

# [Global Histories]

## A student journal

**Review: “Hello World” in Hamburger Bahnhof – Museum für Gegenwart, Berlin**

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EXHIBITION VIEW "AGORA," HELLO WORLD: REVISING A COLLECTION. HAMBURGER BAHNHOF, BERLIN, 2018. COURTESY OF: NATIONALGALERIE—STAATLICHE MUSEEN ZU BERLIN, THOMAS BRUNS.

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## Hello World: Revising a Collection

Museum Hamburger Bahnhof of the Berlin State Museums,  
2018

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REVIEWED BY PAUL SPRUTE

Open between April and August of 2018, the exhibition “Hello World: Revising a Collection” in the museum Hamburger Bahnhof of the Berlin State Museums has served as a prestige project in the quest to turn the Berlin museums from national to “Global.”<sup>1</sup> The exhibition found itself situated against the background of the ongoing debate surrounding the reconstruction of bygone Prussian glory in the *Berlin Stadtschloss*—the rebuilt city palace, set to serve as a shell for the Humboldt Forum of ethnographic museums. The Forum, wryly referred to in the *Tageszeitung* as a metonym for Berlin and Germany’s collective neurosis,<sup>2</sup> has inspired opposition in civil society and from scholars such as Bénédicte Savoy and Jürgen Zimmerer, who criticize the ‘colonial amnesia’ obscuring the structural power disparities that underly its collections.<sup>3</sup>

“Hello World” thus had a difficult task, one overshadowed by other cultural debates that began long before it opened and seem unlikely to end anytime soon. What are the possibilities and the constraints of the State Museum’s attempts at globality? Would this salutation just give lip service to diversity and interconnectedness or actually offer an analysis and critique of the epistemic and social structures that underly its creation?

Using the collection of the Berlin National Galleries “shaped by contingent political and cultural conditions...as a point of departure and frame of reference,” the exhibition “explores the possibility of how a collection...might broaden its scope by combining non-Western artistic tendencies and a transcultural approach. What would the collection be like today had a more cosmopolitan understanding of art informed its beginnings?”<sup>4</sup>

The exhibition answered these questions in thirteen rooms that each had a specific temporal and local, but also thematic focus and were put forward by differ-

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<sup>1</sup> Kulturstiftung des Bundes, “Global Museum,” 2018, [https://www.kulturstiftung-des-bundes.de/en/programmes\\_projects/image\\_and\\_space/detail/global\\_museum-1.html](https://www.kulturstiftung-des-bundes.de/en/programmes_projects/image_and_space/detail/global_museum-1.html).

<sup>2</sup> Esther Slevogt, “Neurose aus Beton,” *Die Tageszeitung*, September 3, 2016, <http://www.taz.de/!5332988/>.

<sup>3</sup> Gero Schliess, “Is Berlin’s Humboldt Forum Shying away from Colonial History?” *Deutsche Welle*, August 14, 2017, <https://www.dw.com/en/is-berlins-humboldt-forum-shying-away-from-colonial-history/a-40082234>; Bénédicte Savoy, “The Restitution Revolution Begins,” *The Art Newspaper*, February 16, 2018, <https://www.theartnewspaper.com/comment/the-restitution-revolution-begins>.

<sup>4</sup> Hamburger Bahnhof—Museum für Gegenwart—Berlin / Nationalgalerie: Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, “Hello World: Revision einer Sammlung / Revising a Collection,” Exhibition Booklet, April 28, 2018–August 26, 2018, [http://ww2.smb.museum/smb/media/exhibition/58028/Hello\\_World\\_Booklet\\_web.pdf](http://ww2.smb.museum/smb/media/exhibition/58028/Hello_World_Booklet_web.pdf), 9.

ent curators. All in all, more than 250 artists were featured in around 800 works of art, roughly half of them from the holdings of the National Gallery and further collections of the State Museums of Berlin, the other half on loan from other collections. In general, the exhibition contributed intriguing insights, included many impressive works of art and suggested a more historically and socially aware way to display them. Still, it consciously refrained from offering any ways forward beyond very slight modifications of the art world's status quo, instead taking refuge in a mystified and unmanageable multitude of connections, possible demarcations, and focal points.

The thirteen "chapters," or "multifaceted narratives" in the parlance of the exhibition booklet,<sup>5</sup> were grouped around the central "agora" in the former concourse of the train station Hamburger Bahnhof, as a "main assembly place [enabling] the urban community to both develop its identity and preserve order."<sup>6</sup> Behind their somewhat elusive titles these rooms, strung together with little hint of connection, put forward individual answers to the exhibition's challenge that varied in their intellectual persuasiveness and their artistic quality.

The 'African section,' "Colomental: The Violence of Intimate Stories," for example focused almost exclusively on the central historical fact of colonialism. The artworks exhibited included a video installation on the Congolese *sapeurs* and their mannerisms; pictures of the collection in the notorious *Koninklijk Museum voor Midden-Afrika* in Tervuren, Belgium; and an installation on the Berlin Conference of 1884, prominently showcasing pieces of the legal texts that were its result, as well as a picture of the former German Minister for Economic Cooperation and Development, Heidemarie Wieczorek-Zeul, who defiantly acknowledged the German 'extermination war' against Herero and Nama as a genocide in 2005. In this chapter, the exhibition was arguably at its weakest. Its awkward and self-centered choices argued, perhaps unwittingly, that art focusing on Africa may only debate colonialism, reiterating the discursive dependence on a European center that needs to speak for the continent. Three of the four prominently featured artists were German. It fell to Joël Andrianomearisoa, born in Antananarivo and working between Madagascar and Paris, to give a compelling and urgent comment on the relations between the colonial past and post-colonial present of both Europe and Africa. Andrianomearisoa overlaid images of the present with others taken in colonial times, pointing to the persistence of power discrepancies despite the world's many apparent transformations.

Other rooms were more refined in their presentations of the complex world relations that a revised National Gallery would incorporate. They benefited from deeper permanent collections, making it possible to draw varied and nuanced pic-

<sup>5</sup> "Hello World," Exhibition Booklet, 9.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

tures of exchange and mutual inspiration while still acknowledging the fundamental unevenness of those relations.



OSMAN HAMDY BEY, "TÜRKISCHE STRASSENSZENE," 1888, OIL ON CANVAS. COURTESY OF: NATIONALGALERIE—STAATLICHE MUSEEN ZU BERLIN, ANDRES KILGER.

A case in point is the painting "Türkische Strassenszene" by Osman Hamdy Bey. The painting depicts a colonial officer, accompanied by his family, haggling with street merchants over Persian-style carpets with the aid of an interpreter. Set in front of a stylized ancient structure, the scene was painted in Western naturalist style by the well-known Ottoman artist and state official. The painting exemplifies a colonial and orientalist gaze but also highlights in its gaze the commercial interests underlying its own production. It twists the expected narrative by pointing out the cluelessness and dependence of the colonial collector on his intermediaries, suggesting complicated relations of agency.

Other notable and convincing rooms were "Making Paradise: Places of Longing, from Paul Gauguin to Tita Salina," focused on the archipelagoes of the Pacific and Indian Ocean. Viewed as a primitivist paradise by European artists, these regions spoke back to those depictions, revealing the dynamics of inspiration and how styles and themes were mutually appropriated. The room "Arrival, Incision: Indian Modernism as Peripatetic Itinerary" skillfully interwove the biographies of artists (such as Rabindranath Tagore, and his nephew Gaganendranath) and their oeuvres over different forms of artistic expression, from painting to poetry, music, or film. The rooms "Sites of Sustainability: Pavilions, Manifestoes and Crypts" and "Portable Homelands: From Field to Factory" debated the roles of artists as

actors in the political and social spaces that they inhabit and shape in the varied settings of socialist Yugoslavia and post-socialist Armenia.

Yet video installations in “Portable Homelands,” as well as in the room “Entangled Holdings: Arte Popular, Surrealism and Emotional Architecture” revealed the absence of a critique of the art market itself in other parts of the show. An installation in “Portable Homelands” on the Dilijan Art Summit presents it as a traveling circus of hypercapitalism that claims to be socially aware, quite literally disembowels social settings by turning the ruins of closed factories into art, and remains meaningless to the people living in those realities. The second installation showcases the perpetual incorporation of the world as a resource for globalized art in the case of the aborted Guggenheim project in Guadalajara, Mexico. These two exhibits could, and should, have been extended into a more fundamental debate on the dynamics shaping the current (re)production and representation of art that would have revealed today’s hierarchizations and exclusions.

“Hello World” took up the entire space of the Hamburger Bahnhof, making it necessary to integrate the permanently displayed works into the concept of the exhibition. Yet, it showed that the simple addition of some ‘contextual’ artworks to the already exhibited pieces can ultimately not replace a more systematic approach. This unsatisfying practice was especially visible in the rooms “The Human Rights of the Eye: A Pictorial Atlas for the Marx Collection,” where the museum’s collection of Pop art was complemented by associative photo collages, and the room “Where Do We Come From? Adapting Sculptural Forms.” Yet it is also currently practiced in other Berlin State Museums, such as the Bode Museum, where European ecclesiastical art is confronted with African sculptures in an exhibition titled “Beyond Compare.”<sup>7</sup>

This kind of unsatisfying contextualization pointed to the show’s fundamental lack of a central thesis. The space to make such a proposal, the former train station concourse at the center of the museum, was instead put forward as an “agora,” a space for deliberation among equals. It is disappointing that this exhibition seeking to widen and even “deconstruct” the Western canon uncritically resorted to its very fundament in classical Athens. Its suggestion as a universally accessible, integrative space ignored the role of the “agora” as a site of the construction of hierarchies and practice of exclusion in Athenian democracy.

It would have surely been more fitting to use this central space to question the basic promise of the universal museum, a promise that this show ultimately devoted itself to upholding. The basic assumption that it makes sense to gather, work through, and showcase the knowledge of the world in Berlin’s National Galleries was not up for debate. Nor were pressing questions about the ownership and repatriation of art, or sufficient focus on the normative and spatial divisions

<sup>7</sup> Staatliche Museen zu Berlin: Preußischer Kulturbesitz, “Beyond Compare: Art from Africa in the Bode-Museum,” 2017, <https://www.smb.museum/en/exhibitions/detail/unvergleichlich-kunst-aus-afrika-im-bode-museum.html>.

between works of ‘art’ exhibited in the National Galleries and ‘anthropological’ or ‘ethnographic’ works to be displayed in the Humboldt Forum from next year on.

Still, “Hello World: Revising a Collection” has contributed to progress in these wider discussions in Berlin by demonstrating the possibilities and limitations of rethinking such a major collection. It therefore was unfortunate that the exhibition closed after only four months, and it should be hoped that its perspectives and the provoked discussions significantly contribute to a changing museumscape in the city.