

Queering as proposition for collaborative student research

Isabel Bredenbröker

“Queerness is not here yet. Queerness is an ideality. Put another way, we are not yet queer. We may never touch queerness, but we can feel it as the warm illumination of a horizon imbued with potentiality.” – José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia. The Then and There of Queer Futurity*

“I would like for us to replace every ‘we’ in Esteban Muñoz’s quote with ‘the Humboldt Forum.’” – Bonaventure Soh Bejeng Ndikung, *Those Who Are Dead Are Not Ever Gone*

The exhibition that you are experiencing over the course of this November weekend or that you may be thinking back of as you read this is the product of a collective research effort in a seminar context. Student participants from different disciplines and at all levels from BA to PhD came together in a student research group. This group accompanies my DFG funded research project ‘Queering the museum? An anthropological toolkit for intersectional relations in the arts’, a project in which I work on and with the Ethnological Museum Berlin. As prompts for the group, I proposed to investigate what non-normative or queer relations exist around ethnographic museum displays and collections. I also asked how we could contribute to realizing such kinds of relational and non-normative displays by using queer methods.

Discussing texts from queer theory, the anthropology of kinship, museum studies, and the anthropology of art, the seminar opened a space for speculative thought, inviting participants to propose approaches, artworks, talks, methods and ideas that productively highlight queer relations around ethnographic collection objects. Paired with hands-on research at the museum and conversations with museum staff, the seminar offered a laboratory for creative approaches to the museum

environment, informed by empirical and ethnographic engagement with the museum.

As the contributions to this group presentation show, queer methods and display approaches can highlight different subject matters and employ different strategies. Queering as a methodology in museum contexts is slowly becoming more and more present, as for example represented by the local network *Museen Queeren Berlin*. Queering museums may include the participation and presentation of queer lives and identities, but going beyond that, also embark from queer experiences of marginalization that inform different ways of displaying, relating, identifying, loving, and thinking the future. In all cases, queering critically challenges normative hegemonic structures. In relation to ethnographic museums and collections, queering must think through and with colonial and other historical entanglements while not simply dwelling in the past but instead making connections to our present and futures via collections and museums. Ideally, queering can then also help to foster dialogue that goes beyond established frames of identity and reference. As the queer studies scholar José Esteban Muñoz writes, this may forever be something to aspire to while driven by the hope for a better future.

Challenging static forms of display:

Introduction by Meral Karacaoglan

Under the premise of non-normative or queer methods, the Berlin University Alliance X-Student Research Group Non-normative relations wanted: Testing queer methods at the Berlin Ethnological Collection, which took place in the summer term of 2023, addressed alternative narratives and ways of knowledge transfer around ethnographic collections. We looked at the ethnographic collection of the Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, parts of which are exhibited today in the Humboldt Forum, a display that has been selectively curated by the Ethnological Museum and the Museum for Asian Art. As a result of our research, nine students have put together a program that enables alternative readings of the collection by visitors to the Humboldt Forum in a total of seven sub-projects. These are now presented in a concluding pop-up exhibition at the Humboldt Forum in the rooms of the Ethnological Museum on 18 and 19 November 2023.

Our exhibition aims to challenge the static nature of object display within ethnographic museums and to update the way audiences interact with cultural artifacts. By embracing movement, performance, critical voices, and alternative forms of knowledge, we seek to deconstruct the traditional model of the ethnographic museum and introduce a 'queering' paradigm of engagement. „Queer“ in this context means different forms of criticism and interactions that go beyond the museal “norm”, which is the standard, static and intended to be neutral display of „Otherness“ that often denies emotional and physical interaction in ethnographic museums.

We conducted research with anthropological, art historical, sociological and curatorial methodologies. Our individual projects do not want to be read as 'artworks'. Rather, we use our contributions critically and

ask what they do as symbols displayed in a hegemonically structuring environment. We try to visualize intersectional factors that can help to put ethnographic displays into new relations and new contexts. We do so in response to the museum as a space representing a largely white- and patriarchally governed society, and to the largely static display of artifacts within this space. Both predominate over alternative narratives and make it difficult to envision relations around these objects beyond those factors.

The overall question that we as participants of the group have followed in our research is: how can we deconstruct colonial or other dominant narratives manifested and inevitably inscribed in the artifacts that shape the display of the ethnological collection in the Humboldt Forum by using queer methods? These methods actively seek to make museal norms visible, tangible and to critically question them by, again, actively practicing an alternative, more responsible and aware visit to exhibited parts of the collection. We seek to challenge the current form of display. As we try to exercise in our own exhibit, exhibitions with/ about 'ethnological' collection items need to consider multiple factors and layers of engagement, more than the current exhibition allows. We hope that our presentation is a step towards locating a queer approach of interaction with objects in the display of the ethnographic collection at the Humboldt Forum.

Program

Saturday 18 November

11.00-12.00 Karina Belik and Polina Shablovskaia - "Mapping Connections: Exploring Contexts and Reflecting in the Humboldt Forum's space"

12.00-13.00 Alessia Oesing & Emilia Gentis - Barrier

14.00-15.00 Christian Beltran – The Child Besides You

15.00-16.00 Aria Tilove – Querying the Queer: Post-It Note Provocation

16.00-17.00 Jiaying Gao – The Tale of Veils

17.00 - 18.30 Drinks and snacks socializing on the 2nd floor of the museum – Outreach and Education space

Sunday 19 November

13:00-14:00 – Alexander Hong – Mapping the Past, Mapping the Present

14:00-15:00 Meral Karacaoglan – Associative Curating: The Kunstkammer in the Humboldt Forum

15:00-16:00 Elizaveta Fokina & Sophie Beßler – S H A R D S

16:00-17:00 Andreas Rumpf – Discussion Atmospheres

Barrier

Alessia Oesing & Emilia Gentis

Format: Interactive installation

Materials: Glass Object, Light-sensors, audio

Relations within the museum context are sheer infinite. Analyzing how vitrines, light, space, sound, materials, barriers, signs and all the other inanimate and animate elements interact, revealed an unwritten rule book on how to act, perceive and shape museums for guests as well as staff, artists and all other people that do museum. A “norm” is being upheld in those big and small parts, so that when entering a museum, one senses its nudges. What would happen if we started queering the museum by just queering parts of those senses? In the course of engaging with the Humboldt Forum, I developed an interest on how the light barrier system partakes in creating barriers not only for security purposes, but also in reinforcing certain behavioral norms and ways of perceiving one self’s position when facing the displayed. By queering this system as part of the broader museum curation, I question how modifying the museum interior could establish (queer) relations between the different elements of the display and visitors.

In our installation, the light and sound barrier it is reinterpreted instead of being rejected. I suggest a different version of it coming from my perspective as a queer young woman. An object on display will invite people to come closer. In doing so, participants will detect an alternative sound that replaces the universally alarming sound with a queer language. It is a sound that some might find inviting, others may find repulsive. In interaction with the installation, people are invited to question how they feel in their bodies and how they relate to the object(s) in the museum. Informed by this new experience, the installation is an invitation to reflect on how museum visitor usually feel when visiting a museum.

About the contributors:

Alessia Oesing (idea and concept) studies human geography at Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin. She also work in, and is passionate about club awareness. Beyond that, her interests as an artist are driven by emotions, relations and bodies underlined with an interdisciplinary approach.

Emilia Gentis (technical implementation) studies communication design at HTW Berlin. She applies a wide range of interests to her projects, from graphic design to new media. With an open-minded approach, she thrives on experimentation and constantly seeks to push the boundaries of traditional design.

Mapping the Past, Mapping the Present

Alexander Hong

Format: Poster

Materials: Printed paper, vinyl, string

The Ethnological Museums' Africa section at the Humboldt Forum is an explicit reckoning with Germany's colonial past. To rectify past mistakes, the curators of the exhibition have also brought in experts from formerly colonized countries to determine the provenance of the objects held by the museum. The use of bold, detailed, large scale, and aesthetically pleasing maps throughout the display help the viewer orient themselves in relation to this process.

A fundamental part of queer relationality lies in understanding material relationships in the world, between oneself and wider society and how these relate to one's own ability to survive. My contribution wants to use the techniques of cartographic depiction as exhibited in the Africa section to map out the contemporary relationship of Germany and the continent of Africa, especially how they are mediated through the presence of the United States of America, asking provocatively whether or not colonial relationships between the 'West' and the African continent have really ended, or if Germany actually has an independent foreign policy.

About the contributor:

Alexander Hong is an Arabic-English translator and a master's student in the program Interdisciplinary Studies of the Middle East (ISME) at Freie Universität Berlin where he works as a student assistant in the research project 'Temporal Communities: Doing Literature in a Global Perspective'. He is interested in how museums are used to reinforce the material relationships of the states that fund and support them.

Querying the Queer: Post-it Note Provocations

Aria Tilove

Materials: Post-It notes, Beyond the Norm tour script

As part of my master's thesis, my project interprets a queering strategy implemented by the museum. From June to September 2023, I conducted field research by attending the Ethnologisches Museum's guided tour Beyond the Norm: A queer look at gender and sexuality in the ethnological collection, analyzing the tour's formative materials and interviewing guides and museum staff. My resulting post-it note intervention queers the knowledge, power, and positionality of the museum through integrating questions raised by the tour, myself and the museum's participants into the permanent exhibition.

About the contributor:

Aria Tilove studies in the Master Research Training Program in Social Sciences at Humboldt University. In addition to writing her thesis, she is a Student Assistant at the Museum für Naturkunde, where she works within the Education and Outreach department on collaborative projects between the museum and Berlin schools.

The child besides you

Christian Beltran

Materials: Mannequins

This project challenges the issue of artifact mishandling and misrepresentation by queering artifact display. Instead of inviting the audience to divide their attention across an artifact collection, their focus is directed to one artifact: a mannequin. And rather than informing the audience how this artifact was discovered, the significance of this artifact is determined by the audience through proximity, contiguity, and evocative materials. Essentially, this project offers not only a space for reflection but also memory activation. The audience associates their past selves with the present and a conversation between the audience and the artifact unfolds. Thus, this project centers the audience (not the museum) as the site of knowledge production.

About the contributor:

Christian Beltran is a graduate student at the Freie Universität Institute of English Language and Literature. He is interested in temporality studies, queer theory, and Joyce. He is an editor at the FU Review, and his writing has been longlisted in the Berlin Writing Prize. He works in Berlin as a nanny.

Discussion Atmospheres

Andreas Rumpf

Format: Audio-Tour

The institution of the ethnological museum is being heavily scrutinized in current discourse in Germany. The audio tour Discussion Atmospheres features different kinds of conversations about colonialism, ethnological museums, and racism in the museum. It does so not in the sense of proposing a new curatorial program but in the form of actual spoken words. The audio tour is composed of fragments of conversations about Germany's colonial past, the institution of the ethnological museum and the connection between the past and the present. It invites the listener to question how these conversations influence the way 'ethnographic' objects are displayed. Where can current discourses be seen in the presentation of objects at the Humboldt Forum?

The intention of the tour is to prompt a new perspective on displayed objects in the Humboldt Forum: to look at them not as enigmatic expressions of alien cultures but as active agents that shape and influence cultural-political life and debates in contemporary Germany.

About the contributor:

Andreas Rumpf studies Cultural and Social Sciences in the fifth semester at Humboldt University. He is a museum enthusiast and participated in the research group as a starting point to look at museums critically from a scholarly perspective. He is particularly interested in museums as a site of knowledge creation and knowledge transfer.

SHARDS

Sophie Breßler & Elizaveta Fokina

Format: Installative sound piece

Materials: Aquarium, object (ceramics), insects (plastic), headphones

A castle standing next to museum island with a vast collection of objects is submerged in water one day. What is left? Unfortunately—nothing, except for a metaphor. What happens when the idea of producing “non-word-units” meets the guiding metaphor of shard? The notion of ‘shard’ is used in our collaborative work to highlight the fragmentation and incompleteness of history while challenging approaches and logics of European institutions, such as museums and archives.

Through metaphors we have also decided to explore and translate our own frustrations, while working with the collection. We refuse to engage with its objects directly in our project, whether those objects that are on display or those stored in the depot—firstly, because of institutional restrictions in terms of access. However, this predicament motivated us to ponder over our own critical enquiries: how can we find new ways of perceiving objects through the practices of caring and repairing? Can we perhaps adapt speculative and liminal aspects of object histories in order to form new modes of working with the collection?

Thus, our encounters with the Humboldt Forum and mutual reflections became a conjoint experience that evolved into both emotional engagement and dis-engagement, while working with the museum. The object and the sound installation that we are presenting are an attempt to convert the result of collaborative thinking into non-word entities.

About the contributors:

Sophie Breßler studied Social and Cultural Anthropology and Musicology in her bachelor’s degree and is currently a master’s student of Art History in a Global Context at Freie Universität Berlin. Her main interest lies in the field of decolonial and diasporic approaches.

Elizaveta Fokina is a master’s student at the Interdisciplinary Studies of the Middle East program at the Freie Universität Berlin. Her current interests evolve around sounds, archives, and spaces.

The Tales of Veils

Jiaying Gao

Format: Installation and performance

Materials: Fan, veils, plinth

This performative installation aims to challenge the static nature of object display within ethnological museums and reevaluate the way audiences interact with cultural artifacts. By embracing movement, performance, critical voices, and alternative forms of knowledge, it seeks to deconstruct a traditional model of museal display.

My work questions the fixed stillness of objects, here using fans as objects that are omnipresent in most ethnographic collections. It explores alternative ways to convey their cultural significance and vibrancy. I seek to “breathe” life into the objects and encourage a more immersive and engaging experience for visitors. By showcasing the reciprocal relationship between the body and the object, it aims to empower visitors to reclaim agency in exhibition contexts. Through a tactile display and a performance that demonstrate how the body moves the object and how the object moves the body, I invite visitors to consider the symbiotic relationship between Qi (Chinese concept of vital energy and force), culture, movement, and materiality. By creating spaces for tactile interaction, I aim to redefine the relationship between the audience and the objects, fostering a sense of connection and intimacy. My work aims to contribute actively to creating performative environments that dissolve a separation between performers’ or artists’ bodies and the assembled bodies of spectators. This signifies the collapse of a simple diametric power structure and disperses power relations to the micro level of multiple interactions and endless possible encounters.

I recognize the emerging significance of performance within ethnological museum contexts, yet find that it is still often overlooked or under-represented. My contributions therefore aims to bring performance to the forefront, acknowledging its value as a form of cultural expression

and representation, creating awareness for this non-normative way of creating knowledge.

About the contributor:

Jiaying Gao is a PhD student in the Advanced Practices programme (Visual Culture department) at Goldsmiths, University of London, UK. She is also a dancer, choreographer and curator. Her research investigates the intersection of body perceptions and the archive, particularly within the frame of dance museums. She has extensive research experience in the field of Chinese dance, as well as cultural and ethnic policies and their impact on social and economic development at local, national and international levels. Jiaying is currently undertaking a practice-based project that aims to extend and reflect the performativity of identities and affect in dance archives and has curated several dance exhibitions.

Associative Curating: The Kunst-kammer in the Humboldt Forum

Meral Karacaoglan

Format: Tour

Materials: Beamer-projection of historical photographs of the Kunst-kammer, Object photographs printed on paper, Tour guide with notepad printed on paper

When we enter an ethnological museum in the European West, we tend to forget that the objects we see were connected to emotions while in use by their former owners. One curatorial specificity of the Kunst-kammer, the first art collection in the original Berliner Schloss that was kept here from about 1600 onwards, was the possibility to associate diverse object correlations. There was no strict distinction between disciplines yet, according to which museums categorize cultural artifacts as for example 'ethnographic' or 'art work' today.

Let's dive into the past and use this opportunity to associate cultural artifacts with emotions. Let us bring the presence of the Kunst-kammer (partially) in our mind. As an alternative narrative, I investigate how much Kunst-kammer still appears in the display of the Ethnological collection in the Humboldt Forum today and to what extent the added value of this historical exhibition practice, which lies primarily in the associative reception of the objects, can create awareness for the diverse origins of the objects.

The Kunst-kammer has its imperial origin back in the 16th century and used to be conceived as a Staatsschatz (National treasury). During the 17th century, this Staatsschatz became more and more curated according to certain educational aspects. In this course, it became more open to the public and 'museumized' in the late 18th century. This art collection forms the basis of large parts of the whole historical museum land-

scape in Berlin until this day. Today, the Kunst-kammer objects that are integrated in the display of the Ethnological Museum alongside objects from other contexts. The display follows a curatorial narrative that mostly addresses the origin of the objects before their existence in Berlin (if known). However, another part of these object's biographies is constituted by their time in the Kunst-kammer where the objects were surrounded by a more diverse selection of object than is the case today, which led to interdisciplinary curatorial concepts. We must not forget that we don't see most of the objects that were an integral part of the Kunst-kammer anymore and that meanings and associations shifts according to context. What feelings do we associate with what we actually see at the museum today? Conceptualized as a tour through the Ethnological Museum, the visitor is led to artifacts that were already part of the Kunst-kammer. By linking various object biographies, I attempt to tie in with the curatorial intention of the original Kunst-kammer, namely to establish interdisciplinary chains of association and to recognize emotional connections between the objects that are not visible anymore.

About the contributor:

Meral Karacaoglan studied art history in Berlin, Paris and Istanbul. Currently, she writes her master's thesis under supervision of Prof. Dr. Horst Bredekamp about representational factors of being female in 19th century painting of the Alte Nationalgalerie Berlin and their effects on the collecting practices of the museum then and now. Being part of the research project Museum and Society - Mapping the Social, she put a focus on art history as cultural history as well as museum history during her studies. Meral will start a position as curatorial assistant of the UN-Secretariats' in-house art collection in New York City in February 2024.

“Mapping Connections: Exploring Contexts and Reflecting in the Humboldt Forum’s space”

Karina Belik & Polina Shablovskaia

Format: Editable digital map, reflection board

Materials: Miro board, projector, tablets, stickers, markers

Stumbling upon unhelpful information on individual museumized objects-subjects and their diminishing classification within the museum space, we propose an alternative: Our project endeavours to illuminate an intricate web of relations among various elements – so-called “objects”, wall texts, art interventions, media tools etc. – exhibited in the Humboldt Forum, and expand it beyond the museum space – for example to the collection’s depot or to global processes.

One of the challenges we confront is the varying description of museum objects. Some items are richly detailed, providing historical facts, provenance, materials, and usage, each creating distinct contexts. In contrast, others offer minimal information, containing only geographical origin, title, and date. This discrepancy prompts essential questions about the multifaceted nature of these objects-subjects. Are they to be regarded as art, cultural artefacts, religious items, historical relics, or are these categories not applicable at all? It also raises questions about the hosting institution itself, considering the politics of its (re)construction, dealing with collections, positioning on the outside, and surrounding local and global processes and discourses. Is all of this a product of conspicuous consumption during the colonial period, a political decision, an educational resource, or a centre for research? We question the necessity of rigid definitions and advocate for a more open, interpretive approach.

We aim to foster visitor engagement by inviting people to actively contribute to the discussion about exhibitions located in the Humboldt

Forum. We have created a digital map to display connections between museum objects, which visitors can edit on their own smartphones or provided tablets. Displayed in the workshop room, it is accompanied by a discussion board where visitors can share their reflections on questions we pose. Our initiative is a response to the pressing need for enhanced contexts and accessibility of information, which in our view, should circulate in various directions between visitors and related communities, external and internal to museum experts. We are creating an open and experimental space for knowledge exchange which challenges power relations in knowledge production and gives room for diverse perspectives. We seek to break away from conventional organizational methods, fostering instead a participative and reflective approach to explore the exhibition. In conclusion, “Mapping Connections” challenges traditional museum practices, offering a novel and inclusive way to explore and respect the diverse cultural heritage housed in museum exhibitions. Our project empowers visitors to actively participate in co-creating narratives by fostering a dynamic and multi-layered collective understanding of the museum’s collections.

About the contributors:

Karina Belik is a master student of European Ethnology at the Humboldt University and a student assistant in the Department for Strategy in the Stiftung Humboldt Forum im Berliner Schloss. In her research, she explores cultures of remembrance in Russia, relations between remembrance of the WWII and the current war of Russia against Ukraine, related Russia’s colonial policies, and decolonial and solidarity initiatives as well as artistic practices.

Polina Shablovskaia is currently pursuing her master's degree in Interdisciplinary Studies of the Middle East at Freie Universität Berlin. Her educational background is marked by her master's in Linguistics from Saint Petersburg State University as well as a bachelor's degree in Oriental and African Studies, which she completed at the same institution. Polina's research interests are diverse and encompass the history and culture of the Middle East and cross-cultural communication challenges, reflecting her dedication to interdisciplinary scholarship.