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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Travelogue / Teaser

In the late 19th century, Adolf Bastian, director of the Berliner Museum für Völkerkunde (Museum of Ethnology Berlin), commissioned the Norwegian captain and explorer Johan Adrian Jacobsen with the procurement of the most "original" objects from the American Northwest Coast. Jacobsen returned to Berlin with not only approximately 3,000 artifacts, but also an impressive account of his expedition. As a historical document, this account is to be part of an exhibition module at the Humboldt-Forum that critically deals with its own history of collecting. For the project "Travelogue," the Humboldt Lab commissioned two groups of artists to translate the very personal record into a contemporary narrative format. The result was a video by Das Helmi puppet theater and a computer game along with an augmented reality presentation, by the media art group gold extra. Both probe the boundaries of knowledge dissemination in the museum in a non-didactic manner.

Travelogue / Project Description

New Narrative Formats for Exploring Collection Histories

by Viola König, Andrea Rostásy and Monika Zessnik

The travelogue by Johan Adrian Jacobsen[1], who toured the American Northwest Coast and Alaska in the late 19th century on behalf of the Berliner Museum für Völkerkunde (Museum of Ethnology Berlin), is an impressive historical document. At the behest of museum director Adolf Bastian, Jacobson was contracted to collect the most original, i.e. free from European cultural influences, objects he could find. The self-proclaimed sea captain returned to Berlin with approximately 3,000 items. However, his report of the expedition was characterized less by precise ethnographic observation than by the exploits of a seasoned adventurer.

As a historical document, Jacobsen's accounts will be the subject of an exhibition module in the future Humboldt-Forum. The goal of the Humboldt Lab project "Travelogue" was to explore how the personal account could be vividly conveyed – and not simply through the objects Jacobsen collected, but also through media-contextualizing narrative forms. The experiment was also to address problems of presentation and the history of collecting itself. It was decided at the outset that two works would emerge, which did not develop didactic media contextualization analogous to exhibition content, but which instead translated the 19th century material into independent artistic entities.

Thus, when the Humboldt Lab organized a two-stage concept competition in 2013 to translate the travelogue into a computer game and a video of a puppet show, the focus was on the exploration of new strategies of knowledge mediation. From the seven invited teams, a jury selected the Berlin puppet theater Das Helmi and the Austrian artist group gold extra.

"Totem's Sound" – Interactive Game and Discovery Tour by gold extra

With "Totem's Sound," gold extra created an installation for the Ethnologisches Museum consisting of an adventure computer game and an augmented reality presentation. The audience could access the latter while walking through the exhibition with a tablet in hand[2]. Both parts referenced each other.

By pointing the tablet at one of the markers[3] on a display case, a short film was set in motion. Five objects appeared, which gave first-hand accounts of their history and discovery: a wooden mask, a copper plate, a canoe, an Indian chief's chair and a totem pole. In the elaborately designed videos, the objects humorously "talked, in their own voices" about the past and illuminated themes ranging from mythology, the potlatch ceremony, and tourism to the functions of the chieftains today and the exploitation of the environment in the territories of the First Nations.

The computer game, designed in the post-pixel style[4], could be played on site at a console. It focused on the exploration of the surroundings and the situation based on the game principle. In the game, visitors experienced a day with Captain Jacobsen and visited a village belonging to the Haida people in Canada: they encountered shamans, dancers, canoeists, wolves and mosquitoes. Wandering about between marsh and festively decorated houses, visitors had to solve a specific task in each game segment. The game is also available post-exhibition as a free download.

The interaction of the two components, the tablet and the game, which had the same five objects as their starting point, was important to the artists, as it allowed different perspectives to be presented – often with a good dose of irony. In this way, gold extra tried to present Jacobsen's view and supplement it with the current state of research, as well as to reflect on how we deal with strangers and the unfamiliar.

"Man from Another Star" - Puppet Show Video by Das Helmi

The puppet theater Das Helmi is known for its highly individualistic homemade foam puppets, rambling improvisations and politically incorrect anarcho-aesthetics. Even for its first elaborate film production, "Man from Another Star," it used these elements of live performance. The performers, who were always visible behind their puppets, assumed Jacobsen's characteristics and heightened them for effect: Jacobsen the adventurer, ridiculed by the Northwest Coast inhabitants, the frenetic art hunter or the misunderstood-feeling scientist, who was denied academic honors during his lifetime. In the film, the puppet theater also critically explored issues that cannot be represented only through an object-based narrative in the museum, i.e. Jacobsen's commission to bring "Indians" from North America back to Hamburg for the human shows in the Hagenbeck Zoo.

In the exhibition, visitors were able to sit in comfortable chairs and watch the movie on a large screen. The drawings, storyboards and images made during the film's production covered the back wall of the sitting area and two large display cases had been used by the artists to exhibit an arrangement made of foam props from the film.

Everything Understood or just well Entertained?

Is it possible to artistically interpret and dramatize a document such as Adrian Jacobsen's travelogue within a museum exhibition in time-based media without trivializing the material? This issue was repeatedly discussed during the project's implementation phase. How does one avoid stereotypes in narrative formats and when

does it make sense to use them deliberately? Native Americans are depicted by the Helmi as nameless chirping birds: on the one hand, as a reflection of Jacobsen's inability to distinguish strangers from one another, and, on the other hand, as a reference to the idea of shifting identities, which allows a person to be a bird at times, a person or even a moose. The dramaturgical staging rendered the double coding comprehensible and opened up new perspectives within the exhibition presentation.

The questions that arose from the task definition and the travelogue's implementation are virulent in current museological discourse and in discussions about knowledge mediation. How can the mediation of serious content be successful at the interface between museum, media and art? How does one address and engage younger audiences without losing older ones? What forms of mediation and communication – both live and digital - do media presentation forms need in advance, during the exhibition and in the follow-up?

Whether or not the computer game by gold extra or the film by Das Helmi will be successful in the museum setting, and whether these formats can be expanded on or transferred to other information contexts, is still unclear. Based on the prototypes created here, however, it is possible to perform an analysis that can be incorporated into a possible transfer of the works to the Humboldt-Forum.

After a two-month trial run and controversial reactions, the computer game had attracted considerable attention: there were approximately 12,000 views, 3,500 downloads and 2,200 views of the trailer. Even people who had not visited the museum or the exhibition and, thus, had not seen the show or knew nothing about Jacobsen and the collections, were interested in the computer game, which was also available online.[5] The expense associated with the development of media formats for knowledge mediation is worth it when their impact goes beyond the museum in this way. Good mediation opportunities also arise, however, from direct encounters and exchanges with the participating artists. In November 2014, when the Ethnologisches Museum conducted the "Let's Play Session" with members of gold extra, the results were exactly what had been hoped for: the attending children and adults had their curiosity awakened, connections were revealed and an educational medium was tested that was clearly enjoyable for all.

[1] Johan Adrian Jacobsen: Capitain Jacobsen's Reise an der Nordwestküste Amerikas, 1881–1883: zum Zwecke ethnologischer Sammlungen und Erkundigungen, nebst Beschreibung persönlicher Erlebnisse. Für den deutschen Leserkreis bearbeitet von Adrian Woldt, Leipzig 1884. Reprint Hildesheim 2013

[2] gold extra used the augmented reality app Aurasma.

[3] Augmented reality markers: The pattern of the marker triggers a sequence on the tablet, in this case, a transparent video, through which the original artifact and marker are still visible. Through this superimposition, an "extended reality" is created, the augmented reality.

[4] The pixel style characterized the first computer games. Because of technical limitations, in game graphics there was a limited choice of colors and a strongly pixelated representation of figures, etc. The characters were animated with a few pictures. The post-pixel style became popular in the mid-2000s and deliberately echoed pixel graphics. Particularly with games on mobile platforms, post-pixel graphics provide an alternative, one, which makes the presentation of graphics appear smooth whilst freeing processor capacity. In addition to these technical components, the post-pixel style is deliberately used as an aesthetic means of abstraction.

[5] A gamer from the USA states, "What Totem's Sounds ends up being is a slice of enjoyable criticism of museums or, at least, how they conducted their worldly gatherings and prescribed to the colonialist attitudes of the time. It's an effort to make us think about the historical foundations our civilizations are built upon, and how we might prioritize our pursuit of cataloging the world above the lives of native people." (Christ Priestman, Kill Screen).

Prof. Dr. Viola König is the director of the Ethnologisches Museum der Staatlichen Museen zu Berlin.

Andrea Rostásy is an artist and media curator.

Monika Zessnik is a curator for American ethnology and communications at the Ethnologisches Museum der Staatlichen Museen zu Berlin.

Travelogue / Positions

"I'll take the landscape with me, too"

by Elisabeth Wellershaus

In dealing with Jacobsen's travelogue, the Berlin-based puppet theater Das Helmi has made a film that visually reproduces the racist prejudices of the time in all their extremes – and, in so doing, provoked a justifiable controversy.

A Berlin museum director commissions a Norwegian adventurer to journey to North America to "procure" a few artifacts along the Pacific Coast from the "Indians" and "Eskimos." On the journey, the adventurer battles with giant squid and killer whales, and later struggles to prove himself among the indigenous population and cope with the drugs proffered at their celebrations. From his perspective, the indigenous people look like elk, turkeys or creatures from another planet. Which is why, as well as the art he has acquired, he also brings a few of them back to Germany for Hagenbeck's so-called Völkerschauen ("people shows" or human zoos).

This is a short summary of the content of a production commissioned by the Ethnologisches Museum in Berlin and subsequently made by the puppet theatre Das Helmi. Inspired by the work of Egyptian artist Wael Shawky, who depicted the Crusades from an Arab point of view in the video of a puppet show in "Cabaret Crusades," the museum wanted to explore aspects of its North America collection. In this way, the travelogue of the self-proclaimed captain and explorer Johan Adrian Jacobsen formed the basis of a 30-minute puppet film, "Man from Another Star." With satirical hyperbole, Das Helmi – known above all in Berlin for its anarchic and irreverent handling of sensitive topics – tries to mirror Jacobsen's naïve observations from 1881 and the prejudices towards Native Americans that were typical of the time. The rapacity of both European museums and art collectors is also revealed.

However, the project crosses problematic boundaries. Jacobsen and the director of the Berlin Museum für Völkerkunde at the time, Adolf Bastian, are certainly well-pilloried. Above all Jacobsen, who is furnished with a brash tone by the puppet master, fulfills every imaginable cliché of the European art hunter. For example, when he blusters through the film with phrases like, "I'll take the landscape, too." In comparison to this, however, the indigenous inhabitants don't even look human. Members of the Haida, for example, are portrayed as a gaggle of startled turkeys. Very few indigenous people have human characteristics in the film. Seen from a charitable standpoint, this could be interpreted as a reference to Jacobsen's interpretation of legends and myths that were alien to him. Nevertheless, the film, which is intended to express a critical standpoint toward colonial thought patterns, could be interpreted as simply a further unnecessary reproduction of racist stereotypes.

Above all, one scene in the film makes its critics baulk: the reenactment of a potlatch ceremony, a tradition common amongst many peoples of the Pacific Northwest Coast. In the reenacted film version, painted naked bodies shake about, arms and legs flail wildly and breasts jiggle around enticingly. It is the only scene in the film in which the puppets step into the background, behind the actors, thereby emphasizing a consciously exhibited exoticism. But a potlatch is actually a ritual exchange of gifts, carried out within complex social hierarchies. And Jacobsen tries to utilize this to his advantage, in order to be taken seriously by his trading partners in order to enable him to trick them later. In the film this is translated into a "red Indian cliché of the lowest order," some ethnologists have criticized.

Yet that is exactly how Jacobsen wrote about it in his travelogue. And this is what the director of the Ethnologisches Museum, Viola König, and the curator Monika Zessnik, wanted to present unexpurgated to the public. With a view to the current debate and the freedom of satire, art, and opinion, in combination with cultural sensibilities, they are certainly aware that such satire does not sit well with humanitarian injustice. Which is why they themselves heighten problematic parts of the film: the almost continuous portrayal of indigenous people as animals, for example, or a drug-trip scene in 1968 hippie aesthetic that dominates the potlatch celebration in the video, but which is not even mentioned in Jacobsen's travelogue.

The film will not be presented in the Humboldt-Forum for several reasons. "Nevertheless, we think controversial experiments are fundamentally appropriate, because a film like this could be used as part of a multiperspective approach within an exhibition model in the Humboldt-Forum," says König. After all, they are still looking for new representational formats. "We are also pretty sure, that the whole thing wouldn't have created such a stir if it had been a normal theatre production and not a work commissioned by the Ethnologisches Museum," says Zessnik. And should they also not be allowed to explore their own history – in this case the Wilhelminian era – from their own perspective?

In the new exhibition format, the European and the indigenous perspectives are to stand side by side. On the one hand, contemporary Yupik (artists) will deal with the objects in the collection. They will explore questions of the significance and the loss of their cultural property in Alaska as well as assess the conservation of their material culture in the museums. Parallel to this, a project is planned to represent the European perspective of the collection's nascence. The end result should obviously not be offensive to the indigenous communities.

“They shouldn't have to keep their children from seeing it,” says König.

But that may well happen, if the racist prejudices from Jacobsen’s problematic travelogue are depicted in a genuinely “realistic” way. Discrimination based on such stereotypes is especially virulent in the USA and Canada to this day. A truly adequate way of dealing with the original written document would no doubt only be possible in direct exchange with the representatives of the relevant cultures; and by asking the question, whether the faithful and detailed reproduction of the material is really the only way to approach the European perspective. The internationally rather underrepresented First Nation communities of North America are, after all, still in the process of regaining their identities. With this in mind, a renewed appropriation of their traditions through the narratives of western curators or artists should be closely scrutinized again. Every artist is naturally entitled to determine the form and content of their own work – that is exactly why Das Helmi was commissioned. But when, in connection with the Humboldt-Forum, the power relations between the cultures remain hidden, one cannot really talk of a genuine exchange.

But it is exactly that which König and Zessnik are seeking, as they emphasize. This is why they are now quite grateful for the critical voices; the deliberation of one’s own history can now move on to the next phase.

Elisabeth Wellershaus is a freelance journalist who lives and works in Berlin.

Immersive Worlds of Experience

by Linda Breitlauch

The computer game “Totem’s Sound,” by gold extra, spirits players away on the North America journey that the explorer Jacobsen undertook at the beginning of the 19th century – casting them as co-authors of the story, the trading and the collection of artifacts.

Stories, especially those of adventurers, can be told in many different ways. Museum artifacts usually tell stories through a broad documentary representation. However, when, in the interests of living museum culture, the purely historical plane is expanded upon with an additional narrative layer of a seemingly fictional nature, a reception situation is created, which requires the visitor to enter into an almost intimate exchange with the work. The Humboldt Lab project “Totem’s Sound” is, in the best sense, an unusual form of the mediation of objects and their history, demanding of its audience a high level of interactive involvement. By using a computer game, a mode of communication was chosen that addresses a pop-cultural phenomenon with its corresponding high level of innovation.

“Totem’s Sound” takes the players on a journey with the Norwegian adventurer Johan Adrian Jacobsen. The player assumes the role of the explorer, who, at the end of the 19th century, travelled to the American Northwest Coast and to Alaska, where he procured numerous artifacts for the museum collection on the behest of what was then the Berliner Museum für Völkerkunde (Museum of Ethnology Berlin). One station of these travels, which Jacobsen described in detail in his travelogue, led him to a village of the Haida people in Canada.

Interactive storytelling that uses computer games as a tool is nothing new, but it is nevertheless not yet an established narrative medium. Since the 1970s, computer games have been a medium with which to approach stories in a direct exchange. Players take on the role of co-authors, and a common narrative relationship is forged. Similar to film, an interactive game depicts an alleged current situation, which draws the players into the action, as though it were taking place today – right now. In this way, events long past can be made freshly accessible.

The aesthetic of “Totem’s Sound” is a homage to the legendary Japanese role playing series “Zelda,” whose optics and game mechanics it references – in the style of old 16-bit action role-playing games. As is common for computer games of this genre, we experience the environment from an isometric perspective that allows the player an overview of part of the playing field. The story starts in a village in which the protagonist “Jacobsen” has just arrived, and from where starts his travels. His first task is to find someone in the forest, who, after a strange biting ritual, presents him with a blanket. He trades this in the village for an artifact, which he wants to take back to Berlin. On his journey through the forest, he battles with mosquitoes, wolves and bears. The moment he hands over the first artifact, the classic genre rules are broken and the game jumps straight into the 20th century. Suddenly the players find themselves in a TV aesthetic reminiscent of the 1970s, complete with a sequence of sound dissonances and postmodern references.

The tools of a computer game differ substantially from those of books, films or documentations, in terms of tackling and processing historical events. But the choice of which path to take in the story is not always completely free in a computer game either. The decisions the players make more or less follow the paths laid out by the creators of the game – the authors, game designers, artists and programmers. When quests are not fulfilled, the story in "Totem's Sound" comes to a standstill. Just as in real life, inaction is what so often leads to our remaining stuck – sometimes until others come along and make the decision for us. In this sense, the player is not a completely free agent within the narrative.

With the instructions to procure further artifacts, new communication options unfold for "Jacobsen" with the local inhabitants, but also new options for action, like a canoe trip or collecting shells among the seals. In this way, the player follows the written words of the explorer and procures and collects the artifacts in the game. Information about the origins of the Ethnologisches Museum's collection can be expanded upon through an immersive journey into the world of Johan Adrian Jacobsen and his travels. The interactive processing encourages reflections on alien and strange encounters, which is the purpose of the topic and the medium. "Totem's Sound" thus slots in to the overall concept of a multi-platform exhibition, "Travelogue." The players can also look at the artifacts they have just "procured" directly in the museum, where, with the aid of tablets and augmented reality technology, they can view historical objects in the display cases, where the virtual world and reality overlap. The transmedia quality of the exhibition, which connects the virtual world with that of the museum space, lends a new dimension, one worthy of repetition, to the principle of storytelling, a classical medium in itself.

Dr. Linda Breitlauch is professor of game design at the Hochschule Trier.

Travelogue / Credits

A project of the Probebühne 4, September 23, 2014 through February 8, 2015

Project supervision: Viola König, Andrea Rostásy, Monika Zessnik
Project assistance: Henning Thiele
Project jury: Martin Heller, Viola König, Heike Kropff, Maryanne Redpath, Stephan Schwingeler

"Man from Another Star" by Das Helmi
Puppet show performance: Felix Loycke, Emir Tebatebai, Brian Morrow, Florian Loycke
Additional performance: Dasniya Sommer, Solene Garnier
Puppets: Felix Loycke, Florian Loycke
Drawings, sculptures, murals: Felix Loycke
Script: Emir Tebatebai, Florian Loycke and everyone
Direction: Florian Loycke and everyone
Music: Brian Morrow, Florian Loycke, Emir Tebatebai, Solame-Musicshow
Lighting, back projection and objects: Burkhart Ellinghaus
Camera and editing: Francis d'Ath
Subtitles: Theatris Theaterbüro
Film processing: Sergej Range
With thanks to: Ballhaus Ost, Berlin

"Totem's Sound" by gold extra
Concept and texts: Karl Zechenter, Georg Hobmeier
Video concept and production: Reinhold Bidner
Programming: Tilmann Hars
Mapping: Georg Hobmeier
Sound effects and music: Karl Zechenter
Assets and graphics: Adeline Ducker
Graphics: Brian Main, Reinhold Bidner
Tablet mounts: Severin Weiser
Voices in the German version: Martina Dehne, Georg Hobmeier
Voices in the English version: Steve Crilley, Lisa Nielsen-Spieler
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Installation view "Travelogue: Man from Another Star," photo: Jens Ziehe

Installation view “Travelogue: Man from Another Star,” puppets made by Das Helmi, photo: Jens Ziehe

Performance by Das Helmi at the opening of Probebühne 4 in the Dahlem Museums, photo: Sebastian Bolesch

Performance by Das Helmi at the opening of Probebühne 4 in the Dahlem Museums, photo: Sebastian Bolesch

Installation view "Travelogue: Totem's Sound," photo: Jens Ziehe

Visitor with tablet of the augmented reality presentation “Totem's Sound” at the Ethnologisches Museum, photo: Sebastian Bolesch