



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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Knight Moves – Again / Teaser

The “Knight Moves – Again” project aimed at supplementing the scientific discourse of museum presentation by means of art. The interventions of the artists Nevin Aladağ, Kader Attia, Sunah Choi, and Mathilde ter Heijne showed in an exemplary way how subjective engagement with objects in the Ethnologisches Museum collection can be negotiated. The concrete relations into which their works entered with museum exhibits also extended how visitors view the collection and the institution as a whole – calling into question principles of ordering, invoking relations to the global present, and inspiring creative reflection on one’s own position in time and space.

Knight Moves – Again / Project Description

Art as Link to the Global Present

by Angela Rosenberg

The objective of the “Knight Moves – Again” project was to use contemporary artistic perspectives to extend the permanent exhibitions at select locations in the Ethnologisches Museum. It sought to facilitate alternative views of objects and their presentation by means of direct interventions in the existing collection, yet without turning the permanent exhibitions upside down. The interventions produced for the project by Nevin Aladağ, Kader Attia, Sunah Choi, and Mathilde ter Heijne illustrated in an exemplary way how to subjectively engage with objects in the collection and how these interventions can thematically and formally supplement the theoretical discourse of museum presentation. Like its predecessor, the project “Knight Moves” at Probebühne 1, “Knight Moves – Again” created leaps of thought to bridge wide differences of theme, region, culture, and time. Unlike the knight in the game of chess, however, which inspired the title, winning was not important for “Knight Moves – Again”; it was more a question of the cooperation of exhibition pieces as well as of the artists, curators, and the various collections’ restorers.



The Interventions

Sunah Choi engaged with objects in the Oceania collection in two projects. Her series of cyanotypes titled “Belichtet” (Exposed, 2015), was produced using objects from the Oceania section storerooms. This photographic process dates to the nineteenth century and is based on the principle of the photogram, where objects leave unexposed areas on photosensitive paper – blue tones in the case of cyanotypes. The photogram technique was popular with the Surrealists as a simple means of producing highly evocative images. Sunah Choi situates her works between this associative approach and exact registration of outlines. She presented images of ten tools and objects unknown, or unusual, in this form in Europe, but which are everyday items in Oceania, thus setting up a precarious balance between scientific image and speculative transfiguration.

For “Projektion” (Projection, 2015), she arranged three vitrines displaying exhibits from the collection on geometrical patterns found on Oceanian tapa (barkcloth), thus challenging current thinking on order and presentation in the museum context. Lit from above, the objects lay on sheets of polypropylene from which tapa patterns had been cut out. Together with the shadows on the base of the vitrines, the ensembles created two-dimensional images, projections that brought out essential features in the issue of reduction.

Nevin Aladağ, by way of contrast, worked with the transcultural and poetic qualities of musical instruments. Her “Musikzimmer” (Music Room, 2015) in the Ethnomusicology section dealt with the production of sound and the effects of music on the human mind. The objects are hybrid musical instruments made from items of furniture: a guitar armchair, a side table with chimes (percussion instrument), and an umbrella stand drum. These musical items of furniture develop their own acoustic properties as resonating bodies to challenge prevalent notions of functionality, ergonomics, and tonal purity. The “Musikzimmer,” then, called into question the intrinsic functionality of the items of furniture and extended it in unexpected ways. The artist was reacting to exhibits in the ethnomusicology section where, for conservational reasons, objects are displayed in vitrines. Her musical furniture drew attention to the unplayed instruments and their absent music, pinpointing a silence precisely where music is at stake.

For her video installation “Pulling Matter from Unknown Sources,” (2015) Mathilde ter Heijne translated the contemporary cultural practice of West African vodou religion into an artistic form, bringing objects of this culture to Dahlem. In 2014, as a novice priestess, together with the Togolese vodou priest Togbé Hounon Hounougbo Bahousou, at present living in Berlin-Weissensee, the artist made video recordings of vodou ceremonies in Benin and Togo. Central to these ceremonies was an altar dedicated to the thunder god Toulabo. The same figure in the exhibition was surrounded by five monitors – up-to-date, modern showcases – opposite the vitrines of the permanent exhibition and the masks they contained. The video sequences presented vodou as a living, everyday practice and activity, and displayed things, processes, and intermediary zones from surprising angles, sometimes entire, sometimes abstract. Alongside views from the standpoint of a sacrificial goat, nocturnal/infrared takes, and so-called aura images, there were scenes in a German abattoir and the artist’s Berlin studio. The artist positioned herself confidently among documentaries from other contexts and regions in the museum’s permanent exhibition. The installation was ritually looked after during the exhibition and so illustrated the everyday handling of a functional object that, though removed from its original context, remained spiritually active, seeking dialogue – on a level that seemed to combine the artistic and the spiritual – with the historical masks and documentaries in the exhibition “Art from Africa.”

Kader Attia’s works address post-colonialism, operating with fracture and repair as a comprehensive cultural and societal task. The suggestive juxtapositioning of his own mirror sculptures in “Mirror Mask” (2014, 2015) and the objects on display in the exhibition “Art from Africa” created an estranging effect. Dogon wooden masks, acquired by the artist in Mali, which he covered with pieces of mirror, returned the viewer’s gaze and cast its fragmented reflection across the room. Attia’s sculptures brought together the art-historical reference to Braque’s and Picasso’s cubist fragmentation, deriving from their artistic exploration of African masks, and a contemporary image of fracture and estrangement. Ancestor figures, portraits, and twin figures became a counterpoint to the artist’s own contemporary interpretation of the mask. Viewers were faced not only with their own fragmented mirror images but with reflections of the sculptures and exhibition around them. “Fragment in order to repair” is Attia’s motto; it established relations between the viewer and the exhibits that did not stop at regional and cultural classifications.

Shifts of Perspective, Extended Field of Action

The “Knight Moves” projects in Dahlem entered into direct relation with exhibits. They invigorated the ways in which the permanent exhibitions are viewed and they extended the museum’s field of action by underlining



additional thematic, formal, or aesthetic areas that challenged existing arrangements and shifted both viewer and institutional perspectives. It is a strategy that also facilitates intervention in the future Humboldt-Forum exhibitions by drawing attention to, problematizing, and, if necessary, challenging interpretative priorities. The interventions can be inconspicuous, or sometimes obvious; but they invariably invite the viewer to engage with the objects in new ways. In precisely this manner, artistic interaction with objects in the collection can enrich scientific and theoretical discourse within the museum context. This kind of expanded contextualization also establishes a link to the present without being overtly didactic. Ultimately, the “Knight Moves” projects bring into focus the importance and relevance of the Ethnologisches Museum collections by using contemporary art to appeal playfully to museum visitors and their varying horizons of experience.

Angela Rosenberg is an art historian, curator, and writer living in Berlin. For the Humboldt Lab Dahlem she curated “Game of Thrones” (2013) with Konstantin Grcic, Kirstine Roepstorff, Simon Starling, and Zhao Zhao at the Asian Art Museum, as well as “Knight Moves – Again.”

Knight Moves – Again / Positions

Displacement as Creative Space

by Jennifer Allen

Richard Sennett’s book *The Foreigner* (2011) has a telling subtitle: “I look in the mirror and see someone who is not myself.” That sentence can describe our experience of Kader Attia’s “Mirror Mask” (2014, 2015). The artist added small mirrors to two traditional masks in the Africa Collection of the Ethnologisches Museum. Visitors peering into the vitrines may be startled to catch a glimpse of their own faces, like the way one could once be surprised by one’s image in the window of a video camera store or, today, how one discovers oneself shimmering in surveillance systems.

While closed-circuit monitors echo us in our immediate surroundings, Attia’s work juxtaposes the familiar and the dissimilar. Whatever our origins, our faces become visually attached to an African mask: our likeness overlays a disguise designed for someone else’s face, for another ritual, beyond looking at treasures in a museum. Since Attia’s mirrors are numerous and fragmented, we see our faces not only superimposed on the masks but also multiplied and divided into fragments. The vitrine spotlight produces more reflections, as a spotlight on a disco ball does. While the mask remains perfectly intact, our reflections suggest multiple personalities with mismatched parts, which cannot be put together to make one image, one surface, one face.

The mirror holds another idea, which addresses the unstable position of the foreigner. Kader Attia, Nevin Aladağ, Sunah Choi, and Mathilde ter Heijne all have this equivocal status; they were born in other countries and came to live long-term in Berlin, somewhat like the holdings of the Ethnologisches Museum. To create a link between the mirror and the foreigner, Sennett offers an unusual analysis of Édouard Manet’s “A Bar at the Folies-Bergère” (1882): the iconic painting of a melancholic waitress manning a bar in the infamous theater in Paris. Like many art historians, the sociologist duly notes that her reflection in the mirror, which is featured in the background, is optically impossible: her reflection shows not only the back of her body but also the face of a man talking to her, who does not otherwise appear in the painting. Yet Sennett sees, not a curious painterly perspective, but an attempt to imagine what could be positive about displacement. Neither Manet, nor the barmaid, nor the man, represent the foreigner. Instead, the perspective itself – a gap between the mirror and its reflection, the coexistence of the familiar and the strange – manifests the foreigner’s displacement as a creative, formal space. “Displacement creates value,” Sennett writes, “reflexive value, that is a value given to the viewer as part of the thing seen; and value given to the physical world itself, whose character and form we are forced to assess by looking at its transmutation in a distorting mirror.”

Attia, Aladağ, Choi, and ter Heijne create this perspective in different ways. Attia uses literal mirrors while Aladağ, Choi, and ter Heijne turn to other media, which produce a similar type of doubling along with the possibility of distortion. Aladağ’s “Musikzimmer” (Music Room, 2015) can be found in the museum’s ethnomusicology section. Yet her sculptural installation serves as both furniture and instruments, which look and don’t look like the guitars and the drums displayed in the surrounding vitrines. Her chair sports metal strings, like a guitar or a harp, under the arm rests; her table includes a bar chime, hanging like a decorative fringe; her circular footrest can double as a drum. In the Africa collection, ter Heijne created the multi-media



installation “Pulling Matter from Unknown Sources” (2015) which includes a portable altar used by the Togolese vodou priest Togbé Hounon Hounoubo Bahousou, who actually lives in Berlin-Weissensee and who is training ter Heijne to become a priestess. Traveling to Togo and Benin in 2014, the artist-apprentice filmed vodou rituals which are projected on five monitors. While some visitors might recognize certain elements of the rituals, the largest monitor shows fantastically-distorted abstract images which seem closer to a science fiction film than to an ethnographic one: more futuristic than religious, traditional, or archaic. Like Aladağ’s instrument-furniture, ter Heijne’s vodou videos both fit and do not fit with the African fetish sculptures displayed in the surrounding vitrines.

In the Oceania collection, Choi created two installations which use a more explicit form of doubling and distortion. For “Projektion” (Projection, 2015), she selected various small objects from the collection, from a Samoan shell bracelet to a New Zealand fishing hook; she placed them on a glass plate in a traditional vitrine but on top of geometric patterns which were inspired by Polynesian and Melanesian tapa barkcloth designs but which were cut out of black and white polypropylene. The objects and the plastic tapa – illuminated from above by the vitrine light – cast strange shadows on the bottom of the vitrine, like ghosts fading into a grid. For “Belichtet” (Exposed, 2015), Choi used a similar method – selecting objects from the collection – but arranged them on a glass plate to create nine cyan-blue photograms. While “Projektion” leaves the objects on display, “Belichtet” forces us to imagine what they were by guessing from their deep blue shadowy outlines: a hook, a fishing net, perhaps a mat.

Again, the artists and the objects in the museum are foreign to Berlin. Instead of identifying with the objects or trying to return them to their origins, the artists create works that make the objects at once more familiar and more exotic. Like Manet, they use mirroring to transform displacement into a positive, creative, formal space. While opening a gap between their works and the rest of the collection, they close up the geographical distance and exoticism implied by an ethnological museum. Catching our reflection in Attia’s “Mirror Mask,” we become part of an African mask instead of viewing it as an icon that has traveled from another continent. Aladağ’s furniture-instruments look like local flea market fare, if not a friend’s living room. As ter Heijne’s altar suggests, vodou rituals are taking place not only in distant Togo and Benin but also right around the corner in a Berlin neighborhood. The doubling in Choi’s works give us the more immediate experience of recognizing the objects in their distorted shadows. We look into the vitrines at the museum, expecting to find a reflection of distant peoples from faraway places; instead, we find a reflection of ourselves, our surroundings, and our presence.

Dr. Jennifer Allen is a writer living in Berlin.

Knight Moves – Again / Credits

A project of the Probebühne 7, June 25 through October 18, 2015

Curator: Angela Rosenberg

Exhibition setup: Nadine Ney, scala Ausstellungsgestaltung – Günter Krüger

Graphics: Antonia Neubacher

Translation: Christopher Jenkin-Jones

Nevin Aladağ: “Musikzimmer,” 2015

mixed media installation

furniture in diverse materials, strings, skins

variable dimensions

Courtesy Nevin Aladağ; Galerie Wentrup, Berlin; Rampa Gallery, Istanbul

With the kind support of: Lars-Christian Koch, Ricarda Kopal

Kader Attia: “Mirror Mask,” 2014

wooden mask, mirror, steel stand

52 x 17,5 x 13,5 cm

private collection, London



Kader Attia: "Mirror Mask," 2015

wooden mask, mirror, steel stand

51,5 x 15,5 x 13,5 cm

Courtesy Kader Attia; Galerie Nagel Draxler, Berlin / Cologne

Conservation: Diana Gabler, Eva Ritz

For theme-related and organizational support we sincerely thank: Jonathan Fine, Paola Ivanov, Verena Rodatus and Galerie Nagel Draxler, Berlin / Cologne

Sunah Choi: "Belichtet," 2015

9 cyanotypes on watercolor paper

77 x 56 cm (I – VIII) / 140 x 100 cm (IX)

Courtesy Sunah Choi

Sunah Choi: "Projektion," 2015

mixed media installation

stencils, objects from the collection of the Ethnologisches Museum in three illuminated vitrines

Courtesy Sunah Choi; Ethnologisches Museum, Berlin

Conservation: Leonie Gärtner, Diana Gabler

For theme-related and organizational support we sincerely thank: Maria Gaida, Claudia Obrocki, Indra Lopez Velasco

Mathilde ter Heijne: "Pulling Matter from Unknown Sources," 2015

mixed media installation

2 portable altars and Hèbièssò ceremonies

wooden sculpture "Toulabo Mathilde" diverse utensils, HD video projection with sound, 4 monitors, 2 flight

cases, aluminum pipes

variable dimensions

Camera: Felix Böttcher, Ingo Brunner, Birgit Möller, Daniela Macé Rossiter

Production and processing: Silke Borsch, Felix Böttcher, Vanessa Gravenor, Martin König

Courtesy Mathilde ter Heijne

Media support: EIDOTECH, Berlin

Conservation: Diana Gabler, Eva Ritz

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Sunah Choi, "Belichtet," 2015, photo: Uwe Walter



Sunah Choi, "Projektion," 2015, photo: Uwe Walter



Nevin Aladağ, "Musikzimmer," 2015, photo: Uwe Walter



Mathilde ter Heijne, "Pulling Matter from Unknown Sources," 2015, photo: Uwe Walter



Kader Attia, "Mirror Mask," 2015, at the exhibition "Art from Africa," Ethnologisches Museum, photo: Sebastian Bolesch, © VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2015