt-Forum and its concept were being discussed by prominent individuals from the field of culture. On this occasion, a curator from the Ethnologisches Museum in Berlin-Dahlem provided a guided tour through “his” depot. The guided tour was transformed into a running narrative, because he had a specific story for each object. The awareness that a generational change would soon take place at the Ethnologisches Museum and the fact that the curators leaving would be taking decades of knowledge and expertise with them into retirement, led Martin Heller to come up with the project “Talking Knowledge.” Not all the senior curators liked the idea of sharing their knowledge in front of a camera. However, Peter Bolz, the curator of the North America collection and thus, of a department very popular with visitors, took up the challenge shortly before his retirement, and became the focus of a filmic portrait “Talking Knowledge.” His expertise, accumulated over 25 years, his stories, as well as his personal career trajectory as a scholar were documented in film with



the help of the collection and its artifacts. In this way, it is now preserved for successive generations of scholars and museum visitors.

The production company Filmgestalten won the commission to realize the project. From the end of September until the beginning of November 2012 a small flexible team (directors, two cameras, sound) wandered together with the ethnologist Peter Bolz and his stories through the collection, which, with 30,000 artifacts, is the largest North America collection in Europe. Before the practical implementation of "Talking Knowledge" happened, various agreements had to be made with all parties at the museum who were directly or indirectly involved: with management, the custodians, educationalists, and conservationists. A trainee at the North America department took on the coordination between the museum, the Humboldt Lab and the film team. In parallel, the directors with the curator coordinated the process and selection of content to be shot over the 20 scheduled days. In collaboration, four main subject areas were selected to be covered by the film's research: the permanent exhibition "North American Indians. From Myth to Modern," curated by Bolz in 1999, the special exhibition "Native American Modernism. Art from North America," a selection of artifacts from the depot, as well as looking at the fieldwork he personally carried out on the Plains Indians. The result was an "ad-hoc shooting script" that served the team as a rough guide through the museum's exhibition rooms. An expedition into the world of the Indian films made in the DEFA film studios and an encounter with the actor Gojko Mitić, the "Winnetou of the East," were unplanned additions.

From North America to Dahlem

Because the roughly 600 artifacts exhibited in the North America collection – bison robes, masks, furs, sculptures, baskets, photographs and much more – are just a fraction of what is stored in the museum's depot, it raised the following questions: How was this selection made and structured? Which objects did Peter Bolz consider to be particularly important and representative? Which objects were close to his heart and why? Taking these questions as their starting point, the film team moved from room to room with Peter Bolz, from display cabinet to display cabinet. The focus was the specialist knowledge of this particular scholar: as a testimony not only to his personal biography but above all to the general cultural context that went far beyond the usual "objective" facts contained in the catalogs. Also important to learn was what Peter Bolz had to say about an artifact from an ethnological and scientific perspective and what connotation the same object attained within a museum-historical context. And what stories and anecdotes he could tell, when the artifact was looked at not only from the perspective of its cultural-historic relevance but also in context to his own life. Against the background of the special exhibitions he curated on modern Native American art, Bolz talked about his personal career trajectory: as a teenager in the Native Americans Club, his degree in graphic design and his growing interest for Native American art, then finally his arrival in the Ethnologisches Museum in Berlin and his first encounter with his predecessor Horst Hartmann. We then followed Peter Bolz into another museum room that was important in his career: the office. Here he leafed through his private photo albums from the 1980s and documents from his field research with the Plains Indians. Animated by the recollections of his travels, Bolz spoke about personal encounters and friendships with the Indians on the reservations and their current problematic living and working conditions. During filming of his research collection there were also situations, in which spontaneous "moments of realization" came up, demonstrating the complex weave of one person's subjective wealth of knowledge.

During filming, detailed directors' notes were made in which the date, topic, room, clip number, camera time code and the object under discussion were all duly noted. These notes were invaluable when it came to editing and dealing with 42 hours of rushes. In addition to filming with Peter Bolz, the objects and rooms under discussion were filmed again later in selected perspectives and angles. In this way material was generated that could be used additionally to illustrate his narration and to provide an exact filmic representation of the objects as well as the surroundings. The editor Anja Keyßelt collaborated with the two directors on "Talking Knowledge" from December 2012 to February 2013. The result was a film documentation about the personal store of curator Peter Bolz's knowledge, running to a total of 27.5 hours, organized into 166 clips, whose individual titles are listed on a separate file. In order to be able to work with the material in an effective and selective way in the future, despite its large scope, the clip lengths have been noted, as have the key words on topics, and names of the objects covered. During the duration of Probebühne 2 selected film clips were shown separately on twelve monitors and presented at a long table. Technical options, for example a databank-supported free choice of clips, were not planned: the primary purpose of the installation was to give a comprehensive overview of the interview.



Living Knowledge

The digital film material was handed over in its entirety to the Ethnologisches Museum archive for visual anthropology and incorporated into the internal museum databank. The original plan may have been to create a “collection object of the highest order” for the archive, but during the creation process further ideas as to its usage arose: film material as a guide in the display depot of the future Humboldt-Forum, the focused linking of clips with object entries in the Ethnologisches Museum databank, or in the exhibition itself or on the website. In this way the filmic interview series “Talking Knowledge” is simultaneously a stock-take of the North America collection, as well as an individual portrait of Peter Bolz as ethnologist, collector and curator during his time in Berlin. In this way the documentation serves as a kind of prototype whose multiple uses can be considered a model for other museums.

Janina Janke is a set designer and director. Since co-founding the artist formation OPER DYNAMO WEST in 2006, she has been involved in a comparative examination of buildings and spaces in Berlin and other cities. She develops concepts and implements spatial interventions, theatre projects and documentation at the interface between art, architecture and science. From 2011 to 2015 Janke has participated in the multidisciplinary research project “andere räume – knowledge through art” which is funded by the Austrian Research Fund (FWF) and seeks to connect artists and scientists.

Dr. Peter Bolz

After completing his studies in visual communications in Mainz, Bolz studied ethnology at the Goethe Universität Frankfurt am Main in 1985 completed his dissertation on the modern reservation culture of the Oglala Sioux (Lakota) in South Dakota. In 1986 he began his career at the Ethnologisches Museum Berlin, first as a museum research assistant, becoming a research collaborator and then the curator of North American ethnology; until his retirement in 2012 he was the director of the North American ethnology collection. In addition to numerous publications and his collaboration on various special exhibitions (for example “Native American Modernism. Art from North America”, 2012), Bolz developed the concept for the permanent exhibition of the Ethnologisches Museum which opened in 1999, “Indians of North America. From Myth to Modernity.”

Talking Knowledge / Positions

“We have many more stories than we can tell.”

Preserving unpublished knowledge and making it accessible to the public: Viola König, director of the Ethnologisches Museum, and Monika Zessnik, the curator of the North America collection, talk about the film documentary “Talking Knowledge.”

Interview: Barbara Schindler

We want to talk about the project “Talking Knowledge.” How did you come up with the idea for this film project, Viola König?

Viola König: The idea arose during one of the so-called fireside chats, which the chairman of the Stiftung Berliner Schloss – Humboldt-Forum, Manfred Rettig, had initiated, in order to popularize the Humboldt-Forum and its concept, in the broadest sense, amongst personalities from the cultural domain. For one of these talks, we had planned a tour of the depot led by my colleague Siegmah Nahser, who is responsible for East and North Asia. As he moved through the depot, he began to talk, and talk, and talk – and everyone was rapt, hanging on to his every word. We looked at the objects too, but above all we listened to what he had to say about the individual objects. Finally Martin Heller, who had just begun working with the Humboldt Lab Dahlem and was on the look out for initial projects, said, “We have to do something with this!” When I told him that Siegmah Nahser was only one of several curators soon to retire, the project “Talking Knowledge” was born.

Peter Bolz was chosen as the narrator. In the film he speaks eloquently and fluently, his well-formulated narratives are spiced with anecdotes and he provides exact dates. Was he consciously selected?



König: Until then we weren't aware – although we had all known Mr. Bolz a very, very long time – that he was such a wonderful storyteller. The added bonus was that Mr. Bolz, unlike the others, was prepared to participate in this experiment, that he was about to retire, and that it all took place in the last eight months of his employment with the museum. Due to those circumstances, he was able to view things from a certain distance. I think that for anyone who has worked in a museum for twenty or thirty years – which is almost an entire lifetime – their perspective shifts somewhat toward the end of their service. If we had interviewed Peter Bolz three or four years earlier, his statements would, no doubt, have come across quite differently.

How did you develop the conceptional approach to this video documentation and how close was the collaboration with the film team when it came to taking the idea further?

Monika Zessnik: The team from the Humboldt Lab chose the production and directorial team together with Peter Bolz after inviting tenders. The entire concept and organization was then developed in collaboration between Peter Bolz, Janina Janke and Franziska Seeberg. There was a shooting schedule, which specified which objects Peter Bolz would talk about.

König: Every Humboldt Lab project is different, and it would be a shame if its experimental character were to be lost. We noticed already in the short discussions with Markus Schindlbeck and Peter Junge, who are both retiring, that they would approach the project in a completely different way – and so would I. Peter Bolz took another approach.

Zessnik: Peter Bolz didn't sit in front of the steadycam and talk into the microphone; instead he had the production team in front of him to whom he talked. Basically the team was his audience.

König: That's what made the whole thing so effective. Also, because they admired him and made it clear to him.

Monika Zessnik, you are Peter Bolz's successor. He came to the Ethnologisches Museum shortly after the reunification and curated the North America collection in 1999. When he retires, after 15 years the collection will be dismantled in preparation for the move to the Humboldt-Forum. What has your experience with the Humboldt Lab project been?

Zessnik: It was a unique opportunity to immerse myself in the collection in a relatively short time and acquire much more background information than I would normally have had access to. When Mr. Bolz started working here, many objects that had been moved from here to Leipzig by the Russians after the war were being returned to Berlin. He was able to process things anew and rebuild the collection; he describes all that in his accounts. After all, we archive everything else, files and other documents, but this here – this institutional expertise – would have been lost forever.

The North America collection comprises around 30,000 objects. Peter Bolz has documented around 180 on film. Have important objects been left out, and how will you deal with any gaps?

Zessnik: The objects that have been described were on display in the permanent exhibition and are taken from groups that include 10 to 20 comparable objects. We will never have an encyclopedic or comprehensive institutional knowledge, even if we strive for that. The gap is something we can live with.

What significance does the project have for the museum?

König: Right from the start it was important for us to test new formats and realities within the Humboldt Lab: only then, in the following step, would we look at what we can utilize for the Humboldt-Forum. Naturally the Humboldt-Forum will have many visitors, but first we wanted to step away from the well-trodden paths and see for ourselves what is possible. The starting point for this project was the recognition that a vast store of unpublished knowledge can be located in a single individual. People retire and take their knowledge with them, and it is lost to the museum. And that is a great waste. Out of that arose the question, how can we retain the knowledge accumulated over decades by the curators: how do we retain it in the museum, in the collection. In the first instance, that has nothing to do with the visitors.

Zessnik: Yes, the implementation and the reactions were secondary – the resulting material was the important thing. And that will not disappear, because it is part of our databank just like photos or other knowledge carriers: it can be accessed later and at some point digitally incorporated into the exhibitions, and so on.

According to plans, the depot will be integrated into the future Humboldt-Forum exhibition space as a display depot. Do you already have a more exact idea of how the film documentation could be presented there?



König: Our exhibition concept is based on flexibility and on frequent change. The display collection will be an important part of the exhibition. This is where we will be exhibiting the entire material from North America, the prairies and plains, in a much higher density. To begin with we will only provide film excerpts with Mr. Bolz in which he deals with those regions, regardless of whether in the depot or the exhibition. We could, for instance, theoretically imagine the prairies and plains section disappearing after three years and the American Southwest coming into the display depot. Then you would hear different excerpts from "Peter Bolz." But it may well be that we will utilize them later in an exhibition module. That is completely open. We have the recordings now and can use them in a variety of ways.

Zessnik: We want to set up the display depot so that visitors will understand how research and fieldwork on an object is carried out. Because according to the "Taggesschau," knowledge that is made accessible by museums is considered credible. The more clearly we show how personalized the processing of information is, the better. Because every type of knowledge is constructed from a subjective approach. And that changes.

Until now the website of the Staatliche Museen does not carry any names, responsibilities and contact details of employees. Is "Talking Knowledge" a step toward making that public? Because in addition to information about the collection and its objects, one also learns a great deal about Peter Bolz.

Zessnik: I agree with you – that is important, because a museum, like any other cultural institution, is brought alive by the people who work there. That's why it's important to make that transparent for visitors. Usually the public only meets the supervisory staff and the mediators, and in the best case, a curator. It is, of course, gratifying, no matter how self-explanatory an exhibition is, if you have it explained to you personally by someone. After all it's all about communication.

Ms. König, you once said in an interview, "we have many more stories than we can tell." Is this project a way of closing that gap a little?

König: The Lab project has, for the first time ever, provided us with the opportunity of thinking about how we can conserve personal and institutional knowledge. I think this is only the beginning.

Prof. Dr. Viola König is the director of the Ethnologisches Museum, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin; previously she was the director of the Übersee-Museum Bremen, director of the Department of Ethnology at the Niedersächsisches Landesmuseum Hannover and museum educator at the Rautenstrauch-Joest-Museum in Cologne. She holds an honorary professorship from the Freie Universität Berlin and the Universität Bremen, and is as well visiting professor at Tulane University, New Orleans.

Monika Zessnik is the curator for American ethnology and communication at the Ethnologisches Museum, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin. Previously she was the curator for mediation and education at the Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, head of communications at the Ibero-Amerikanisches Institut and project coordinator at the Haus der Kulturen der Welt in Berlin.

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 was held in July 2014.

Talking Knowledge / Credits

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

Narrator: Peter Bolz
Producer: Manuel Kinzer, Filmgestalten
Directors: Janina Janke and Franziska Seeberg
Camera: Sunyam Riegger
Sound: Manuel Vogt
Editing: Anja Keyßelt
Second camera, assistant: Dennis Schnieber
Production assistant: Claudia Schütt
Installation construction: PA-Tischlerei



Thanks to Claudia Roch and Helene Tello for organizational and restoration supervision.

The interviews were recorded in Fall 2012 in the permanent exhibition "North American Indians. From Myth to Modern," in the special exhibition "Native American Modernism. Art from North America" (March until October 2012), in the collection depot, as well as in the curator Peter Bolz's office.

Talking Knowledge / Imprint Documentation

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Installation view "Talking Knowledge," photo: Sebastian Bolesch



Installation view "Talking Knowledge," photo: Jens Ziehe



Shooting "Talking Knowledge," © Filmgestalten

Study collection "American Ethnology": Cape made of guts from Alaska as an example of the restoration of collection artifacts (in German), 4:52 min.



**Permanent exhibition about Native North Americans: Inuit kayak with equipment, Greenland (in German),
8:20 min.**