



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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Seeing South / Teaser

The Ethnologisches Museum has an extensive archive of ethnographic films that were reviewed and categorized for the first time in 2014 as part of the Humboldt Lab project “Sighting.” The follow-on project “Seeing South” explored the potential of dialog between objects and moving images by integrating ten of these films into the South Seas collection. Can film material reveal meanings and connections that would not be communicated through an object presentation alone? Does the medium provide historical artifacts with a contemporary context that would otherwise not be attainable? And what does a successful object-film exhibition, which creates connections without imposing its own interpretations, actually look like? The exhibition parcours “Seeing South” punctuated the collection with film excerpts from different decades in an attempt to update object presentations with moving images.

Seeing South / Project Description

Illuminating Objects. Ethnographic Films as Windows to Multiperspectival Knowledge

by Andrea Rostásy

The archive for visual anthropology at the Ethnologisches Museum contains around 1700 films. Until recently they were almost inaccessible. Only in 2014 did the Humboldt Lab project “Sighting” systematically assess the museum film archives and add them to the museum data base. Thanks to that, the museum now has a comprehensive film list detailing content, techniques, material state –an invitation to exhibit the films or use them as part of future exhibitions.

“Seeing South” accepted this invitation, or challenge. With a selection of ten films the project realized and researched the possibilities of film integration into object-based exhibitions, by way of example. The primary question was whether film can facilitate multiperspectival access to ethnological information – whether



interpretations and connections can be made visible where mere object presentations cannot. How could a contemporary relevance be demonstrated which at the same time did not obstruct the temporal difference between the creation of the object, its collection and its museal presentation? What kind of dialog could be created with a combination of a filmically interpreted theme together with an exhibited object? How can you present formal-associative, or thematic references in a clear way without imposing them on the collection objects? And here too: How can films be shown within object installations without losing their coherence?

A Film-Object Parcours

Markus Schindlbeck, then head of the Australia and Oceania collection at the Ethnologisches Museum, and the filmmaker and ethnologist Ulrike Folie, who curated the project together, developed a film-object parcours with ten stations for "Seeing South" in the permanent exhibition South Seas and Australia. This meant developing a suitable presentation situation that takes into account the required duration for understanding the film excerpt and illustrates the film's connection to the objects at first sight. Every station was marked out clearly by graphic and textual elements. Along the non-sequential parcours visitors could discover film-object installations that dealt with various thematic fields, from issues of representation to the effects of climate change to tourist encounters. The films were shown here in excerpt; the full-length films were available to watch on the upper floor of the exhibition in a special screening room. In the stairwell gallery and on the upper floor contemporary photographs by Santiago Engelhardt and Jörg Hauser were shown.

The parcours kicked off with the film "Taking Pictures" by Les McLaren and Annie Stiven (1996), which explores the political, ethical and practical aspects as well as aesthetic of ethnological film work. Excerpts of the film were shown, juxtaposed with short statements ("limits of comprehension") or questions ("filming – for whom?"), displayed on a second screen. The questions raised on representation and critical viewing of ethnological films were intended to accompany the visitors on their further path through the exhibition.

The subsequent stations all created a connection either in terms of content or form between the film excerpt and objects. "Assuming Responsibility" is the title of one of the stations, for example, which shows only one scene from the 73-minute film "The Disappearing of Tuvalu. Trouble in Paradise" by Christopher Horner and Gilliane Le Gallic (2004). The scene shows just water, seemingly washing up against the screen. At the same time you hear the voices of Tuvalu locals talking about the clearly discernable effects of climate change on their lives. In the vitrine, fishhooks from Tuvalu were exhibited. What relevance do these objects have today with the backdrop of rising sea levels and Tuvalu's threatened environment?

Excerpts from the film "Paikeda. Man in Stone" by Ineke de Vries (2002) in combination with stone figurines comprise the station "Limits of Understanding." The film shows the current re-purposing of mysterious prehistoric stone implements by the Me people in Papua. With the station "Fascination of the First Contact" and the film "A Reminder. A Cultural Center in Eipomek" by Ulrike Folie and Gugi Gumilang (2014, 11:03 Min.) shown in full-length, a circle was completed to the first station and the film "Taking Pictures": "A Reminder" reports on the re-acquaintance of the inhabitants of Eipomek with their old knowledge and stories, due to the establishment of a new cultural center in Eipomek in 2014 – supported by German researchers who had collected exactly this knowledge 40 years prior as part of a research project for the Ethnologisches Museum. In this way the film deals with the connection between the Ethnologisches Museum Berlin and the Eipo and the responsibility of the museum in this context.

Design Challenges

The use of film as medium enabled "Seeing South" to contribute additional layers of contemporary relevance to the knowledge imparted via the artifacts. Different perspectives were perceived as more tangible and complex than could have been communicated purely on a textual basis. At the same time the use of film heightens the complexity of the exhibition work to a large extent because the film material has to be processed. This raises questions in terms of content, design, and of a legal and technical nature. Whether the presentation of a film in full length is intended, or an excerpt, or even the re-editing of a film, a change in presentation format or digitalization – permission must be explicitly granted by the authors. At the same time the films themselves must be critically reflected upon: that means the specific historical and social context of their naissance must become more apparent than was possible in "Seeing South."

A central aspect of the exhibition design is the creation of a relationship between film and object. This is easy to grasp if monitors and objects lie on the same visual axis and are positioned in a uniform way within the



exhibition: recognizably connected to one another. This was not possible within the permanent exhibition and led to the visitors having to re-orientate themselves anew at each station.

In its succinctness, the excerpt of lapping water shown at the station “Assuming Responsibility,” to be interpreted as the rising sea levels, worked most powerfully of all. The effect was further condensed with the statements taken from the film and the newly recorded voiceover statements, which literally carried the current situation of loss and destruction of the Tuvalu into the exhibition. With this more creative, rather than purely documentary, approach not only did the present become tangible along with its relationship to the objects on display, but in its succinctness also functioned almost as a film preview, and thus as a pointer to the complete version shown on the upper floor.

In the Humboldt-Forum the combination of films, images and documents will be used as continuous element, working with a combination of uniform media tables, touch screens or iPads. With the aid of special technology it will also be possible to watch films in complete length or access background information that not only provides background on the artifacts but also on the films themselves. This kind of presentation was not feasible within the framework of the Probebühne 4.

Even if the myriad possibilities in terms of film usage within object presentations has only been hinted at in “Seeing South” – the great potential of the medium in the Ethnologisches Museum was certainly underlined.

Andrea Rostásy is an artist and media curator.

Seeing South / Positions

“Not depicting what once was, but documenting processes”

How can the present be brought into the museum by means of film without obtruding upon the world of the object? The filmmaker Bettina Renner, the ethnologist Steffen Köhn and the exhibition developer Martin Heller on the potential of the medium and visual anthropology’s perspective.

Interview: Christiane Kühl

Ms. Renner, you are a documentary filmmaker for cinema and television. You have now made a film commissioned by the Humboldt Lab Dahlem for the Ethnologisches Museum, entitled “Being HMONG. A Family Encounter.” Did the idea of making an ethnographic film influence your view of the people and your working methods?

Bettina Renner: Not really. The heart of the project was: what is the identity of the Hmong living in the Swabian Jura? And how has it changed over the three generations in which the Vang family has lived there? My approach was based on my experiences as a director, and I received additional tools from the curator who told me which questions were of interest to him. At the same time I set tasks for myself and my team, to involve the protagonists themselves. From the outset, in the form of extensive conversations. That’s something that differentiates this film from others. I knew it would be difficult because it can sometimes be taxing for the protagonists. Because they think you have certain expectations and then want to fulfill them.

Steffen Köhn, you have seen the film by Ms. Renner and also the historical film material that Ulrike Folie put together for the project “Seeing South.” As a cultural anthropologist, how can you tell that one is a film from the twenty-first century and the other films are mainly recordings from the twentieth century?

Steffen Köhn: That’s a good question – but I think the cut isn’t really between the twentieth and the twenty-first century. The “Seeing South” exhibition covers a long time span, which makes it so fascinating, and you can see large shifts in the filmmaking methods there. What makes these films so interesting, also in terms of the history of visual anthropology is that Papua New Guinea, after opening its borders in the 1960s, was one of the few places in the world where “first contact” situations were still to be had. So a new generation of ethnologists could test out new ideas of filmmaking with their theories and methodologies. One can see in the exhibition that the films became increasingly reflexive and how, above all in the 1980s, the view pivots onto us



Europeans and our way of seeing.

Films not only ask to be seen, but also to be shown. Mr. Heller, this question goes to you as director of the Humboldt Lab Dahlem and as exhibition developer: why are the films we are discussing not being screened in the museum cinema but in the exhibition between the artifacts?

Martin Heller: For the Humboldt Lab there were two main motivating factors for "Seeing South." On the one hand a previous project had only just enabled access to the archives of ethnographic films in Dahlem. Now we were looking at a case-study situation, where we wanted to explore the potential of connecting these two worlds: the medial world and the world of objects, with which, primarily, we are concerned in a museum. One should note that in the museum there is a generation gap. There are older curators who find it hard to see the potential in film material. But it's not about just piecing things together in a medial way. The museum can also be active: it can commission work, as was the case with "Being HMONG." We can think prospectively: Where do we want to implement the medium? Of course there is the younger generation of ethnologists who see things completely differently. What was your impression when you saw the exhibition?

Köhn: I thought it was fascinating to see this thread between the objects and the films, which on the one hand showed the context of every day life, but on the other, not simply a one-to-one translation. The fact that there was friction and that some films led you to new paths. The film "Ich bin ein Kanake" for example really made you think. It wasn't about a strange culture from the outside, but about how you yourself grew up with the term. Watching "Being HMONG" was a similar experience: the most fascinating aspect was listening to the Hmong speak Swabian and French. And that's the point at which I hit on one of the problems of the collections, which are so taxonomically cleanly categorized, according to nationality and state and ethnicity...as ethnologists today we are much more concerned with transnationalism, syncretisms and migration. The question surely is: how can you bring globalization into an exhibition context? And your film brought that across successfully for me, merely on the strength of the language aspect.

Renner: I am always interested in how films can work in exhibitions, without being simply reduced to a flickering accessory or something that dictates what you are seeing, but that instead creates something new by its presence. And it was exciting to find out how to edit a 25-minute film so that it works as a loop. In the sense that you have the classical narrative arc but at the same time you enable the viewer to leave or arrive at any point.

Köhn: I think ethnographic collections could learn a lot from contemporary art exhibitions. Take the two-channel installation "All That Is Solid Melts Into Air" by Mark Boulos, which shows a battle of the Ogoni rebels in the Niger Delta in Northern Nigeria on one screen, where Shell is extracting oil, and the other screen shows a Canadian stock exchange with trading taking place in so-called "futures" of raw materials. That is a good image of globalization. I would wish to see more of that in an ethnological context. That probably means having to let go of the collections to a certain extent. Or one has to succeed in putting the objects back into a transnational context. Questions of provenance are all too often overlooked.

Heller: Collection history is a project all of its own, which we follow up with "Object Biographies" as part of the Probebühne 6. But the question of how to present and examine, in which medium, that is posed time and again. With "Seeing South" it was the declared aim to bring the present into the game, without imposing one's own agenda onto the objects. Would it have been possible to show the films together with the objects in the vitrines? Would that have made a difference?

Renner: One would have to try that out. Also in terms of spatial use one could get inspiration from art exhibitions. In Artur Zmijewski's installation "Democracies" for example, the room was full of monitors, showing protests from all over the world. But the sound came from the ceiling, and depending on where you stood you could listen to one of the many stories. Whether you stand, or sit, whether you hear the sound directly or via headphones – all that makes a difference and has an effect on what you take in.

"All That Is Solid ... " as well as "Democracies" are fantastic works of art. But they do not deal with objects within an exhibition space. This is what we were interested in though: how can a film enter into a productive dialog with an object? Or, in reverse: how can one prevent the film from "stealing the show" from the object? Because that can happen quite easily; the moving image easily draws attention to itself.

Köhn: Many objects in the museum, especially if they are cult objects, have a practical value. To reduce them merely to the aesthetic is a very western approach, a concept of art that has nothing to do with the local contexts. It would be great if a film could be produced especially for those objects, placing them in a social and cultural context. In the "Seeing South" exhibition however it is more a symbolic relationship that is



created. I like that a lot, because in this way the objects attain the role of signposts that point the way to somewhere completely different. Thus the exhibition functions as a kind of small network.

Heller: The proportion of the objects to the amount of film material shown plays a significant role. With the films we have undertaken a kind of punctuation of the collection. On the one hand you could argue that "Seeing South" didn't go far enough in its experimenting with other forms of representation. But on the other this restraint ensured that the objects are still intact. I found it interesting, that restraint, used systematically, can have an effect. Ulrike Folie and Markus Schindlbeck consciously tried to display a whole range of different connections. It's a massive difference whether I use film to show the present, in which I have no background or context for the objects, or if I – as was done here – attempt to emphasize the world of objects with the film, sounding them out. Where the Humboldt-Forum is concerned, we are still thinking about whether we can integrate a repertory cinema with current global films. But that only impacts on the exhibitions to a minor extent.

Renner: In preparation for the film I read a lot about the Hmong. Also about American Hmong production companies who were making films about Hmong and sending them into communities so that they could see their homeland and watch the traditions. The Vang family also proudly showed me one of these films. That also contributed to my worry that the family members would think they had to fulfill certain expectations. One day the women said they wanted to do something for us. As a filmmaker you usually recoil when someone tells you they want to explicitly do something for the camera. In this case I just said to myself "Bettina, just let it happen, this is part of the project." They then baked rice cakes, which is usually only done at New Year's. For the women it was really important that this tradition be shown in the museum. That's why they wanted to do that especially for the film. That made me very happy, because at that moment I realized that they had come to see the film as theirs.

How did you explain your motivation for making the film to the family? Surely it's a little strange being "musealized" whilst still alive.

Renner: I told them that I was interested in how they live and how their lives, their culture, have changed over generations. The fact that the film would be shown in a museum made them proud. At the same time the editor Mona Bräuer and I were well aware that we had a special responsibility to the family, with their lives suddenly on display to a public audience, and that for a very long time. You always have a responsibility toward the people you film but the duration and location make this quite different.

Heller: Responsibility drives everyone, the museum curators too, who are always reassessing their connection to the object and the source communities. But it is very difficult to show that here in the exhibitions; the objects alone do not communicate that. That's the appeal of "Seeing South," with its combination of film and the permanent exhibition.

Köhn: You could take that further and say if an object is given back or repatriated then the display case could stay empty: instead of the object you could show a film about the negotiation process. I believe that that is the challenge of a good ethnographic museum today: not depicting what once was, but to document processes. And in those terms film has a great potential.

Heller: These Humboldt Lab projects are intended to provide the initial spark for concepts at the Humboldt-Forum. We have experienced that collaboration between ethnologists and filmmakers can be difficult. Why do you think that is?

Köhn: There is a fear that film will bring a superficiality into the field of ethnology, because it is essentially populist and not a medium suited to expressing theories.

Renner: The potential of film to be an enrichment is often overlooked. It is not automatically a challenge to the preexisting body of knowledge or to the collection of objects. That is a misunderstanding.

Köhn: In Aarhus in Denmark there is a new ethnographic museum, the Moesgaard, which has almost no collection, but has very good facilities for screening films. I will be fascinated to see if that will become the blueprint for an ethnographic museum that doesn't even try to carry its colonial ballast. Instead, dealing with contemporary themes in a contemporary way.

Martin Heller is a member of the board of directors of the Humboldt Lab Dahlem.

Steffen Köhn is a research associate for the visual and media anthropology master's course at the Freien Universität



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Bettina Renner is a Berlin-based documentary filmmaker. She made the documentary "Being HMONG: A Family Encounter" for the Humboldt Lab Dahlem.

Christiane Kühl is a journalist and dramaturge based in Berlin. Together with Barbara Schindler, she supervises the online documentation of the projects for the Humboldt Lab Dahlem.

The conversation took place in March 2015 in Berlin-Dahlem. It is equally pertinent to the project "Being HMONG: A Family Encounter," Probebühne 5, which is why it also appears in this dossier.

Seeing South / Credits

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Installation view "Seeing South," photo: Jens Ziehe



Installation view "Seeing South," photo: Jens Ziehe



Installation view "Seeing South," photo: Sebastian Bolesch



Photographies by Jörg Hauser in the South Seas-exhibition of the Ethnologisches Museum, photo: Jens Ziehe



Photographies by Santiago Engelhardt in the South Seas-exhibition of the Ethnologisches Museum, photo: Jens Ziehe



Film still "Zur Erinnerung. Ein Kulturzentrum in Eipomek" (A Reminder. A Cultural Center in Eipomek,) © Ulrike Folie



Film still "Zur Erinnerung. Ein Kulturzentrum in Eipomek" (A Reminder. A Cultural Center in Eipomek,) © Ulrike Folie