



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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Appropriations / Teaser

Rituals, art, everyday routines: many objects in the Ethnologisches Museum have a performative element embedded in their original use. And yet, the objects of the collection deny us usage for differing reasons. The performative conference "Appropriations" aimed to bring alive the act of experiencing, using lecture performances, reenactments and theatrical installations. Beyond false representations, a rapprochement with lost profane and sacred practices has been attempted – in the full knowledge that appropriations are always proprietary acts and therefore also acts of violence.

Appropriations / Project Description

Choreographies of Distance and Proximity

by Florian Malzacher

Appropriation, even cultural appropriation, is always a violent act. The (direct or structural) violence, with which ethnological collections have appropriated many objects, repeats itself in the ongoing reappropriations of these objects through interpretation and contextualization. However, appropriation also implies a proximity that does not leave the appropriators themselves unchanged.

The performative conference "Appropriations" on November 16, 2014 in the Dahlem Museums reflected the difficulties of appropriation from alien (to the West) knowledge and cultures via the path of performative reconstruction, reformulation and reenactments. It is an approach that is suggested by the nature of the collection: a large proportion of the objects, above all those of the Ethnologisches Museum, seem to demand to be used, yet at the same time their use is denied us for ethical, political but also conservational reasons. Their performative nature lies in their original usage – whether as part of a ritual, in art or in everyday tasks. Within the logic of performance theory these objects are *performance remains*.

So how can one approach such irrecoverable or inaccessible performative acts, whether profane, artistic or



sacred? This ethnological question resembles one from the performative arts: how do you reconstruct a performance or choreography without having seen it, or of which there are perhaps only a few photos, notes, audience descriptions or props? Is it possible to simulate the act of experience? Is it possible to appropriate a performance that is temporally or also culturally, distant, without simply filling the gaps of the unknown, the incomprehensible, and negating them? And how can one avoid false representations?

Reenactment as Appropriation and Rapprochement

While the concept of reenactment commonly designates the restaging of historical events in a way that seems to be as true-to-life as possible, within the performing arts, in recent years a more differentiated discourse around the term has developed. In dance and performance it mainly describes a critical way of dealing with the possibility and impossibility of reconstruction or the reinterpretation of central choreographic works of modernism. What is always at issue is the difference, the incomprehensible, the not-knowing. Appropriation is seen in its ambiguity, which is inherent in the German word “Aneignung”: appropriation and rapprochement in one.

There are also overlaps with the discourse on reconstruction in architecture: David Chipperfield’s sensitive handling of the Neue Museum in Berlin is one of the most prominent examples for its emphasis on the gaps, on what cannot be reconstructed. In contrast to this, the reconstruction of the nearby Berlin Palace represents the desire to heal historical and architectural wounds without, as far as possible, leaving any visible scars, while at the same time reformulating Prussian history and whitewashing uncomfortable memories: with the move to the Humboldt-Forum, the Ethnologisches Museum and the Museum für Asiatische Kunst are relocating into an uncritical reconstruction full of hidden agendas.

Ethnological museums are, on the one hand, symbols of the West’s colonial past and, at the same time, concrete manifestations of this history that is far from past, and in Germany’s case, compared to other countries, has only been partially processed. During the preparations for “Appropriations” the question was repeatedly raised as to whether it is even possible to work in an artistically responsible way, within the context of the Humboldt Lab and the Ethnologisches Museum. Can critically challenging positions be formulated productively from within, or do they, on the contrary, merely serve as a legitimization of the institution that produced them? The artistic and curatorial consensus though was that it is necessary to repeatedly confront these toxic legacies of our Western colonial past – especially in and with the collections themselves. The legacy of a colonial past remains: it will not disappear; it is also part of our present and something with which we have to come to terms.

The performative conference “Appropriations” was preceded by an almost year-long research phase with participating artists and numerous discussions with the scientists and curators of the museum that were often very productive, but at times also very difficult. As part of a workshop in May 2014 the preliminary results were sketched out. At the end of this process “Appropriations” marked an agonistic field, upon which the various aesthetic and discursive positions confronted the collection: the participants roamed from lecture-performances by Dorothea von Hantelmann, Ulf Aminde & Shi-Wei Lu and Kapwani Kiwanga to Alexandra Pirici’s immaterial additions to the collection, and to the theatrical installation by Ant Hampton and Britt Hatzius, encountered famous fakes in the depot, accompanied Yael Bartana on a visual journey into the Amazon and were themselves cast as performers in the choreography of deufert&plischke. Later, in 2015, the artists’ cooperative Politique Culinaire plans to bring the crimes of the so-called 1884/85 Congo Conference onto the agenda, within the framework of a re-dedication of an historical dinner.¹

Productive Spaces of the in Between

Positions, ideas, proposals – sometimes overlapping, sometimes contradicting each other. “Appropriations” was a performative conference, not only because its contributions were of a performative nature, but because they were performed themselves: by visitors roaming the museum in different groups, their corporeal presence becoming a significant component of the conference in which time and duration consciously contributed to the choreography; by excitement, exhaustion, collectivity and isolation, moments of haste and times of relaxation creating their own dramaturgy of awareness.

“Appropriations” was not only site-specific but also to a large extent time-specific: in 2014 the Ethnologisches Museum found itself in an interim phase, in which encounters were facilitated that could not have previously taken place in the same way, and soon will not be possible again. “As Never Before / As Never Again,” as Hampton & Hatzius called their work. It is a collection on call; its temporality is tangible. And not only the



actual museum is on call, but also the historical, ideological, philosophical basis on which it was founded. Ethnological museums are a symbol for the crisis of modernity, enlightenment, Western self-perception and at the same time their symptom – which is especially visible in the Dahlem suburb of Berlin, where the former West suffers its phantom pain with dignity.

This unstable situation leads to a prevailing sense of irritation, which places its stamp on all the works within the frame of “Appropriations” and indeed makes them first possible. Only in this context was it possible for the artistic *soft power* (Alexandra Pirici) to have an impact: “We are strong in our weakness” (as Yael Bartana expressed it in a different work). It is a fragility, that could well be a strength, because, beyond all the rhetoric of “state museums” and “Prussian cultural heritage” the hegemonic narrative of the Dahlem museums is porous and can only be formulated as an in between. The Humboldt Lab Dahlem (which, in this respect, and contrary to all political intentions, is not the precursor of the Humboldt-Forum) is located in exactly this space of in between, which is precisely why it is such a problematic but, at the same time, often very productive space.

Only where there is a consciousness of temporality, can performance, whose own ephemerality is one of its essential themes, begin: the original collection objects that were reproduced by Hatzius and Hampton may, after the museum’s move, be destined to remain in the depot for eternity. On the other hand, Kiwanga’s installation consists of objects that have yet to reach the collection. deufert&plischke allow us to briefly strike a pose, Aminde demonstrates the helpless futility of Western attempts at appropriation, and Pirici wishes to contribute nothing more than intangible additions anyhow...

Behind the sandstone-clad concrete walls of the Humboldt-Forum in the new Berlin Palace this kind of *soft power* of art will no longer have an impact – the soft hegemony, which will skillfully incorporate all criticism whilst simultaneously casting its position in cement, certainly won’t have any need for genuine irritation.

¹ For various reasons, the *Politique Culinaire* project for the Humboldt Lab Dahlem could not be realized (editor’s note.)

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Appropriations. A Performative Conference / Positions

Interconnectivity, beyond the Museum Order

by Katrin Bettina Müller

What happens to the object and your own perspective after you spend a day perusing the collections in Dahlem, guided by theory and accompanied by artistic performances? The performative conference “Appropriations” invited visitors to spend eight hours in concentration, taking part in discussions and making connections beyond the boundaries of museum order.

Why are no artifacts from Taiwan to be found in the Museum für Asiatische Kunst in Berlin? Is it because of the complicated political status of present-day Taiwan? Or is it due to its history of being subject to changing occupying forces? This question was casually raised at the lecture performance by Ulf Aminde, in the exhibition room that houses the imperial Chinese throne from the Kangxi period. In addition to this testimony of former power, Aminde talked of the power wielded by present-day corporations located in Taiwan. He dealt with BenQ and Foxconn, both key partners in the production of Apple products. The artist passed on information about the suicides of workers who cannot keep up with the work pressures imposed by these electronics giants.

For “performing labour contracts, made in Taiwan (to love is give) #booty_n'dahlem_version2” Aminde used iPhones and iPads, to project photos of the production sites and demonstrations against the poor working conditions on the wall. An absurd image was seen of nets, installed under factory windows to stop workers jumping out of the windows. Short video sequences showed performers from Taiwan and China interpreting labor contracts in the style of a Peking Opera for the BenQ and Foxconn workers, but also labor contracts of European artists. “I came here to earn some money. Now all the dreams are broken, and I think there must be



more,” – the comments of a Chinese worker read in the English subtitles.

“I think there must be more,” could well have been the motto of the performative conference, after all, it was about the search for new connections, different from the previous forms of museum mediation. What can forms like lectures or performances contribute in terms of addressing the various questions from a contemporary perspective that impinge on museums and their exhibited objects? To answer this question, visitors to the conference spent an entire day at the Dahlem Museums, as invited guests to six artistic interventions, two introductory speeches and a short tour through the depot of the Ethnologisches Museum. The finale was a collective ritual, a performance by deufert & plischke, who distributed small cards to all the visitors with instructions on what movements to make, for example: “When you see a pattern of imitation emerging on the dance floor, go onto the dance floor yourself and imitate the imitator.” With highly dramatic music from Stravinsky’s “Rite of Spring” conference visitors were encouraged to imitate each other, shake the hands of strangers, roll around on the floor – of their own free will, amused, and also relieved to meet one another in a playful way, after all the intellectual challenges of the day.

For Florian Malzacher, the curator of “Appropriations,” ethnological museums present a political and aesthetic challenge. Because the history of their establishment is inextricably linked to the history of colonialism, and the original idea – to conserve cultures that were “destined for extinction” in a museum context – appears to be a denial of the fact that the countries in which such museums were built were themselves among the profiteers of colonial exploitation, the former “ethnological museums” as institutions come in for criticism. Malzacher sketches the museums’ appropriation as an act of violence, which continues through the presentation, reception and in the interpretation.

Dorothea von Hantelmann, an art historian and ethnologist, formulated a different concept of the function of museum collections in her keynote introduction. She examined the question of why museums today are so successful, have so many visitors and are being expanded. In her answer she described how museum practice – removing and separating objects from their everyday context – also has an emancipatory aspect, of releasing things from traditional ties and world orders. The space in which the museum visitor appropriates a piece of the world through the exhibited objects, is, according to this concept, at the same time a space of self-appropriation and self-reflection. In this sense she sees the museum as a liberal and democratic format.

What happens to the object in the museum? How does the dominance of the viewpoint impinge on its meaning? This question is tackled by the installation “As never before / As never again” by Ant Hampton & Britt Hatzius in the Mesoamerica exhibition with a lucid image that appears like a small performance by the sculptures for themselves. The artists have chosen small sitting and standing figures, about whose provenance and meaning not much is known, but which we are drawn to because of the expressivity of their body language, their touching mimicry and aesthetically persuasive nature. Copies were created with a 3D printer and then mounted on small pedestals in front of the glass cabinets like a mirroring of the original – as though the sculptures were engrossed in conversation, not simply exposed to the gaze of the visitor, but immersed in self-reflection.

This work also includes tracks on the audio-guide in the Mesoamerica exhibition, which remind visitors of the lack of information about these sculptures. They are historical, cultural, ethnological documents – and at the same time something more. This puzzling ‘something else’ has perhaps something to do with their autonomy as works of art, but also with the awe and admiration engendered by things that we cannot understand. This awe fosters an empathy that precedes the desire to know more.

With the sculptures that contemplate themselves, the museum visitor also begins to look at their own expectations and to question them. Does the aura of a work of art stand in the foreground or is it the didactic mediation of a cultural, or cult-like, practice? Are we concerned with style analysis or socio-historical localization? Is the provenance of an object more important or the interest that led to its being collected?

Such questions also played a role in the more theoretical contributions by Yael Bartana, Kapwani Kiwanga and Alexandra Pirici. However it was not always easy to follow them. The Rumanian artist Alexandra Pirici chose an exciting approach with which to confront the forms of museum representation and works of art. A group of visitors to the conference was led into the exhibition “Art from Africa”, between the lavishly presented sculptures. Between the cabinets, three performers reenacted works of art, whose titles they had announced beforehand: steel sheep from an installation by Amir Nour, an LP cover from Grace Jones and a portrait of Toussaint L’ouverture, a former slave, who led the Haitian revolution towards the end of the 18th century. One could have imagined that the referenced works were part of a trail leading to a culture of Afro-American empowerment in order to contradict the idea of an extinct culture in the collection of African sculptures. But that would be to assume that visitors had a previous knowledge of the images invoked. Yet it



was difficult to acoustically understand the announcements by the performers of the titles, a technical weakness that undermined the performance in the museum space.

When visiting the Dahlem museums visitors often pass through or intersect different collection areas, before reaching the department or special exhibit they have come to see in the first place. Sometimes this results in visual bridges between apparently disparate objects. The day of “Appropriations” encouraged such random wandering through the juxtapositions of the collections and collection concepts, but also fostered the search for interconnectivity, that lies beyond the museum order.

In her keynote speech Dorothea von Hantelmann spoke about the museum order following the idealistic concept of a timeline, a continuing narrative of development: what you see in a museum belongs to an episode of the past. In the guided tour through a small section of the East Asia department in the depot of the Ethnologisches Museum, Siegmar Nahser, curator of the Korea and Japan collection, pointed out an old Buddhist “Helper Figure” that has now become the model for new temple figures and was copied for a new temple in China. In this way, the timeline sometimes describes a loop. With the asynchronicity of developments, the museum narrative shifts, just as the function of the collection does. What is conserved as a document of the past in the museum, is not simply past, but represents challenges to the present. The “performative conference” often allowed us to glimpse of this.

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A Few Observations on “As Never Before / As Never Again”

Britt Hatzius & Ant Hampton on their installation in the Ethnological Museum.

On our initial visit to the Ethnological Museum in Berlin Dahlem, we were immediately drawn to some of the smaller figures in the Mesoamerica Room and particularly to how the room layout allows the visitor to view them from behind. On reviewing the photos we took from this angle we noticed how the figures seemed lonely, cracked, and forlorn, often propped up by their arms or literally held together by support structures. We started to think about the capacity for photography to give distance and assist critical thought on the one hand, and on the other, to enhance this kind of emotional identification, even concerning inanimate objects. We thought about other forms of ‘mimetic representations’, especially concerning sculptural objects, and visited Berlin’s Gipsformerei (Replica Workshop), which has the world’s largest and most actively used collection of original plaster casts. Thomas Schelper, our guide there, introduced us to Joachim Weinhold from the 3D Laboratory at the Technische Universität, with whom he has started to collaborate. This meeting threw us into considerations of the future and this rapidly developing new technology whose wide-ranging implications have barely begun to be imagined and explored. Among the many discoveries made during this part of our research, we learned about the process of ‘powder printing’, whereby forms (based on 3D scanning - video here) are created by a ‘printer head’ passing through a chamber of thick powder, bonding it as it goes. Britt captured on 16mm film one of the figures being ‘excavated’ from this chamber by a lab technician using a vacuum pipe and brush. Following the original’s first emergence from the earth and kiln, as well as the second (when discovered and excavated in the late 19th century) it’s hard not to see this moment as a third – a futuristic, white-on-white, dream-like re-enactment, a re-emergence.

Parallel to this research we were surprised to learn from the museum that the figures we had fallen in love with will not be shown at the Humboldt-Forum (still being built and otherwise known as the controversial replica Berliner Schloss, built on the site of the former Palast der Republik). The reasoning behind this is that the Mesoamerica exhibition at the Humboldt-Forum will focus on “graphic communication systems”, and since the space allocated to the Mesoamerica collection will be smaller than it is currently, tough choices had to be made about what will be displayed. To us, the fact that so little is known about these figures that will soon disappear into the depot made them especially intriguing to work with. This interest in not knowing seems to run contrary to the mindset behind contemporary communication systems, which logically would be: the more concrete an item’s history, the greater its designated value. How to engage with a lack of knowledge, via touch screens, headphones and displays? (We attempt this, however, as a kind of rehearsal in “As never before / As never again” using the current museum’s own audio guides: there are numbers on the windows



containing the cloned objects, and selecting them on the device triggers a text listing a series of unknowns – a non-info guide). It's easy to imagine that mystery, holes, and cracks (whether in knowledge or material) would not play to the figures' advantage in a world of such slick, high-tech presentation.

We also learned that the archive depot (where any items not on display inevitably end up) is also moving, not to somewhere next to the museum as it is today, but to somewhere quite far away on the outskirts of Berlin, meaning that the costs involved in moving these fragile items between the spaces will be far higher. It made us wonder: when will these figures be seen again after the move? In a minimum of 15 years? What will the world be like in 15 years' time and how will 3D printing have developed? Will there still be ethnographic collections in Europe in 30 years' time? (Did the collectors of the late 19th century ever imagine that their practices would be challenged some 80 years later?) For the first time, we heard the term 'digital repatriation' being used by some ethnographic museums in Australia and USA who had sent 3D scans of items (and computers to view them with) to the communities where they came from. Should we expect them to start sending 3D copies instead? Or to keep the copies and send the originals? How long will it be until technology is advanced enough to consider this seriously? How much do we actually need the 'original' object to remember or explore a cultural past? What in fact is the 'original' state of an object? Could the Humboldt-Forum make 3D scans of its whole collection and only exhibit replicas? Wouldn't the new Berliner Schloss, itself a replica, be the ideal venue for a museum of copies? Continuing in this way, we can see a situation which despite seeming preposterous is nevertheless a possibility - and thus in the tradition of good science fiction.

If the rationale behind moving the ethnographic museum to the centre of town were based on the promise of increased visitor numbers, we might also ask ourselves without judgement how a town centre visitor might differ from one who makes the trip to Dahlem. If the reality of a town centre is dictated to a large extent by commercial activity, and if a large section of the increased visitor numbers are in fact, for better or worse, re-directed shoppers and tourists visiting on the fly, then perhaps the Humboldt-Forum, without too much cynicism, might identify their engagement with any object behind glass as principally a fantasy of ownership or attainment, and fully embrace that?

The questions and implications of this new mimetic form of reproduction can of course continue into areas of mind and body, spirituality and materiality. If the original was once believed to be imbued with a kind of spirit or power, was this to be found in the materiality of the figure, or in the form which it embodied? Or neither, but rather triggered by the performance involved in using or handling it? The fact that we're already printing human body parts (bones, kidneys) means that on a certain level, the distinction between original and copy is starting to be ignored even if we are involved in the most physical sense. How long until molecular structures are replicated and printed, so that it is not just the form of an object which is copied but the materiality itself?

So, there are many, many questions, some of which we explore with this installation in the Mesoamerica room. Replacing the visitor's usual frontal viewing position with a 3D replica becomes a staging of what looks like a strenuous effort by the figures and their copies to comprehend each other and the situation they find themselves in: a tense moment of mutual bewilderment between the ancient and ultramodern. As spectators, we find ourselves outside this dialogue, and yet at the centre of the conundrum: for us, the unknown goes both ways, into both an unknown past and a blind future.

The British artist Ant Hampton creates theatre and performance works for the stage, landscapes and public space. Positioned between visual art, film and ethnography, Britt Hatzius works with different media related to the moving image and explores forms of knowledge acquisition.

This text is a reworked version that first appeared on the websites of the artists.

Appropriations / Credits

A project of the Probebühne 4, September 23, 2014 through February 8, 2015
Performative Conference: November 16, 2014

Curator: Florian Malzacher

Production management: Pamela Schlewinski, Syelle Haase



Appropriations

Ant Hampton / Britt Hatzius: "As never before/ As never again"

Creative producer: Katja Timmerberg

Scientific consultation: Maria Gaida

Restoration supervision: Kai-Patrica Engelhardt

3D powder prints: Technische Universität Berlin, Institut für Mathematik, 3d-Laboratory: Joachim Weinhold, Samuel Jerichow

deufert&plischke: "Position yourself"

Concept and artistic implementation: Katrin Deufert and Thomas Plischke

Artistic collaboration: Flavio Ribeiro

Appropriations. A Performative Conference

With: Ulf Aminde & Shi-Wei Lu, Yael Bartana, deufert&plischke, Maria Gaida, Richard Haas, Ant Hampton & Britt Hatzius, Dorothea von Hantelmann, Kapwani Kiwanga, Siegmund Nahser and Alexandra Pirici.

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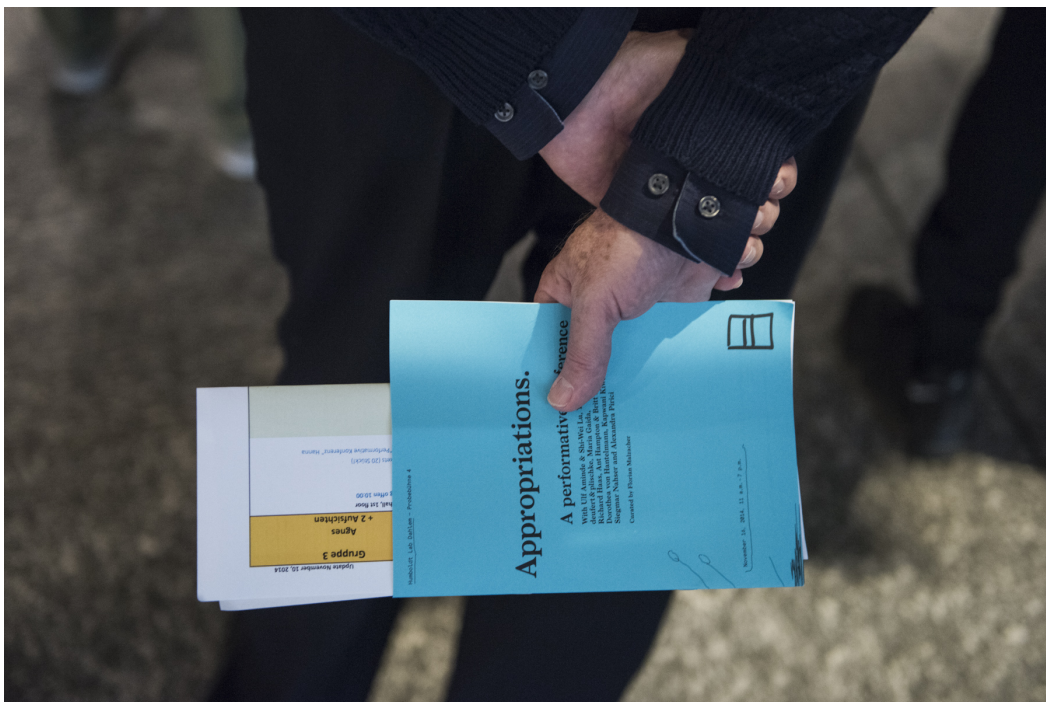
Note for the PDF print version: all links can be accessed on the respective subpages of www.humboldt-lab.de.



"As Never Before / As Never Again," Ant Hampton and Britt Hatzius, 2014, photo: Jens Ziehe



"The Exhibition," lecture demonstration by Dorothea von Hantelmann, photo: Sebastian Bolesch



Visitor of the performative conference with playbill, photo: Sebastian Bolesch



"Cannibals and Forms of Life," Alexandra Pirici, performed by Maria Baroncea, Sandhya Daemgen, Jared Marks, Foto: Sebastian Bolesch, photo: Sebastian Bolesch



"Museum for the Blind," lecture performance by Kapwani Kiwanga, photo: Sebastian Bolesch



Curator Siegmah Nahser in the depot for the East Asian collection, Ethnologisches Museum, photo: Sebastian Bolesch



"Ins Tanzen," choreography by deufert&plischke, photo: Sebastian Bolesch



"performing labour contracts, made in Taiwan (to love is give) #booty_n'Dahlem_version2," Ulf Aminde & Shi-Wei Lu, installation after the performative conference, Museum für Asiatische Kunst, photo: Jens Ziehe