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Anything but a Völkerkundemuseum [ethnographic museum]

Zur aktuellen Konzeptentwicklung des Humboldt Forums

“Be outraged, but publicly, please! Anthropology as a Science of Disturbance” – this was the title of a plenary session moderated by Cassis Kilian at the 2013 German Anthropological Society conference “Positionings: Anthropology in the Academy, the World of Work, and the Public Sphere” in Mainz, where I lectured on the then-current state of the Humboldt Forum. At the center of the discussion was the general complaint that the voice of cultural anthropology went unheard when it had something to say about central topics. Four years later, cultural anthropology, at least in the shape of its museums, is now at the center of public attention, but in a negative way. What has happened?

A resolution of Germany’s parliament, the Bundestag, stipulates that the Ethnologisches Museum Berlin should move to the Humboldt Forum in the center of the German capital. Nothing could be more central than here surrounded by the Museum Island, the Berlin Cathedral, the Foreign Office, and Alexanderplatz. As long as the contents for the museum were planned solely internally and discussed solely in specialist circles, politics and the public were little interested in the exhibition concept of the anthropologists, i.e., of the curator team at the Ethnologisches Museum Berlin. Controlled by various responsible parties, advisors, and bodies and evaluated nationally and internationally, it developed a flexible masterplan capable of being updated to follow timely themes under the guidelines of “multiperspectivity, present time, public”. The President of the Prussian Cultural Heritage Foundation formally released the state of planning reached in 2015 for implementation. But the building, whose growth out of the earth cannot be overlooked, has shaken politics

awake. Even the Chancellor piped up. Her “fear that what would develop is merely an ethnographic museum [Völkerkundemuseum]” has been frequently quoted.[1] Berlin’s Culture Senator Klaus Lederer is afraid of “an old-school anthropological museum”, although he at least perceives: “Diverse anthropological and ethnological museums around the world are just now beginning to critically examine their own history.”[2]

These statements reflect negative basic attitudes toward the institution of the anthropological museum as such. One wonders: Do the quoted politicians know anthropological museums from their own experience and have they been informed on the openings or new approaches to exhibitions of the last decade, as in Paris, Basel, Cologne, Geneva, Frankfurt, and Bremen? However, they demand specific contents: the great themes of humanity, like religion, migration, life and death, and so forth. So far, there has been no discussion about what the great themes of humanity are, from whose perspective they are to be determined, or how they can be presented in anthropological museums.[3]

But not only the anthropological collections and museums are being criticized; so is the discipline itself. Even among university professors, if one follows the statements of Bénédicte Savoy or Horst Bredekamp, knowledge of the field seems to be restricted to the acknowledgement of the tradition of 19th-century anthropology.[4] The 20th and 21st centuries remain bracketed away, and this is reflected in the composition of the current team of international experts. In a letter to the editor on Karl-Heinz Kohl’s article “Dies ist Kunst, um ihrer selbst willen” [This is art for its own sake] of 9-6-2017 in DIE ZEIT, we read:

> “It’s an unparalleled scandal that the body Chancellor Kohl appointed does

> not have a single representative of the discipline. Anthropologists were excluded; instead, art historians and sometimes lay people have taken control of the museum. This is as if the managing body of a state hospital included not a single physician, or as if the Superior Church Council comprised all kinds of specialists, but theologians had no voice; or as if a Higher Regional Court were headed by archaeologists, linguists, and computer specialists – but not a single jurist. The ignorance that dominates here is incomprehensible. Anthropologists from the museums, universities, and research institutes are the people suited to judge the matter. But that's how it is: today, anyone may do anything; only those who learned it can have nothing to say."[5]

Yet, anthropological expertise is lacking not only in the team of experts, but also on the level of decision-making for the so-called optimization of the existing concept developed by the museum's anthropologists, by the founding director and his deputy, both art historians. Obviously, when it comes to independently conceiving and implementing exhibitions, the criteria that apply to the anthropologists in the Humboldt Forum differ from those for curators in disciplines like art and art history. This is reflected in the kind of substantive interventions in the concept and in how the curators are treated; it is expressed in the disrespect shown toward the results of years of planning and the well-considered sequences of exhibitions. For example, there is a return to the traditional dichotomy between permanent and temporary exhibitions. The new use of the former portal rooms of a Palace (that has after all been reconstructed) as a space for temporary exhibitions leads to the interruption, disturbance, and even complete cancellation of important conceptual contents that had been planned for this space. New so-called viewing windows and other interventions referring to the history of the Palace create confusion and threaten to push coherent anthropological statements into the background. This, although the call for the architecture contest still stipulated that the interior of the Palace was to

have a modern design and be suited for use as an exhibition space.

The substantive emphases of the new concept are to be determined by the end of the year. At the time of this article's writing, the most recent utterings on this can be found only in two current lectures by the founding director and his deputy.[6] Can anthropologists identify themselves in this?

With a project on this scale, criticism can be expected after the opening in 2019. But against whom will it be directed? – It seems there will be no grand opening anymore; taking tactical precautions, the Minister of State for Culture recently doubted "whether it really makes didactic sense to open everything all at once, or whether we should present the contents in justifiable phases"[7]. Ostensibly to avoid expecting too much of him, the visitor will not be able to view an overall concept of the exhibition, but only parts of it. This would mean that the original idea and the reason for moving from Dahlem district to the Palace, namely to present the Ethnologisches Museum Berlin anew as a whole, can no longer be realized.

Meanwhile, the club of Humboldt's heirs continues to grow, because the Humboldt Forum Kultur GmbH is constantly hiring new personnel, including scientific staff, and anthropologists have good chances for employment. The question will be the degree to which they can contribute substantively and whether they will have the courage to position themselves to keep the contents up-to-date from an ethnological perspective. And yet, at stake are not only the exhibitions, but also the program of the Humboldt Forum. If the new generation of participating anthropologists manage to have a say on content, for example currently on the pop-up cinema, a kind of traveling movie house operated by the Humboldt Forum and the Berlinale NATIVe, then the Humboldt Forum could still become a turning point for the discipline, beyond the exhibitions.[8]

translated by Mitch Cohen

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[1] https://www.bundesregierung.de/Content/DE/Rede/2016/06/2016-06-09-rede-merkel-kultursalon-unter-der-kuppel.html

[2] https://www.3sat.de/page/?source=/kulturzeit/themen/193929/index.html

[3] See for example Minister of State Monika Grütters http://www.deutschlandfunk.de/kulturstaatsministerin-monika-gruetters-diversitaet-ist-ein.911.de.html?dram:article_id=394373

[4] For example, “Ein Ort radikal verstandener Toleranz”, DIE ZEIT, 31.8.2017

[5] Leserkommentar, http://www.zeit.de/2017/37/humboldt-forum-exponate-herkunft

[6] Https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HYLMgvGN3bM from 13.9.2017 and https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7qiY_IeUT_g (starting at the 30th minute) from 14.9.2017

[7] Http://www.tagesspiegel.de/kultur/das-humboldt-forum-im-schloss-noch-ein-berliner-bau-der-nicht-fertig-wird/20209228.html

[8] Https://www.humboldtforum.com/de-DE/veranstaltungen/pop-up-cinema-14/ from 18.9.2017