



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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Audio Guide Special – Storylines / Teaser

A museum information system that enables a clear, unobstructed view of objects? One that even lets visitors discover the stories that link different exhibits and get a glimpse of the bigger picture? The "Audio Guide Special – Storylines," developed by Serotonin for the exhibition "Myth of the Golden Triangle" in the Ethnologisches Museum, aims to be just that: a non-linear audio guide that enables personalized museum "walkabouts." The sound art duo collaborated with the HTW Berlin - University of Applied Sciences to create a gesture-controlled headphone prototype. Its potential was tested in two workshops in Dahlem and then demonstrated in the museum as a 72-minute audio mash-up.

Audio Guide Special – Storylines / Project Description

Individual Pathways through the Exhibition Landscape

by Katharina Kepplinger

Exhibition audio guides are usually based on one of two different principles: First there is the linear guide that lays out a specific route and with it a dramatic composition. Then we have what is called a random access guide; all audio tracks can stand alone and there is no predefined route to follow. Linear guides build up suspense which is resolved at the end of the tour. They show links between different objects and coordinate facts and contexts. With random access guides, the visitor is in charge. He or she decides the length of the tour, which objects to spend more time on, and where it all starts and ends. Random access guides allow visitors to design their own audio tour and the museum can also easily modify or expand the guides.

With the project "Audio Guide Special," the sound art duo Serotonin, made up of Marie-Luise Goerke and Matthias Pusch, attempt to combine the advantages of these two audio guide concepts. The idea is for users to find their own way through the exhibition and still create a dramatic arc. Serotonin developed a dense web of storylines that are interwoven in different ways. Similar to a circular railway, this system lets users to



decide when they would like to stop, switch cars, continue, or even return to a previous station. A novel approach in its current museum context, this principle can be adapted for many different exhibitions.

The Stories between the Objects

How to convey non-linear text elements in an exhibition was a central question that the Humboldt Lab Dahlem had grappled with before the project for the “Audio Guide Special” was commissioned. The objective: to reveal the stories connecting the objects. Serotonin was interested in finding an information medium that would allow visitors to keep their focus where it mattered: on the exhibits. In cooperation with the Hochschule für Technik und Wirtschaft (HTW) Berlin – University of Applied Sciences, the two artists collaborated with engineers to develop a device prototype with gesture control. Thanks to a device – in this case, headphones – that can recognize nodding as an affirmative gesture, visitors can decide how to navigate through the collection without having to take their eyes off the objects or images.

Given the complex technical demands, the development of a fully functional prototype could not be completed within the project time frame. The guide’s potential was therefore simulated in a 72-minute mash-up for visitors, who could listen to recorded instructions and learn about future applications. An initial feasibility study was completed by the HTW Berlin and a gesture-controlled headphone prototype was created and tested during two workshops in Dahlem.

The Visitor as Curator

The “Audio Guide Special” was developed for the exhibition “Myth of the Golden Triangle” at the Ethnological Museum. This permanent exhibition was conceived by Roland Platz, curator for South and Southeast Asia, whose arrangement of objects, pictures, and text panels informs visitors of the lives of mountain people in Southeast Asia. Curating an exhibition always involves decisions: choices about objects, but also topics, emphases, and information. Because of their size, text panels cannot contain comprehensive historical information or storylines. Nor can they be responsive to individual visitors: What are their interests? What prior knowledge do they bring to the space?

The “Audio Guide Special” asks visitors to step into the role of the curator and make decisions as they go. The guide contains audio topics defined by Marie-Luise Goerke and Matthias Pusch, which they then paired with central exhibition pieces. Visitors choose their own path through the exhibition depending on their interests, energy level, and state of mind: “I want to find out more about opium.” “Stories alone are boring; I’m going to activate the sound score on my audio guide.” “I have a tight schedule today; the interview with the collector Hansjörg Mayer needs to wait until next time.” “I am already pretty tired and don’t feel like I can absorb any more information. I’m going to turn on the music score for the rest of the exhibition and just let the objects speak for themselves.” For their next visit, visitors can compose a different audio guide by making different selections.

Mobile Guides in the Humboldt-Forum

Developing hardware that is fully dictated by artistic ideas and that enables a non-linear audio guide is both an ambitious and a welcome endeavor. Serotonin’s cooperation with the HTW Berlin to develop gesture-controlled headphones for their “Audio Guide Special” presents a model approach in this context. In terms of its content and creativity, the “Audio Guide Special” can also be viewed as an exemplary audio guide for the Humboldt-Forum – in addition to outstanding text, sound, and narrator quality, it also offers an excellent mix of original recordings, sounds, and music that come together to create new auditory content. The “Audio Guide Special” initiates a dialog with its listeners by prompting them to make active decisions; the dynamic software responds accordingly. Visitors receive a tour that matches their interests and follows the questions they have about the objects and the exhibition. The “Audio Guide Special” can therefore be grasped as a positive contribution to the culture of multiperspectivity that the Humboldt-Forum hopes to foster.

Katharina Kepplinger joined the Humboldt Lab Dahlem and the staff unit Humboldt-Forum in May 2015. Previously she worked as a specialist museum assistant in professional training at the Ethnological Museum of Berlin and as a sales assistant for audio guides and audio tours for museums and exhibitions.



Audio Guide Special – Storylines / Positions

“We took Internet hypertext and transferred it to an audio format”

The sound art duo Serotonin on their “Audio Guide Special”
Interview: Gaby Hartel

Marie-Luise Goerke, Matthias Pusch, let’s talk about names: What made you decide to call your audio guide “special”?

Matthias Pusch: An audio guide that just gives listeners snippets of information and explains different objects doesn’t serve the actual purpose of a museum. That’s our firm opinion. That purpose, to me, is to form a connection between the objects and their “hinterland”. That question includes why these exact pieces were chosen for the museum and not others. Or topics like provenance, which is currently under a lot of scrutiny.

And maybe the different issues that surround an object’s origin?

Pusch: Exactly. The Pergamon Museum here in Berlin has the Pergamon Altar in its collection. Fortunately, you could say, if we think about the recent destruction of cultural heritage that has been happening in the Middle East. But it’s not enough to leave it at that and say nothing about the rather problematic idea of a Western museum as a “safe harbor”. During their formative years in the 19th century, museums were established for much different reasons than they are today.

They were conceived as institutions of teaching, collecting, and learning that met with the support of the educated classes. Museum visitors were well-read; they could already connect the dots. Today text is used to supply those links. Now your approach is to use the polysensory medium of sound art to convey things – a very different principle than text on a wall panel.

Marie-Luise Goerke: At the beginning of the project we started out with the very basic question of how people approach text. We found that today, in the 21st century, linear text is still the standard, even though the entire online world is based on a non-linear structure. We took this basic idea of non-linearity and applied it to a complex text structure in an educational context. Definitely a big challenge.

Pusch: Because there’s still no standard way to do it. We could just hand out portable devices with standard browser-based internet access. It would be a familiar method for implementing non-linear text and visitors would know how to use it. But the screen would come between them and the objects. And the reason why we go to the museum is to be in a room with original pieces, to feel their aura.

Your approach is less about transmitting information, and more about knowledge transfer through remediation, which is to say, moving from concrete objects to a more general understanding. What’s exciting about your “Audio Guide Special” is that it creates direct sensory and experiential links to things that are very distant in time and space.

Goerke: Yes, it’s different than a lexical approach. Most conventional audio guides rely on a text-object correlation. There might be a few breaks – and sound, music, or original recordings could be inserted into the text. But they still dictate a prescribed pattern of how visitors should see and understand an exhibit piece. So they’re basically about describing, providing a description of an artwork or another piece.

What role does the selection of narrators play in your work?

Goerke: An absolutely critical one! I don’t want to start bashing audio guides, but the voices that you normally hear in this context are all wrong: They are either those smooth voices you hear in advertising or they sound clinical and perfect. There is no emotional spark and the voices have nothing to do with what is being conveyed. We decided to use voice as an instrument to appeal to visitors and make them want to keep delving deeper into the exhibition.

Pusch: The subtitle “storylines” already contains the idea of a non-hierarchical, interwoven texture that’s made up of overlapping narrative threads. The concept of storylines comes from the Australian Aborigines, who inspired our work. The Aborigines do not grasp a landscape, or in other words their living environment,



as a Cartesian system of cartographic coordinates, but as an individual or collective experience, as a lyrical system in the broadest sense.

Based on an embodied, stimulating “aesthetics of walking” that is currently the topic of spirited debate in art and philosophy. Paths through the exhibition are created as an open design, and you speculate that your storylines will be enriched by the visitors’ memories, prior knowledge, and interests as they decide how to move from exhibit to exhibit.

Goerke: Walking and storylines are interwoven. Visitors don’t move in a progression of numbered objects, for example “one–three–eight.” Instead they try to follow a path that relates to a specific subject – like economic trade in the Golden Triangle, for example. That can take place independently of the objects “one, three, and eight,” but it doesn’t have to. We started by producing our idea as a 72-minute sound mash-up that we provided to visitors during a test and evaluation phase as the “Audio Guide Special.” We also held workshops using a dedicated prototype we developed with HTW – the local University of Applied Sciences. The device contains an interface with gesture recognition and we wanted to test the options for an interactive, non-linear “walkabout” through the exhibition.

You draw your audience to certain thematic “magnets” that you use to show the complexity of life underlying the exhibit. Your approach is more about conveying knowledge than information.

Goerke: That was the plan. For this exhibition we chose key objects – like a typical Chinese shopping bag made of plastic – for certain themes and used them to get to the bigger picture: in this case, the economics of a cultural region, with ideas we thought were important to relate.

In a different case, we weren’t looking to provide an exact description of Mien scroll paintings of Taoist deities. Instead we wanted to get at what motivated the collector Hansjörg Mayer, whose voice we hear in the audio guide, to collect these objects. He tells some really beautiful stories about them, I think. The deities needed to be convinced to leave the paintings before they were sold. Only after this ceremony were the paintings ready to be moved to a different cultural context. The direct narration of this ritual to prepare the paintings for their journey is important in order to grasp the divine character of a scroll painting. A description of the images never could have conveyed that. Our goal was to reveal these different thematic layers.

Pusch: The artistic idea behind our work is that everyone who visits the museum – depending on their educational background and interests as well as their individual story – can understand, feel, and hear it differently. That’s why we set up certain transfer stations where visitors can “dig deeper” if they would like. Basically, we took internet hypertext and transferred it to an audio format.

Your “Audio Guide Special” lends a personal or private aspect to the exhibition although the listener is moving through public space.

Pusch: It does. We wanted to view the relatively manageable number of exhibits as a landscape and give visitors the opportunity to have their own conversation with this landscape, to ask their own questions.

Dr. Gaby Hartel is a curator, art publicist, and radio journalist who works at the intersection of the visual arts, literature, and sound art. Currently, she is a sound art curator at the Museum für Naturkunde Berlin for “Art/Nature”, a pilot project in cooperation with the German Federal Cultural Foundation.

The Berlin-based sound-art duo Serotonin is made up of author Marie-Luise Goerke and sound engineer/composer Matthias Pusch. Together they create fictional and documentary work for radio broadcasting and audio books, as well as numerous spatial and sound installations.

Audio Guide Special – Storylines / Credits

A project of the Probebühne 5, November 9, 2014 through April 6, 2015

Exhibition curator for “Myth of the Golden Triangle”: Roland Platz

Artists behind the Audio Guide Special mash-up for “Myth of the Golden Triangle”: Serotonin (Marie-Luise Goerke, Matthias Pusch)



Narrators: Friedhelm Ptok, Simone Kabst

Interviews: Hansjörg Mayer, collector; Gretel Schwörer, ethnomusicologist, Martin Luther University Halle-Wittenberg

Composition: Martin Daske

Artistic consultant: Gaby Hartel

Device engineers: Thomas Schwotzer, HTW Berlin - University of Applied Sciences; Niclas F. Jagoda, HTW Berlin student

Duration: Approx. 72 minutes

Audio Guide Special – Storylines / Imprint Documentation

Publisher: Humboldt Lab Dahlem, a project of the Kulturstiftung des Bundes and the Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz (2012-2015). Directors: Martin Heller, Viola König, Klaas Ruitenbeek, Agnes Wegner

Editor: Christiane Kühl

Assistance: Carolin Nüser

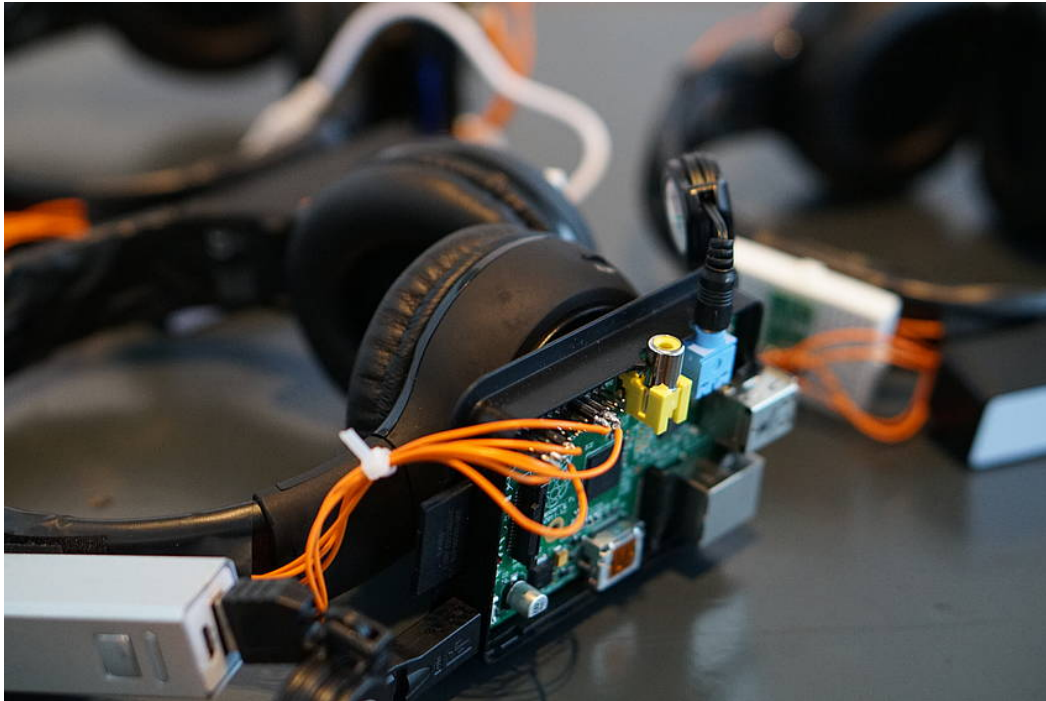
Translation: Sarah Matthews

As of July 2015

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Visitor with the “Audio Guide Special” in the exhibition “Myth of the Golden Triangle,” photo: Sebastian Bolesch



Prototype of headphones that work through gesture recognition, photo: Serotonin

7



Installation view “Audio Guide Special,” photo: Jens Ziehe



Visitor with the “Audio Guide Special” in the exhibition “Myth of the Golden Triangle,” photo: Sebastian Bolesch