

Artistic Intervention as Scene Construction/Deconstruction: An Analysis of the Display of the Kangxi Throne in the Humboldt Forum in the Context of the Cross-Cultural Exhibition

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Abstract

Based on the research perspective of cross-cultural exhibition analysis, this paper takes case study as the fundamental methodology under the framework of museology and art history research in order to analyse the new display of the Kangxi throne and its screen, which were lost overseas from China during the war years and have been transferred from the Museum of Asian Art in Dahlem to the Humboldt Forum, which is deeply involved in the controversy of its colonial history. This study primarily focuses on the situational methods in which the exhibits were connected to the public under artistic intervention. In the exploratory stage, the “Game of Thrones” project in the Humboldt Lab Dahlem programme offered multiple versions of interpretations, which ultimately prompted the museum to change the scene restoration plan and invite the famous Chinese architect Wang Shu to complete the rooftop installation. Between construction and deconstruction, the artwork’s scenic intervention creates structural descriptions for the presentation of cross-cultural differences, and accommodates ethical conflicts from different sides with its poetic, distanced interpretations, while providing a shared language for comprehending the various facets of nationhood amidst the intersection of history and the present.

Keywords: the Kangxi throne, Humboldt Forum, artistic intervention, scene construction/deconstruction, cross-cultural exhibition

1. Scene Construction: Updating the Display of the Kangxi Throne

1.1 The New Tasks Resulting from the Institutional Changes of the Museum of Asian Art

In 2021, the Humboldt Forum, which was constructed on the original site of the Berlin Palace, opened its doors to the public. The museum, described as Germany’s most important and expensive museum project at a cost of around 595 million euros, has incorporated the collections of two museums, the Ethnological Museum and the Museum of Asian Art, both of which were originally located in Dahlem, the far southwestern suburb in Berlin, and thus not conducive to attracting visitors, and it also receives valuable collections from other institutions such as Humboldt University. The origins of both the art museum and the ethnological museum can be traced back to the ancient Prussian *Kunstammer*, on the basis of which the Royal Museum for Ethnology was founded by King Wilhelm I of the German Empire in 1873. At the beginning of the 20th century, its East Asian collections were separated into the Museum of East Asian Art; the Indian collections were separated into the Indian Department, later referred to as the Museum of Indian Art, which merged with the Museum of East Asian Art in 2006 to become the Museum of Asian Art. Moreover, in 2020, it was combined with ethnographic collections from Africa, the Americas, Oceania, and Asia to form the non-European cultural aggregation which was named after Alexander und Wilhelm von Humboldt, two of the most iconic figures of the 18th-century German Enlightenment.

The institutional transformation has witnessed the logical change in the West in terms of locating world cultures and engaging in the production of knowledge: From the all-encompassing cosmos showcased in the cabinet of curiosities during the pre-modern era, to the gradual formation of modern disciplinary boundaries in the process of identifying and analysing which imposed potential hierarchical divisions between national cultures and subjects, the Humboldt Forum of the new era further seeks to revive the Humboldt Brothers’ cosmopolitan spirit of exploring the unknown and upholding equality, so as to create a space for reflection and exchange while

transcending cultural and intellectual boundaries. The museum has, however, been the subject of much controversy since its inception: the fit between the building's history of imperial colonialism and the non-European collections that are equally rooted in the imperial era seems to be irreconcilable with its decolonisation vision.

Therefore, the changing identities essentially pose two kinds of thorny problems for the exhibition planning in the Museum of Asian Art. First, when an aesthetic place reencounters ethnographic collections in an institution focusing on cross-cultural display, the museum will necessarily assume the responsibility of exploring the historical and cultural context of the collections in a more profound manner. For a long time, one of the most obvious divergences in curatorial tendencies between art and ethnographic exhibitions has been the treatment of cultural contexts. Ever since Franz Boas (1927, p. 4), the father of American anthropology, proposed that "each culture can be understood only as a historical growth determined by the social and geographical environment in which each people is placed and by the way in which it develops the cultural material that comes into its possession from the outside or through its own creativeness", the corresponding ethnographic curatorial concept - arranging the collections in a combined manner to depict the users' lifestyles, thus making the collections meaningful in context - has gradually become a vital guideline for exhibiting ethnographic collections (Ames, 1992, pp. 51-52). The scene construction discussed in this paper is a representative strategy for visualising cultural contexts. For instance, Boas developed a special display technique called "life group" for the Northwest Coast Hall of the American Museum of Natural History that highlights tribal life patterns with a three-dimensional set device that combines model figures and artefacts and has become a traditional symbol for ethnographic presentation. Contrarily, the "white cube", which is the mainstream mode of displaying art, brings to an endpoint the relentless habit of self-definition in modernist art (Doherty, 1976), preferring to de-contextualise or weaken the context by focusing the viewers on the aesthetic value of the artworks. Even though artists, art critics, and curators continue to affirm the value of breaking through this isolated mode, the fundamental contradiction between the two disciplines forces the newly opened Museum of Asian Art to face inevitable interdisciplinary challenges in terms of the assessment and exploration of scene construction.

In addition, the ambivalent vision of the Humboldt Forum brings the Asian art collections into a broader decolonising background and a more complex real-world scenario. Being positioned as a "forum" is crucial to the museum's self-justification because it demonstrates its fundamental intention to dismantle the authoritative identity of Duncan Cameron's so-called temple-like museums, and to transform the inevitable "conflict" itself into the starting point for the museum's meaning production. As a result, the static, didactic, traditional curatorial approach to spatial design no longer applies, since the nature of the cultural landscape it creates more closely resembles a kind of "zoo multiculturalism" (Hage, 1998). As a platform dedicated to cross-cultural discussions, the Humboldt Forum should offer a dynamic framework for an ongoing process, just as Ralph Appelbaum Associates (RAA) and its partner malsyteufel, the designers of the two museums' new exhibitions, discuss the basic concepts of design in their joint statement, thus it should not only accommodate the voices of historians, but also invite the source communities and contemporary artists to reflect on the complexity of the world we live in, in the midst of different, and sometimes conflicting cultural perspectives (Humboldt Forum, 2021).

1.2 The Kangxi Throne as Lacquer Furniture and Power Center

According to the history of the institution as well as the tradition of Western art history, the original collections of the Museum of Asian Art were naturally categorised into two major exhibitions: "Art from East Asia" and "Art from South, Southeast and Central Asian Art". The Humboldt Forum further divides its Asian collections into six exhibition units with the "Northern Silk Road" unit serving as a link between the two regions of Asia which includes Buddhist art collections from the Western regions of China, while the rest of the Chinese collections, which primarily belong to Chinese central plains culture and cover a wide range of categories such as ancient bronzes, pottery, jade, lacquer, paintings and calligraphy, are exhibited in three separate galleries about East Asian art (Note 1).

The room titled "China and Europe" also features Chinese court art. It is also referred to as the "Wang Shu Room" named after its designer, or the "Throne Room" (Note 2), taking its name from a group of emperor's throne and screen from the Kangxi period of the Qing Dynasty (Figure 1) that has always been the focal point of the display of Chinese court art from Dahlem to the Humboldt Forum. From the museum's information, it is revealed that this group of lacquerware was made of precious palisander wood with gold and silver foil, and mother-of-pearl inlays. One of the distinctive characteristics of Qing Palace furniture is its ability to combine with different crafts to give spectacular decorative effects (Tian, 2012, p. 132), but there were not too many large black lacquered furniture pieces inlaid with mother-of-pearl produced by the Qing court due to its time-consuming nature. The center of the throne is painted with the Taoist "Western Paradise", signifying the

divine right of emperors and conveying their desire for eternal life. The object was acquired from its former Chinese owner by a French dealer in 1924, and it was added to the museum's collection system in 1972. As a totem of power for the feudal emperors in ancient China, the throne, compared to other types of furniture, covers high political and cultural meanings. Its production should strictly comply with the requirements of etiquette, and its placement should also rigorously adhere to the hierarchy of orientation in traditional Chinese architecture. According to *Lijing Shili* by Ling Tingkan, the Qing Dynasty scholar, if the seat in the hall is facing downwards, the south direction is honoured; *The Analects of Confucius: Yong Ye* also records that "Confucius says: Ran Yong is a man who can face the south", meaning that the Confucius believes Yong has the ability to govern the country. Furthermore, as described in *Master Lü's Spring and Autumn Annals*: In ancient thought, the place where the emperor built his kingdom should be in the center of the world, the location of the royal palace should be in the center of the country, and the location of the temple should be built in the center of the royal palace. The "center" is the direction that denotes the highest authority over the entire territory, thus the majority of the thrones are strictly placed in the center of the main hall, sitting in the north and facing the south; on both sides, there are also the precious elephant, incense tube, or other burning sandalwood incense vessels, surrounded by a screen at the back. This combination of furnishings itself is known as the "throne room".



Figure 1. The Kangxi throne and screen displayed in Dahlem

According to the archives of the Office of Manufacture of the Qing Imperial Household Department, a huge number of thrones were made for the Qing court by the workshops under the Office of Manufacture, many of which were shown in the Forbidden City, royal gardens and other traveling palaces. The thrones are similar in shape but have exclusive characteristics in decoration and size (Gong, 2021, p. 19). One of the best-known thrones in China is the one put on the seventh floor of the Hall of Supreme Harmony, the highest-ranking structure in the Forbidden City, which is carved with dragons and painted with gold. This throne was lost during Yuan Shikai's reign, and in 1947 the Palace Museum attempted to place other dragon thrones made in the Qing Dynasty, but none of them could match the screen and the magnificent hall. In the 1950s and 1960s, the Palace Museum found the original throne and restored it, and eventually put it back on display, further restoring the former splendour of the architecture (Zhu, 1980). Hence, in a certain sense, the throne should be regarded as a part of the palace architecture, since its representation of the imperial power is dependent on the structural association of the palace space under the norms of the etiquette, and the presence of the throne also substitutes for the emperor who is often absent, completing the power manifestation of the palace. Therefore, when the emperor's throne enters the field of museums, detached from its original context, contextual cues will become a powerful strategy for it to transcend the aesthetic display of individual lacquer furniture.

From the museum that was primarily "by connoisseurs, for connoisseurs" (Stoye, cited in Trilling, 2022), which categorised their collections by the school of art and displayed them mainly in a conventional way, to the Humboldt Forum, which is dedicated to cross-cultural and interdisciplinary discussion, the Kangxi throne saw an opportunity to update its presentation strategy. The Kangxi throne is the only collection of thrones in European museums that also has an accompanying screen, making its display more relevant to the concept of a "throne room". The museum points out that the throne was originally located in a traveling palace on Panshan Mountain in Ji County, Hebei Province (now Tianjin Province), which was utilised by the Manchu emperors during their

trip to Chengde Summer Resort. *The Panshan Local Chronicle Authorized by Majesty* records that Kangxi entered Panshan 4 times, whereas his grandson Qianlong visited Panshan 32 times, building the second largest royal palace garden here after the Chengde Summer Resort, which was later destroyed by the Japanese army during World War II. When it comes to the contextual presentation of the Kangxi throne, the Humboldt Forum holds the view that the original architecture is no longer present, so the question turns to the exploration of the method of exhibition design. Additionally, as a symbol of divine and secular rule, the throne is easy to understand for audiences from different cultural backgrounds. When the first large-scale exhibition of Chinese cultural heritage was held overseas in 1935, an Emperor's Throne, which was not valued too much by Chinese experts and classified as "miscellaneous furniture", was incredibly well-liked by the Western public (Xu, 2021). Therefore, the curators of the Humboldt Forum were drawn to the question of how to release the potential of the throne from the traditional gallery in Dahlem, to go beyond viewing it as a flattened symbol representing only the court lacquerware and the traditional feudal empire, and to utilise it as a bridge for cross-cultural communication, giving Western audiences a more comprehensive understanding of Chinese culture and society.

2. Experiment: Playing "Game of Thrones" During the Transformation

Before the design of the "Throne Room" was finalised, the Humboldt Lab Dahlem's research and practice played an essential key role in the transition. The Humboldt Lab Dahlem held between 2012-2015 in the museums that were awaiting relocation was conceived as a rehearsal room so as to boost creative synergies (Berlin State Museums, n.d.). The project's strategy largely coincided with the wave of institutionalising contemporary artists' institutional critical practices, considered a powerful method for establishing interactions between distinct disciplinary fields represented by museums and questioning the existing procedures of scientific research with the poetic research approach by art (Peters, 2013, p. 8). It is thus employed as one of the key strategies for Humboldt Forum to shape the identity of a "critical institution". Simultaneously, this project was also a new experiment with the artist-as-curator model that Marcel Duchamp has developed: considering contemporary art mainly as pluralistic forces that can intervene in the curatorial process beforehand, with the goal of generating inspiration for new forms of cross-cultural exhibitions in the contemporary context, so the basic approach was combining "postcolonial curatorial and artistic strategies with the requirements of scenographic design and staging" (Blasi, 2019, p. 9). Therefore, a significant expectation placed on creators by curators was the incorporation of their own understanding of the situation in which museum collections would be shown into the expression of art.

According to the leaders of the museum programme, "Game of Thrones", an early project of the Humboldt Lab Dahlem that borrowed the name of a famous American series, started from the idea of "recreating a piece of historical palace architecture for the throne and its screen" (Ruitenbeek & Heller, p. 3). Three artists and a designer were invited to work with the grey or white replica models of the throne as well as the screen as the raw materials. Moreover, they were given a copy of the quasi-model of the exhibition space - the works would occupy rectangular spaces that would not interfere with each other in a gallery that was divided into four sections. Ultimately, the models were all placed on display in the central axis position in the rectangular space, while facing different directions (Figure 2). However, the Humboldt Forum made it clear after the exhibition that the four proposals would not be immediately incorporated into the museum's new galleries. Visitors who have seen the works will find it easier to comprehend the museum's decision: Industrial designer Konstantin Grcic created the stage in front of the throne as an improvised labyrinth, setting up barriers to prevent public access (Figure 3); Artist Kirstine Roepstorff made lamps inspired by the shape of Chinese traditional lantern, which intertwined with the throne through the action of light; Simon Starling designed a video installation indicating the tiny details of the surface of the throne, and places it face-to-face with the throne, easy to remind us of Nam June Paik's famous work TV Buddha; And even more devastatingly, Zhao Zhao, the only Chinese artist, poured a "waterfall" of red wax over the entire surface of the throne (Figure 4), creating a violent scene of flowing bright red colour.

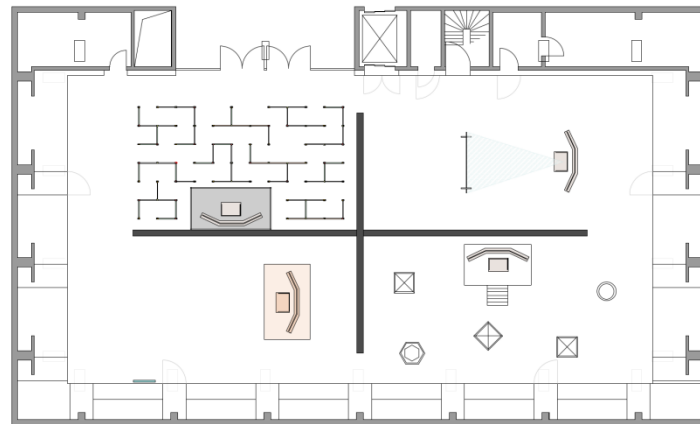


Figure 2. Layout of the “Game of Thrones” exhibition hall



Figure 3. Konstantin Grcic, *Migong*, 2013



Figure 4. Zhao Zhao, *Waterfall*, 2013

The choice of critical interventions from artists seems to be at odds with the Humboldt Lab Dahlem’s vision of inspiring future curation. The ideology of contemporary art gives it the free will to surpass the work of conservation and restoration in the museum sense, going beyond the history itself, and to engage in lateral thinking based on rapidly extracting the essence from the knowledge of the artefacts (Mutumba, 2014, p. 27). The artworks in “Game of Thrones” therefore alluded to more deconstructive reflections on cultural scenarios that were based on the underlying tension among artists, professional curators, and historians. From the starting point, the project provided the four creators with models that bore the shape and dimensions of the original work,

which on the one hand encouraged the creators to concentrate on the experimental connection between the physical space occupied by the artefacts and the space of the gallery, and on the other hand weakened the character of the “lacquer furniture”, referring more directly to the symbolic significance of the “power center”, as the name of the project suggested. The artists’ deconstruction of power center scenarios also varied at the same time. Taking *Migong*, the most stage-like artwork, as an instance, Grcic appropriated and deformed the original context of the throne - the embedded structure of the Chinese wooden palace complex, to construct a minimalist labyrinth utilising industrial steel tubing, which is frequently employed by modern institutions to organise queues, inviting the viewers to step in and complete the obstructed route, so as to satirise the hierarchical structure of the palace while providing “a reference to the furnishing of public places, particularly museums” (Rosenberg, p. 10), forming the critical discourse on museum power itself. By imposing the imagery of violent scenario directly on the model, Zhao Zhao’s *Waterfall* also contains multiple symbols of power, with the flowing bright red colour not only depicting the artist’s sharp commentary on the political situation in feudal period and contemporary China but also inevitably brings to mind the real-life controversy surrounding the Humboldt Forum’s history of colonialism. Besides, the work can draw the viewer’s attention to the historical encounter with the lost artefacts in China symbolised by the throne, showing the scarred history and questioning the validity of the interpretation of artefacts in the context of Western museums.

From the starting point of the restoration of the palace architecture to the deconstruction of the artefacts and their scenarios, the throne and screen open up numerous dimensions of dialogue as well as reflections over the models. The anthropologist Elizabeth Edwards (2001, p. 199) borrows Benjamin’s view of “translation” to explain the cross-border collaboration between museums and contemporary artists: for the purpose of presenting the original work faithfully, the translator must leave the original and seek fulfilment in something beyond the original. Therefore, to a certain extent, meaning exists in the space between the original and the translation. Since the restoration of a Chinese palace in a Western museum lacks the ability to be convincing (Rosenberg, p. 9), when the “distanced” feature of artistic creation translates the cultural context of the artefacts into a variety of abstract, multi-sensory scenic experiences, the museum’s presentation of material attributes is able to transcend the static historical slices and lead the public to enter into a broader interpretive space, to determine the historical significance of the work in the more complex structural associations between the object and people, and to engage in the exploration of issues of the contemporary society together. Therefore, as argued by the curator Angela Rosenberg, this project showed its task clearly, namely to investigate the potential of scenic interpretation in the museum and to come up with alternative ways of seeing the museological objects (Rosenberg, p. 9). Despite the fact that it did not directly provide a formal reference for the Humboldt Forum, this project ultimately posed a methodological challenge to the newborn museum that was still in its design phase: whether the museum was able to find a viable translational strategy between the restoration of the palace building and the deconstruction of artworks.

3. Between Construction and Deconstruction: The Cross-Cultural Display in the “Wang Shu Room”

As was already mentioned, “Game of Thrones” revisits the logical parallels and distinctions between contemporary art and curation, much like many subsequent Humboldt Lab Dahlem projects. On the one hand, due to the highly free and individualised mode of expression of art, the final concrete results of the lab show significant barriers to articulation in the actual curatorial work of the Humboldt Forum. On the other hand, when it comes to the construction of narrative discourse, the utopian illusion of contemporary museums as creators of eternal truth has long been shattered. The existence of exhibitions is more like the formalisation of the ethical conflict, mentioned by the philosopher Simon Critchely (Hernández, 2010, p. 12), and due to the unbalanced requirements in the exhibition, every exhibition is an ethical device that brings into play infinite demands that are impossible to fulfil completely. As a result, the curator’s job is to provide specific versions of the collection’s narrative in a responsible manner “to initiate and engage in stimulating debate”, as underlined by Alfred Barr (Carter, 2014, p. 232). Moreover, for attracting visitors to actively take part in the discussion, the museum should also provide a kind of sensual unity of experience and knowledge in terms of spatial design. Brückner and Greci (2015, 103) directly refer to Richard Wagner’s concept of “total work of art” as an analogy, pointing out that an important trend in the current transformation of exhibitions is the creation of holistic stages that also accommodate the audience’s interaction, bringing “possibilities of access and reception that go beyond complex content or foreign language barriers” and leading to a judgement of the museum and its diversified collections as “relevant to me” for the audiences.

As one of the investigating techniques employed in the pre-Humboldt Forum period, “Game of Thrones” finally contributed to a change in the initial plan for the palace restoration and the significance of scenography as a crucial approach to creating the “total work of art” was further acknowledged. Therefore, Klaas Ruitenbeek,

director of the Museum of Asian Art, travelled to Hangzhou and invited Wang Shu, the Chinese architect and the first Chinese Pritzker Prize winner (Note 3), to complete the scenography of the gallery, which was thus given a new name after the artist. Among the permanent exhibition halls of the Humboldt Forum, the 559-square-meter gallery is the only space that is not designed by RAA, and it is labelled “Must see” on the Humboldt Forum’s official website. Its allure stems not only from the richness of the Chinese exhibits which include the Kangxi throne, but also from the huge, gently sloping wooden roof hanging above the gallery, which clearly reveals its structural form (Figure 5), while the cabinets, floors, walls, and other interiors match the roof to form a unity of aesthetic perception. The roof is a structure developed and frequently used by Wang Shu. Its form is clearly borrowed from traditional Chinese roofs, but the beams and columns that play a load-bearing role in traditional architecture have been replaced by 1,300 tiny and fragmented parts through the use of mortised joints combined with diagonal struts, and 1,500 screw joints are also utilised here. The visual effect is similar to that of the highly decorative bucket arch in traditional architecture, thereby illustrating the structural effect of forming a large span with small objects.



Figure 5. The Wang Shu Room

Inviting the participation of the source community and appropriately combining local traditions with contemporary art language have been consistent cross-cultural presentation strategies from the Humboldt Lab Dahlem to the Humboldt Forum, which can show great respect for the power of self-representation of local people and dismantle the traditional/modern dichotomy of non-Western/Western cultures. And compared to pure artists, architects are more adept at striking a balance between the free interpretation of contemporary art and the functional needs of a space. Wang Shu, the dean of the School of Architecture and Art at the China Academy of Art, has long been pursuing the goal of “reconstructing contemporary regional architecture in China”, and his reflection on traditional architecture is not driven by the “empty symbolism of nationalism”, but rather it is deeply rooted in the cultural lineage of the nation, and in line with the design concepts of contemporary architecture, creating everlasting vitality for cultural traditions. His design approach therefore often involves the reorganisation of traditional buildings based on his grasp of the spirit of Chinese aesthetics and contemporary architectural ideas.

The design of the “Wang Shu Room” finds its specific solution for creating the context of the throne precisely between construction and deconstruction. First of all, unlike Western architecture which tends to emphasise the façade, traditional Chinese architecture places a strong emphasis on the roof. On the one hand, Wang Shu highlights the traditional philosophical foundation and aesthetic flavour of using wood, a natural material, to construct the roof with the exposure of its structure, putting into practice the skills and spirit of traditional Chinese craftsmen in creating large spaces with small materials. The innovative use of industrial materials, on the other hand, along with the little materials change the original structural characteristics resulting from the traditional way of stressing, creating distinctly modern aesthetics. As Lord Palumbo (2012), jury chairman of the Pritzker Prize, said: “Wang Shu’s work is able to transcend the debate (over whether architecture should be anchored in tradition or should look only toward the future), producing an architecture that is timeless, deeply rooted in its context and yet universal”. His efforts allow visitors without relevant cultural backgrounds to perceive the aesthetic spirit in the gallery and engage in the dialogue of cultures through immersive experiences.

Secondly, from the perspective of the layout, the throne is positioned at the central axis of the hall, differentiated from other collections with an independent pedestal and wall, and facing the south wall. However, the central axis of the roof installation is dislocated 90 degrees from the throne, highlighting the architect’s thoughts on the aesthetic relationship between the audience’s viewing line and the orientation of the roof installation. As a result,

the art installation serves primarily as a particular cultural symbol which provides spatial experiences for the audiences, much like its contemporary distorted shape, rather than as a kind of restoration of the spatial structure of the original scene. In order to compensate for the “distanced” nature of the artistic translation, a simple photo of the imperial throne in the Palace of Heavenly Purity in Forbidden City is also shown on the label, so the viewer is able to briefly read about the furnishings of the “throne room” and the scenic connection between the throne and the building in reality.

Wang Shu’s scenario is not the only contemporary art in the gallery. Directly opposite the throne is a large-scale mural “The Buddha Sermon” painted by Qing dynasty court painter Ding Guangpeng, which was originally housed in the Ethnological Museum. Its category of court art and its religious depictions are consistent with the throne. Furthermore, as one of the largest Chinese paintings of the 18th century, the mural which was also divorced from its original building - the Wanshandian temple in the Imperial West Garden, shares with the throne the focal position in the narrative of the gallery as well as the obvious situational dependence on the roof installation, which in turn underpins the contextual relevance of the roof installation to the rest of the collection in the gallery, such as ceramics, paintings of landscape and bamboo, and copper plates. The mural is only occasionally displayed in a day so as to prevent damage to the work by light. Sometimes a video art created by the Chinese artist Lin Haizhong is shown instead, and a photograph of the mural is projected on the curtain during the remaining time, in a way that seems to replay the role of the throne model in the “Game of Thrones”, and continues to foster the interaction between traditional art and new media technologies.

Behind the throne is the installation *Teahouse* brought from Dahlem. Ai Weiwei, one of the most well-known Chinese contemporary artists who is famous for his fierce critique of Chinese politics, is the creator of this work. The work consists of plenty of cubes and prisms of compressed Pu-erh tea to form a “house”, while the ground is paved with tea leaves to form a circular “lawn”. The style of the work is distinctly minimalist, which is a considered way to demonstrate the history of the Sino-Western trade exchanges and ancient Chinese philosophy in a Western context. Its gently sloped roof is also compatible with the roof from Wang Shu. Despite the different identity backgrounds of the creators, these works, with their contemporary stance and historical responsibility, add more distinctive relevance and credibility to Wang Shu’s artistic construction and deconstruction of the throne scene, and constitute the contemporary art landscape that transcends the barriers of cultural exchange. At the same time, the creativity and international influence of Chinese artists also create a stronger perception of contemporary China under the humiliating history implied by the Chinese lost artefacts.

As a number of scholars have already mentioned, if globalisation emphasises cultural homogeneity, then cross-cultural study attaches great significance to the differences and the ways of bridging the communication gap (Shao, 2008). The museum’s intention to restore the architectural scene of the throne, as opposed to the conventional display setting, creates a structured description of the distinctions and further bridges the interdisciplinary display differences between art history and ethnography. However, when taking into account the essentialist questioning of the collections out of their original display context by museum sceptics, this purpose appears to be clumsy and ineffective. In this case, the “distanced” character of contemporary art and architecture, creates holistic and broad perceptual space for the interpretation of the scene between construction and deconstruction by dismantling the ultimate goal of “restoration”. This thus provides legitimacy in a certain sense, and offers audiences from different backgrounds a shared language for analysing the history from the contemporary viewpoint. As Wang Shu (n. d., p. 19) stated in the interview, the most important thing is giving the visitors a feel for the exhibition and aiding them to overcome the barriers between the old and the new world. Cross-cultural exhibitions not only imply the collision and communication between different traditions but can also provide an opportunity to grasp the different facets of nationhood in the intersection of history and the present. Poetic intervention from contemporary art can be rooted in cultural traditions, and while moving through the diversified coordinates of historiography and geography, it is able to accommodate ethical conflicts from multiple viewpoints and create flowing and varied cognitive pathways for cross-cultural interaction and mediation.

4. Conclusion

As cultural nomads, artists are often thought to occupy a meta-position in inter-disciplinary and cross-cultural conversations, similar to philosophers. They appear to be especially well-equipped against regional fundamentalisms since they are sufficiently detachable and skilled at abstraction (Blasi, 2019, p. 219). The Humboldt Forum chose Wang Shu, who carries the dream about “reconstructing contemporary regional architecture in China” and has established a strong international reputation, to create an art installation that can build a perceptual and cognitive unity for the gallery’s narrative and establishes the contextual connection between the public and the Kangxi throne, demonstrating unique value among the museum’s diversified

contemporary art projects. What cannot be overlooked, however, is that under the perceptual privilege of the high visibility of contemporary art, the museum also seems to conceal the inadequacy of the throne's provenance research, which weakens the presentation of accurate information on the entire lifecycle of the throne, including its manufacture, use, circulation, etc., from the regular exhibition in Dahlem, the exhibitions and symposiums at Humboldt Lab Dahlem, and onwards to the Humboldt Forum. The severity of this issue is even more conspicuously obvious in many colonial heritage studies in the museum. How to truly transform the way the world is understood is still an ongoing quest for the Humboldt Forum in the midst of controversy.

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Notes

Note 1. The three units are: “Arts of Japan, Tea House, Sacred Arts of East Asia”, “Arts of China and Korea, Study Collections” and “China and Europe - Art between War and Peace”.

Note 2. According to the Merriam-Webster’s Dictionary, “The Throne room” refers to “a formal audience room containing the throne of a sovereign”.

Note 3. Wang Shu is also the second ethnic Chinese architect to win the award after Ieoh Ming Pei in 1983.

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