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# Present Imperfect, Future Intense:

## The Digital Opening of the Humboldt Forum

*On December 16, 2020, the Humboldt Forum—a major cultural centre in the middle of Berlin—officially opened. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the opening took place online and consisted of two events: a press conference and an opening ceremony. Ambitious and expensive, the Humboldt Forum has been fraught with controversy ever since it was conceived. And even though, as of February 2021, the institution remains closed to visitors, the debate around it continues to be heated. Has the Forum's digital opening resolved some of the issues at the heart of the discussions––or added fuel to the flame? This essay reflects on the Forum's opening, the protests it provoked, and their media coverage.*

### A symptom of 'a festering wound'?

The media coverage of the Humboldt Forum has ebbed and flowed over the past decade, spiking each time a new development was announced. Various criticisms of the Forum have been part of the reporting since the project's inception. The main concerns voiced in the coverage pertain to the dimension of the postcolonial and include a variety of aspects: from the restoration of the royal palace of the Hohenzollerns to the provenance of objects that are to be housed in it. As one outlet put it, the Humboldt Forum 'is a symptom of a festering wound: Germany's colonial legacy'.

Surges in the Forum's coverage were provoked by various occurrences and events as well. For instance, the reporting soared when a cross was mounted on the building's cupola, with both then hoisted to the top of the palace. Another significant rise in the media's interest towards the Forum occurred shortly before its opening, in early

Irene Hilden
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December 2020, when Nigeria's ambassador to Germany, Yusuf Tuggar, tweeted about his country's restitution claim addressed to the German federal government (discussed below). Though the issue of the problematic provenance of multiple objects to be exhibited in the museum complex had been a continuous topic in the media, Tuggar's words reignited the issue in the international press in the weeks leading up to the Forum's opening (*Tsp*, *DW*, *La Vanguardia*).

Some publications, such as the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* and *The Art Newspaper*, took up the task of summarising the Forum's long history, looking back all the way to the construction of the original 15th-century imperial palace, the subsequent GDR-era Palace of the Republic and its destruction, and the 2013 start of the Humboldt Forum's construction. (A certain negligence of GDR memories and of the German-German history was present in the earlier coverage, but has since been somewhat overshadowed by colonial concerns.) The Forum's architecture was also widely discussed immediately prior to the opening, with select outlets (like ZDF) finding words of praise for its role in transforming Berlin's city centre. However, even when the building's overall aesthetic was reviewed positively, the crowning of the palace with the golden cross was subjected to criticism. For instance, Nikolaus Bernau, writing in *Cicero*, sees this decision as a 'fatal' misstep and an 'affront to non-Christian cultures and religions'.

Irene Hilden
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Andrei Zavadski





The building of the Humboldt Forum has one modern and three reconstructed facades. Copyrights: SHF / Photo: Christoph Musiol

Numerous articles referred to the fact that times had changed and so had the public's consciousness. In the last decade, we have seen a wider acknowledgement of Germany's colonial legacy and of the problematic provenance of numerous objects of 'non-European' origin, as they are often semantically bundled together, in the country's museums. This, many media concluded, would haunt the Humboldt Forum in the years to come, making its work challenging and demanding. Taking up this central criticism, popular TV-anchor and satirist Jan Böhmermann chose to spotlight the Forum in a segment titled 'Raubkunst in Berlin?' ('Stolen artworks in Berlin?'), which, due to the show's comedic form, was viewed by a wide audience.

Irene Hilden
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Andrei Zavadski



All in all, there was not much optimism in the press with regard to the Humboldt Forum's inauguration in the weeks leading up to it. As summarised by *Süddeutsche Zeitung*'s Peter Richter, 'The construction makes no one really happy'.

How, if at all, were these controversies addressed during the Humboldt Forum's opening? And how did the opening's digital format come into play here?

**'A place of contention'**

The participants of the press conference almost unanimously presented the Humboldt Forum as 'a place of contention' (*ein Ort der Auseinandersetzung*). This catch phrase, presumably used to emphasise that it should be a platform of debate, constituted the press conference's key message.

Monika Grütters, Germany's minister of state for culture and media, spoke of the Humboldt Forum as a stage for the discussion of colonial histories and for a dialogue of cultures, 'in the spirit of the enlightenment, cosmopolitanism and tolerance'. She suggested that the institution 'should be a benchmark and a role model for all of Germany for dealing with cultural assets from colonial context, for presenting the stories of origin, for access to the objects, for cooperating and reappraising the collections, and I am sure we are going to be that model role for Germany'.

Michael Müller, governing mayor of Berlin, expressed confidence that it would be a place of 'Auseinandersetzung' with 'our history and our role in the world'. He acknowledged that 'controversial debates' accompanied the project from the very beginning, but did not elaborate further. Discussing his visit to Kenya, where he had been approached by young people who asked whether they could be part of the Forum and work there on their own history, Müller concluded: 'I think this is a wonderful idea. And we will clearly fill [it] with life by welcoming people from all over the world'.

Irene Hilden
Harriet Merrow
Andrei Zavadski



Hartmut Dorgerloh, the Humboldt Forum's director general, continued this line of thought by inviting 'the critics and sceptics of the project to join in'. He underlined that only in a collective effort could the new institution become 'a place of curiosity and wonder, of education and cultures, of listening and experiencing, of debate and contradiction, in the true spirit of [the Humboldt brothers]'. Having put on a worker's helmet in honour of all those who had contributed to the Forum's creation, he then took it off saying: 'It is no secret that it was not always easy. There were controversies, there was resistance and there were problems that had to be overcome and solved. Today we can say that we have achieved this goal… And from now on, we no longer have to wear a helmet here'.

In short, the press conference's participants acknowledged the controversies around the Humboldt Forum, but positioned them in the past. The problems and challenges of yesterday were mentioned here and there, but hardly addressed. Was the opening ceremony any different?

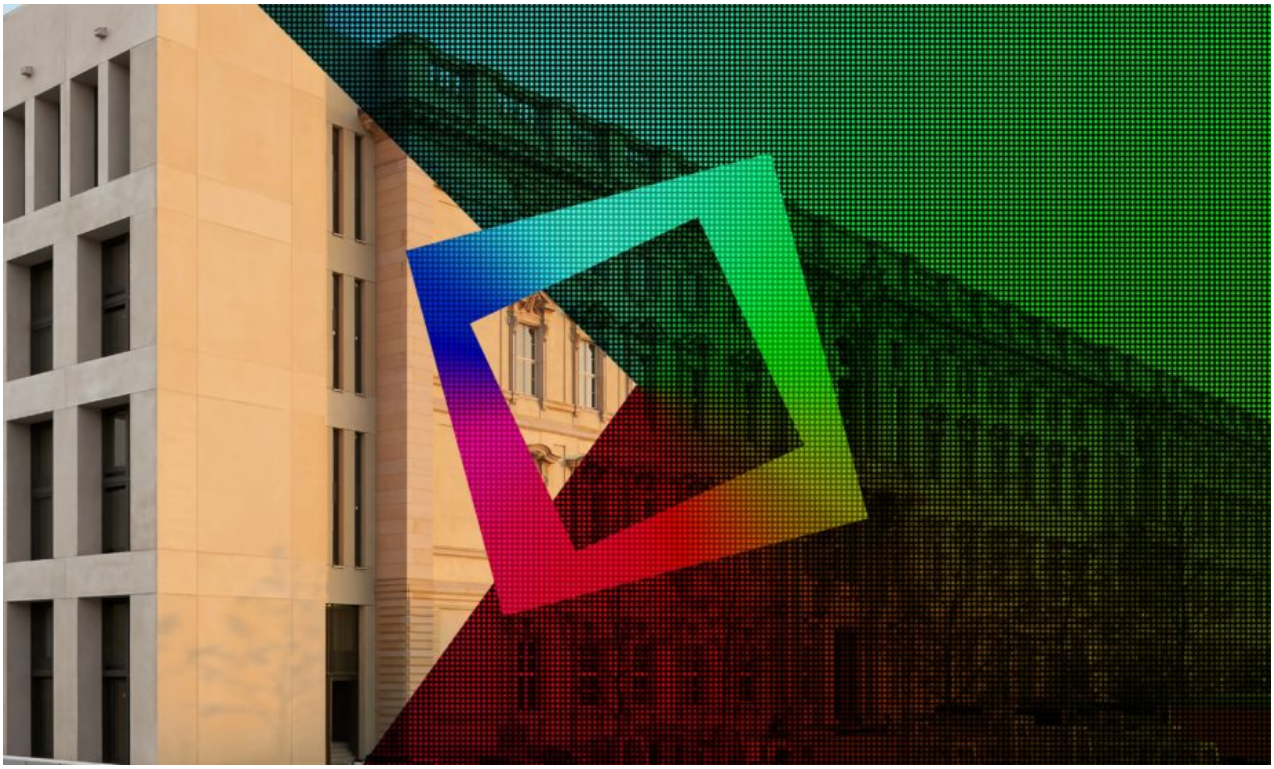
**'So, that's one perspective. Can you give us another one?'**

The acknowledge-without-discussing approach characterised the opening ceremony as well, despite a few carefully choreographed interventions (first and foremost by Priya Basil, see below). At the very beginning of the evening, the presenter Mitri Sirin asked Hartmut Dorgerloh about the controversies around the Forum, namely colonialism, plundered art, and Nigeria's 'renewed claim to the Benin bronzes.' Dorgerloh did not address them directly, saying instead: 'I think people will flock here, they will come and be astonished and take ownership of this place.' Pointing to the fact that numerous difficult topics, like colonialism and the future of the ethnological collections, will be debated within the Forum, he emphasised that 'we are not going to talk *about* others, but talk *with* others.' What does this answer imply? More than anything, it points to an attempt at re-directing the debate: let's

Irene Hilden
Harriet Merrow
Andrei Zavadski



stop talking *about* the Forum, Dorgerloh seems to be saying, because we *will* be able to discuss all of these questions *within* it.



The video of the digital opening can be accessed via the website of the Humboldt Forum. Copyrights: SHF

Overall, the evening was one of a festive atmosphere, wonder, and celebration. Monika Grütters once again claimed to be looking forward to controversial debates within the Forum. George Okello Abungu, former director general of the National Museums of Kenya, spoke of his own involvement in the Forum, emphasising the work with numerous 'communities' that has been done. Author Andrea Wulf focused on the Forum being a place for public discourse.

However, one point of view, that of writer and activist Priya Basil, differed from the rest. Basil's video essay, extracts from which were shown during the opening

ceremony and which was uploaded to the Humboldt Forum's media platforms on the same day, presented a highly critical perspective on the Forum. In the essay (although not in the extracts screened at the opening), she speaks of the institution's problematic nature because of its 'planned function to house violently looted or dubiously obtained ethnological objects and simultaneously develop a decolonising approach to itself, its holdings and its workings with others.' Basil admits to having felt 'the force field of coloniality, its distorting effect' upon entering the building for the first time. Calling the Forum 'a very modern form of feudalism', she sees it as 'a monumental homage to coloniality.' When invited to curate a project for the Forum, she decided, upon reflection, to accept the offer: 'I can step away from the Humboldt Forum, but I can't step out of the world.' We have to keep asking painful and necessary questions, Basil reflects, if we want to challenge the narratives of the Forum and broader colonial legacies. 'It remains to be seen if a forum can offer a meaningful passageway from what should not have come to pass', she concludes.

According to Lavinia Frey, the Humboldt Forum's managing director for programming and projects, Basil's 'film hurts. It is also moving. But it also sparks hope because it demands a great deal' of the people working at the Forum. 'So, that's one perspective', summarised the exchange Mitri Sirin. 'Can you give us another one?' After which they proceeded to present other, more celebratory approaches to the Forum.

Was Priya Basil's voice—powerful, personal and critical as it was—enough for the Humboldt Forum to present itself as a platform of public discourse, open to a whole range of perspectives on its existence? And is the opening ceremony really the appropriate place and time for engaging in debate?

That a new museum wants to celebrate its own opening is not surprising. Neither is a generous cascade of thanks and acknowledgements that usually accompanies such events. But it seems to us that an institution that aims to be a platform for discussion and contention—a *forum*—could well practice what it preaches already at the

opening. Might we even suggest that the situation in which the Humboldt Forum has found itself, with a cannonade of criticisms directed at the institution from all sides, *demanded* a radically different format for the opening? A conference or symposium, for instance, that would combine celebration with reflection.

Intentionally or not, however, the organisers and participants of the opening events forewent the format meant to be at the root of the institution's very existence. Instead, the opening events seem to have instrumentalised the critical discourse to argue that the Humboldt Forum will provide a space for continuous disagreement: the very fact that the Forum has been so contentious until now is to mean that it will function all the better as a forum in the future.

Another issue worth reflecting upon is the digital format of the opening. The COVID-19 pandemic made offline events impossible, which is why broadcasting the ceremony online was the only way to do it (if waiting for a better time was not an option, but then again, it was—and still is—unclear how long one would have to wait). Broadcast on the Forum's website and on YouTube, the events consisted of German- and English-language channels (both the press conference and the opening ceremony) as well as a channel with a translation into the German sign language (the opening ceremony only), providing space for the inclusion of different publics. The main attraction of the ceremony was a pillar screen called 'cosmograph'. This technological innovation, placed in the building's main hall, served as a 'sitting area' for the ceremony's Zoom participants. It was also used for the screening of short contributions by the Forum's collaborators and of video 'excursions' around the Forum. Commenting on the participants' greetings in *Die Zeit*, Kolja Reichert expressed his discontent at the fact that some of the videos were presented as live events, though many of them had in fact been pre-recorded. With regard to the tour of the Forum, the focus of the ceremony was on the building itself. With some of the exhibitions within the Forum still in preparation, the ones that are ready (like *Berlin Global*) were not given much 'air time', leaving the viewer somewhat puzzled as to

Irene Hilden
Harriet Merrow
Andrei Zavadski



the actual contents of the institution.

All in all, the digital format of the opening could be seen a success, allowing for a much wider audience to take a glimpse into the Humboldt Forum than any offline event would have made possible (especially in the current pandemic). As of February 18, the two opening events were viewed on YouTube more than 32 thousand times, with the German-language opening ceremony channel leading in the number of views (at a little over 23 thousand) and Priya Basil's essay coming last (378 views in German and 332 in English). However, one cannot but regret the fact that the organisers of the opening events did not use the possibilities of the digital to the full. Instead of taking the viewer through the exhibitions (which is what one expected from the opening), they chose to emphasise the scale and ambition of the Forum, as exemplified by the giant 'cosmograph'. But how much does this emphasis add to what we have heard before?

**'Tear it down—and turn it upside down'**

While the opening ceremony largely followed the logic of acknowledging controversies without discussing them (which those responsible presumably considered most appropriate for opening celebrations), the way in which the Humboldt Forum treats criticisms has seen some significant changes. The Forum's spokespersons—who, it must be said, have also changed over time—no longer ignore its critics. They now frequently address controversial aspects in their public outreach and offer the Forum's critics a platform for voicing their concerns.

The Coalition of Cultural Workers against the Humboldt Forum (CCWAH), a group of activists that have been protesting against the Forum's construction, sees this as an appropriation of the critique. In a statement released in January 2021, the Coalition claims that the Forum 'assumes neutrality. But a so-called "forum" contained by a

Irene Hilden
Harriet Merrow
Andrei Zavadski



facade that was originally funded by the slave trade cannot ever be considered neutral or accessible “for all”. … When the Humboldt Forum commissions so-called “critical perspectives” to spew out images of protest, including images appropriated from the Black Lives Matter movement, it pretends at neutrality. This pretence repeats the universalising gesture of Western cultural imperialism: a gesture that grasps to own everything, and that led to the theft of artefacts and bodies from “the colonies” in the first place.’

In the weeks leading up to the Forum’s digital opening, there were numerous media articles focusing not only on the outward appearance of the new building, but also on the voices critical of and protesting against the institution. An idea both radical and satirical, proposed by journalist and publicist Oliver Gehrs, was to demolish the new palace in 2025. The plan suggests repeating the act of 1950, when the then top politicians of the newly founded GDR decided to demolish the ruins of the original Prussian palace that had remained after World War II. It was further proposed to dump the debris of the Forum in front of the private house of Wilhelm von Boddien, the reconstruction’s initiator, which would be ‘a cheerful monument to Germany’s failed symbolic politics after 1989’.

Irene Hilden
Harriet Merrow
Andrei Zavadski






Entrance tickets for BARAZANI.berlin—Forum Colonialism and Resistance. Copyrights: Christoph Balzar

Another demolition—this time of the Palace of the Republic (built between 1973 and 1976, closed in 1990 and demolished between 2006 and 2008)—is the starting point for Barazani Berlin. The initiators of Barazani (which means 'forum' in Swahili) Berlin attempt to go back in time to the empty *Schlossplatz*, where so much seemed possible in the years between 2008 and 2013, before the laying of the new palace's foundation stone. By creating and curating a virtual space, Barazani Berlin turns to the past while envisioning a future for their forum—a place of de-colonial cultural and political intervention, resistance and remembrance. The people behind Barazani Berlin (international activists and artists, scholars and curators who have been voicing their critique for many years) see their approach as a way to digitally subvert and question the physical site. As is stated on the project's website, they consider the realisation of the Humboldt Forum 'a continuation of the colonial injustice system

and making visible its effects on contemporary society'. Brought about by the emergency of the COVID-19 pandemic, the notion of an online space extends a powerful form of intervention far beyond the current situation. The website was launched two days before the Forum's digital opening. The initiators chose this timing not only to take advantage of the increased public and media interest, but also to stay ahead of the official opening. As exhibitions at the Forum will open at different dates throughout 2021, so will the digital content of Barazani Berlin expand.

On the very day of the opening night, the Coalition of Cultural Workers against the Humboldt Forum showed their physical presence in front of the palace. In the weeks before, the group had launched a poster campaign on social media, with slogans explaining why they refused to collaborate with the Humboldt Forum and demanded to defund the project. At the protest on December 16, each participant could pick up one of the posters and join the others in shouting the slogan 'Tear it down—and turn it upside down' as well as in performing the protest song 'What goes up must come down'. The coalition was founded in the summer of 2020 by a loosely connected group of mostly Berlin-based cultural workers and artists. According to them, it was the installation of the golden cross on the cupola of the palace that had triggered the group's formation and activism. In response to the widely voiced criticism, the Humboldt Forum initiated a discussion about the cross and invited a number of experts (including Sharon Macdonald, Flower Manase and Jürgen Zimmerer) to comment (see also Duane Jethro's reflections on the cross and cupola). The coalition criticises that the Forum will house art and artefacts stolen or unethically acquired in colonial contexts and calls the project neo-colonial.

Irene Hilden
Harriet Merrow
Andrei Zavadski






Protest on December 16, 2020 by the Coalition of Cultural Workers Against the Humboldt Forum. Copyrights: Andrei Zavadski

Seizing the moment when public attention was directed at the Humboldt Forum before its opening, and as mentioned earlier, Nigeria's ambassador to Germany, Yusuf Tuggar, reiterated his demand for the restitution of the Benin bronzes, which he made in a formal letter to German chancellor Angela Merkel and minister of state for culture and media Monika Grütters in August 2019. The Ethnological Museum houses more than 400 of the Benin bronzes, which belong to those looted by the British in 1897 during a so-called punitive expedition and subsequently sold at art auctions throughout Central Europe. A selection of the bronzes stored in Berlin will

be on display as part of the Ethnological Museum's exhibitions, which are scheduled to open at the Humboldt Forum in late summer 2021. Although attempts for diplomatic discussions have been initiated, neither the German government nor the Prussian Cultural Heritage Foundation wish the letter from the Nigerian embassy to be understood as an official request for restitution. For now, the museum seems to stick to its plan to exhibit the bronzes, which scholar and curator Anette Hoffmann calls schizophrenic. She asks how a museum can acknowledge the fact that it is in possession of looted art and at the same time display the artefacts in a reconstructed palace, with the original building erected not least with funds derived from trading operations of Prussian emperors in former colonial territories.

**'An imperial museum that does not want to be one'**

The digital opening of the Humboldt Forum has not been able to abate the concerns and fears of activists, academics, and journalists. It has managed, however, to generate more criticisms from journalists.

The part of the opening ceremony that appears to have angered some media most was Hartmut Dorgerloh's aforementioned reply to the very first question posed by the evening's moderator, Mitri Sirin. The deeper implications of the question whether the debates concerning looted artefacts were to overshadow the digital opening were evaded by the director general, whose quipped answer instead drew much attention in the reporting following the festivities, with *taz* admonishing Dorgerloh's reply as 'brazen' (*unverschämt*) and 'impertinent' (*frech*).

To be sure, the Forum's future task of dealing with its contested colonial legacy were addressed in more depth in a previous press conference (October 2020) as well as on the institution's website, to which a section titled 'How does the Humboldt Forum deal with colonial collections?' has been added. Moreover, it was reiterated in a

Irene Hilden
Harriet Merrow
Andrei Zavadski



statement of the Forum to the news agency *dpa*, some weeks after the opening. Here, Dorgerloh positioned colonialism at the centre of the institution's reflections, emphasising that the plethora of postcolonial continuities such as poverty, the climate crisis, and everyday racism had to be included in the Forum's work. Germany's colonial legacy also took centre-stage in both Monika Grütters' and Hermann Parzinger's (head of the Prussian Cultural Heritage Foundation) respective comments to the *dpa*. As Grütters emphasised in her remarks, she believes the Humboldt Forum has functioned as a catalyst and a driving force behind the postcolonial debate in Germany. This may be valid in terms of the debate reaching wider publics, but is somewhat dismissive of the decades of work by postcolonial scholars and activists.

The pandemic-dampened festivities drew smirks from multiple voices in the press, with one even placing 'opening' in quotation marks. The hour-long, tightly choreographed digital 'babbling on' was declared to be soberingly 'anticlimactic', at best. According to *Die Zeit*, the unfortunate opening resulted from a fundamental confusion at the root of the cultural institution—namely, that the Humboldt Forum is 'an imperial museum that does not want to be one'.

**'We will become the Humboldt Forum'**

'As of today, we can say: We will become the Humboldt Forum', stated Dorgerloh at the end of his press conference speech. The choice of the future tense is remarkable here. On the one hand, it might point to the Forum's understanding of its own highly problematic inception story, the acknowledgement of the fact that the criticisms directed at the institution have been addressed imperfectly, and a genuine intention to deal with the issues at stake in the near future. On the other hand, however, the future tense implies that up to now, the Humboldt Forum was not really a forum but, presumably, a construction project that had to be realised. One with a lot of

stakeholders and complex power dynamics. One that required wearing a helmet that would safeguard those involved from all the problems and challenges. One to which the digital opening was meant to put a full stop. Only now that the building is standing in the middle of the city and can hardly be taken down (despite protesters' demands), will the Humboldt Forum apparently become a *forum*. Whether and how this forum-ness of the institution will translate into resolutions of the conflicts behind it, only the future will show. And this future will be intense.

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