



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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Touching Photography / Teaser

The exhibition was based on the Ethnologisches Museum’s huge stock of portrait and type photographs from Amazonia. As part of a research project, Michael Kraus had previously reappraised more than 6,500 pictures in the historical photo collection dedicated to Latin America. The aim of “Touching Photography” was to shed light on the moments the pictures were taken and used, as well as on concrete knowledge of individual persons and forms of encounter. In collaboration with the office for scenography chezweitz, experiments were conducted with forms of media conveyance, without presenting the original historical prints. The exhibition was shown in three rooms: after encountering several projected, life-size portraits, narratives based on historical texts explained the contexts in which the photos were taken. Finally, an archive situation was provided, in which the visitors could actively take part.

Touching Photography / Project Description

New Narrative Strategies for Historical Photographs

by Michael Kraus

The idea for “Touching Photography” originated while reappraising the collection of historical photographs on Latin America at the Ethnological Museum Berlin. I dealt with these photographs for a period of two years, looking at the persons in these pictures almost on a daily basis. What I found striking was the poor degree of documentation on the numerous portrait and type photos. In many cases we know virtually nothing about the lives of those depicted. Only the ethnic group, the photographer and the date of the photograph are noted down. Were the persons in the pictures even perceived as individuals? Or were they only interesting as representatives of a collective, possessing features of a certain culture?

This led to the idea for an exhibition that raises questions pertaining to personal issues, individual fates and contexts of encounter. Who were these people? What can be told of their lives today? Can narratives be



developed from these photos that differ from their “classical” uses, such as the illustration of ethnographic descriptions or, more seldom, their presentation as photographic works of art—narratives that would help undermine the application of collection categories that establish a distance? Does a narrative form exist that could bring us closer to these people today?

The Path of the Pictures – Contexts of Origin and Usage

The Berlin-based office for scenography chezweitz was responsible for the exhibition design. One specification they were asked to follow was that the photographs should be shown life-sized, if possible at one place. The visitors should be able to look the depicted persons in the eye. However, this “eye level” was never meant in the sense of an equal footing, the illusion of an approach free of contextual asymmetries, something that never existed and would also be hard to find today. But it belonged to the original idea to place the person in the picture at the center of attention and not the object status of the depiction or the aura of the original historical print.

To this end, chezweitz developed the idea of “living images” i.e., the digital animation of selected photographs. chezweitz also suggested using overhead projectors and transparencies to give the impression of an archive situation. This made it possible to show a relatively large number of photos. At the same time, the chosen presentation form enabled the visitors to influence the picture selection on the wall and the attendant search for information and impressions. In a joint discussion, this design was expanded by a further room dedicated to the narratives of selected pictures.

Upon entering the exhibition at the designated place, the visitors first encountered three screens hung from the ceiling onto which the 21 life-sized portrait photos were projected in an alternating sequence. Further information was deliberately dispensed with here. When meeting a stranger for the first time, one knows nothing about him or her. The first impression is an external one. It is visual and spontaneous, and our reaction usually reveals more about ourselves than about our vis-à-vis. The crucial design element was the animation of the depicted persons: a young man moved his shoulders, arms and upper body; an elderly woman started smiling; another person slowly turned to the visitors with a drawn bow and arrow. The movements caused a moment of amazement and wonder that boosted one’s willingness to linger and take a closer look. The low sound of breathing prevented the room from being completely silent.

In the center room, a large-format wall text gave information on the origin and intention of the exhibition. The researched scenarios of encounter were presented. In addition to a personally formulated introduction, one could choose among six stories on the available tablets. The titles were “Fear”, “Empathy”, “Body”, “Art”, “Ambivalence” and “Change”. Stories, biographical fragments and forms of encounter related to selected photographs were imparted via headphones. The texts included numerous original quotes from travelogues and diaries.

The third part of the exhibition included three overhead projectors with 158 transparencies designed like index cards. 149 transparencies showed persons of the indigenous population of South America, seven showed selected photographers and two expedition members. The notes under the keyword “Link” enabled visitors to view related pictures next to each other. In some cases, several pictures of the same person existed, partially taken from different perspectives, and more seldom in different years and by different photographers. Furthermore, there were photos of relatives, persons who were part of the same story, and of course the connection between the photographed person and the photographer. The pictures and text modules on the transparencies could thus be supplemented to form a larger narrative. The photographs on display in the first two rooms were also available on these “index cards.” In addition to the effect of recognition, the search for interrelations, the impression of an archive, and the viewing of newly added shots, the transparencies once again vividly conveyed to the visitors what had already been mentioned in the wall text: how large the number of existing pictures is and how small the amount of personal data on those depicted. Fragmentation and reduction, but also standardization and the comparability of scientific data, became just as evident as the varied pictorial languages of the photographers and the different degrees of effort made by the respective explorer to also document information on the individuals.

Points of Contact instead of Dogmatism

The aim of the exhibition was both to stage the moments when the pictures were taken and put to use and to convey concrete knowledge about individual persons and forms of encounter. One reading that the developed dramaturgy offered was the course of an actual encounter: the first meeting (Room 1) followed by the phase of social negotiation processes (Room 2) and then the ordering and summarization of the impressions gained in



the first two scenarios (Room 3). When viewing the exhibition in the opposite direction, one could experience the path from the large amount of material in the archive to the “animation attempt” of a (re)constructed narrative using a reduced selection of images.

Besides the large-format depiction, two other points were of particular importance. On the one hand, the complexity, heterogeneity and ambivalences of the encounters at the time—and their results—were to become tangible. On the other, the interpretation of what was shown was not to be pre-structured starting with the first text panel. Instead, the existing information was presented in a way that left the last step—how to evaluate a certain form of taking photographs, a found mode of behavior, historically reconstructed expectations—to the visitors. Anyone expecting to be amazed by the achievements of explorers, or a context-free aesthetics, or postcolonial deconstruction or even condemnation, might have been disappointed. Yet one should dispense neither with the discomfort caused by complex constellations nor with the demand to position oneself.

Dr. Michael Kraus has been working for the department of early American studies at the Universität Bonn since 2013. He was previously a research assistant in the ethnology department of the Philipps-Universität Marburg, where he received his doctorate with the thesis “Bildungsbürger im Urwald. Die deutsche ethnologische Amazonienforschung (1884 - 1929)” in 2004. He then worked as a curator, among others, for the exhibitions “Novos Mundos – Neue Welten. Portugal und das Zeitalter der Entdeckungen” (Deutsches Historisches Museum, Berlin 2007) and “WeltWissen. 300 Jahre Wissenschaften in Berlin” (Martin-Gropius-Bau, Berlin 2010).

For more than ten years, the studio for scenography chezweitz directed by Detlef Weitz and Sonja Beeck has been designing art and theme-related exhibitions. It was responsible for, among others, the design of the anniversary show “Modell Bauhaus” in 2009 at Martin-Gropius-Bau, Berlin, and the 2011 exhibition “Arbeit. Sinn und Sorge” at the Deutsches Hygienemuseum Dresden initiated by the German Federal Cultural Foundation. The studio was awarded the Designpreis der Bundesrepublik Deutschland in Gold 2011 for the Andy Warhol exhibition “Other Voices, Other Rooms” at the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam. chezweitz is currently working on the new permanent exhibition of the DB Museum in Nuremberg, an interactive “European Classroom” for the Route Charlemagne of the City of Aachen, as well as - together with the FEZ-Berlin - the children's exhibition “POP-UP Cranach” in the Gemäldegalerie of the Staatliche Museen zu Berlin.

Touching Photography / Positions

The Ethnological-Anthropological Portrait

by Paul Hempel

The exhibition installation “Touching Photography” ventures to deal not with any kind of image, but precisely with a genre of scientific photography that from today’s perspective appears, more than all others, as problematic or at best outdated: the ethnological-anthropological portrait.

Portraits can be found in large numbers and diverse forms in the photographic collections of ethnological museums and archives. Yet these images often approach us in way that is even more “speechless” (if such a comparative exists) than other photographs. What is particularly outrageous is that, as opposed to shots of landscapes or objects, they depict humans. Women, men and children gaze at us more or less under compulsion, more or less clothed, and literally say nothing. This lack of address is most disturbing in the case of formalized type photographs or “race portraits,” the hybrid genre that so vividly embodies the permeable borderline between ethnology and physical anthropology in the long 19th century.

When browsing through the stocks of photographs, these pictures are usually brushed aside—as inherited burdens from a distant and at times inglorious past. They disqualify themselves above all for exhibitions, if they happen not to be testimonies to this past—and even then, they do (or may) not break their silence. Instead, they are preferably pigeonholed anew, stylized and reduced to icons of a colonial-chauvinistic worldview.

Such a capitulation to the doubtless difficult material is shortsighted in several respects. What is disregarded



is that precisely these pictures expressed lively debates on adequate visual methods and issues already at the time, and some of the formulated problems needn't appear all that wayward today: How can ethnological-anthropological data be defined, acquired and transported? What is the relationship between cultures and bodies, and can these concepts be projected onto each other? How objective, true-to-life, and authentic are these images? How autonomous and meaningful are they, after having been placed in other contexts? These are questions that the image producers themselves raised when dealing with and discussing their photographs. We needn't adopt all the answers given at the time, but we should take the pictures seriously. This implies not only viewing them as the expression of fixed notions, but also always as the trigger of one of the driving forces of science per se, which is so rarely addressed in scientific exhibitions: doubt.

Why do we so often deny portraits, in particular, this creative potential? Probably because they appear so self-assured and authoritarian in their formal stringency. In order to break through this facade, it seems necessary to open up the pictures, as is done in the exhibition "Touching Photography" in several respects and different dimensions. Visitors are confronted with the diverse contexts of origin of the portraits, with touching biographical details, as well as with moments of disturbance and confusion when delving into the image material. The exhibition's contemporary presentation of the images thus also succeeds in transporting the methodological doubt that many actors at the time brought into the field and back again with their camera.

Employing such exhibition concepts that focus not only on the product but equally on the process of scientific image production and utilization, an ethnological museum of science (the Humboldt-Forum) could distinguish itself more distinctly and aggressively as an inquiring rather than as a knowing institution.

Paul Hempel (M.A.) works at the Institute of Social and Cultural Anthropology of the Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität Munich. Within the framework of his dissertation on the use of visual media during expeditions in Brazil between 1883 and 1914, his main focus was on the status of photography in the production and dissemination of ethnological knowledge. This commentary is based on a keynote address that he held as part of an evaluation workshop of the Humboldt Lab Dahlem.

Transmissões e contato: Transmission and Contact

by Wolfgang Schäffner

Michael Kraus takes up the crucial challenge of considering how historical research on foreign cultures can be transferred to a modern notion of "working with" cultures based on collections of objects. He is especially concerned with revealing, within the objects and their focus on originality, the processes of transfer to which they owe their existence. The project shows this in the way it treats historical photographs: what "touches" in the case of the photograph is not the "originality" of the historical print, which, in the sense of the punctum of photography, "rises from the scene, shoots out of it like an arrow, and pierces me," (Roland Barthes¹). Instead, the radical approach of "Touching Photography" consists in the photographs no longer being presented as historical objects. What is at issue is the path that the photographs from the Amazonian region have taken to reach us, covering a spatial and temporal distance.

The historical photographs are transferred to three different media formats: first, the bureaucratic registry of a dataset attributing metadata to the photos of indigenous persons (ethnic group, date of photograph, photographer etc.) presented via overhead projectors – a technological medium developed at the same time as photography. A particularly competent manufacturer of these projectors in the 1920s was the Düsseldorf-based firm Liesegang. The photographs are thus integrated into a presentation and transmission system that decisively alters their materiality: light turns the photographs into agents; they start shining and are transmitted through a new active medium. This activation of the original medium also determined, albeit in a different way, the animation of the photographs on the large scale of 1:1. The photographic stills are transformed into moving images through digital algorithms. Based on photographs, they simulate filmic movements by animating only the persons standing in the foreground. Hence, the photograph becomes an object attaining a new animated presence in the digital medium, something that the photo as a historical medium excludes. The tablets in the third scenario offer an altered ontology ("fear," "empathy," or "body," instead of categories of identification), presenting a technological innovation of touching. The touch screen allows and necessitates that which historical photography indeed forbids: actual contact. "Directly" touching the photograph enables zooming into details and moving through and beyond the photos. The digital medium therefore excels customary touch precisely by avoiding the materiality and originality of the photograph.



Moreover, the tablet, as a network-controlled medium, could simultaneously provide access to any kind of data and images. This would even allow transferring Amazonia to Europe in a topological network order in which original sites no longer exist. Once the presentation site itself becomes mobile, the separation between site of find and museum, which is inherent to European collections of non-European objects, becomes obsolete.

The historical sequence of media, which Michael Kraus and chezweitz present as transmission media based on photography, essentially determines and changes the way one works on a culture as it is documented in the photographs of ethnic individuals from Amazonia. This new way of working with the processes of transmission and their media alters the scenarios in a crucial manner—they are dislocated: they can visualize their own processes of transmission through space and time and thus dissolve their fundamental difference. These are the coordinates of a new method of working with a culture that symmetrically combines different sites. And what may then complete a presentation of transmission processes, alongside the photographs and objects, are the jaguar hides, the wood and the rubber, as things that were transferred to Europe and that, conversely, left their mark in Amazonia in the form of railways or telegraph lines as media of transmission. The answer given by this experimental exhibition is that photographs touch, or, put differently: they only arrive in our media-technological present when their processes of exchange and transmission can visualize the distance they have covered in time and space.

¹ Roland Bathes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*. New York 1981.

Prof. Dr. Wolfgang Schäffner has held the chair for the history of knowledge and culture at the Institute of Cultural Studies of the Humboldt-Universität (HU) zu Berlin since 2009, he is the spokesperson of the excellence cluster of the HU "Bild Wissen Gestaltung. Ein Interdisziplinäres Labor" and has been the director of the Hermann von Helmholtz-Zentrum für Kulturtechnik of the HU since 2013. He is a honorary professor of the faculty of architecture, design and urbanism at the Universidad de Buenos Aires, where he is also the director of the Walter Gropius Research program. This commentary is based on a keynote address that he held within the framework of an evaluation workshop of the Humboldt Lab Dahlem.

Touching Photography / Credits

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

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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)
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Viola Vahrson (Stiftung Universität Hildesheim)
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Detlef Weitz (Büro für Szenografie chezweitz)

Moderation: Irene Albers (Freie Universität Berlin)

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Note for the PDF print version: all links can be accessed on the respective subpages of www.humboldt-lab.de.



Visitors at the opening, photo: Sebastian Bolesch



Installation view "Touching Photography," photo: Jens Ziehe



Tablet in the exhibition "Touching Photography," photo: Sebastian Bolesch



Installation view "Touching Photography," photo: Jens Ziehe