

AH236: Critical Perspectives on Berlin's New Cultural Venue: the Humboldt Forum

Seminar Leaders: Prof. Dr. Aya Soika, Bard College Berlin; Dr. des. Tarek Ibrahim, Stiftung Humboldt Forum im Berliner Schloss

Email: a.soika@berlin.bard.edu

Office Hours: by email appointment & Thursdays 11:00-13:00 (please get in touch beforehand)

Course Description

Hardly any project has been more controversial than the rebuilding of Berlin's City Palace. Ever since its opening in 2021, the Humboldt Forum has brought in more than 2.5 million visitors, constituting one of the centerpieces of the capital's *New Mitte*. Yet, the newly opened cultural venue – which gathers five institutions under its roof – is still very much in the process of considering how to address the challenges that arise from the contradictions between its form (a hybrid of Baroque and modern) and its contents (serving as a home to and meeting place for the cultures of the world). Most delicate is its role as the new home of the Ethnological Museum (previously housed in Berlin-Dahlem) with collection histories that are often inextricably linked to European colonialism. The seminar provides an introduction to the history and current operation of the Humboldt Forum and to the various institutions and collections that it accommodates on more than 16.000 square meters. Furthermore, as a collaborative project with the *Stiftung Humboldt Forum im Berliner Schloss*, the class seeks to give students insights into the conceptualization and planning of cultural events, exhibition projects and educational outreach. Members of the Humboldt Forum's team will introduce students to not only the building and its collections but also to their day-to-day tasks and overall aims.

Requirements

Academic Integrity

Bard College Berlin maintains the highest standards of academic integrity and expects students to adhere to these standards at all times. Instances in which students fail to meet the expected standards of academic integrity will be dealt with under the Code of Student Conduct, Section 14.3 (Academic Misconduct) in the Student Handbook.

Accommodations

Bard College Berlin is committed to inclusion and providing equal access to all students; we uphold and maintain all aspects of Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, and the ADA Amendments Act of 2008, and Section 3 of the German Disability Equality Act of April 27, 2002 (Federal Law Gazette I p. 1468). If you have a disability, or think you may have a disability, please contact the Disability Accommodation Coordinator, Atticus Kleen, (accommodations@berlin.bard.edu) to request an official accommodation.

Requests for accommodations should be made as early as possible to ensure adequate time for coordination and planning. Please note that accommodations are not retroactive and may require advance notice to implement. If you have already been approved for accommodations with the Disability Accommodation Coordinator, please arrange to meet with me outside of class so that we can develop an implementation plan.

Students may face extenuating circumstances related to various personal or external factors, which impact their academic performance. While these circumstances often do not fall within the legal framework of Disability Accommodations, Bard College Berlin is committed to supporting students experiencing such circumstances. A student needing a short extension or a replacement assignment because of an extenuating circumstance is encouraged to make arrangements directly with instructors if possible. If further support is needed, please visit the [Bard College Berlin Accessibility page](#). Questions about this process can be directed to James Harker (j.harker@berlin.bard.edu) or Maria Anderson-Long (m.andersonlong@berlin.bard.edu).

Attendance

Attendance at all classes is a crucial part of the education offered by Bard College Berlin. To account for minor circumstances, one absence does not affect the participation grade or require documentation. Please inform Aya beforehand should you not be able to attend class. Beyond that, unexcused absences will affect the participation grade and you will be asked to make up for it by submitting an 800-word response related to the readings of the missed class. Bard College Berlin may not offer credit for any course in which a student has missed more than 30% of classes, regardless of the reasons for the absences. The full Bard College Berlin attendance policy can be found in the Student Handbook, Section 2.8.

Punctuality

Punctuality is also essential. Turning up late will also affect the participation grade. Since all our visits will take place at the Humboldt Forum in Berlin-Mitte please make sure you depart early in order to reach the Humboldt Forum before the beginning of class. The nearest Underground station is "Museumsinsel". The itinerary can be checked on www.bvg.de

Class Etiquette

In the case of unavoidable absences, a short notification via email sent before the beginning of class is appreciated. Please keep your bathroom breaks to a minimum. When visiting the

galleries you should stay with the group while the conversation is still going on. Please do your best to stay focused: This includes listening to students' presentations and to our many seminar guests.

Weekly Readings

Weekly readings and other specific assignments will be confirmed in an email by the beginning of each week, all materials are uploaded on our class padlet. Please check your Bard emails regularly and read our weekly emails carefully. Please also make sure you can access the padlet. Should you have any problems or not have received an email by Tuesday before our class please get in touch with Aya as there might have been a glitch.

Assessment

The course assessment includes the overall seminar work (response papers, regular class participation, shorter group presentations and a final presentation) and the final project. See also "Grade Breakdown."

Padlet Responses

Students are asked to submit weekly responses of 200 words each to be uploaded on the class padlet by Wednesday evening, 20:00. **Grading Criteria:** Punctuality of submission (!), structure, relevance to the prompt, readings and depth of analysis; awareness of context and key debates. You may refer to your classmates' uploads or present your own line of argument, ideally your responses can help pave the way to a lively classroom discussion.

Group Presentation

Procedure

We will set aside approximately 30 minutes for preparation (14:45–15:15). Afterward, we will meet in front of the first artwork and begin with the first group presentation. The aim is to deliver an informative and thought-provoking presentation. Each participant should contribute **3–5 relevant points**, for example on:

- the work's aesthetics, meaning, and background
- its context within the space and gallery
- the artist and their intentions (direct quotes encouraged)
- links to our discussion of the Wonisch text and the broader questions raised (e.g. What might be the intended function of the work? Do you think this function is successfully achieved?)

Criteria

- Respect the timeframe of **10–15 minutes maximum**
- Distribute speaking time **equally** among group members
- Ensure a **clear and logical structure**
- Offer **critical analysis** of the work's meanings and functions
- Provide **relevant and well-researched information**, including additional background where useful

Final Presentation

Clarity of ideas, structure and research question, but also the effort that went into the slide-show, background research and the overall fluency and delivery of your presentation. Address your visual or textual examples adequately (i. e. stress the links between them and

your overall ideas), feel free to offer an original perspective or interpretation, but also show awareness of existing scholarship / comparative solutions. Above all, make sure that you rehearse beforehand and – by all means – do not exceed the given timeframe!

Final Project / Essay

In addition to weekly responses, there is one more extensive writing assignment for the course: your final project. Prompts and further instructions will be provided in advance.

A preliminary outline of your final project is due in Week 11 (see weekly syllabus).

Your polished presentations are due in Weeks 13 or 14, and your final, written-up piece is due on 17 December (Wednesday), midnight. Presentations slides and final essays are to be emailed directly to Aya. Your project's structure, contents and arguments should be discussed in individual meetings with Aya or Tarek. Please note that prior consultation with the Bard in Berlin Writing Centre may also be recommended. In principle, your submitted work should engage with relevant sources, just as your presentation should show awareness of current debates in architecture, museology, collection history etc. The final project should include references (e. g. in the form of footnotes), a bibliography and a list of illustrations.

Here are some basic points you should bear in mind:

Title and Topic: How does the title of your work as well as your introduction reflect your objectives? What is the aim of your project? Be as clear as possible about aims and objectives.

Background Research: How can you include references to some of the required readings from our course in a meaningful way? Have you researched your topic sufficiently? What kinds of sources have you found and where else could you try to find out more about the topics you discuss?

Facts and contextual information: Have you acquired sufficient foundational knowledge - e. g. are you aware of the necessary foundational information, relevant historical contexts and theoretical debates? Have you been able to acquire a sense of the relevant cultural and political debates or issues related to your project's topic?

Interpretations, comparisons and/or overview of scholarship: What kinds of approaches to your topic have you encountered so far? How would you distinguish them in terms of the questions they ask and the methods they apply? How does your own approach relate to them? Don't be afraid to engage with quotes and other references. These should be accompanied by an annotation providing the source reference.

Format: Your final project essay should be of circa 3.500 words of length (+/- 10%), including captions, annotations and bibliography. The referencing style should be consistent, the format should be double-spaced with 12-point font. Please include page numbers, a title, captions, annotations, a list of illustrations and a bibliography.

Grading Criteria:

Line of argument with regard to the question (organization, coherence and execution of the argument); Awareness of context and existing literature/scholarship on the topic including our class readings; structure, quality of writing and format (consistent use of annotations, bibliography & list of illustrations).

Policy on Late Submission of Papers:

Any work that is submitted up to 24 hours late will be downgraded half a full grade (from B+ to B, for example). In exceptional cases extensions of up to a few days can be given, but the binding final deadline must be agreed upon by both parties. Thereafter, the student will receive a failing grade for the assignment. Students who fail to submit the final essay cannot pass the class. Grades and comments will be returned to students in a timely fashion. Students are encouraged to make an appointment to discuss essay assignments and

feedback with Aya, and are entitled and welcome to discuss seminar participation or course progress at any stage in the semester. They will also receive written feedback on their final essays, and, if requested, feedback on earlier drafts or outlines.

Grade Breakdown

Listed below is the percentage grade allotted to each essay, and to classroom participation and assignments.

Padlet Responses throughout Semester: 25 %

Participation (preparation, short presentations, questions, attendance): 20 %

Final Project: Essay & Final Presentation: 55 % (with the presentation weighing 20% and the final essay weighing 35%)

Schedule

Scheduled class times will be available online under the relevant course heading:

[BCB Fall Semester 2026 Course Search Page](#)

Part I: History, Governance & Partners

Week 1

03.09.2026, Thursday, 14:00-17:15

Meeting Point: Humboldt Forum, Seminarräume

Crash Course on the Humboldt Forum: History, Debates, Controversies

Introduction and overview of class contents and structure

Tarek Ibrahim and Aya Soika

Preparatory watching for general background and critical examination:

Deutsche Welle Documentary: A Palace for Berlin and the World?

[A palace for Berlin and the world? | DW Documentary:](#)

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P392ewvC_w4

Preparatory Reading:

Natalia Majluf: "Starting from Place: Claims to the Nation and the World." In: (Post) Colonialism and Cultural Heritage. International Debates at the Humboldt Forum, Hansa: Berlin 2021, pp. 13-25;

Frank-Walter Steinmeier, Federal President, at the inauguration of the exhibitions on 22 September 2021 (PDF)

Task:

Add your image to the class padlet and present it in class. Address one of these questions: With the help of the film and texts you've read, discuss any aims, functions or problems of the Humboldt Forum which strike you as particularly interesting.

Week 2

10.09.2026, Thursday, 14:00-17:15

Meeting Point: Humboldt Forum "Werkräume" (1st Floor, opposite entrance of Berlin Global exhibition)

Strategy, Governance and the Global Cultural Assembly (GCA)

The Global Cultural Assembly exhibition space / Discussion of the GCA as a new acting agent and pillar of the Humboldt Forum

"Matters of Perspective", Discussion of Installation at Humboldt Forum's Ethnological Museum

Reading (TBD):

Strategy Manifesto: Dignity, Continuity, Transparency

<https://www.humboldtforum.org/en/dignity-continuity-transparency/>

Preparatory Watching:

Clémentine Deliss: Whose Objects are they? Academy in Exile, 2021 (53 minutes)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l82ua2S7Eqc&t=2s>

if interested, follow-up with:

Clémentine Deliss: Curatorial Roundtable Discussion on the “Metabolic Museum”, Mannheim, 2022 (75 minutes)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QC3gczU3-f8>

Reading:

Duane Jethro, “Matters of Perspective at the Humboldt Forum”. In: *Berliner Blätter*, 89, 2024, 61-70;

Clementine Deliss: “Walking Through. Thoughts on the metabolic practice of the museum”, talk given at Goethe Institute Brussels, 3 May 2019

Prompt:

In preparation for our class, please listen to Clémentine Deliss’s 2021 lecture. In addition, read (1) the short GCA manifesto and (2) the recent review of the *Matters of Perspective* installation. In your Padlet response, discuss Deliss’s reflections on the “metabolic museum” in relation to making the museum a place of equal encounter, **or** engage with one of the other two readings.

Week 3

17.09.2026, Thursday, 14:00-17:15

Meeting Point: Humboldt Forum “Werkräume, No 8” (1st Floor, opposite entrance of Berlin Global exhibition)

History of the Site, 1500 until Today

Blown Away: The Palace of the Republic

Video Panorama, Sculpture Galleries, History of the Site and Palace Cellar

Preparatory Readings:

Karen Buttler, Hartmut Dorgerloh, Judith Prokasky, and Anke Schnabel: “Blown Away. The Palace of the Republic”. In: Exh. Cat. Blown Away. The Palace of the Republic, Humboldt Forum: Seemann Leipzig 2026, pp. 14-21;

Judith Prokasky: “Building Politics – 800 Years Summarized”. In: Humboldt Forum. The History of the Site. Exhibition Guide. Munich, London, New York 2020, pp. 8-21;

Oliver Wainwright: Berlin’s Bizarre New Museum: a Prussian Palace Rebuilt for EUR 680 Million: <https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2021/sep/09/berlin-museum-humboldt-forum>

Further Background Reading:

Reinhard Allings: “1950-1989. Up and Coming”. In: Exh. Cat. Blown Away. The Palace of the Republic, Humboldt Forum: Seemann Leipzig 2026, pp. 33-47;

Reinhard Allings: “1889-1990. The Tipping Point”. In: *ibid.*, pp. 137-141;

Reinhard Allings: “1990-2013. Down and Out”. In: *ibid.*, pp. 151-157

Task: Point out an episode in the history of the site that struck you as particularly interesting. Or: What could ‘memory work’ with regard to the history of the site entail?

Week 4

24.09.2026, Thursday, 14:00-17:15

Meeting Point: Humboldt Forum “Werkräume, No 8” (1st Floor, opposite entrance of Berlin Global exhibition)

The Humboldt Forum and its Neighbors: Precedents and Rivals

James Simon Gallery, Neues Museum, Bode Museum

Readings:

Friedrich von Bose, The Making of Berlin’s Humboldt Forum: Negotiating History and the Cultural Politics of Place, in: Darkmatter Journal, November 2013

Oliver Wainwright: “David Chipperfield’s Berlin Temple: Like Ascending to the realm of the Gods”, in: Guardian, 8 July 2019

<https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2019/jul/08/david-chipperfield-james-simon-gallery-berlin-museum-island>

Task:

How does the Humboldt Forum/Palace (past or/and present) relate to Museum Island?

Discuss by engaging with von Bose’s essay, addressing – for instance – urban issues, the historical conception of Museum Island, the idea of the Renaissance *Kunstammer*, the 19th century “universal Museum” or new museology debates. You could also examine potential problems von Bose identifies in his 2013 essay – long before the Forum’s opening - i. e. the rhetoric of ‘universality’, and consider how these debates intersect with questions of colonial legacy, urban memory, and other the issues we have discussed so far.

Part II:

Potentials and Pitfalls

Week 5

01.10.2026, Thursday, 14:00-17:15

Meeting Point: Humboldt Forum “Werkräume” (1st Floor, opposite entrance of Berlin Global exhibition)

Contemporary Voices and Partnerships

Group Presentations of Contemporary Installations

Reading:

Regina Wonisch: “Decolonising ethnological museums. Art as a way out of the crisis of representation?” In: Ifa Input 04/2017, pp. 1-9

Additional Readings (selection, depending on your presentation group):

Klaas Ruitenbeek: “Wang Shu. Design of the “China and Europe” Gallery in the Museum für Asiatische Kunst.” In: Contemporary Art in the Humboldt Forum, Berlin: Deutscher Kunstverlag 2022, pp. 102-111;

Uta Rahman-Steinert: “Ai Weiwei. Teahouse”. In: Contemporary Art in the Humboldt Forum, Berlin: Deutscher Kunstverlag 2022, pp. 112-112;

Alexander Hofmann and Hans-Dieter Hegner: "URA Architects & Engineers: The Japanese Tea House Bōki-an." In: Contemporary Art in the Humboldt Forum, Berlin: Deutscher Kunstverlag 2022, pp. 122-131;
Aude Christel Mgba: "Justine Gaga. Indignation". In: Contemporary Art in the Humboldt Forum, Berlin: Deutscher Kunstverlag 2022, pp. 140-147;
Dietmar Rübel: "Kang Sunkoo. Statue of Limitations". In: Contemporary Art in the Humboldt Forum, Berlin: Deutscher Kunstverlag 2022, pp. 70-81;
Also: Manatunga: Artistic Interventions by George Nuku:
<https://www.humboldtforum.org/en/programm/laufzeitangebot/exhibition/manatunga-145831/>

Task: What functions can contemporary art play in the collections of the Humboldt Forum? What are potential pitfalls? Discuss with reference to the article by Wonisch. Preparation of Student Group Presentations

Week 6

08.10.2026, Thursday, 14:00-17:15

Meeting Point: Humboldt Forum "Werkräume, No 8" (1st Floor, opposite entrance of Berlin Global exhibition)

**The Elephant in the Palace - Form, Content (and Controversies)
Introduction to the "permanent" collections of the Ethnological Museum,
followed by a walk-through of the collections**

Follow-up Discussion: Screening of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie: Opening Speech of the Humboldt Forum, held on 25 September 2021
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K1Cxhq0gF6E>

Readings:

Aboulaye Touré: "Reflections on the Future of Postcolonial Collections. To Whom does Culture Belong?" In: (Post)Colonialism and Cultural Heritage. International Debates at the Humboldt Forum, Hansa: Berlin 2021, pp. 40-54;
George Okello Abungu: "The Question of Restitution and Return: A Dialogue of Interests". In: (Post)Colonialism and Cultural Heritage. International Debates at the Humboldt Forum, Hansa: Berlin 2021, pp. 101-119

Further Background Readings:

Power relations. A booklet on postcolonial provenance research in the permanent exhibition of the Ethnologisches Museum and the Museum für Asiatische Kunst at the Humboldt Forum (PDF, selected pages).

Léonora Miano: On Greatness. The Question of the Gaze in Germany:
<https://www.humboldtforum.org/en/magazine/article/on-greatness-the-question-of-the-gaze-in-germany/>;

"The Restitution of African Cultural Heritage. Toward a New Relational Ethics", by Felwine Saar and Bénédicte Savoy, 2018 (PDF)

Task: Discuss the political, social or cultural dimension of museum collections, particularly those of 'ethnographic' museums, with the help of an example.

In what ways can provenance research serve as a viable first step in addressing the problems ethnological museums face today? What potential pitfalls might it entail? You may choose any example from the booklet, or / and connect your response to Adichie's lecture.

Week 7

15.10.2026, Thursday, 14:00-17:15

Meeting Point: Humboldt Forum "Werkräume, No 8" (1st Floor, opposite entrance of Berlin Global exhibition)

Behind the Scenes: Exhibition Programming and "Wechselausstellungsflächen" (Temporary Exhibition Spaces)

Exhibitions: Living Room; Family Matters; Histories of Tanzania; Conservation in Dialogue; Feliciano Lana. The Story of White People

Task: Second Round of Students' Group Presentations

Readings:

James Clifford on the Museum as "Contact Zone" (1997)

Additional (Selections, depending on group allocation):

<https://www.humboldtforum.org/en/programm/dauerangebot/exhibition/geschichten-tansanias-137350/>

<https://www.humboldtforum.org/en/programm/dauerangebot/exhibition/tsuu-cedar-51597/>

Roland Platz: "Introduction", In: Voices from North-East India. Nagaland, Berlin 2023, pp. 9-11; Zubeni Lotha: "Unseeing the Past". In: *ibid.*, pp. 12-23

<https://www.humboldtforum.org/en/programm/dauerangebot/exhibition/naga-land-46452/>

<https://www.humboldtforum.org/en/programm/dauerangebot/exhibition/gegen-den-strom-51551/>

22.10.2026: No session, Fall Break

Week 8

29.10.2026, Thursday, 14:00-17:15

Meeting Point: Humboldt Forum "Werkräume, No 8" (1st Floor, opposite entrance of Berlin Global exhibition)

Museum of Asian Art & Sanchi Gate

Readings: Study of Exhibition Websites and Exhibition Materials (TBD);

Sharon MacDonald: New Constellations of Difference in Europe's 21st-Century Museumscape. In: *Museum Anthropology*

Viola König: Renaming ethnographic museums. Implications and strategies for the presentation of the collections. The example of the Humboldt Forum Berlin. In:

Museumskunde 81, pp. 80-86 (PDF)

Task: [Reflections on Weeks 5-7] What potential does a temporary show have as compared to a permanent exhibition? OR/AND: How useful do you find Clifford's idea of the museum as "contact zone"?

Week 9

05.11.2026, Thursday, 14:00-17:15

Meeting Point: Humboldt Forum "Werkräume" (1st Floor, opposite entrance of Berlin Global exhibition)

"Doing Diversity" and Berlin Global

Readings:

Sharon Macdonald: Diversity Max. Multiple Differences in Exhibition-Making in Berlin Global in the Humboldt Forum. In: Doing Diversity in Museums and Heritage. A Berlin Ethnography, pp. 173-191

Task: Discuss Sharon Macdonald's definitions of "Diversity"

Part III

Practicalities: The Inner Workings of a Cultural Institution

Week 10

12.11.2026, Thursday, 14:00-17:15

Meeting Point: Mechanical Arena in Humboldt Forum covered courtyard for Seminarraum

Media Tables

Branding, Marketing & Advertising, Publications, Social Media / Digital

Guests (TBC)

Reading: Jean-Michel Tobelem: "The Marketing Approach in Museums", in: Richard Sandell and Robert R. Janes (eds): Museum Management and Marketing, London and New York 2007, pp. 294-312; (TBD): Mark W. Rectanus: "Globalization: Incorporating the Museum", in: Sharon Macdonald: *A Companion to Museum Studies*, London 2006, pp. 382-397

Task: What, to you, is a successful digital strategy for cultural institutions? Check out the Humboldt Forum Website and discuss in how far it matches with your own set of objectives.

Week 11

19.11.2026, Thursday, 14:00-17:15 [Tarek not there]

Meeting Point: Humboldt Forum "Werkräume" (1st Floor, opposite entrance of Berlin Global exhibition)

**Management of the Objects: Conservation, Restoration, Off-Site Storage,
Registrar;
Management of the Building: Sustainability, Security and Facility Management**
Guests (TBC)

Reading: "Toxic dilemma faced by German Museums repatriating Artefacts", 17 Jan 2023
<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/jan/17/toxic-dilemma-german-museums-repatriating-artefacts-pesticides-objects-contaminated>

Task: Raise questions that you consider of interest when discussing the management of the objects and the building. Why do you think these are relevant?
Lottery of Who presents When... (Week 13 or 14)
Padlet Task: Provide a preliminary sketch (200 words) of your final project ideas

Week 12

26.11.2026, Thursday, 14:00-17:15

Meeting Point: Humboldt Forum "Werkräume" (1st Floor, opposite entrance of Berlin Global exhibition)

**Program and Events: From Vision to Showtime
Behind the Scenes: Humboldt Forum Akademie (Outreach / Education)**
Guests (TBC)

Reading: Zahava D. Doering: "Strangers, Guests, or Clients? Visitor experiences in museums." In: Richard Sandell and Robert R. Janes (eds): *Museum Management and Marketing*, London and New York 2007, pp. 331-344;
George E. Hein, "Museum Education", in: Sharon Macdonald: *A Companion to Museum Studies*, London 2006, pp. 340-352

Task: What potential do you see in the events program of a cultural institution, especially of a museum?
Additional: Individual Discussion of Final Projects (see syllabus instructions and emails for further information)

Week 13

03.12.2026, Thursday, 14:00-17:15

Meeting Point: SEMINARRÄUME

Student Presentations of Final Projects

Task: Individual Discussion of Final Projects, continued from Week 12

Week 14

10.12.2026, Thursday, 14:00-17:15

Meeting Point: SEMINARRÄUME

Student Presentations of Final Projects Concluding Discussion

Essay Deadlines

Deadline for weekly Padlet Entries: Wednesdays, 20:00.

Deadline for Final Project: Wednesday, 17 December, 24:00.

For further information on essay guidelines and grading criteria see above (pp. 2-4)

Grades Submission

Final grades for all students are due on January 2, 2026 (unless you are a graduating student in which case you will receive feedback and the final grade by December 12, 2026)

Library and Book Purchase Policies

There will be no book purchases for this class. All readings are provided in PDF format or via online links.