Representation of Culture(s): Articulations of the De/Post-Colonial at the Haus der Kulturen der Welt in Berlin

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Preliminary remarks

Across Anthropology – the title of this book – could not more accurately describe the conceptual frame, or the challenges of this essay. This text deals with the question of how to represent cultures, a central question of anthropological inquiry, and – at the same time – one of the core questions of curatorial practice in a ‘transcultural’ context.

Footnote 1: The term “transcultural” is closely linked to a specific understanding of culture or a specific discourse on art and culture. As the discussion will show, ‘transcultural’ has come under increasing scrutiny from the perspective of an entangled history approach, especially over last ten years. Nevertheless, it was of central importance for a certain period of curatorial work, especially in the 1990s and 2000s. Thus, when the term is used in the following text, it is placed in quotation marks to refer to this discursive context of practice.

But how do you write when you are both the recording ethnographer and the ethnographic subject, both the observing participant and the participant observer? This essay is, firstly, an (ethnographic) approach to and an account of a specific cultural institution, the Haus der Kulturen der Welt in Berlin. Founded in 1989 as a forum for contemporary international arts and cultures
with a focus on Africa, Asia, and Latin America, without a collection, conceptual mandate, or disciplinary and theoretical affiliations, the Haus der Kulturen der Welt seems – at first glance – an odd choice for a discussion that deals with the “where, what, and how of anthropology” as a discipline (see introduction, this volume), an institutional framework, and a mode of inquiry. And yet, as we will see, in any institution that situates itself in a ‘transcultural’ context or is engaged with global entanglements, internal and external perspectives, action and critical reflection have been and remain inseparably entangled. The ‘anthropological’ is both content and method at the same time.

Secondly, the ‘anthropological’ defines much of my own personal history. In the early 1990s, as a student of social anthropology, geography, and art history, I completed an internship at the department of Exhibitions, Film and New Media. After completing my studies at SOAS (University of London) with a PhD in African Studies, I then returned to the Haus der Kulturen der Welt in 1999, for a further seven years as programme coordinator of the Visual Arts Department.

Given the high frequency of projects and exhibitions – often realised under considerable time and financial constraints in the context of the highly dynamic artistic and discursive environment of contemporary global arts – there was scarcely any time for a critical revision of my own, and the institution’s, practice. The moment for a more theoretical reflection came when I joined my husband in Montreal and became Affiliate Professor in the department of Art History at Concordia University in 2008. In my research, I focused on questions of transcultural curating, curatorial studies, and global art history. In 2012, I moved back to Berlin. As project director at the Haus der Kulturen der Welt, I led long-term curatorial research projects that explored artistic positions, scientific concepts, and spheres of political activity amidst profound global and planetary transformations. By virtue of this decade-long connection with the Haus der Kulturen der Welt, lodged between practice and theory, my biography is also deeply anchored in the anthropological, both as the content and the horizon of reflection.

So how can and should we write from this mesh between inside and outside, between personal experience and institutional practice? In the following I will examine the notion of cultural representation at the Haus der Kulturen der Welt and trace its impact on programme-making and curatorial practice. How has the Haus dealt with this complex – and highly political – issue over the past thirty years? What was the discursive environment, which policies, strategies and formats have been developed in reaction to de- and post-colonial criticism? How can the conceptual approach be described today?
The vantage point from which I explore these questions must by necessity be a radically subjective one. In my account, I substantially draw on personal experience and memory. Theoretical considerations alternate with personal memories and accounts of key moments in my own practice as well as with the institutional history, as I experienced it.

Footnote 2. Given my own long-standing affiliation with the Haus der Kulturen der Welt, one should expect source material that reveals the most inner workings of the institution: correspondences, conceptual sketches, or emails, which allow insights into programmatic thinking, reflective processes, and conceptual developments. Unfortunately, the data situation is more difficult than one might expect from a public institution. The Haus der Kulturen der Welt was founded as a cultural institution without a collecting mission. Due to its project orientation, increasing digitisation, a heavy workload, and a comparatively high fluctuation among the staff, neither systematic documentation nor the building of an institutional memory were accorded any priority. This was particularly true for the early years, when the focus was on the realisation of programmes, not their archiving. Consequently, many letters and documents were lost or are now stored in the Federal Archives in Bonn. Email correspondence, especially from the first decades, is no longer accessible or has been deleted following numerous server migrations and system updates. Even visual material from the early years is difficult to obtain. It was only in the mid-2000s that the Exhibitions Department began, for example, systematically to document openings and exhibition views as well as record and archive accompanying events such as conferences or workshops. The situation fundamentally changed with the start of long-term projects from 2013 onwards, when the practice of archiving became an integral part of the institution’s practice. In terms of my first years at the Haus der Kulturen der Welt, I must therefore largely rely on personal memories, supported by publications, oral history, and reports by third parties – colleagues, artists, curators – or personal recollections of former staff members, the latter published online on the occasion of its twenty-fifth anniversary.

The early years: Genealogies of representation

I came to the Haus der Kulturen der Welt as an intern in 1994. I had just completed my Master’s in Social Anthropology and African Art at SOAS. The Haus der Kulturen der Welt had been founded only five years earlier in
1989, the same year that the Berlin Wall had come down, heralding a new era of global relations and worldwide mobility. It was the same year in which the exhibitions *The Other Story* at the Hayward Gallery in London and *Magiciens de la terre* at the Centre Pompidou challenged the canon of Western modernism, changing the understanding of contemporary art forever.

The foundation of the Haus der Kulturen der Welt followed the successful festival of world cultures *Horizonte*, organised by the Berliner Festspiele. The ‘cultures of the world’ were accorded a permanent home: the former Congress Hall in the Tiergarten, a ‘propaganda’ building designed by American architect Hugh Stubbins in 1957, and a gift from the USA to Berlin. Situated in immediate proximity to the Berlin wall, the building was intended to promote democracy and liberal values and signal freedom across the border.

Funded by the City of Berlin, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of the Interior and allied with the Goethe-Institute, the HKW (or HdKdW, as it was initially known) was one of the first institutions that spearheaded the systematic engagement with contemporary non-Western arts, with a special focus on Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Its mandate was to provide a forum for contemporary and emerging arts and cultures from regions which had hitherto largely been ignored or excluded by ‘the West’. This understanding defined the programme well into the mid-2000s. When I left the Haus in 2006, the introductory paragraph of my reference letter read: “The mandate of the Haus der Kulturen der Welt is to present non-European cultures in the visual arts, dance, theatre, music, literature, film and media and to place them in a public discourse with European cultures. The programme of the Haus der Kulturen der Welt is dedicated to the contemporary arts and current developments in the cultures of Africa, Asia and Latin America.”

From the onset, the Haus der Kulturen der Welt was designed as a multidisciplinary institution. Instead of being committed to a specific understanding of art or a theoretical approach, it highlighted the diversity of contemporary artistic, intellectual, and cultural expression around the world across all genres and subject matters. This holistic approach was reflected in the working structure of the Haus der Kulturen der Welt. It was divided into three programme areas led by three sections: the department of literature, humanities, and science (today: Literature and Humanities); the department of exhibition, film, new media (today: Visual Arts and Film); and the department of music, dance, theatre (today: Music and Performing Arts). In its conceptual approach, it combined ideas of multiculturalism with principles of foreign cultural policy.

A number of pages from the programme brochure, the so-called *Pixiheft*, which appeared twice a month, gives an idea of the outstanding diversity and
Fig. 14.2 Sample pages from the programme brochures (so-called Pixihefte), which appeared monthly. Photographs by the author
topicality, as well as frequency, of the programming of these early years. The teams were small, the responsibilities comprehensive. As an intern of the exhibition department, I had a wide variety of different tasks: On my very first day, I was asked to develop a guided tour concept through the newly opened exhibition *Tanzania. Masterpieces of African Sculpture* (1994) from the Marc L. Felix Collection. Next, I was to set up a showcase with Ukrainian headscarves from the collection of the wife of a German ambassador, write texts on an exhibition of Kanga fabrics and the meaning of proverbs in East Africa, and file correspondence from the landmark exhibition *China Avantgarde*.

With its commitment to contemporary international arts and cultures, the Haus der Kulturen der Welt soon acquired a considerable reputation: as a platform for ‘non-Western’ arts and cultures in Berlin and Germany, as well as an entry point to the Western art world and art market. Soon the diverse programme attracted more than a quarter of a million visitors a year (1992). Yet, given the lack of an overarching theoretical approach and conceptual framing, it was also criticised as being inconsistent, exoticising, and naïve.

What united the programme was a commitment to ‘cultures’ (plural), whereby culture was understood as a rather indiscriminatory term including all forms of contemporary artistic and aesthetic expressions of ‘a nation’ or a ‘cultural region’. The scope was nothing less than ‘the world’, more specifically, the ‘world out there’ (as opposed to the ‘Western’ world). The idea at the time was to make visible those arts and cultures which, from the institutional point of view, were regarded as subaltern and therefore largely ignored by the ‘Western’ art world. The HKW was to counter these exclusion mechanisms and to decolonise the Western art’s canon. Consequently, the notion of representation was considered primarily in positive terms. It was not after contemporary artists, academics and intellectuals, and ‘entire art scenes’ had been put on show for many years already, that the cultural assumptions driving this representational approach, this type of curating began to be criticised. Similarly, the concept of “culture”, which was then essentially defined by national or ethnic affiliation, remained virtually unquestioned at the time. Terms from cultural diplomacy such as “encounter at eye level”, “dialogue”, and “understanding between nations/people” were part of the rhetoric, and inspired me and many visitors at the time.

Furthermore, the idea and practice of curatorial authority remained equally unquestioned in these first years. Affiliated to the Goethe-Institute, the Haus der Kulturen der Welt drew on the former’s administrative structure. Both the director of the HKW – first called “General Secretary”, later “Artistic Director” – and the department heads were employees of the Goethe-Institute. They were advised by a programme board which was
composed exclusively of Germans, two of whom were directors of ethnological museums. Many of the department heads had served abroad on the executive level, before applying for their five-year tenure at the Haus der Kulturen der Welt as part of the Institute’s rotation system. It was the Goethe-Institute reversed. The department heads curated the programmes, supported by a project team. In addition to their management experience and professional expertise, they brought regional knowledge and their global network. The programme reflected the diversity of their interests.

The first head of the exhibition department, Wolfgang Pöhlmann, was a trained art historian; he was succeeded by Alfons Hug, who had studied linguistics, comparative literature, and cultural studies and later became a well-known curator in Latin America; succeeding Hug was Michael Thoss, a journalist and translator, interested in photography and contemporary arts from Africa. Topics dealt with under these directors ranged from the art-artefact debate and political art to art-theoretical discourses and canonical questions, such as the critical inquiry of a ‘non-Western’ modernity.

From today’s perspective, it might sound problematic to fill curatorial positions with generalists and civil servants. Yet for a true assessment of this decision we must recall the level of knowledge and academic training in Western academia. In the early 1990s, it was not possible to study art ethnology, art history, or contemporary art from Africa, Asia, or Latin America as separate subjects in Germany. Neither did post-colonial discourse play a role in the teaching of art history. Regional or indigenous art historie(s) were taught by assistant lecturers, if at all, and – if so – mostly in the department of ethnology, not in the department of art history. As for myself, the only option I had was to enrol at the School of Oriental and African Studies in London, where I majored in African Art, African Literatures, and Social Anthropology.

In addition, the HKW was founded the very year in which the Berlin Wall came down. The end of the Cold War ushered in a new era of global networking and of worldwide artistic activity. Residency programmes for young artists from all over the world were established; the international art market began to reach out for art production beyond the Western centres; biennials or art fairs offered a platform and an infrastructure for worldwide contemporary art production. Young contemporary art scenes began to form worldwide at a rapid pace. For many of us, including the department heads, it was not easy to keep track of emerging artists and new developments. Overall, the atmosphere at HKW was marked by great excitement and a sense of ‘discovery’. There was no binding canon, no established framework to discuss, assess, or select art works from contexts other than the Western canon.
Despite or perhaps just because of this openness – or: lack of conceptual framing – many exhibitions of these early years, including *China Avantgarde* (1993), *Other Modernities* (1995), or *Colours: Art from South Africa* (1996) turned out to be highly influential, contributing significantly to art discourses and artistic developments of the time. At the same time, however, cultural misunderstandings and differing expectations of curators, artists, and the audience shaped the Haus’ early years.

I will never forget an anecdote that one of my colleagues told me during my internship as a warning: A group of Aboriginal women from Australia had been invited to perform a ritual chant. The performance was supposed to start at 8 p.m., and the time had been communicated to the performers. The hall filled up and the audience waited. When at 8:15 still nobody was to be seen on the stage, a staff member ran backstage and frantically signalled to the performers that they were late and had to get on stage. The women looked confused. They had started on time, at 8 p.m. sharp, with a ritual that was part of the singing but had to be performed in secret. This story stayed with me for a long time. To me, it highlighted the inner contradictions of a transcultural work environment, where differing perceptions, practices, and expectations needed to be reconciled. My way of thinking was still strongly influenced by my studies of *Ethnologie* in Germany, which was organised around the notion of culture, then understood as ethnically, regionally, and nationally distinct units. Curating in this environment – a Haus der Kulturen der Welt, that is, a House of the Cultures of the World – thus meant translating the ‘outside’ to the ‘inside’ – ‘Curating Outside-In’.

**Curatorial shifts: The Contemporary (capital C) art turn**

Despite its successful programme and international recognition, the Haus der Kulturen der Welt began to face mounting criticism in the late 1990s. It was accused of a naïve and uncritical, if not neo-colonial, attitude. To be sure, the questions were numerous: Does ritual flute music by indigenous musicians from the Amazon belong on a *stage*? Is it an event, a performance, or a ritual? How is everyday culture from Ghana altered by the exhibition context in a Western art institution? Who has the right and the authority to classify, to value, and to judge these questions?

Another criticism was directed at the programming itself. In the eyes of many visitors, it lacked conceptual orientation. Were all events, exhibitions, and performances to be understood according to the same theoretical framework? What was praised by some as the greatest possible openness – and
therefore as a significant challenge to the Western concept of art – for others was simply a programmatic and aesthetic confusion, an artistic ‘supermarket’. These controversies were consequential; political pressure grew.

It became increasingly obvious that the HKW had begun to diverge from the objectives of the government’s foreign cultural policy, which increasingly led to irritations. The metaphor politicians frequently used to describe their approach towards cultural policy was the “two-way street”. This was supposed to convey the idea of a two-way rather than a one-way cultural transfer. Yet, it failed to acknowledge the growing importance of dialogue and exchange and the expansion of international cultural networks after 1989. Other politicians considered the HKW “too intellectual” and not as attractive as a Carnival of Cultures, for example. Also, it lacked support within the German cultural scene. With exhibitions or film festivals such as “Die anderen Modernen” (Other Modernities) or FESPACO the HKW had questioned the judgement of well-known critics and art institutions which denied modern and contemporary art outside of “non-Western cultures” quality and equal status.

Footnote: A much-discussed dispute between the HKW and the music critic Peter Müller highlighted how the media at the time struggled with their limitations when it came to understanding non-Western contemporary art and music. In a review of a concert of contemporary gamelan music, curated by Dieter Mack, Müller criticised the inability of Javanese musicians to play modern music. Musicians of the “third world”, who were not familiar with modernity, should instead concentrate on their traditions.

With the arrival of a new director, Hans-Georg Knopp (in 1996, general secretary; from 2002-2005, director of the Haus der Kulturen der Welt), the curatorial approach changed radically. Anything ‘ethnographic’, ‘traditional’, ‘folkloric’ – whether contemporary or not – was dismissed in favour of a rather narrow, very specific understanding of ‘contemporary art’. It was contemporary art in a generic or canonical sense, with a capital C. The main cooperation partners and points of references were now global institutions of contemporary art, their networks, and infrastructures, meaning museums, biennials, independent curators, and so forth. Curators and artists including Danny Yung from Hong Kong, Els van der Plas (Prins Claus Fonds), Ong Keng Sen (Singapore) Margerethe Wu (Taipei) and Moon Ho Gun (Seoul) were invited as international advisors. A further and decisive step in the reorientation of the house consisted in the complete dissociation of the HKW
from the Goethe-Institut and the Federal Foreign Office and thus also from the guidelines of foreign cultural policy.

Footnote: The reorientation also marked the end of the cooperation with the “Heimatklänge” (“Homeland Sounds”) channel, in residence at the HKW since its inception, which had broadcast so-called “world music” via the RBB (Radio Berlin Brandenburg). In the eyes of the director, the colourful mixture of cultural sounds from the so-called Third World was benign and well-intentioned, but not on a level playing field and devoid of political commitment.5

Upon completion of my studies at SOAS, I rejoined the Haus der Kulturen der Welt, first as a coordinator of the two exhibitions Photographic Positions of a Century (2000) and Heimat Kunst (2000). Then, a year later, I became the programme coordinator and deputy head of the exhibition department. Knopp’s conceptual restriction to “Contemporary Art” made the work much easier. The playing field was much more clearly defined. It greatly facilitated the communication of the programmes to the press and the general audience, as well as received more critical attention from art historians, critics, and other art institutions.

The following years saw a series of so-called Verbundprojekte, collaborative and multidisciplinary projects, which were developed jointly by all three departments. They were dedicated to contemporary developments in the arts, literature, music, dance, film, or intellectual discourses of a particular ‘nation-state’ or ‘cultural region’, such as China, the Middle East, Iran, India, Central Asia, and others. The regional focus and this kind of geographical and cultural mapping was proposed by the artistic director or by a department head who would also chair the project team.

Even though the focus on contemporary art had brought conceptual clarity and defined a common frame of reference, a central dilemma remained: The curatorial concept and the selection of artists was still the responsibility of the department heads, that is, it was made from the ‘outside’ of these fields. So, while contemporary art had replaced the vague and more inclusive notion of ‘culture’, the Haus der Kulturen der Welt still remained committed to a cultural-geographical outlook or, to its critics, a world view of center and periphery.

At the beginning of the 2000s, this practice of mono-centric curating came under increasing attack from post-colonial theorists, who targeted a culture of exhibition-making in which the world was practically divided into curating and curated cultures. The practice of curators in the institution
thus relied on the implied “acceptance of the curator’s capacity to make transcultural judgements and, from here, the belief in the universality of art” (Mosquera 1994: 136).

To remain faithful to its mission – the celebration of cultural and artistic diversity – the Haus der Kulturen der Welt adjusted its approach once again. Not in-house staff, but, rather, ‘local’ curators from the region itself were assigned to develop a curatorial concept and select the artists. The Haus der Kulturen der Welt hoped it could thereby avoid the fallacies of misrepresentation, and feature the ‘truly local’, ‘undistorted’ by Western perception and judgment. This change of strategy raised a new set of questions, though. This became particularly clear to me during an exhibition that I coordinated between 2002-2003. It was entitled subTerrain. Artworks in the cityfold (2003) and part of the collaborative programme body city dedicated to contemporary arts and culture in India.

**subTerrain (2002/2003)**

As early as 2000, the then head of the exhibitions department and my direct superior, Michael Thoss, had travelled to Bombay and Delhi together with colleagues of the other departments. Together, they attended concerts, readings, performances, visited museums, studios, and art galleries and met with artists, writers, intellectuals, musicians, art historians, and curators. The aim was to get an overview of the contemporary art scene in India and identify a local curator for the exhibition. Local and international critics, museum curators, intellectuals, artists, and members of the local Goethe-Institute suggested names but no decision was made. A second stay was planned for autumn 2002. Several days before the planned departure, Michael Thoss had to cancel his trip and asked me to jump in and travel to India instead. I accepted, hesitantly; I was certainly not an expert on Indian art, and I only had a few days to prepare. I trusted that my general understanding of contemporary art would help me understand the Indian art scene. I was wrong. During studio and exhibition visits and in conversations with collectors, artists, or curators, a complex picture emerged that became ever more confusing. Among our interlocutors, contemporary art seemed to be considered more as a temporal rather than a canonical category. Among other things, this became obvious to me on the cover of the standard work Contemporary Indian Art (2006) by art historian and curator Yashodhara Dalmia, where popular art, traditional sculpture, modern painting, as well as installation art share the same cover page.
Despite this holistic view, what became also evident was the outstanding role of modern(ist) painting. When I asked local artists and critics which contemporary artists they would select, I was repeatedly referred to painters such as Tyeb Mehta, Nalini Malani, Sayed Haider Raza, Bhupen Khakar, or M.F. Husain. By contrast, local staff of the Goethe-Institute and Indian interlocutors with a more international background recommended then emerging installation or performance artists. So, what was ‘representative’ of the Indian art scene?

During a studio visit to the artist couple Subodh Gupta and Bharti Kher, I understood that these two seemingly separate art worlds not only co-existed but also were both important reference systems, even for a younger generation of artists. While Bharti Kher had already attracted international attention with her sculptures and installations, Subodh Gupta was then still at the beginning of his career in terms of his international recognition. First, he showed me metal castings of milk cans for a planned installation, as a commentary on the complex of popular culture and the holy cow. In the following years such large-scale works would earn him worldwide fame and turn him into one of the most celebrated Indian artists in the international art circuit. When I asked him which work meant the most to him, though, he pointed to an early self-portrait that he had painted, partly with cow dung. As he explained, he had been trained as a painter. Even if he experimented with contemporary techniques, he still drew his strength and focus from painting.

Arriving back in Berlin, I wrote, somewhat perplexed, a memo in which I summarised the outcome of the trip. If one were to curate an exhibition from an Indian perspective, I argued, then painterly positions would have to dominate. In terms of both content and aesthetics, however, the works might not be received as contemporary art in the same terms by an audience in Berlin. How to convey the subtleties and specificities of Indian modernist painting to an audience which was neither acquainted with the modernist tradition in Indian art nor able to read and decode the many symbols and allusions to myths, religious narratives, or contemporary politics? It seemed hermetic. Much more familiar to me were young contemporary artists whom we had also met, and who were also recognised, though not by the majority of art connoisseurs, but by an internationally trained Indian elite. What exactly would such an exhibition then stand for? For India? For global art?

After extensive discussions within the team, the artistic director of the Haus der Kulturen der Welt invited the internationally acclaimed Indian critic and art historian Geeta Kapur to develop a concept for the exhibition. As author of the seminal book When Was Modernism (2000) and an
internationally acclaimed curator, she was trusted to navigate the pitfalls of cross-cultural curating, while mapping out the local canon.

For her exhibition, entitled subTerrain. Artworks in the cityfold, Geeta Kapur followed up on the theme of ‘politics of place’ and ‘the artist as citizen-subject’, which she had begun to explore in her contribution to Century City: Bombay-Mumbai 1992-2001 at Tate Modern (2001). subTerrain featured the work of sixteen artists from the then younger generation (such as Subodh Gupta or Anant Joshi) to internationally renowned artists (including Atul Dodiya and Nalini Malani). Equally familiar with Indian contemporary art and the expectations of a Western audience, Kapur was aware of her role as an interlocutor in a ‘transcultural’ exhibition context. In her curatorial selection, she opted for works that could transcend local references and inscribe themselves into the vernacular register of Contemporary Global art, or, as Terry Smith (2012) calls it, a “cosmopolitan aesthetics”.

This became particularly evident in the selection of works by those artists who navigated between a national Indian and an ‘international’ context, and worked in different vernaculars. Nalini Malani, for example, was known in India primarily for her painterly work – watercolours, painting behind glass, and oil paintings. For subTerrain, however, Kapur chose the video work Hamletmachine from 2000, a two-channel video projection. Based on a text by Heiner Mueller, the work addresses the issue of fascism in light of the Gujarat Massacre. While the text by Heiner Mueller connected the work to the German context, the contemporary rendering moved the work even further beyond its local points of reference. The same could be observed with the selection of works by Atul Dodiya or Subodh Gupta.

The exhibition was a great success. Several of the participating artists soon became household names in the international art circuit. To me, however, the question remained: What exactly had been conveyed to an audience in Berlin? What had become visible and what not? The audience could rightfullyassume that what they saw was representative of contemporary art in India. And in a way, it was. The audience, however, would be surprised if they visited India and expected to encounter the same canon. My Indian father-in-law was indeed quite irritated when he visited the exhibition in Berlin: “This is Indian contemporary art? Where is Husain? Or Raza?”

What could be concluded for the institutional practice of the Haus der Kulturen der Welt? The transfer of conceptual responsibility to local curators had been an attempt to redress the power imbalance between curating and curated cultures. The responsibility for representation had been reassigned from ‘the outside’ to the ‘inside’, from ‘the etic’ to the ‘emic’ perspective. And here, the same criterion applied: the criterion of ‘connectivity’ and
Fig. 14.3 Nalini Malani, Titel: Hamletmachine, 2000. Video installation with four lcd projectors, four dvd players, amplifiers, speakers, salt, mylar, mirror. Installed as projections on three walls and salt-bed (variable). Closed room 1100 x 800 x 400 cm (variable). Video loop 20 minutes, © Nalini Malani, Mumbai
‘translatability’. Nevertheless, on closer examination, the problem had not been solved. It had just been moved. Western curators might no longer select the art, but they still chose the curator.

**Spaces and Shadows (2005)**

Despite all these unresolved contradictions that arose from the tension between curated and curating ‘cultures’, the regional exhibitions enabled a hitherto unknown overview of current developments, artistic networks, and emerging art scenes. Still, the focus on a ‘region’ also fostered the notion of a cultural identity and cultural representation.

National or cultural geographic boundaries explained the curatorial selection and demarcated the frame of reference. The subtitles of the exhibitions read as follows: *Off the Silk Road: Art and Culture from Central Asia* (2002); *DisORIENTation: Contemporary Arab Artists from the Middle East* (2003); *Distant Proximity: New Positions of Iranian Artists* (2004); or *Spaces and Shadows: Contemporary Art from Southeast Asia* (2005).

However, the more ‘global’ the artists became, and the more complex their biographies, the more problematic this approach became. One of the areas in which I blatantly felt this contradiction was catalogue production. For some years, it had become common practice to dedicate one or two pages to each artist, hence highlighting their artistic personality and celebrating their individuality. Each page began with their name, followed by place of birth or the current place of residence and work. While in the 1990s, there was apparently still a great conformity between place of birth and ‘cultural’/’national’ identity, this representational claim became increasingly difficult to maintain in the early 2000s.

How would such a convention translate, for instance, to an artist like Rirkrit Tiravanija – born in Buenos Aires to Thai parents; educated in New York, Chicago, Banff, and Toronto; resident in Bangkok, Berlin, and New York – if he participated in an exhibition of contemporary art from Southeast Asia? What justified his inclusion? Was it the origin of his parents, his family, the fact that he had spent his youth in Thailand, which influenced his thinking and artistic practice? What role did his cosmopolitan lifestyle play, his education in the USA and Canada, or his residence in Berlin? Or was it his pad thai series, in which he transformed a popular Thai dish into a contemporary art experience, thereby prompting a new theory and discursive turn (relational aesthetics)? Would it then not be justified to expand the circle of participants to include non-Thai artists, whose work engaged with Thai
practices? And wasn’t the celebration of a common meal, such as pad thai, a clever strategy to combine the two conflicting criteria of global art: authenticity, on the one hand, based on ethnic ‘foreignness’ or ‘neo-ethnicity’; and global connectivity, on the other, as in his contemporary practice, relational aesthetics, concept art? What role did the regional framework serve?

**Black Atlantic (2004)**

The reality of global interdependence increasingly challenged the idea of regional exhibitions. A year before the project *Spaces and Shadows*, another project had already challenged the idea of cultural demarcation and thus also the distinction between ‘one’s own’ and ‘other’ culture. The joint project *Black Atlantic: Travelling Cultures, Counter-Histories, Networked Identities* (2004), focused, for the first time in the history of the Haus der Kulturen der Welt, on the history of cultural entanglement.

The project was inspired by Paul Gilroy’s *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (2002 [1993]). Gilroy, one of Britain’s leading post-colonial critics, describes the Black Atlantic as a space that has developed over the centuries of the slave trade as a cultural area in its own right, and that cannot be described by established attributions of cultural or national identity. As he puts it, the

Black Atlantic is perceived as a complex unit, as a space of transnational cultural exchange beyond the bodily, economic, and material toward hybridity, across and beyond the nation-state identity. Through forced displacement new identities and relationships are forged, defying cultural constructions of national identity. It forms a distinct black Atlantic culture that incorporates elements from African, American, British, and Caribbean cultures. (ibidem)

Like other collaborative projects, *Black Atlantic* (2004) also was developed by the heads of the programme areas: Shaheen Merali took care of the exhibition area; Johannes Odenthal focused on the music, dance, theatre area; and Peter Seel took care of the literature, society, science area as the project leader – all three working closely with Paul Gilroy and the black feminist theorist of visual culture and contemporary art, Tina Campt.

With this project, the Haus der Kulturen der Welt brought the Black Atlantic into public awareness in Germany. It also addressed a persistent blind spot in the cultural and social consciousness among a German public
at the time, namely, the history and present of the Black Diaspora. In contrast to Great Britain, where the Black Atlantic had long become an integral part of national consciousness through the writings of W.E.B. Du Bois and others, this recognition was still missing in Germany. At the time of the project, for instance, no German translation of Gilroy’s book existed. In his introduction to the accompanying catalogue (2004), Peter Seel and Hans-Georg Knopp explained the project’s motivation:

The temporal shift in the reception of Du Bois’ thought and work points to the difficulties in dealing with, the lack of awareness of, indeed the negation of, one’s own history, in which German colonial rule is just as repressed as the contribution of the black population to German history, culture and German self-image as a whole. To this extent, any preoccupation with the Black Atlantic, with the history and present of the Black Diaspora in the world, also requires a critical understanding of history, demands that history be read against the grain and related to power relations and surviving colonial (thought) structures. (ibid: 6)

Leading post-colonial artists and theorists participated in the project, including Stuart Hall, Paul Gilroy, Edouard Glissant, Olu Oguibe, Koyo Kouoh, Tiago de Oliveira Pinto, Celia Quiarox, James Clifford, Fatima El-Tayeb, and Michel Rolph-Trouillot. Across a series of lectures, performances, talks, a music programme, films, and visual arts, the programming addressed issues of racism, colonialism, exploitation, identity politics, belonging, memory and counter-memory, image politics, history writing, and historicity.

The project focused on historical interrelationships but also opened up a space of transcultural relations and entanglements. From this point of view, the concepts of cultural ‘demarcation’, of ‘representativity’, and cultural ‘representation’ no longer made sense. What was ‘self’ and what ‘other’ could no longer be separated. They were inseparably interwoven in history and the present. This understanding also informed the exhibition Black Atlantic as curated by Shaheen Merali, then head of the exhibition department, himself a Black Indian British artist. The exhibition centered on the nature of image politics and cultural representation, both from a historical and a contemporary perspective. For the exhibition, Merali invited the artists Isaac Julien, Keith Piper, Lisl Ponger, and Tim Sharp. Julien explored the imaginative charge of black and queer identity in two large scale video-triptychs entitled True North Series. Keith Piper’s Sounding Gallery was devoted to the situation of Afro-Germans under National Socialism. Ponger and Sharp’s work somehow troubled me: In a free association, the video
work *Passages* (1996) linked the ship of the middle passage as a central topos of formative migration to the experience of Central European Jews fleeing the Third Reich to Asia. Private recordings of holiday trips and cruises contrasted the idea of freedom and leisure with slave ships. While, in my view, Piper and Julien’s positions represented an important step towards revising an ‘ethnic-national’ concept of culture and returning the gaze to the ‘other’ back to one’s own, Pongers and Sharp’s work made me question the extent to which one’s ‘own’ narratives may and should dominate in the context of an entangled history.

**Once more: Conceptual turn at the Haus der Kulturen der Welt**

As this brief institutional history has shown, the self-understanding of the Haus der Kulturen der Welt has been anchored in and deeply influenced by de- and post-colonial positions. Over the years, however, it had to repeatedly adjust its curatorial approach. In the first years, the aim was to challenge Western art canons and to give artistic practices and developments international visibility; in the following years, the programme was more profoundly shaped by post-colonial thinkers and writings. As a consequence, we questioned our individual, institutional, and German social reality. Furthermore, the Haus der Kulturen der Welt attempted to de-colonise its curatorial practice by collaborating with local curators.

Despite all the efforts and improvements, however, it seemed impossible to free oneself from the post-/de- of post-colonial entanglement. Ultimately, as Mosquera (1994) put it, these contexts posed questions of power, the sovereignty of interpretation, the division of the art world into curating and curated, into representing and represented cultures. This imbalance did not appear to be resolvable by any curatorial practice, no matter how well adjusted and reflected upon. One reason for this lay in the inner contradictions of a public cultural institution operating in both local and international contexts: Who curated exhibitions, why, and for whom? What becomes visible, who decides on and according to which canon? Who are the addressees and what are their expectations?

We all, myself included, used the terms “inter-” or “trans-culturation”, which had been so formative for many years, with more and more hesitation. They presupposed distinct ‘cultures’, between which one should translate. But how could this be done in a globally entangled world? Had the terms ever been justified? Had we not, despite all our efforts, always translated in just one direction?
This unease was heightened by the fact that contemporary artists were increasingly hesitant to exhibit at a Haus der Kulturen der Welt. More and more frequently, I received rejections of invitations to participate in exhibitions. The artists justified their refusals by saying that participating in a regional exhibition at a Haus der Kulturen der Welt would reduce their artistic personality to being representative of a ‘culture’. Also, many of the artists who had been exhibited at Haus der Kulturen der Welt, had by that point embarked on international careers. They had become present in the art scene of Western biennials, art fairs, art galleries, and museums of contemporary art. In some sense then, the Haus der Kulturen der Welt had achieved one of its goals, namely, to challenge the Euro-American canon and help to fold it into a global art world. The Haus der Kulturen der Welt seemed to have become superfluous. Should it dissolve? What was the next step?

**Crisis and reorientation (2005)**

During this time of crisis, a new director arrived. Bernd Scherer took over the Haus der Kulturen der Welt in 2005. He knew the Haus well from his time as head of the Department of Literature and Humanities and had served as the director of the Goethe-Institute in Pakistan and Mexico.

One of his first initiatives was to organise an internal workshop, to which he invited the entire staff, amounting to more than sixty people. The questions he posed were vast: Where does the Haus der Kulturen der Welt stand today? What is its self-understanding and mission? Where does it want to head in the future?

One of the most animated debates centered on the name of the institution itself. It summed up the unease which was felt by many of us. Was the name Haus der Kulturen der Welt still appropriate in the context of a globally connected world? Had it ever been appropriate, quite apart from the fact that in the English version ‘House of World Cultures’ – instead of ‘House of the Cultures of the World’ – this translation had led to misunderstandings anyway? Shouldn’t it be changed and a new name be chosen, once the future mission had been agreed upon?

In the weeks following the debate, Scherer and his head of communications decided on a compromise. The name itself would remain, but it would be only ever used as an acronym: HKW. This was an expression of recognition for the institution’s founding idea. At the same time, a new beginning was marked, a paradigm shift, which would have been unthinkable without the history of the institution.
The programmatic shift, which was to shape the programme in the following years, was based on the understanding of global interconnectedness. The point of departure was the unprecedented speed and extent of planetary transformations that affect the world today and which caused an epistemological and ontological crisis; a crisis of representation. All certainties, concepts, world views, and strategies have been put to the test. On the methodological level, this change of perspective meant a break from the notion of representation. Global issues can since then, in this logic, only be tackled jointly. Reflecting the self is no longer an option or a programmatic decision, as it was with Black Atlantic, but a necessity.


In 2006, I moved to Canada with my family, where I taught as professor of exhibition history at Concordia University in Montreal. In 2012, I returned to Berlin, again to the HKW. My new task reflected the programmatic change of direction that the HKW had taken since 2006. I became director of projects at the office of the artistic director, which had evolved into a programme unit in its own right. In this function, I was responsible for the long-term curatorial projects that shaped and structured the HKW programming from 2013 onwards. The projects were based on each other: The Anthropocene Project (2013-2014) was followed by 100 Years of Now (2015-2018) and by The New Alphabet (2019-2021). All the projects were designed as long-term curatorial research and were funded by the Bundestag.

Former methods and contents were subjected to a critical revision. The first major shift came with the Anthropocene Project. It was conceived as a joint project (Verbundprogramm). Over a period of two years, it determined most of the programme of the HKW. Curatorially, it differed substantially from earlier projects. The programs were openly curated in-house and communicated accordingly. The overall conceptual and curatorial responsibility lay (and still lies) with the artistic director Bernd Scherer. The department heads Katrin Klingan, Anselm Franke and Detlef Diederichsen were (and still are) responsible for the individual projects. Unlike earlier programmes, however, the project did not begin with a theme, but with a series of questions – in this case questions which addressed current planetary transformations and their cultural implications. In this way, a space for collaborative thinking and experimentation was opened up which was (and still is) explored and researched together with experts, scientists, artists and curators worldwide.
The curatorial approach was as radically specific as it was open. By inviting and moderating worldwide constellations of knowledges the question of representation becomes obsolete.

In another project, the exhibition project Wohnungsfrage (part of 100 Years of Now), curated by Hila Peleg and the architects and critics Wilfried Kuehn, Nikolaus Hirsch, and Jesko Fezer the concept of the expert was reformulated and radically expanded: Those living and using houses – senior citizens, students, etc – worked together with architects and were actively involved in the research and conception process of a sub-project. Together with theoreticians, artists, and activists, they participated in discursive events and had their own publication in the twelve-part publication series. For the team and myself, this was one of the most enriching, and also one of the most demanding projects from a curatorial point of view, since we had to navigate the additional languages of experience and knowledge of the apartment users.

This and other projects were defined along thematically, and no longer cultural, national, or geographical parameters. Over a period of several years,
these projects proposed thematic thinking frameworks that could examine the far-reaching transformation processes of the present. They interrogated planetary changes as well as global-technical and social transformations. They investigated historical conditions and looked at the cultural implications and epistemological ruptures in their global interdependencies. Every way of knowing, every expertise and perspective, was required to grapple with these changing times and to act within it.

As a result of the speed of these contemporary transformations, established categories and epistemologies, disciplinary methods, and convictions seem increasingly insufficient. The inquiry mode replaces the representative approach. Projects are conceived as experimental arrangements, as changing constellations of artists, curators, scientists, experts from all over the world, as curatorial and artistic research at the interface of art, science, and knowledges. Not the representation of knowledge, but formats of knowledge production in the sense of curatorial or artistic research moved into the centre of what could now be called processual and relational curating. Classical formats, such as exhibitions and concerts are thus redefined. In essay exhibitions, lecture performances, discursive concerts, experimental arrangements, conversations, art, science, and expert knowledge are brought into an exchange. The HKW of today searches for questions, initiates debates, and develops new frameworks of thinking by enabling new constellations of knowledges and enable trans-disciplinary exchange.

For me, this reorientation meant a shift from content-driven to method-driven work. Whereas previously the focus was on specialist knowledge, now other anthropological skills came to be of paramount importance: compiling, mediating, translating, moderating, stimulating, asking questions between cultures, between cultures of knowledge – anthropology across cultures.

Concluding remarks

In October 2019, I left the HKW and took up a new position as the director of the Museum Rietberg in Zurich. As a collecting institution, it differs, in many respects, from the conceptual approach and curatorial practice of the HKW. Yet in many ways fundamental questions remain the same, most importantly the issue of cultural representation.

Looking back at the years at the HKW, it seems to me to be a sequence of conceptual 'morphing' that emerged from the one basic question about the representation of cultures in a transcultural context: Who speaks for whom?
Is it possible to translate between different traditions of art and reception in such a way that misunderstandings are kept to a minimum? Are such translations possible in the first place? How do we reckon with the power imbalance between curating and curated subject? In the course of this morphing, categories such as ‘culture’, ‘art’, ‘world’, ‘representation’, or ‘trans-culturality’ have been questioned, formats were adapted, and a struggle for an institutional self-image maintained. This was possible because the HKW, as a multi-part building without a collection mandate, was conceptually and programmatically much more flexible than, for example, a museum.

The movements that the HKW has undertaken since its foundation can be described as a development from a representative to a research-driven, process- and topic-oriented approach. Differentiations between one’s ‘own’ and ‘other’ have given way to dynamic, moving networks of relationships and knowledge constellations. With thematic projects such as the Anthropocene or Wohnungsfrage, some power structures seem to have been overcome – at least in theory. If one looks at curatorial practice, here, too, mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion, audibility, and invisibility affect different groups, such as the non-academic, non-English or German-speaking, or non-art communities.

Current projects address these inclusions and exclusions as well – not in the cultural sphere but in the participation in intellectual and discursive environments. The New Alphabet School, for example, is a collaborative self-organised school with the aim to explore critical and affirmative research practices. Over the course of three years, it will function as a colloquium to engage in discussions and develop ideas in the fields of the arts, archives, poetics, and activism. It is conceived of as a space for research approaches outside of academic, disciplinary, or genre constraints, seeking different methods of learning and unlearning in order to rethink the idea of criticism as a practice of shared responsibility and care.

To curate, to shape a program, always means to include and represent and thereby, by definition, also to exclude. Every curatorial attitude is based on a narrative. Even if this narrative is only a horizon, and the curatorial self-image is a moderating, rather than a determining gesture, the HKW still remains a particular institutional framework to which curators are committed. Whatever efforts are made to share or abolish interpretative sovereignty, and thus overcome colonial structures or discursive affiliation, each project will produce new inclusions or exclusions. What is needed is a radical transparency, a disclosure of selection criteria and curatorial choices, which lay open the narrative, while at the same time also serving as references to other practices, other communities, other languages, and horizons of experience.
that might remain hidden. An authoritative truth might thus become a narrative position, which can be discussed and challenged – until it is changed again.

Notes

1. The image on p. 336 is Figure 14.1 Anthropozän-Projekt/Anthropocene Project, 2013, Eine Eröffnung/An Opening, Metabolic, Kitchen, raumlabor Berlin, Haus der Kulturen der Welt. Photograph by Joachim Loch.
2. I would like to sincerely thank Hans-Georg Knopp and Bernd Scherer for their insightful and extensive comments on the first draft of this text.

References
