Press kit contents

„The Tropics. Views from the middle of the globe“

Exhibition: 1st April – 14th June 2009

Iziko South African National Gallery, Cape Town

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Paradise, or unpredictable, menacing jungle, escape or place of damnation? This exhibition investigates the myth of “the tropics” through the juxtaposition of contemporary and pre-modern artworks. Contemporary artistic involvement with the myth of “the tropics” is juxtaposed with historical objects from the geographically defined belt of the tropics. Exhibits from Africa, Asia, Oceania and tropical America on loan from the Ethnologisches Museum, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin – some of the most important worldwide – enter into a dialogue with the works of 15 contemporary artists from Germany, Spain, Brazil, Great Britain, Vietnam, Indonesia, Peru and South Africa.

With the exhibition at Iziko South African National Gallery from Wednesday 1 April until Sunday 14 June 2009 (Tuesdays to Sundays 10:00 until 17:00), it is the first time that artefacts from the Staatliche Museen zu Berlin’s collection are being shown in Sub-Saharan Africa. The Tropics: Views from the Middle of the Globe has in an extended version been presented in Brasilia, Rio de Janeiro and Berlin. It was hugely acclaimed and in Brazil alone more than half a million visitors came to see the show.

The exhibition is accompanied by a cultural programme of Iziko South African National Gallery as well as the Goethe-Institut.
The exhibition The Tropics: Views from the Middle of the Globe is a joint project of the Goethe-Institut and the Ethnologisches Museum, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin and was funded by the German Federal Cultural Foundation.

E N D S

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Dates and Facts

The Tropics: Views from the Middle of the Globe

Exhibition: Iziko South African National Gallery
1st April – 14th June 2009

Location
Iziko South African National Gallery, Government Avenue, Company’s Garden, Cape Town

Hours
Open 10:00-17:00 Tuesdays to Sundays
Closed Mondays and Worker’s Day

Entrance fees
Visitors 16 years and older: R15
Under 16 years free
South African pensioners, school learners and students: R5
Free entrance on selected commemorative days.
Facilities
Parking: Yes
Disabled access: Yes
Shop: Yes
Café: Yes
Conference facilities: Yes

Walkabouts
Walkabouts are held daily at 11:00 and 13:00, no booking required. To book walkabouts at other times, contact Kathy Coates on 021 457 4669, kcoates@iziko.org.za.

Website
www.goethe.de/the-tropics-exhibition

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“The Tropics – Views from the Middle of the Globe”

By Alfons Hug, Peter Junge, Viola König

Almost twenty years after the pioneer show “Les Magiciens de la Terre” (Paris, 1989), the exhibition “The Tropics – Views from the Middle of the Globe” attempts, in times of tension, to detect anew currents of energy and subtle disturbances between the hemispheres in the search for cooperative as well as counteractive cultural forces. The exhibition was already presented in Brasilia, Rio de Janeiro and Berlin.

While physically imperceptible, the tropics are in reality a boundary, where attitude towards life, observation of nature and perception of art change. Further, the tropics are always a European projection, an image that stands in contrast to European perceptions of self-discipline, efficiency, technological progress and enlightenment. Aspects of this cliché can be found in allegorical representations of the continents of the European Baroque era, in the exotic view that modernism has of the South Seas and of Africa, up to contemporary tourism promotion that advertises the sun, palm trees and beach. Pictures of tropical lushness, the boundless growth of nature but also tropical cities have little or nothing in common with reality in this part of the world. In the midst of an abundant nature, the inhabitants are often nevertheless extremely poor from an economical point of view. The tropics are home to extravagant plenitude as well as bitter destitution. Nowhere in the world are humans closer to life, while at the same time nearer to death. Nature and the way of life and culture in the tropics, in all their magical and controversial facets, present materials of unimagined potentiality and are an abounding source for contemporary artistic inspiration.
Exhibits from Africa, Asia, Oceania and tropical America kept in the collections of the Ethnological Museum in Berlin, which rank among the most important ones in the world, enter into dialogue with works by contemporary artists from South America, Europe, Africa and Asia. Old and new art converge at one place. In contemporary art the subjects range from Vietnam to Cuba and from South Africa to Brazil. As the show is conceived as an art exhibition, the older works as well were primarily selected according to aesthetic criteria. In general, the exhibition attempts a re-aesthetisation of the tropics, in order to place more emphasis on cultural aspects of tropical regions, as opposed to the otherwise prevailing negative political and economic discourses.

This re-aesthetisation considers the tropics as a European construct, while attempting at the same time to clarify this construct and to consider it as a topic of discourse about the tropics. This inherent ambivalence becomes apparent in the different approach of the three curators: Alfons Hug not only presents works by contemporary artists from the tropics, but also includes works by artists who do not originate from there, yet take the tropics as their subject. Viola König arranges objects within the topic “Colours and Sounds of the Tropics”, thus making it possible to trace specific common aspects of the art from the tropics. By contrast, Peter Junge’s approach is rather positivistic. The works of art in the three subject areas curated by him are examples of different forms of art, whose only common characteristic is their assignment to cultures found in the geographically defined realm of the tropics.

Additionally, the exhibition marks a step on the way towards the “Humboldt-Forum”, to be based in Berlin, Germany, which in the future will invite the non-European cultures to a dialogue with the masterpieces of Europe. Its outstanding collections will transform Berlin into a “tropical” metropolis.

The exhibition is structured in seven sections, each of which refers to a chapter heading in Claude Lévi-Strauss’ work “Mythologica”. It all begins with “After the Deluge”, the chapter that deals with nature and landscapes. Pre-modern artworks in the exhibition touch or approach two aspects of nature: firstly, metaphorically conceived images of mighty animals that embody social power; and, secondly, representations of creatures who act in nature, the environment of human civilisation, either by threatening or assisting mankind.

An extraordinary example of representations of creatures acting in nature by threatening or assisting humans, is the figure of a hunter spirit from New Guinea, a creature of the
wilderness that assisted mankind during the hunt. Here, we find a highly abstract image of the human form. In the centre of the slender, tall figure there is an open-work element considered as the heart. Hook-shaped elements bend above and below, their movement orientated towards the heart.

The tropical landscape, the wilderness surrounding civilization, appears frequently in contemporary art, for example in photographs by Hans-Christian Schink. In his works, the primeval forest is not a geographic but a metaphoric space.

In her photographic series “Zoological Gardens”, Candida Höfer takes a look at the domesticated tropics in Europe. The more the natural habitat of tropical animal species disappears, the more zoos and safari parks are established. In Höfer’s presentation, the enclosures in Berlin, London or Rotterdam resemble less a safe Noah’s Ark and more a museum-like space that is populated by animals that are no more than lifeless exhibits.

In her series “From Ethnographic Collections”, Höfer has combed through some ethnological treasuries. In the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford, which was founded by a collector of weaponry, she discovered arrows; in Berlin she found shields, and in Venice spears, furthermore in Leiden figures of Buddha, and in Zurich African sculptures. These are all trophies from Colonial-period expeditions but also testimonies to an encyclopaedic thirst for knowledge. Objects that once were part of royal “cabinets of curiosities”, today encourage the interpretation of complex cultural phenomena and the development of a differentiated worldview.

“The Short Life” is devoted to human representations, portraits and ancestors. Whereas the so-called ancestor cult held a superior position in ancient art, the image of man plays a preeminent role in contemporary art, not only as portrait but also as a view on the interaction of the individual and society. Caio Reisewitz bestows dignity upon a dark-skinned doorman of São Paulo in his daily struggle for survival. On the other hand, Walmor Corrêa re-invents well-known mythological figures of the Amazon region in paintings that are reminiscent of anatomical charts.

The veneration of ancestors helped to live in harmony with cultural concepts and, thus, to achieve contentment, recognition and social as well as economic success. The Tau Tau, ancestral figures of the Indonesian island Sulawesi, are outstanding in their high degree of
individuality in design. Their bodies are carved from wood, often an assemblage of several parts, and clothed with textiles. This naturalism is additionally enhanced by a coat of paint and by inlaid eyes.

“The Broken Arrow” concerns the representation of power and the frequently resulting conflicts. For example, Guy Tillim follows the traces of devastation in Central Africa, and Dinh Q. Lê from Ho Chi Minh City demonstrates in his video work “The Farmers and the Helicopters”, how dramatically the Vietnam War has been engraved into the cultural memory and the landscape of his country.

In the art of the past objects were created to symbolize the power and legitimation of kingship or to emphasize its wealth. In many societies objects may represent the abstract concept if power, or be “powerful” in themselves. Among such objects filled with power were the Osun sticks from the kingdom of Benin in Nigeria, which were preserved in shrines of the god Osun. Their power was used by ritual specialists for the healing oracle and, in particular, as a remedy against witchcraft, which was an omnipresent threat.

In the fourth and fifth section – “The Colours of the Birds” and “The Forbidden Laughter” – the exhibition arrives at the enigmatic moment, at which colours and pictures imperceptibly blend into sounds. An exhibition can concentrate only to a limited extent upon the context of clothing, such as face painting, performances (ritual, festivals, spectacles), including scents, sounds and flavours. However, the interplay of all these components brings forth the work of art entirely. The tour of colours begins in Ghana, West Africa, and then proceeds eastwards to the “Golden Triangle” in Thailand to Guatemala and Panama vis-à-vis the African Gold Coast, which was the starting point of the journey.

The sensual frenzy continues in Theo Eshetu’s video “Trip to Mount Zuqualla”, which features a colourful religious procession in Ethiopia. Majestically like the three Magi, the priests and their entourage proceed to the holy volcano that is venerated by Coptic Christians and animists alike. The soundtrack underlays Bach’s “Oh Haupt voll Blut und Wunden” with old Ethiopian drums and hip-hop rhythms that emphasise the syncretism of the Ethiopian culture.
The sixth section shows forms of the tropical Baroque. In a time of increasing political and economical disparity between the continents, one is well advised to look back to the 17th and 18th centuries, a time during which one art form performed the task of uniting the hemispheres. In the New World of the 17th and 18th centuries, “Baroque” meant not only an architectural style, but also an area of freedom, a place of self-assertion and dignity. And with this very dignity, historical Incan rulers are portrayed. Their genealogy goes back to the semi-mythical first ruler couple Manco Ccapac and his wife Mama Oclo Huacco.

The last section, “The Urban Drama”, brings the visitor to the point, where art of the past is almost silenced, leaving the field mainly to the contemporaries, that is, the urban maelstrom of tropical mega cities. At first, Hans-Christian Schink glances back over several centuries and reminds us of the fact, that in pre-Colonial times there were already large cities in the tropics, such as Machu Picchu.

The anonymous canyons of present-day metropolis are known all too well by the girls of the prostitutes’ association DASPU in Rio de Janeiro. They have enriched their precarious existence on the edge of society by way of self-help by producing artefacts that are highly esteemed in art circles. One example is the elaborately embroidered wedding gown that is covered with condoms and worn by these prostitutes at spectacular fashion shows.

The exhibition cannot answer the question of commonalities in tropical art. However, at the same time this unresolved situation has a fostering effect upon discourse on the tropics. It helps to deconstruct the concept of the tropics invented in Europe – a precondition for a new, more adequate view of this subject. And commencing with a look at works of art from the tropics is indeed a suitable approach.
Information on the Accompanying Cultural Programme:

**Discussion Forum and Special Video-Screening:**
23 May 2009
14:00 – 15:30
Venue: Iziko South African National Gallery

A panel discussion and audience debate and question time, will be followed by a special screening of the video *All That's Solid Melts into Air* (2005/6) by Laos born artist Vong Phaophanit.

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**Educational Programme:**
14 May & 19 May 2009
10:00 – 15:30
Venue: Annexe, Iziko South African National Gallery

The educational workshops, aimed at school-learners, will incorporate both discussions and practical workshops. They will be presented by the Iziko Education and Public Programme Department.

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List of Contemporary Artists and Artworks:

Pilar Albarracín
*Furor Latino*
2003
Video installation
Photo: Pilar Albarracín
© Pilar Albarracín

Marcos Chaves
*Mask*
2005
Video installation
Courtesy: Galeria Laura Marsiaj, Rio de Janeiro
Photo: Marcos Chaves
© Marcos Chaves

Marcos Chaves
*Kissing Mask*
2005
Video installation
Courtesy: Galeria Laura Marsiaj, Rio de Janeiro
Foto: Marcos Chaves
© Marcos Chaves
Walmor Corrêa

*Curupira*

2005
Acrylic on canvas
135 x 190 cm
Courtesy: Galeria Laura Marsiaj, Rio de Janeiro
Photo: Christian Carvalho
© Walmor Corrêa

Walmor Corrêa

*Undine*

2005
Acrylic on canvas
135 x 190 cm
Courtesy: Galeria Laura Marsiaj, Rio de Janeiro
Photo: Christian Carvalho
© Walmor Corrêa

DASPU

*Vestido de Noiva (Bridal Gown)*

2006
Stoff, Latex, Schleier und Kondome / Fabric, latex, veil and condoms
Collection Cooperative of Prostitutes DASPU, Rio de Janeiro
Photo: DASPU
© DASPU

Theo Eshetu

*Trip to Mount Zuqualla*

2005
Video installation
Photo: Theo Eshetu
© Theo Eshetu
Candida Höfer

Zoo Series:

*Rotterdam II*
1992
C-Print
26 x 47 cm

*Hamburg I*
1990
C-Print
26 x 47 cm

*Washington DC IV*
1992
C-Print
26 x 47 cm

*Berlin II*
1992
C-Print
26 x 47 cm

*Hannover V*
1992
C-Print
26 x 47 cm

Photo: Candida Höfer
© VG BildKunst

Candida Höfer

*Ethnographic Collections Series, Rijksmuseum for Volkenkunde Leiden VII*
2003
C-Print
85 x 85 cm

Photo: Candida Höfer
© VG BildKunst
Candida Höfer

*Ethnographic Collections Series, M. V. Lomonosova, St. Petersburg*
1992
C-Print
85 x 85 cm
Photo: Candida Höfer
© VG BildKunst

Candida Höfer

*Ethnographic Collections Series, Ethnological Museum, Berlin III*
2003
C-Print
85 x 85 cm
Photo: Candida Höfer
© VG BildKunst

Candida Höfer

*Ethnographic Collections Series, Pitt Rivers Museum, Oxford III*
2004
C-Print
85 x 85 cm
Photo: Candida Höfer
© VG BildKunst

Candida Höfer

*Catedral Basílica de Salvador Bahia*
2005
C-Print
180 x 217 cm
Photo: Candida Höfer
© VG BildKunst
Mandy Lee Jandrell
*Bridge of Time, Palace of the Lost City, Sun City, South Africa*
2003
C-Print Photograph
80 x 100 cm
Photo: Mandy Lee Jandrell
© Mandy Lee Jandrell

Dinh Q. Lê
*The farmers and the helicopters*
2006
Video installation
Photo: Dinh Q. Lê
© Dinh Q. Lê

Marcel Odenbach
*Disturbed Places*
2007
Video installation (34 min.)
Editing: Heike Mutter
Music: Ricky Ojijo
Photography: Ranu Ghosh, Marcel Odenbach
Casting: Anindya Banerjee
Production: Goethe Institut
Photo: Ranu Ghosh, M. Odenbach
© Marcel Odenbach

Vong Phaophanit
*All That’s Solid Melts into Air*
2005/2006
Video installation / Video installation
Photo: Vong Phaophanit
© Vong Phaophanit
Caio Reisewitz

Rufo
2003
C-Print
180 x 240 cm
Courtesy: Galeria Brito Cimino, São Paulo
Photo: Caio Reisewitz
© Caio Reisewitz

Caio Reisewitz

Goiânia Golf Club
2007
C-Print
180 x 240 cm
Courtesy: Galeria Brito Cimino, São Paulo
Photo: Caio Reisewitz
© Caio Reisewitz

Tracey Rose

Lucie’s Fur
Adam and Yves (BC – 2003)
2004
Lambda Photograph
82 x 82 cm
Photo: Tracey Rose
© Tracey Rose

Hans-Christian Schink

Bayon (Cambodia)
2007
C-Print
220 x 180 cm
Courtesy Gallery Rothamel Erfurt and Frankfurt a. M.
Photo: Hans-Christian Schink
© Hans-Christian Schink
Hans-Christian Schink
*Machu Picchu* (Peru)
2004
C-Print
183 x 216 cm
Courtesy: Gallery Kicken Berlin/Gallery Rothamel Erfurt and Frankfurt a. M.
Photo: Hans-Christian Schink
© Hans-Christian Schink

Hans-Christian Schink
*Iguaçu 1*
2007
C-Print
178 x 211 cm
Courtesy: Gallery Kicken Berlin/Gallery Rothamel Erfurt and Frankfurt a. M.
Photo: Hans-Christian Schink
© Hans-Christian Schink

Fiona Tan
*Rain*
2001
Video installation
Courtesy: Frith Street Gallery, London
Photo: Fiona Tan
© Fiona Tan

Guy Tillim
*Election in Kinshasa*
2006
Photograph (Series)
100 x 120 cm
Courtesy: Michael Stevenson Gallery, Cape Town
Photo: Guy Tillim
© Guy Tillim
Guy Tillim

*Mobutu und Leopold*

2006

Photograph (Series)

135 x 47 cm

Photo: Guy Tillim

© Guy Tillim

David Zink Yi

*Abakuá*

2006

Video installation

Courtesy: Galerie Johann König, Berlin

Photo: David Zink Yi

© David Zink Yi
List of pre-modern artworks:

Women’s dress of the Cuna
Mola bluse and skirt
Panama, Cuna
20th century
Appliqué and embroidery on cotton / Cotton
Staatliche Museen zu Berlin – Ethnologisches Museum
V B 16265, V B 17942

Women’s shawl
Ghana, Ashanti
20th century
Silk
Staatliche Museen zu Berlin – Ethnologisches Museum
III C 40744

Women’s dress of the Akha
Thailand, "Golden Triangle"
20th century
Staatliche Museen zu Berlin – Ethnologisches Museum
I C 46096, I C 46128, I C 46132, I C 46139
Spirit of hunt
New Guinea, Korewori river region
Middle of the 20th century
Wood, height 205 cm
Staatliche Museen zu Berlin – Ethnologisches Museum
VI 51634

Anthropomorphic architectural element
Bolivia, Tiahuanaco
Ca. 700 AD
Stone, height 44 cm
Staatliche Museen zu Berlin – Ethnologisches Museum
V A 10881

Cult figure
New Guinea, Kwoma
First half of the 20th century
Wood, height 240 cm
Staatliche Museen zu Berlin – Ethnologisches Museum
V I 49680

Ancestral figure
Cameroon, Kundu
19th century
Painted wood, height 172 cm
Staatliche Museen zu Berlin – Ethnologisches Museum
III C 10026

Female ancestral figure
Indonesia, Sulawesi, Toraja
Middle of the 20th century
Wood, cloth, height 105 cm
Staatliche Museen zu Berlin – Ethnologisches Museum
I C 48105

Male ancestral figure
Indonesia, Sulawesi, Toraja
Middle of the 20th century
Wood, cloth, metal, height 150,5 cm
Commemorative statue of a king
Cameroon, Bamenon
Second half of the 19th century
Wood, cloth, glass beads, cowry shells, height 195 cm

Epa Mask
Nigeria, Yoruba
Early 20th century
Wood, height 142 cm

Osun staff
Nigeria, Kingdom of Benin
18th/19th century
Iron, height 178 cm

Portraits of Inca rulers, the wife of the first ruler and the conquistador Francisco Pizarro
Peru
Probably 19th century
Oil on canvas, height 67,3 cm
The rain god Tlaloc
Mexico, Mixtec
1200 - 1521
Greenstone, height 16,7 cm
Staatliche Museen zu Berlin – Ethnologisches Museum
IV Ca 3380

Huipil (Women's blouse)
Guatemala, Sacatepequez, San Antonio Aguas Calientes, Cakchiquel-Maya
Second half of the 20th century
Cotton with brocaded patterns, height 70 cm
Staatliche Museen zu Berlin – Ethnologisches Museum
IV Ca 50227

Mola blouse
Panama, Cuna
20th century
Appliqué and embroidery on cotton
VB 16068
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*The Tropics: Views from the Middle of the Globe*
Iziko South African National Gallery, 1 April 2009 to 14 June 2009

Please take care of the copyright. We kindly ask for one copy of your contribution to be sent to each of the following addresses:

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Marcos Chaves

*Mask*

2005

Video-still

©Marcos Chaves

Candida Höfer

*Zoo Series, Hamburg I*

1990

C-Print

©VG Bildkunst

Photo: Candida Höfer
Female ancestral figure
Indonesia, Sulawesi, Toraja, 20th century
Wood, cloth
Height: 105 cm
Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Ethnologisches Museum
Inv. – Nr. I C 48105
©SMB, Ethnologisches Museum
Photo: Martin Franken

Mandy Lee Jandrell
Bridge of Time, Palace of the Lost City, Suncity, South Africa
2003
C-Print Photograph
© Mandy Lee Jandrell
David Zink Yi

*Abakuá*

2006

Video installation

© David Zink Yi

Courtesy Gallery Johann König, Berlin

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Caio Reisewitz

*Goiâna Golf Club*

2007

C-Print

©Caio Reisewitz

Courtesy Gallery Brito Cimino, São Paulo
Guy Tillim
Elections in Kinshasa
C-Print, 2006
© Guy Tillim

Portrait of Pachacutec
Probably 19th Century
Oil on canvas
Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Ethnologisches Museum
Inv. Nr. V A 66702

For further images, contact:
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Information on the Catalogue

*The Tropics: Views from the Middle of the Globe*

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THE TROPICS
Views from the Middle of the Globe
Words of Welcome

Klaus-Dieter Lehmann
President of the Goethe Institute

This art exhibition is something special – in more ways than one:

- for the first time a temporal link is being forged between pre-modern times, pre-colonial times, and contemporary art,
- for the first time an exhibition is covering the entire "solstice zone" that runs all round the globe,
- for the first time a project of this magnitude is being organized jointly by the Goethe Institute and the Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz (Prussian Cultural Heritage Foundation), in cooperation with the latter’s Ethnological Museum,
- and for the first time an exhibition is being used as a foundation for a thematic supporting program dealing with the various aspects of the Tropics.

The idea and momentum came from the Goethe Institute in Rio de Janeiro with its director Alfons Hug; the Ethnological Museum in Berlin, with its director Viola König and curator Peter Junge, was a strong museum partner with its unique collections from pre-colonial and colonial times; the Iberoamerican Institute with Barbara Göbel was, together with other institutions, responsible for the supporting program; and Bruno Fischi from the Goethe Institute’s central office assembled all the components to form an impressive overall concept of events. The exhibition would not have been possible without the generous support of the Kulturstiftung des Bundes (German Federal Endowment for the Arts) and other sponsors. We would like to express our thanks to everyone involved. What has been achieved here is quite exemplary.

Following an initial, trial version in several Brazilian cities, the exhibition will now open at Berlin’s Martin-Gropius-Bau and turn the city into a tropical metropolis.

The over 5000-km-wide tropical belt between the Tropic of Capricorn and the Tropic of Cancer is a fascinating part of our Earth that follows a different rhythm and obeys different laws. This "zone of the solstice" is a geographical reality and a cultural construction; it is a projection screen for European utopias and dreams. It is also a real place containing global phenomena such as environmental destruction and rampant mega-cities; it is both paradise and hell – a realm of paradoxes.

Dealing with these paradoxes is the concept and content of the exhibition. The exhibition has the potential of holding a critical discourse on the Tropics with the means of art – in a sensorial, reflective way, even to the extent of dismantling structures. It builds a bridge between works created in pre-modern times and art’s contemporary positions. It conveys the differences and similarities of nature, culture, and ways of life and in a diverse language of shapes and colors. Whereas pre-modern art grips the beholder more through its spiritual and mythical imagery, the captivating thing about contemporary art is its high degree of reflection. The exhibition organizers evidently believe that art is capable not only of formulating messages, but also of having an effect. Art is certainly not the weather-maker, but perhaps it has the barometer.

The issue at the center of the exhibition is a re-aestheticization of the Tropics. The aim of this re-aestheticization is "to bring the cultural weight of the tropical natural environments to bear in view of the overwhelming power of political and economic discourses." It is artistic expression which is becoming emancipated vis-à-vis the daily poverty debates and superficial banalizations; it allows approximations that neither science nor religion can afford.

The tropical belt, in which over a third of the world’s population now lives, has clear, precise borders that separate it from the rest of the world. Within this zone, however, one experiences a different logic of what borders are. Not that they are absent; it is rather that they are not drawn with a ruler like the Tropics of Cancer and Capricorn, but instead are subject to the experience of the unpredictable, of sudden events. Precisely this logic is reflected in the art and the social life. Improvisation and flexible changes are its charac-
tropicalism, an art genre and aesthetic theory from the Tropics, confronts this issue. The exhibition does not cover the complexity of the Tropics encyclopedia, but in an exemplary way by focusing on characteristic phenomena, fragments of the Tropics which have nevertheless led to an astonishingly concentrated presentation.

Berlin is no arbitrary venue for an exhibition of this kind. Nowhere has art from outside Europe – including art from the Tropics – been collected as comprehensively as in Berlin. And, in turn, nowhere is this more visible than in Mitte (the city’s central borough). One of the spiritual fathers of such a global venue for art and culture was Alexander von Humboldt, who impressed distant cultures upon us and proved to us the equality of cultures. His name and his message laid the foundation for the Humboldt Forum in Mitte’s Schlossplatz. What, in the nineteenth century, was a visionary idea can be realized by us today in the twenty-first century: In the same way as the Museum Island, as a humanistic educational landscape, presents the history of ideas in Europe, just opposite, at Schlossplatz, will be the venue of the non-European cultures: the world as a stakeholder in Berlin-Mitte.

Culturally, the Humboldt Forum is highly topical in several ways. The equality of all cultures is its program; in this way it helps people to experience and gain insights into the “other” in a globalized world. It defines a network of metropolises through art and culture, and it becomes a point of departure for an exciting and knowledge-based presentation on the skill of understanding the world.

The Berlin Museums are fully aware of the fact that the Royal Art Chamber designed by Leibniz, which was once located in the Schloss (castle), was the root whence they came. From the outset, the Berlin Museums were intended as universal museums of all the arts and cultures of the world and were thus geared toward the interplay between the Museum Island and the Schloss.

The exhibition thus becomes a landmark on the road to the Humboldt Forum, a united intellectual unity of cultural heritage, cultural knowledge, cultural encounter, cultural experience. Not only exhibitions of classical and contemporary art belong to this concept, but also literature, music, theatre, cinema, and discourses. This, too, will be realized in a suitable format at the Tropics exhibition. There will be a “Long Night of the Tropics”, a series of movies on the Tropics including Murnau’s famous silent film Taboo, theme days with performances, discussions and readings, series of lectures and symposia, and a “Lisbon-Maputo-Berlin” concert.

The exhibition and supporting program will reveal the Tropics to a European audience as a feeling for life, a way of viewing nature, and a conception of art in the most diverse of facets.

To return to Humboldt: it is a happy coincidence that in the fiftieth year of the magazine entitled Humboldt, (which is published by the Goethe Institute in Spanish and Portuguese and whose current edition also deals with the Tropics) it will be available for the first time in German. This issue will provide additional and surprising insights on this exciting topic.
Words of Welcome

Hermann Parzinger

The exhibition The Tropics. Views from the Middle of the Globe is exceptional in several respects, and of considerable importance for the development of novel forms of presenting non-European arts and cultures. It goes far beyond the traditional method, still prevalent in cultural-historical and ethnographic museums, of reflecting on art. While forms of expression manifest in objects were hitherto basically interpreted within the context of the latter’s respective specific regional provenance, they are here related to universal issues that arise as a result of the process of globalization. Thus, the present exhibition also becomes an experiment: By confronting old art with contemporary art, it attempts to raise questions, to delineate positions, and, if possible, also to offer new answers.

The Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz (SPK) is currently engaged in developing a detailed concept for the Humboldt-Forum, which will be located in the Berliner Schloss, a palace to be rebuilt in the historical center of the German capital. This political-cultural project – doubtlessly the most outstanding of its kind in Germany at the beginning of the twenty-first century – will be dedicated to non-European regions of the world. At its central location, the Humboldt-Forum will present the arts and cultures of Africa, the Americas, Australia, Oceania, and Asia. In fact, it will be located right next to the Berliner Museumsinsel (Museum Island), whose museums are committed to Europe, but also to the Near East, a region inextricably linked to the history of Europe. In terms of content, the Museumsinsel on the one hand and the Humboldt-Forum on the other thus form a unity, and need to be perceived as a whole. In that unity, it will become possible to experience and interrelate arts and cultures of the entire world.

The exhibition The Tropics. Views from the Middle of the Globe should also be understood as a step on the way to the Humboldt-Forum. While Wilhelm von Humboldt stands first and foremost for the history of ideas and education in Europe, and thus for the Museum Island, naturalist and explorer Alexander von Humboldt becomes the Leitfigur for the Humboldt-Forum at the Berlin Palace. Yet both brothers shared a cosmopolitan world view in which the equality of all world cultures was an indispensable postulate. The association of the future cultural center in the heart of Berlin with the name “Humboldt” is thus both symbol and agenda of a new perception of the world that manifests itself in the Humboldt-Forum, and will gain international recognition.

The basis for the Humboldt-Forum, as well as for the exhibition The Tropics, is provided by the world-renowned collections of the Ethnological Museum and the Museum of Asian Art, both belonging to the Staatliche Museen zu Berlin (National Museums in Berlin). The exhibition comes with an extensive cultural program – including film screenings, symposia, and lectures – developed by the Ibero-American Institute, which, like the museums, is part of the Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz. This project thus also sums up the future strategy of the Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz, a strategy that aims at outgrowing any focus on single disciplines only; instead, the emphasis will be on a further intensification of the cooperation between the various institutions within the SPK.

The discovery of the world by the Europeans, which already set in during early modern times, resulted in the appropriation of the world, not only in economical, but also in intellectual and scientific terms. Whatever was newly discovered was surveyed, described, and collected. Yet besides that scholarly stocktaking, clichés about the new, strange world emerged, clichés that still persist today. This ambivalence particularly applies to the Tropics, although that term originally merely referred to one of the climatic zones of the earth. Like no other region, the Tropics symbolize the exotic per se. They have become the screen onto which we project our own wishes and dreams, and the basis for constructs of our own culture.

Hence, one of the central themes of the present exhibition is our own picture of the Tropics. The exhibition mirrors that picture, then dismantles and undermines it. The works of art on exhibit thus do not only offer an overview of tropical art, they also incorporate the European perception of that region. And of course we will have to ask ourselves to what extent this natural space with its very specific characteristics has shaped
human activities, ways of thinking, feelings, and expressions, and channeled them into particular courses. Is there, in spite of all peculiarities, also some common ground shared by cultures within that tropical world, be they located in the Americas, Africa, or Asia, and what distinguishes these zones in the periphery of the equator from regions that are completely different in terms of natural environment and culture? The exhibition will not be able to answer these questions in detail, but it will inspire the visitor to reflect on what is one’s “own” and what is “foreign.”

In combining old art and ethnographic objects with contemporary art, and in presenting the theme of the earth as one single, world-encircling region, the exhibition surmounts all limits set by time and culture. It covers a spectrum from ninth century Buddhist sculptures from Southeast Asia all the way through to fifteenth century Aztec art, and from the art of Nigeria dating from the same time to ancestral figures from Indonesia and the South Seas, and it presents works of contemporary art from tropical Asia, Africa, and the Americas.

Given this background, it is important that the exhibition is not only shown in Berlin, but has also been – and still is – present in tropical countries. Thanks to financial support granted by the Banco do Brasil, some 500,000 visitors have already seen a smaller version of this exhibition in Rio de Janeiro and Brasilia. In 2009, it will be shown on the African continent, in Cape Town. An Asian venue is also planned. The Tropics. Views from the Middle of the Globe is a successful, exemplary joint project of the Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz and the Goethe Institute. This cooperation is due to the wish of the SPK to establish a stronger global presence as a German cultural and scholarly institution of international standing within the context of the International Metropolitan Program Berlin. Particularly in view of the fact that the collections of the Ethnological Museum and the Museum of Asian Art are outstanding, the SPK explicitly addresses itself to the task of presenting not only German and European art worldwide, but also the remarkable collections from Asia, Africa, the Americas, and the South Seas. The cooperation between the Stiftung Preußischer Kulturbesitz and the Goethe Institute is also based on the firm conviction that the two institutions are nothing less than partners in spirit when it comes to build solid cultural bridges between Germany and the world.
Words of Welcome

Hortensia Vöckers Member of the Foundation Board / Artistic Director,
German Federal Cultural Foundation
Alexander Ferenholz Member of the Foundation Board / Administrative Director,
German Federal Cultural Foundation

The “Tropics” can only be defined cartographically at best – these globe-spanning regions are too diverse for anything more. Nevertheless, from a European perspective this term arouses deep-rooted notions of exoticism and “being different,” perceived as either fascinating or disturbing. Things associated with the “Tropics” include a mythical unspoiled nature and natural forces, but there are also impenetrable cycles of poverty, violence, and political crises. “The Tropics” are seen as a paradox between untouched jungle and exploding mega-cities – between paradise and hell. For Europe in particular, the “Tropics” always were – and still are – a projection screen and a space for reflecting on our own hopes and fears.

In order to better understand the peculiarities of tropical countries, it would probably be more useful to examine the things they have in common with Asian, African, and American cultures, rather than how they differ from Europe. The exhibition The Tropics. Views from the Middle of the Globe proposes precisely this change of perspective in several ways. On the one hand it shows pre-modern works from the Berlin Ethnological Museum’s collections, which are implicitly tropical because they came from these regions and are an expression of the associated living conditions and cultural traditions. On the other hand, the exhibition shows contemporary works of art – from countries such as Venezuela, Peru, Brazil, Vietnam, Ethiopia, India, Singapore, Laos, and Thailand – which explicitly deal with “the Tropics”. This project thus combines an endogenous perspective with an exogenous one, in order to draw a new picture of the “Tropics” based on art and cultural objects. Both sides – the masterpieces from the collection and the contemporary works of art – are presented not as the arguments of a contrastive assertion, but rather in their aesthetic wealth, and they are connected in a non-linear fashion. The aim is for the interrelation between the works to become visible through their formal references rather than by a narrative on cultural history.

With this novel dialogue across geographical and historical boundaries, the exhibition The Tropics. Views from the Middle of the Globe aims at a complex unleashing of the kind of images we associate with the “Tropics”. As an experiment in dealing with ethnological collections, it also represents a pilot project for the Humboldt Forum, which will in future complement the museums devoted to classical Europe on the northern half of Berlin’s Spree Island by offering a glance at the non-European world. We wish this important exhibition every success.
Educational supplement: Welcome note Goethe-Institut

The Goethe-Institut is most pleased to have been able to facilitate the co-operation between the IZIKO South African National Gallery and the Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Ethnologisches Museum. As German cultural facilitators, we welcome the establishment of the partnership between these two esteemed public institutions, and the dialogue that it creates. A strategic partnership between the Goethe-Institut and the Staatliche Museen zu Berlin had already been established during the successful co-operation “Art from Africa – Master Pieces of the Ethnologisches Museum Berlin”, and we are most pleased to be able to be working together again for “The Tropics – Views from the Middle of the Globe”.

“The Tropics” has been shown with overwhelming success: first in Brasilia in 2007, then in Rio de Janeiro in 2008 and subsequently in Berlin. Curators from the Goethe-Institut and Staatliche Museen zu Berlin selected artworks that reflect on the notion of “the tropics”, focusing the viewer’s attention particularly on this mythical terrain. This focus, as well as the juxtaposition of old and contemporary art, recontextualises these works in an exhibition which already transgress geographical and temporal boundaries.

Though it was not possible to bring “The Tropics” in its entirety to Cape Town, the selection of work contributes significantly to the discourse of the “self” and “other”. We hope that this exhibition encourages a lively debate around the choice and context of the works, the necessity of taking control of writing our own histories, and international co-operation.
I would like to thank the curators Alfons Hug, Viola König and Peter Junge, as well as the many people on the South African and the German side, who have made this presentation possible. Above all, my gratitude goes to the Federal Cultural Foundation, and in particular its artistic director, Hortensia Völckers, for their support. Finally, I thank Nadja Dähnke and Pam Warne of SANG, who have taken up this project with great enthusiasm and have given their all in its realisation.

“The Tropics” comes at an interesting time - 20 years after the fall of the Berlin Wall and 15 years after the end of apartheid - and emphasises the importance of strengthening cultural ties and the bilateral relations between Germany and South Africa.

Peter Anders
Head of Cultural Programmes
Africa south of the Sahara
Goethe-Institut South Africa
Johannesburg
The coinciding of the exhibition *The Tropics: Views from the Middle of the Globe* with South Africa’s third democratic general election raises complex, even uncomfortable, yet unavoidable questions. For decades identities were imposed on the South African population, defined and shaped to fit a long-standing racial mythology; then came the moment of liberation, of hope and *simunye*, ‘we are one’. After the post-election elation we have been forced to re-identify ourselves both in relation to each other and globally, not in terms of liberation sentiment, but in terms of daily, lived reality. A political election is about policies and access to resources, but also about how we think of ourselves - how we identify ourselves - as individuals and groups within a nation and within the broader, global context.

‘The tropics’ can be seen as a fantastic, romantic, contradictory dream, envisioned and imposed by ‘outsiders’, but at times embraced by ‘insiders’. A belt encircling the globe also known as the torrid zone, defined geographically by its adjacency to the equator and its relationship to the sun, the tropics are less a place than a screen onto which longings and fears have been projected for centuries. However, this screen was and is not blank, and the projections are not always innocent: discrimination and inequality frequently lie in their wake.

The exhibition *The Tropics: Views from the Middle of the Globe* walks a tight-rope. It emphasises the existence of the tropical myth, while at the same time pointedly underscoring how identity is constructed. Giving form to the myth raises the inescapable question of whether this emphasis shifts into re-exoticisation (with the
concomitant power inequalities this word implies). On the other hand, investigating the myth of the Tropics can serve as a mirror for South Africa and our own struggles with how to be in a new way which might escape stereotypes and entrenched power systems.

We speak now of a global world, post-black, post-feminist and, with recent spectacular economic implosions, potentially even a post-capitalist world. But how does one formulate an identity out of a ‘post’? Can one, in fact, formulate an identity? And, if not, on what basis does one claim agency to counter what is considered the normative (for which term, all too often, one can still substitute the term ‘western European’)?

In this exhibition the chaos, the contradictions, the very inconclusiveness of the installation may be seen as a metaphor for the struggle to name the self and its counterpart beyond a simplistic division between Self and Other. Emphasis is given to experimentation, to playing with clichéd narratives of nature, power and ancestors, setting up themes only to have them unravel. The exhibition asks whether it is possible to look at the images and objects, not in terms of overly familiar historical stereotypes, but in order to see a new poetry at play and, in the end, poses the question of whether the viewer can find this poetry in the way s/he approaches his or her own identity and place in the world.

In South Africa in 2009, this exhibition reminds us that identity is a double-edged sword: to identify means to have a voice and thus to have significance. But to name, (to identify), also means to be the ‘other’, to separate and thus to discriminate. Can a new poetry be found for the way in which we identify ourselves within society?

Much has been written in recent years on identity which suggests a shift away from a hierarchical understanding of the social, to that of a complex, inter-woven, inextricable web of relations. Such a network does not consist of individuals, but rather of multiple enmeshed connections between individuals. An analogy is made with the rhizome, a plant stem which develops horizontally and sends up new shoots and a tangle of roots wherever it grows. The manner in which images and objects for this exhibition were chosen and displayed corresponds with this idea. Rather than being prescriptive and deterministic, a maelstrom of images and objects interconnect, attempting to set up juxtapositions, only to contradict and question these.
Through this exhibition we are privileged to see and experience pre-modern works of
great beauty and rarity, originating from Indonesia, Thailand, Burma, Africa and
elsewhere. We are indebted to the Staatliche Museen zu Berlin for making a
selection of the cultural treasures of their collection available for display in Cape
Town. In addition, South African audiences will be able to engage with work by
several notable international contemporary artists. Iziko wishes to thank the curators,
Alfons Hug, Prof. Dr. Viola König and Dr. Peter Junge, as well as Peter Anders, Head
of Cultural Programmes Subsahara-Africa and his team at the Goethe-Institut,
Johannesburg. It is through the extraordinary generosity of the Institut that it has
been made possible for the exhibition *The Tropics* to travel to South Africa.

Nadja Daehnke
Curator
Iziko South African National Gallery
Cape Town
Hot, humid, mysterious

The Berlin exhibition “The Tropics” aims as the middle of the globe using artistic media

By Elke Buhr

Never without a plumb line or a marine chronometer: this was Alexander von Humboldt’s most important rule on his travels to the tropics. Daniel Kehlmann portrayed the story of the neurotic fastidiousness which accompanied this “measuring the world” in his recent novel. But even Humboldt, like the many number-obsessed European scientists who followed him must have noticed that even the best measuring instrument cannot record everything about the latitudes between the Tropic of Cancer and the Tropic of Capricorn.

Geographically the tropics are an approximately five thousand kilometre wide girdle along the equator, where the sun reaches its zenith twice a year. It is a climatic zone which has in common perpetual heat and frequent torrential rainfall, but which otherwise can only be regarded as a single cultural area from the vantage point of European telescopes.

This is blatantly clear to those who have mounted the exhibition “The Tropics” which opens today at the Martin-Gropius Bau in Berlin after being on display on a much smaller scale in Brasilia and Rio de Janeiro. Such an exhibition, which was initiated by the Goethe Institut in Rio de Janeiro, and put together with the help of the Berlin Ethnological Museum, can do no more than play with clichés and perceived images, seek to appear new from multiple perspectives, and to promote awareness of which particular looking glasses are being worn.

The curators’ solution was polyphony. Carved masks and ancestral figures from New Guinea or Africa encounter costly materials from the Andes and attempt a dialogue with works by contemporary artists from Germany, South America, or India. The result is a courageous composition, the theme of which is primarily sensual; not to obscure the political, but in essence to argue on the basis of aesthetics and therefore bewitch and captivate the onlooker purely through opulence.

The curators, Alfons Hug from the Goethe Institut in Rio de Janeiro, and Viola König and Peter Junge from the Berlin Ethnological Museum, have constructed the exhibition not on the basis of history or geography, but according to themes. Nature and landscape, images of humankind, colours and abstractions, power and conflicts or the urban drama in the megacities of the tropics are the only captions. At every step visitors are catapulted into new worlds. From the tropical metropolises of pre-colonial times such as Angkor Vat and Tenochtitlán, which have been photographed by Hans-Christian Schink, to the transvestite prostitutes in Caracas, interviewed on film by the video artist Alexander Apostol, and from there deeper into the wilderness, into the unknown forces of Côte d’Ivoire which are given a face in the masks of the Baule people.

The main asset of this exhibition is the art which it brings together, whether modern or from the excellent collections in Berlin. For some years now Alfons Hug, director of the Goethe Institut in Rio de Janeiro, has noticed a growing interest in the tropics on the part of German artists such as Franz Ackermann, who regularly tours South America by bus, Candida Höfer,
who documents the breathtaking baroque architecture of Brazil, and Thomas Struth, who photographs the jungles of Peru. And by using only visual images to present its argument, with no lengthy written explanations, the exhibition generally succeeds in embedding the works in a multi-perspective narrative.

When Hans-Christian Schink photographs the thundering waterfalls of Rio Igacu as a glorious monument to the beauty of nature, the entire discourse of German natural romanticism is alluded to – here Fiona Tan’s humorous video installation depicting water overflowing from plastic buckets during a cloudburst in Jakarta provides a perfect alternative perspective. Another example is the Brazilian photographer Caio Reisewitz’s ironic depiction of the longing for nature in his photographs of designer golf courses, while Thomas Struth stands in front of the labyrinth of the jungle as if before a wall.

The exhibition sends a message that what is behind this wall is known to the art of indigenous peoples, whose statues and masks do not reflect a depiction of nature but rather the embodiment of power.

Of course in using such radical associative methods the Berlin exhibition runs the risk of cutting off contexts too violently and of reducing this pre-modern art to merely decorative items. But their eagerness to experiment means that in the end the interdisciplinary team of curators may be able to carry the exhibition off. Thus this exhibition on the tropics will perhaps provide an initial foretaste of new kinds of exhibitions essential if the new Humboldt-forum is to be a meeting place of world cultures.

Martin-Gropius Bau, Berlin

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www.gropiusbau.de
Measuring the jungle

Work on a legend: an exhibition in the Gropius Bau in Berlin seeks commonalities between the art of the tropics

By Christina Tilmann

We have hardly gone through three rooms when the curators engage in a vehement discussion. The argument flares up in relation to one of the masks. “Art, pure art”, states Peter Junge, who manages the “old art” section for the exhibition “The Tropics”. The mask dates from around 1950 but looks as though it comes from the 19th century. “Our European, evolutionary image of the history of art is of no use here”, Junge goes on: we have not been using the correct criteria for engaging with, and analysing, African art. What is in fact old, and what is contemporary? In response, Viola König, Director of the Dahlemer Museum, throws in the concept of “indigenous art”: art, which was not created for the European market, but for the artist’s own needs. “According to these criteria Renaissance art is also indigenous” argues Junge, while König and the co-curator Alfons Hug wander off still in heated discussion.

More dissent than agreement, more questions than answers, more experimentation than final results: “The Tropics”, created in a cooperative project between the Goethe Institute and the Dahlem Museum, and which has been successfully presented at venues in Brazil, opens tomorrow in a considerably expanded form at the Gropius Bau in Berlin. It is a very exciting exhibition: one that seeks to achieve too much, one that risks being seen as superficial, and at the same time one that provokes thought and reflection in a way that has not happened for some time. It raises issues around attributes such as old and new, central and peripheral, evolution, time and space. It concerns how we see art from countries outside Europe, and even more, to what extent the European concept of art is placed in perspective when seen alongside art from outside Europe. There has been art criticism and development in these countries for a long time, according to Peter Junge, who in his new conception of the African section in Dahlem, has pleaded for artefacts to be understood as high quality works of art and not only as ethnological illustrations. Not all of his colleagues agree.

In his preface to the catalogue Klaus-Dieter Lehmann states that he wants the exhibition to be understood as a testing ground for the upcoming Humboldt-forum. As the current President of the Goethe Institute, and the former President of the Prussian Cultural Property Foundation, Lehmann brings the two partners together and is also the founder of the Humboldt-forum to be established in the grounds of the City Palace as a centre for non-European culture in Berlin. And if even the curators feel that Humboldt-related topics have been exhausted, they are entering new territory in the field of non-European art. There is some disquiet about the future set-up at the City Palace, and this exhibition emphasises the uncertainty of the terrain. Perhaps this kind of essayistic treatment of non-European art is only a temporary digression, and perhaps it is also the solution for the future. Who knows?

It all begins with the subject of the exhibition: conceiving of the Tropics, a 5000 kilometre girdle around the globe between the tropics of Cancer and Capricorn, as a coherent cultural space, would not have occurred to anyone in the countries concerned. Alfons Hug explains that whereas the concept is part of Latin American national culture – the term Tropicalismo has its origins in Brazilian music and has long been established as a cultural and artistic
concept – and there are also signs in Thailand of a tropical consciousness in Apichatpong Weerasethakul’s film “Tropical Malady”, other countries in Asia and Africa are more disturbed by the idea of being grouped together as a tropical region. In Japan for example people are of the opinion that the problem of tropical temperatures can be dealt with by installing air-conditioning systems. Attempts to find tropical themes in Africa have also come to nothing.

The commonalities emerge more easily for a European eye. “After South America the tropics are most popular in Europe”, confirms Hug. The idea of the exhibition is primarily a result of the staff of the Goethe Institut in Rio becoming aware of a new enthusiasm for the tropics among European artists. Franz Ackermann, Andreas Gursky, Thomas Struth, Hans-Christian Schink, Julian Rosefeldt, and Candida Höfer have all travelled in Brazil, Venezuela, Guatemala or Peru. And more recently, following the huge success of Daniel Kehlmann’s Measuring the World and the lavish new edition of von Humboldt’s monumental five volume work The Cosmos published by Eichborn, the tropics are once again part of popular consciousness, which is most probably the result of a glimpse into the fascinating and other.

The distinguishing features that the German exhibitors wanted to bring out in order to conceive of the Tropics as a region reflect old myths: lushness, lavish vegetation, a myriad of colours, anti-rationalism and romanticism – these are the words Hug uses to describe Hans-Christian Schink’s waterfall photographs (exactly in the spirit of the European Romantic Movement), the teeming installations by the Swiss pair, Gerder Steiner and Jörg Lenzlinger, made up of ‘finds’ from the throw-away culture in Brazil, or the carnival images by Mauricio Dias and Walter Riedweg. Here the verdant green of the jungle grows rampant, and masks and costumes merge into one another in the intoxicating samba parade, in heat, exoticism, and eroticism.

But the European approximation is only part of it. The concept is actually much broader and more ambitious. As a result the exhibition confronts contemporary art with the rich collections in the Dahlem ethnological museum. Seven sections, on nature and landscape, images of humanity, power and conflicts, colours, sounds and the city are filled with combinations of objects which do not belong together geographically. Photographs of the jungle cities of Machu Picchu or Angkor Vat meet Aztec reliefs; African ancestral figures or power symbols from Mali meet contemporary portraits such as the poignant photographs of a Brazilian porter by Caio Reisewitz or the teeth-baring rubber masks by Marcos Chavez. Guy Tilliam observes an election in Kinshasa, Mark Dion reproduces a shop in the jungle in the Gropius Bau, and the tropical baroque is given its own separate section.

Many themes, many perspectives, which obviously give rise to a number of fascinating questions: why for example do the colourful fabrics from Guatemala resemble those from the Golden Triangle in Asia, even though there was never any trade relations between the two regions? Why do the same forms appear in a contemporary work by an aboriginal artist as those in a fragment of a gable from Papua New Guinea? What place do Dutch cheese or nail varnish have in a discarded shop in the jungle?

A much deeper dialogue, a much more scientifically based attempt to find commonalities would have required a team of curators that included representatives from the various countries concerned. In addition, there is still no real South-South dialogue, complains Hug. In the end for the European eye a multi-coloured cloth resembles other cloths, an ancestral mask other masks. A “migration of forms”, as Documenta 12* wanted to make of them,
almost inevitable results in a superficial comparison. And that is another problem that the future Humboldt-forum will have to address.

*A German exhibition of art which takes place every five years.
The organizers wish to thank the Goodman Gallery for their technical assistance.