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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Being HMONG. A Family Encounter / Teaser

With the working title "The Hmong Diaspora in the Swabian Jura" a filmic snapshot of a family has been created, that lives as a small ethnic minority in Baden-Württemberg, now in its third generation. Central questions of identity and self-perception were elaborated on site together with the family and then subsequently transposed into a flexible shooting script, allowing for impromptu changes and ideas, contributed by family members, to be taken into account. The key aspects taken up by this Humboldt Lab project were the ideas of multiple perspective and contemporary relevance, thereby picking up on the Humboldt-Forum's main themes.

Being HMONG. A Family Encounter / Project Description

by Roland Platz, Bettina Renner and Barbara Schindler

Diaspora in the Swabian Jura

Since 2011 the exhibition "Myth of the Golden Triangle" has been on show at the Ethnologisches Museum in Berlin-Dahlem and illuminates the current situation of various mountain peoples in Southeast Asia. In order to draw attention to the fact that members of these ethnic minorities also live in Germany, texts and photos of a Hmong family living in the Swabian Jura were displayed. In order to give this group, living in the diaspora, a voice of its own, and to strengthen the contemporary relevance of the museum in a prominent way, the curator Roland Platz suggested making a film for the Humboldt Lab about the Vang family, with whom he had remained in contact over the years. The documentary filmmaker Bettina Renner who was, at that time, working on the installation "Vision: Humboldt-Forum" for the Humboldt-Box, also joined the project. In joint talks between the curator, film director and the Vang family about the feasibility of representing identity, the curatorial idea was developed further into a concept and the real Humboldt Lab project took off from there.

Home Visit with a Camera

The Hmong are an ethnic minority numbering between two to three million people, living in several countries across Southeast Asia and in southern China, largely in mountainous regions. Their culture and language differ markedly from those of the surrounding lowland populations. Towards the end of the 1970s, many Hmong people fled the encroaching Vietnam War, which had also spread to Laos, emigrating to Canada, America and to Europe – predominantly France and Germany. As one of ten Hmong families, the Vang family is living in Baden-Württemberg and is now in its third generation. On the occasion of the 50th birthday of Yao Vang, the curator and film director visited the southern German province. After a curatorial briefing and establishing the themes to be raised in the film, Bettina Renner discussed all further details with the Vang family. Together they talked about diverse issues centered on the perpetuation and transformation of their identity as Hmong: What role did language, religion, the family, or their own culture play? How was their relationship to Germany, to the neighbors in the village? What did they miss most, and how did the answers given by the different generations diverge within the family? All these questions were integrated directly into the shooting script and continually elaborated upon with the Vangs. Accordingly the first script was intentionally quite flexible and was adjusted where necessary during shooting. This method allowed the crew to react to the dynamic within the family and also to accommodate their impromptu suggestions. For example, Mrs. Vang and her sister-in-law spontaneously decided to make traditional sticky rice cake – usually a new year's tradition among the Hmong, but this ritual was so important to them that it was integrated into the filmic documentation, despite the fact that filming took place during the summer. For various reasons (for example, lack of permission to film), individual family members decided against being filmed at their workplaces, at school or in further education, preferring to stick to their own private sphere.

One of the aspects of the project in which the family was actively involved was when it came to the choice of language: because it is a significant part of each individual's identity, every family member decided for themselves in which language they wished to speak. Depending on which generation they belonged to, they spoke in Hmong, or German, in Swabian dialect or in French. Accordingly, the director chose a bilingual Franco-German film team. The entire film has German and English subtitles.

The film team was available for eight days, while the director remained on site for a few days before and after the shoot, in order to answer any additional questions the family might have. After completing shooting, Bettina Renner returned to the Alps several times in order to translate the narratives from Hmong into German together with the eldest son, Tchoua Vang, and the cousins, Rosana and Liliana Vang. She also took the rough cut back to Baden-Württemberg in order to discuss the final version with the family. The consent and participation of the Vang family during the entire process was a core aspect of the project.

Loop and Short Cut: Two Film Formats as a Method of Approach

In order to integrate the product optimally into the exhibition, the director, together with the editor, developed a longer film version as well as several so-called shorts.

The 25-minute film was intended to work on a visual plane as well as acoustically as a loop, providing the exhibition visitors with the opportunity of engaging with the film at any point, and being able to get something out of it, even by watching a brief scene. Spatially somewhat separate, with seating, in an appropriately darkened space, the documentary was shown in the permanent exhibition "Myth of the Golden Triangle" during Probebühne 5.

The shorts have a duration of between one and two minutes. Because no material was to be used here that had already been used in the long film, the shorts were completed only after the finalization of the longer version. Varied approaches were used in terms of content, providing a direct reference to objects from the permanent exhibition (for example on the theme of clothing), or with more abstract references (like weddings, families). The five shorts were not available within the permanent exhibition, but they are available to watch on the Humboldt Lab website.

As in her other documentary work, the director wanted to forgo any kind of commentary or use of music. The idea then arose of working with the songs and music created by the family themselves, as well as background sounds from the local environment. That's why, in the post-production phase, the sound design was worked on extensively.

The Experiment of an Encounter

The Humboldt Lab project "Being HMONG. A Family Encounter" was an attempt to generate an authentic portrait of the protagonists in cooperation with them, and to talk about what it means to live in the diaspora. The twelve main protagonists who came to the film premiere together with other family members (Yao Vang and Lao Vang, Tchoua, Tcheng and Anja Vang, Xou Vang and See Lee, Rosana del Carmen, Liliana and Khai Vang, Flavia and Miguel Vang) were very happy with the results and proud, as representatives of their culture, to be able to share their story with others in a museum context.

The filmic snapshot "Being HMONG" documents the new positioning of minorities living in the diaspora, and thus fulfills the fundamental requirements of the Humboldt-Forum: to engender a contemporary relevance and, at the same time, permit multiple perspectives. That is the reason why the 25-minute film will be utilized in the new exhibition module "Struggle for Self-Determination," which will have as its theme the situation of minorities in Northeast India (Nagaland) and the so-called Golden Triangle in Southeast Asia.

Dr. Roland Platz has been curator for South and Southeast Asia in the Ethnologisches Museum since 2009. After studying ethnology and sociology in Freiburg, he spent extensive periods doing fieldwork in Northern Thailand and many years as a freelance lecturer, trainer and journalist. His special field of interest is the minorities of Southeast Asia and the associated questions of identity.

The director Bettina Renner has been making documentaries for broadcast channels like ZDF, ARTE and ARD since 2006, as well as producing video installations. Her films have been screened at international film festivals and won awards. For her latest documentary "bury my heart in dresden" she received the "Achievement Award for Documentary Filmmaking" in Los Angeles in 2013. Bettina Renner has completed various courses in American studies, communications and, economics, in Dresden and the USA.

Barbara Schindler works in the field of cultural PR. After completing degrees in general and comparative literary studies and French, she worked for the Carl Hanser Verlag, the Volksbühne am Rosa-Luxemburg-Platz in Berlin, and Tanzplan Deutschland. Together with Christiane Kühl she supervises the online documentation of the projects for the Humboldt Lab Dahlem.

Being HMONG. A Family Encounter / 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 Ogono 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 Berlin's Ethnological Institute.

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 "Seeing South," Probebühne 4, which is why it also appears in this dossier.

Being HMONG. A Family Encounter / Credits

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

With: Cha Soua Vang and Cha My Vang; Yao Vang and Lao Vang; Tchoua, Tcheng, Pagou, Blong and Anja Vang; Xou Vang and See Lee, Rosana del Carmen, Liliana and Khai Vang
Author, Director: Bettina Renner
Produced by: Bettina Renner
Idea and Academic consulting: Roland Platz
Narrator: Barbara Philipp
Camera: Frank van Vught
Sound: David Amsalem, Charles Grégoire
Montage / Editor: Mona Bräuer
Postproduction: credo: film gmbh
Sounddesign: Ricarda Holztrattner
Sound mixer: Florian Beck
Grading: Christoph Sturm
Translation Hmong: Rosana del Carmen Vang, Liliana Vang, Tchoua Vang
Translation French: Magali Gerberon, Sarah Maret
Subtitles: Babelfisch Translations

Being HMONG. A Family Encounter / Imprint Documentation

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Film still “Being HMONG. A Family Encounter,” © Bettina Renner

Film still “Being HMONG. A Family Encounter,” © Bettina Renner

Film still “Being HMONG. A Family Encounter,” © Bettina Renner

Film premiere at the opening of Probebühne 5, photo: Sebastian Bolesch

Installation view "Being HMONG. A Family Encounter," photo: Jens Ziehe

SHORT CUT 4: Lao Vang