



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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Concentrating (on) Collections / Teaser

Public display and study collections play a prominent role in the exhibition plans for the Humboldt-Forum. Next to the major exhibitions, the Humboldt-Forum will feature large display-case areas where extensive portions of the collections will be exhibited. The compelling little Humboldt Lab installation “Concentrating (on) Collections” has gathered together different ideas and recommendations for implementing this, touching on some fundamental questions in the process. How can the huge scale of museum collections be presented in all their diversity – right across from thematic exhibitions with comparatively few objects – without seeming boring and monotonous to viewers? How can the objects’ recognition value be brought to the fore? “Concentrating (on) Collections” assembles different casebook examples for handling both abundance and detail, supplying provocative conceptual suggestions for how to stage display-case zones in the Humboldt-Forum.

Concentrating (on) Collections / Project Description

Abundance as an Asset and a Challenge

by Nicola Lepp and Nina Wiedemeyer

The Ethnologisches Museum and the Museum für Asiatische Kunst possess vast collections, assembled over the course of centuries. To make as much of these collections publically accessible as possible, the plans for the Humboldt-Forum site call for tall, densely packed display cabinets. Three locations within the Ethnologisches Museum will feature display-case zones: the America collection, the Africa collection, and the South Seas collection. These display cabinets are each up to 30 meters long, and are arranged uniquely in each of the three areas. The cabinets will have a high recognition value and, for visitors, will clearly be perceived as a comprehensive whole.

Inevitably, the significance of the individual objects in such cabinets takes a backseat to the respective



collection as a whole. Much more, what is being presented to visitors – and what hopefully excites them – is the abundance of the collections, in all their variety. Yet monotony is pre-programmed, to a certain extent, the more such a display-case zone is enlarged and extended. The abundance must be arranged with precision.

Ideas for Organizing the Display-Case Zones

What can the density and abundance of objects in the display-case units potentially offer to the public? What can be shown and conveyed in this specific space – as distinct from a thematic exhibition? What unique opportunities for presentation and storytelling do the display cabinets offer? And finally: what can showcases accomplish, and what are their limitations?

Based on a comprehensive study of the internationally widespread form of presentation through display cases, “Concentrating (on) Collections” recommends that the display-case areas in the Humboldt-Forum share an overarching dramatic composition. Probebühne 7 at the Humboldt Lab Dahlem was used to generate different recommendations for possible implementation, in the form of a slideshow. For this we concentrated on the various challenges, from a museum and media perspective, posed by condensed presentations and used these as the point of departure for generating ideas.

To arrange the display-case zones in a manner that is factually precise, aesthetically pleasing, and comprehensible for visitors, one of the central prerequisites is to clearly distinguish these zones from the presentation forms used by the actual exhibition. Therefore, a thematic approach seems to contradict the logic of a display case. While both permanent and temporary exhibitions, which organize objects according to cultural/geographic criteria or specific thematic connections, are obligated to approach the objects in a narrative manner, display-case zones depend upon the abundance of collections and objects. When planning such exhibition units, this means that rather than beginning with themes, one should think systematically about the objects and make both the collection itself and the act of collecting a primary theme.

The abundance of objects and their condensed presentation, therefore, unlike thematic units, should initially start by following the fundamental logic of the collections, whether organized by object species and material, by collector, or chronologically. Yet this alone doesn’t suffice to lend enough variety to the 30-meter-long cabinet area.

“Concentrating (on) Collections” therefore introduces a conceptual approach that is based on the idea of continuously suspending the presentation of the collection’s abundance – interrupting the presentation with questions derived systematically from the objects themselves. Inserted into the large exhibition spaces of the cabinets are small, medium and large frames or boxes in different forms and formats; these frames or boxes can pick up on small details, arguments, and connections between the objects. In the context of the large display cabinets, they function like special-exhibition sites in miniature, where individual questions and observations can be addressed paradigmatically as individual episodes on a larger stage. The units can comprise a range of media, but should always be derived directly from the descriptive context of the display case. These interruptions, commentaries, and buttresses permeate the presentation of the collection, and serve to interrogate, contravene, or scrutinize the exhibited objects. Here would also be an ideal place to incorporate findings from the Humboldt Lab’s Probebühnen or from contemporary research projects. A number of scenarios have been worked out as examples in the slideshow for Probebühne 7. The project is a work in progress that will be furthered through the composition of a manual on the subject as well as through future workshops.

Reinforcing the Logic of the Collections

Using the “abundance of objects” as the representative principle for the display-case units in conjunction with the commentating interruptions serves to take the objects’ polysemy into account and present them in all their multi-perspectivity. The process of abbreviating and smoothing content toward a specific meaning – a process necessary in the context of a thematic exhibition – is relativized in the display-case units and expressed concretely as only one possible perspective among others. At the same time, the display cabinets maintain a perspective toward the collections’ history that isn’t typically found in thematic permanent exhibitions. Thus, a strategic interplay emerges between argumentation and visual experience, between the presence and the meaning of the objects. From a practical perspective, the minimalist form of the interruptions allows curators to integrate new viewpoints and research findings into the exhibition with little expenditure or forethought.

Altogether, it’s even conceivable that the three planned display-case modules (Africa, America, South Seas)



each maintain a different focus, so that an internal dramaturgy emerges between the modules. The display-case modules would then be received like an exhibition tour.

For staging the individual frames, it is of fundamental importance that the precisely developed content of the units is also designed in aesthetically compelling fashion. The units should invite viewers to look closer, to transfer the suggested viewpoints to other objects, and to ask questions. The attractiveness and popularity of a display case arranged according to the logic of the abundance of objects will be determined, to no small degree, by how carefully it is set up.

Prof. Nicola Lepp is an expert in cultural theory and exhibition curator and since 2015 she has held a professorship in cultural education at the FH Potsdam; she has been curating thematic exhibitions in various constellations since 2001. Among the most significant are: "GRIMMWELT Kassel," 2015; "Museum der Gefäße," Humboldt Lab Dahlem, Berlin 2013; "Arbeit. Sinn und Sorge," Dresden 2009; "PSYCHOanalyse. Sigmund Freud zum 150. Geburtstag," 2006; "Der Neue Mensch. Obsessionen des 20. Jahrhunderts," 1999; Her research focuses on the theory and practice of things as well as critical pedagogic and educational museum theory.

Dr. Nina Wiedemeyer is an art and media scholar. Since 1998, she has worked as an author and curator for museums and exhibition firms, including prauth (the exhibition project "Arbeit. Sinn und Sorge," Deutsches Hygiene-Museum Dresden, 2009/2010) and exponenten. Since 2012, she has been conducting a post-doctorate at UdK Berlin in the graduate college "Das Wissen der Künste" with a project on the precarious theory of knowledge of the applied arts. Her last published work was "Buchfalten: Material, Technik, Gefüge der Künstlerbücher," Zürich/Berlin 2013.

Concentrating (on) Collections / Positions

“Concentrating (on) Collections”: Rather than an Exhibition, a Collection of Concepts for Exhibiting

by Philipp Teufel

“Concentrating (on) Collections” almost isn’t an exhibition. It’s simply a small slideshow for the interested public, a collection of concepts, a laboratory report in the best sense of the term. A concept orients itself toward professional third parties. Here, the concept is to rewrite the grammar of exhibiting for the display and study collections planned for the Humboldt-Forum. At the same time, it’s a manifesto from the Humboldt Lab on the “Laboratory Concept.” The concrete recommendations it contains are of equal importance and significance as its ideas for design. “Concentrating (on) Collections” formulates questions about contemporary exhibition design for display cases and their integration into a museum exhibition; it gathers concepts and presents innovative ideas for a hybrid of storage facility and exhibition. What are the contemporary approaches, and what are the most suitable concepts for the material?

Concentrating (on) Collections Professionally

These questions remind me of the first instances when we, as future designers of the Humboldt-Forum, toured the storage facilities of the Ethnologisches Museum and the Museum für Asiatische Kunst in Dahlem. It was a very special situation – what happens when different professions concentrate on the collections? What insights emerge among them? For the architects and designers at Ralph Appelbaum and malsyteufel, this was the first step in the process: going through the storage facilities, the stacks, and the display collections alongside the directors, curators, and conservators. By this point, it had already become clear that a curator, designer, architect, or conservator pays attention to different issues. What ultimately will interest later visitors: the arrangement, or the sheer number of exhibits in a particular collection spread before them like a tapestry of objects? Or will they instead discover the individual objects inside?

We are fascinated simultaneously by the detailed glimpse and by the whole, by stories and by images.

Collections and Objects Have a History – and Tell Stories

On these visits to the collection, the storage facility becomes a place of observation, selection, and



conversation between different disciplines, objectives, and ideas. Often, as designers, we've found that the quality of stories told by the curators isn't conveyed in the exhibitions. Sometimes, information about objects in the storage facility is only housed in the archival records. Or it resides solely in the heads of scholars (for more about this, see the Humboldt Lab project "Talking Knowledge").

The Storage Facility or Archive as 'Spatial Image'

Beyond the actual collections, we were impressed as designers by the overall picture: the storage facility is a self-contained, well-composed spatial image. Indeed, many artists and photographers have been fascinated by museum storage facilities, and have captured this in their chosen medium. Archival filing cabinets, shelves, pallets – such images are characterized by entirely unique forms of storage furniture. Even the clothes worn by conservators can be quite specialized. I'm thinking of Candida Höfer's world-renowned photograph from the rooms of the storage facility at the Ethnologisches Museum in Berlin. The two conservators, in their protective suits, look something like extraterrestrials, or forensic specialists in a detective film.

To Store or to Show?

Looking back over the history of the Ethnologisches Museum and the Museum für Asiatische Kunst, you find people debating how much space to reserve for exhibitions versus storage from the very beginning. At one of the former locations, on Stresemannstraße, these areas weren't separated. In Dahlem, the storage facility was separated from the exhibition areas – a solution that seems unattractive from today's perspective, as it withholds the majority of the collection from the public.

For us as designers, the objective was to present the collections at a level of quality defined neither by quantity of square meterage, nor by the exhaustive presentation of the collection holdings. To meet this objective, we have developed independent, clearly defined elements and spatial strategies to help the Berlin institutions establish a distinct individual presence. These elements and strategies create tangible space for new ideas and presentations of the collection in the future. They enable curators to discover their own approach within a coherent whole, while facilitating flexibility that can be sustained into the future. Among these components are the showcases and the study collections.

The Showcases

The Humboldt-Forum's exhibitions and display-case zones will enable scholars, specialists, and members of the original cultures to conduct studies and research. They will also enable regular visitors to explore the collections themselves. Simply due to the extent of the collections – they are always growing – this presents a particular challenge for the storage sites, which at other buildings are reserved for specialists. Today, the Ethnologisches Museum's collection alone comprises some 500,000 ethnological and archaeological objects. "Only" some 20,000 of these will be exhibited at the Humboldt-Forum.

For this reason, new concepts and strategies are needed. And the "Concentrating (on) Collections" project from the Humboldt Lab has supplied important foundations for their development. I read the project as a recommendation that we bring together the viewpoints of different experts, bring together the view toward object histories and the view toward the total spatial image.

Concentrating (on) Collections in the Lab

"Concentrating (on) Collections," curated by Nicola Lepp and Nina Wiedemeyer, brings these important topics together as if under a microscope in the laboratory. The project poses a number of decisive questions for the further implementation of the project: Is everything of equal importance in a display case? Do exhibits in a display case lose their uniqueness? What happens when you walk along and compare the exhibits? To make a comparison, you need at least two objects – but how do visitors handle many hundreds of objects? Are there appropriate and inappropriate comparisons when an entire collection is exhibited?

Of central importance is that a collaboration takes place between those who understand the objects and their individual history, and those who see the whole picture and are capable of designing it. The curators come to notice that the things don't divulge as much to everyone as they themselves perceive. The designers realize that the exhibits must be staged in a certain way for their appeal to unfold. How then should this mass of exhibits be made to "speak" in a showcase? How can new perspectives toward the collection be perceived spatially by visitors, through a communicative dialogue?

Together, curators and designers 'layout' the exhibits for visitors – in the dual sense of presenting and



interpreting. “Concentrating (on) Collections” shows how, together, curators and designers can lay out “clues” for visitors to generate new forms of experiencing, seeing, and understanding, new forms of encounter between the subject and the object, new forms of promoting dialogue with visitors.

Communicating and Conveying through ‘Fields of Play’

The concepts recommended by “Concentrating (on) Collections” present different forms of emphasis, ways to demarcate boundaries within the density of the presentation – elements within the giant display cabinets signaling that something unusual can be seen here, that a unique perspective is being offered. One concrete example is the recommendation that a ‘field of play’ be included in the presentation of the numerous buffalo robes from the North American Prairie and Plains collection. A specially placed box in front of the lower part of the display cabinet serves to mark out the field of play. In this case, the game found inside is intended for children, and consists of characters from the stories portrayed on the buffalo robes. This invites viewers to approach the objects through the stories depicted on them. The static abundance of the collection is made dynamic – analogue gamification. The game also draws attention to a unique, concrete feature of the collection: this buffalo robe, too, is all about stories. New ways of viewing the objects emerge. The game allows the exhibits to speak – viewers can make their own sense of what the collection says.

“Concentrating (on) Collections” isn’t an exhibition yet. But by 2019, there will be an exhibition that invites us to concentrate (on) collections, and this project will have helped inspire how.

Professor Philipp Teufel is the Deputy General Project Manager of Exhibition Design for the Humboldt-Forum, in cooperation with Ralph Appelbaum Associates. Teufel possesses over 25 years of experience in the field of museum and exhibition design. From 1985 to 1995, he worked in Frankfurt as one of the primary designers for various museums on Frankfurt’s Museumsufer (Museums Embankment). In 1994 he was appointed to the Fachhochschule Düsseldorf (known as the Hochschule Düsseldorf since 2015) where, together with Professor Uwe Reinhardt, he heads the Exhibition Design Institute and MA program of the same name. His most important museum projects include: the Deutsches Filmmuseum in Frankfurt am Main, the Museum für Vor- und Frühgeschichte (known as Archäologisches Museum since 2002) in Frankfurt am Main, Historisches Museum Frankfurt, Museum Judengasse in Frankfurt am Main, the Neues Museum in Berlin (invited to compete in call for bids), Museumsinsel Berlin (Corporate Design and Signage System – competition), Geldmuseum der Deutschen Bundesbank in Frankfurt am Main, Polizeimuseum Hamburg (master plan), and the Haus des Waldes in Stuttgart. He is the author and editor of numerous publications dedicated to exhibition and museum design.

Concentrating (on) Collections / Credits

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Installation view “Concentrating (on) Collections,” in the study collection of the Museum für Asiatische Kunst, photo: Uwe Walter



Installation view "Concentrating (on) Collections," in the study collection of the Museum für Asiatische Kunst, photo: Uwe Walter



Scenographic sketch "Concentrating (on) Collections," Atelier Gillmann, Basel



Visitors at the opening, photo: Sebastian Bolesch