



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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Man – Object – Jaguar / Teaser

The aim of the exhibition was to convey to museum-goers the way in which indigenous groups of the Amazonian lowlands understand the world, and to visualize the theory of perspectivism. Humans, objects and animals can equally take on the status of a person. The most important object was a shaman’s stool in the shape of a jaguar from the ethnological collection. The ethnologist Andrea Scholz and the artist Sebastián Mejía did not tell a classical story of an object, however, but placed the visitors at the center of a complex media installation: when walking through the installation, designed like an adventure path, they themselves underwent a number of perspectival changes — from human to object to animal. During the course of the process-oriented exhibition, accompanying workshops were held for specific target groups. The results were directly integrated into the installation.

Man – Object – Jaguar / Project Description

An Approach to Perspectivism

by Andrea Scholz

“The objects in the depot are alive!” – This assumption suggests itself when visiting the South American ethnological collection of the Ethnological Museum in Dahlem, for the stored ethnographic artefacts are made almost exclusively of (formerly) living material. They are part of the close connection between humans and their natural environment. However, the transformation of “nature” into “culture” is by no means a one-sided affair: wearing feathers or masks and the use of utensils such as shaman’s stools or rattles effect a power of transformation that can grant people entrance to the world of animals or animal spirits.

The basic principle of perspectivism is that all things were originally sentient, connected by a shared culture. The difference lies merely in the outer shell, the “natures”, and thus in the perspectives. Objects in the museum that are treated as supposedly cultural-historical evidence often assume the status of subjects



possessing agency in the indigenous ontologies of the Amazonian lowlands.¹ Hence, only a small mental leap lies between the insight that things are alive and the theory of perspectivism.

Despite the great relevance to ethnological museums, these approaches do not play a role in exhibitions. This may have to do with the difficulties of an adequate conveyance of theoretical discourses that are, for the most part, only held among circles of experts.

In the Humboldt-Forum, we would like to face this challenge in the future and present the South American ethnographic artefacts under the title “The Life of Things”. This includes attempts such as perspectivism, which are treated in the sense of the writing culture paradigm as subjective approaches to indigenous ontologies. Moreover, we want to avoid stripping the objects of their magic through prosaic ethnological theories.

The idea for the Lab project “Man – Object – Jaguar” resulted from the search for a corresponding form of presentation. As a consequence of the representation-critical basic attitude, the realization was conducted from the outset in cooperation with the artist Sebastián Mejía, who in earlier works has dealt with changes in perspective and the “humanity” of animals (e.g., “Es geht auch anders”). The project was additionally conceived to include the reception by certain target groups and to change specific aspects during the course of the exhibition. The experienced Eta Boeklund office was commissioned for this task.

From the Idea to its Realization

In realizing the idea in the form of a spatial installation, ethnological theories were to be brought to light along with the extent to which museal interpretations often deviate from indigenous realities. The aim was to draw a picture that does not play with exoticism and jungle fantasies, but utilises an analytical approach.

Sebastián Mejía and I viewed the collection several times and came upon the shaman’s stool in the shape of a jaguar² as the suitable object. Theodor Koch-Grünberg had acquired it from the Yekuana in the region of the upper Orinoko in 1912. Along with other utensils and ritual songs, these kinds of stools are (to this day) at the service of transforming their owners into other forms of being, as the collector describes in his travelogue.³

Sebastián Mejía sought to create an environment for presenting the shaman’s stool that would visually convey the perspective of the jaguar. Using surveillance cameras integrated as elements of the show, the perspectives are reversed: upon entering the exhibition, the visitors were filmed by a camera and projected onto a drawn basket pattern of the Yekuana⁴ on the opposite wall. The second camera was positioned in the eye of a huge drawn jaguar. The visitors recorded from the perspective of the predator were projected onto semi-transparent curtains that simultaneously served as room dividers. On one curtain, a herd of peccaries was depicted, because: “Conversely, animals do not see humans as humans. The jaguars see us as prey, for example, as a kind of wild pig, or more precisely, as peccaries.”⁵ The other curtain was penetrated by an arrow directed at half height to the beholder and additionally emphasized the image of the human as prey in the eye of the jaguar.

The stool was not placed centrally in the room, but on a plinth under the stairs behind several Plexiglas panels. These were partially embellished with scratched drawings depicting a shaman sitting on the jaguar stool, smoking a cigarette and turning into a jaguar. This visual comment on the object made its original use comprehensible for the visitors. The moment of transformation itself was shown on the middle one of the five panels with the picture of a jaguar. The two adjacent panels depicted the smoking shaman looking in different directions. The backdrop of the room was a drawn river scene.

At the opening, the wax-cylinder recording of a Yekuana shaman’s song was played. As with other aspects, the sound concept changed during the period of the exhibition.

Guide for Further Reflection

In retrospect, the idea of visualizing changes in perspective in an exhibition appears more complex than expected. The threshold to engage with it was (unintentionally) high; many visitors immediately left the installation without having actually entered the room or read one of the texts. The images they were confronted with were too disconcerting: instead of being able to view “foreign” objects in display cases, as is customary in museums, the visitors saw a distortion of themselves, while the only “ethnographic” object was virtually hidden.



Admittedly, there was a lot of room for imagination. A fact that perhaps appealed especially to children, for according to the accounts of the “live speakers”, the guides of the Humboldt Lab, the installation went down just as well with them as with the expert audience. Was it an exhibition only for young visitors and ethnologists?

Personally, I evaluate the installation “Man – Object – Jaguar” less with regard to the polarized reactions than with regard to the process of development, realization, active reception, and change, which was accessible for the interested public. In my view, this process and particularly the inclusion of different and also unusual perspectives are the actual results of the Lab project; something that can also be applied in this manner to more permanent exhibitions.

¹ Cf., for example, Fernando Santos-Granero (ed.): *The Occult Life of Things: Native Amazonian Theories of Materiality and Personhood*. Tucson, Arizona, 2009. The probably best-known theorist of perspectivism, Viveiros de Castro, mainly focuses on the relationships between humans, animals and spirits (see, for example, *Cosmological Deixis and Amerindian Perspectivism*. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 4). The authors in Santos-Granero's reader go beyond this interconnection.

² Jaguar stool, wood, length: 66 cm, height: 23 cm, Inv. no. V A 61093.

³ See Theodor Koch-Grünberg: *Vom Roraima zum Orinoko. Schilderung der Reise*. Berlin 1917

⁴ According to David Guss (*To Weave and Sing. Art, Symbol and Narrative in the South American Rain Forest*. Berkeley, CA 1989), the Wajas (basketwork plates) of the Yekuana Indians, whose power had to be placated by ritual songs, reflect their entire conception of the world. The pattern displayed in the exhibition symbolizes the struggle between good and evil.

⁵ Eduardo Viveiros de Castro: *Une figure humaine peut cacher une affection-jaguar*. Réponse à une question de Didier Muguet. *Multitudes*, 24-1, 2006.

Dr. Andrea Scholz has been a research assistant at the Humboldt Lab Dahlem since March 2014. She studied ethnology, sociology and took Romance studies in Bonn, Germany, as well as conducted research in Mexico (2004) and Venezuela (2007 - 2009). The theme of her dissertation was the recognition of indigenous territories in Guayana/Venezuela, which was published in 2012 under the title “Die Neue Welt neu vermessen” (“Surveying the New World Anew”). During the course of her field studies and internship at the Ethnological Museum (2012 - 2014), Andrea Scholz has intensively dealt with the material culture of the Guayana region.

Sebastián Mejía (*1980 in Columbia) lives and works in Düsseldorf. He studied art from 1999 to 2004 at the Universidad Javeriana, Bogota, Columbia, and from 2007 to 2009 at the Hochschule für Bildende Künste Dresden. His objects, photographs, videos, and installations are experimental arrangements. Exhibitions at, among others, Künstlerhaus Ziegelhütte Darmstadt and ZKM Center for Art and Media, Karlsruhe, as well as the art fairs Scope Miami Art Show, Volta, New York, The Others Art Fair, Turin, and Preview, Berlin.

Man – Object – Jaguar / Positions

An Experiment Against the Certainty of Complete Knowledge

by Mark Münzel

Museums distinguish themselves from other media (books, for example) through their objects, but they also fulfill an academic mission that equally corresponds with the audience's curiosity regarding background information: museums conduct research and comment on the objects in overarching contexts, in themes. Almost by default, the thematic exhibition is also an exhibition of propositions, since scholarship reflects on themes by means of propositions. But in scholarship's self-understanding, they amount to a search and do not give final answers to the questions that the audience poses to the museum.

“Man – Object – Jaguar” confronts the misunderstanding that the museum is a site of secured truth in an adroit and innovative way by conceiving a scientific exhibition as an artistic installation. For the audience does not expect a final truth from an individual arrangement or an experiment. Visitors do not encounter what is allegedly eternally valid in the interplay of interpretation and theory here, but instead, they encounter a science that is engaged in a quest. This is combined with the ethnological approach of “indigenous



perspectivism” that explores changing shamanist perspectives.

However, it is precisely the approach of “indigenous perspectivism”, deriving from structuralism’s tradition of abstraction, that in its genes retains the distorted picture of a university discourse: objects and humans disappear behind the artful language. It is now in the process of overcoming this non-objective rhetoric by more strongly including concrete objects.¹

An exhibition based on this approach could risk reinforcing the presumption that the university (the lord of theory) formulates the propositions that the museum (its maid, in charge of practical matters) then only needs to translate for the audience, which is despised as ignorant.

The project in Berlin avoids this distance to the objects by concentrating on the indigenous object (a small shaman’s stool) that the installation stages from several perspectives. The theme of perspective can thus be experienced with the senses. While an accompanying text may be required for understanding, the direct impression has priority. Similar to the classical ethnological path, the art installation initially exposes the viewers (like ethnology does with researchers) to perplexity, which is then replaced by understanding. The artistic appeal of the exhibition is worth the effort of dealing with an initially incomprehensible object, demanded from those who prefer to grasp the world through abstractions rather than things.

“Man – Object – Jaguar” prompts one to search for approaches stemming less from university abstractions than from the museum-ethnological exploration of the concrete. This was an attempt made by the exhibition “Augenblicke” (“Moments”) at the Weltkulturen Museum in Frankfurt in 2005/2006, for example: South American cultures were made accessible by explaining the symbolism of the patterns of a drinking vessel, while simultaneously presenting a drinking song celebrating the vessel, for instance. The story of the ceramic object was supplemented by photos and vitas of the ceramists. To explain the initially incomprehensible object, “Man – Object – Jaguar” employs the effect of the installation and the uncertainty that accompanies it in both art and ethnology. Through precisely this uncertainty and the effort to overcome it, the exhibition succeeds in breaking open set views of foreign ways of thinking.

¹ See, for example, the focus on “Perspectivism” in *Indiana*, Vol. 29, Berlin 2012, e.g., the text by Dimitri Karadimas.

Prof. Dr. Mark Münzel was professor at (today’s) Institute for Comparative Cultural Research of the Philipps-Universität Marburg as well as the director of the ethnological collection from 1989 to 2008. He was custodian at the former “Museum für Völkerkunde” (now renamed the Weltkulturen Museum) in Frankfurt / Main from 1973 to 1989. This commentary is based on the keynote address which he held within the framework of an evaluation workshop of the Humboldt Lab Dahlem.

Experimental Forms of Curatorial Practice in Ethnological Collections

by Viola Vahrson

In their search for new educational approaches and forms of presentation, ethnological museums have recently been inviting artists to work with the artefacts of their collections.¹ An important component of this cooperation is the presentation of the artistic processes and results within the exhibition spaces of ethnological collections. The Humboldt Lab Dahlem also offers artists a platform for concerning themselves with ethnological themes and objects.

The museums see this cooperation as an opportunity to provide visitors with new approaches to their collections. Dealing with ethnological objects and the institutional structures and conditions, in the sense of artistic research, engenders insights that are rarely granted through customary presentation forms.

Artists take on the function of curators at certain points, acting (relatively) free of institutional and specialist determinations. This is probably what makes this position so appealing to all sides: the artists deal with the order of the museum without having to comply with it; they can defy expectations and conventions and present unexpected results to the public.

However, the complex and profound knowledge that is required to adequately delve into ethnological objects



must also be taken into consideration in the artistic endeavor. One possibility is for artists and curators to collaborate, as was the case with the project “Man – Object – Jaguar.” The presentation developed by Sebastián Mejía and the ethnologist Andrea Scholz was so compelling because the exhibited object, the shaman’s stool from the Amazonian lowlands, was not presented in a usual display case. It was a component of a complex multimedia staging that addressed the indigenous experience of the world in the Amazonian lowlands by academic and artistic means.

With regard to the artistic aspect, such a cooperation implies the consistent further development and opening of the existing concepts of authorship and artwork. Where scholarship and the museum are concerned, it entails that the curators, too, further explore the aesthetic dimensions of academic thought and action. The establishment of artistic research as an independent form of knowledge could conversely serve as a model for the practice of the museum as well. Inventive, experimental, poetic, and aesthetic methods and approaches should be grasped more distinctly than has hitherto been the case, as fields of activity of curatorial practice, alongside scientific insights and methods. A self-understanding of curators in cultural-historical collections expanded in this sense would certainly enrich the plans for the new Humboldt-Forum and prompt the urgently needed public debate.

¹ The most prominent example in this respect is certainly the *Weltkulturen Museum* in Frankfurt / Main.

Prof. Dr. Viola Vahrson has been professor at the Institute for Fine Arts and Cultural Studies of the Universität Hildesheim since 2010. This commentary is based on a keynote address that she held in the frame of an evaluation workshop of the Humboldt Lab Dahlem.

Scenarios for Aesthetic Education

by Andrea Scholz

The Workshop Program

The project “Man – Object – Jaguar” was predominantly dedicated to conveying theoretical discourses. One crucial aspect was the attempt to abolish the conventional separation between the levels of production and reception and include specific target groups as critical actors in the process-oriented exhibition. The Eta Boeklund office was commissioned to conceive accompanying interventions and to support this process.

In four mostly one-day workshops, so-called para-experts were invited to deal with selected aspects of the installation. Body, critique, sound, and taxonomy were the discussion starting points. The results were made available to the visitors in the exhibition space in the form of references as well as research and reflection aids.

Taking up the theme of “body”, the choreographer and dancer Hermann Heisig dealt with the installation and developed movement instructions for the exhibition space, which were then placed in a cardboard box on the “Reflection Table”. The proposed choreographic instructions were supplemented by Polaroid shots of his own performance.

Taking up the theme of “critique and reflection”, a group of young cultural journalists engaged in a dialog with the team of artists/curators and two active museum guides (so-called live speakers) from the Humboldt Lab Dahlem to write reviews of the exhibition, which were also made available on the table.

The music ethnologist and sound specialist Matthias Lewy developed a new sound concept for the exhibition. His aim was to sensitize the visitors to the sonic atmospheres of Amazonia.

A group of animal rights activists, vegans and vegetarians shed light on the present-day relevance of the relationship between humans and animals addressed in the exhibition. Examining the categories of human, object and jaguar, the group developed a mind map with alternative approaches to the installation. A visual commentary designed by Sebastián Mejía (an equestrian statue on transparent plastic entitled “The death is dead,”), and half-masks depicting animals or patterns were tentatively included in the installation.

The series of interventions was rounded off by a final discussion. Most participants from the four workshops were present and had the opportunity to show each other their work.



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Man – Object – Jaguar / Credits

A project of the Probebühne 3, October 17, 2013 through March 30, 2014

Concept: Andrea Scholz, Sebastián Mejía

Artistic realization: Sebastián Mejía, Pablo Fernandez

Sound Installation: Matthias Lewy

Design: Günter Krüger

Texts: Andrea Scholz

Conservational supervision: Diana Gabler, Helene Tello

Media equipment: cine plus

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Accompanying workshops (December 2013 through February 2014)

Concept and realization: Eta Boeklund office

An internal evaluation workshop of the Humboldt Lab Dahlem was held on February 15, 2014. It was dedicated to the two projects that dealt with the stocks of the Amazonia Collection of the Ethnologisches Museum (Ethnological Museum). "Touching Photography" and "Man – Object – Jaguar." Irene Albers moderated the discussion attended by around 20 fellow experts:

Heike Behrend (Universität zu Köln)
Friedrich von Bose (Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin)
Alexander Brust (Museum der Kulturen Basel)
Angela Dreßler (Büro Eta Boeklund)
Richard Haas (Ethnologisches Museum Berlin)
Ernst Halbmayer (Philipps-Universität Marburg)
Paul Hempel (Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München)
Jens Jäger (Universität zu Köln)
Michael Kraus (Universität Bonn)
Ingrid Kummels (Freie Universität Berlin)
Matthias Lewy (Freie Universität Berlin)
Sebastián Mejía
Stefanie Kiwi Menrath (Büro Eta Boeklund)
Mark Münzel (Philipps-Universität Marburg)
Wolfgang Schäffner (Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin)
Andrea Scholz (Ethnologisches Museum Berlin)
Mona Suhrbier (Weltkulturen Museum Frankfurt)
Viola Vahrson (Stiftung Universität Hildesheim)
Agnes Wegner (Humboldt Lab Dahlem)
Detlef Weitz (Büro für Szenografie chezweitz)

Moderation: Irene Albers (Freie Universität Berlin)

Man – Object – Jaguar / Imprint Documentation

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Visitors at the installation “Man – Object – Jaguar,” photo: Jens Ziehe



Visitors at the installation “Man – Object – Jaguar,” photo: Jens Ziehe



Installation view “Man – Object – Jaguar,” photo: Jens Ziehe



Andrea Scholz and Sebastian Mejia at the installation “Man - Object - Jaguar,” photo: Sebastian Bolesch