

**HUMBOLDT
FORUM**

TERRIBLE BEAUTY ELEPHANT – HUMAN – IVORY

PRESS KIT



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**STIFTUNG
HUMBOLDT FORUM**
IM BERLINER SCHLOSS

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“There needs to be an understanding and an awareness of the human condition, and that it is going to be measured by the way humans treat other species. Whether a society is a civilized or a barbarian society can easily be measured by the way it treats its animals.”

Ai Weiwei, artist, in the publication accompanying *Terrible Beauty*

Ivory is fascinating – and polarizing. As early as 40,000 years ago, humans were using mammoth tusks to create musical instruments and intricate representational figures. In the more recent past, animal tusks have come to symbolize injustice and brutality. The programme for *Terrible Beauty: Elephant – Human – Ivory* addresses this topic with the help of a temporary exhibition, a series of discussions and artistic events, and educational activities.

ELEPHANT: PHYSICAL HEAVYWEIGHT WITH A PRODIGIOUS MEMORY, A SYMBOLIC KEYSTONE SPECIES AT THE MEETING POINT OF NATURE AND CULTURE

Large and highly muscular ears providing a perfect auditory and cooling system, a long flexible nose known as a trunk that is both sensitive and tough, cushioning on the balls of the feet that acts like a gel pad – and overall an imposing physique that makes it the largest existing land animal: the elephant undoubtedly cuts a phenomenal figure. And then there are its long, curved tusks, which the elephant needs as a sexual attribute, for the purposes of defence, and as a tool – they are used to gain access to water sources, for example. Yet this creature’s valuable dentin has turned it into an endangered species, for the tusks, in the form of ivory, have been coveted by humans for millennia. The qualities typically ascribed to this highly intelligent animal – majesty and power combined with benevolence and fairness – were also attributed, with dire consequences, to its tusks and, moreover, to anyone who owned them. It is primarily the African Savannah and Forest elephants whose distinctive tusks are highly sought after; the tusks of the smaller Asian elephant are more modest in size and therefore deemed less attractive, while the female does not develop any at all.

HUMAN: FRIEND OF THE BEAUTIFUL – FOE OF THE ANIMAL?

In natural and cultural history the elephant has been cast in a wide variety of roles, some of them contradictory. As a sympathetic comic character and circus attraction acrobatically prancing in the ring, the elephant is a fixture in the childhood memories of many growing up under the influences of the West – and as a Hindu deity with multiple arms it is highly revered in India and around the world. It is used as a resource and source of labour in the husbandry of Asian forests – yet frequently feared as a competitor for arable land, habitat, and essential food in Africa. As a sensitive individual with a high degree of social competence and its very own communication system, it is of interest to both zoologists and tourists – yet its tusks make it the ongoing victim of brutal hunting methods, despite the 1973 Washington Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES). Only about 350,000 of these relatives of the woolly mammoth, which became extinct 12,000 years ago, now live in the savannahs and forests of Africa, compared with two million in 1970. A single tusk can change hands for up to 50,000 US dollars on the illegal market.

IVORY: FRAUGHT BEAUTY WITH AN ONEROUS HERITAGE

Ivory feels good to the touch and can be readily shaped and carved, it is sturdy yet also elastic. It does not conduct heat and never gets really cold or overly hot. Its bright white colour and regular form are a trope of purity and innocence in certain contexts and periods of cultural history, even if these qualities bear absolutely no relationship to the way it is procured. Apart from a few finds taken from animals that have perished, the success of the ivory trade is invariably predicated on the death of the animal. “Ivory and rhinoceros horn are now on a par with blood diamonds, with the proceeds from them being used to finance terrorist cells and rebel groups,” writes the conservation organization WWF. “The procedure [...] is becoming increasingly brutal. The criminals have set up mafia-like structures, and the animals have almost no defence against their tormentors.”

Nowadays, innovative plastics and artificial dentins are adequate substitutes for ivory, and the “white gold” – as ivory is colloquially known – no longer plays any real role in many people’s daily lives in Europe and the West; yet the fascination with ivory continues to exert a global influence as an attractive luxury good. And although most countries now abide by the international convention for protecting endangered animals and species, the demand for ivory still exists, as do the illegal imports. The records of the global trade in ivory make grim reading: an elephant dies every twenty minutes as a consequence.

Ivory is not only used as a powdered elixir and remedy to enhance potency – in its carved form it is still prized above all as a status symbol for projecting power. The principle of trophy hunting thrives on this; its practices threaten almost all of Africa’s “big five” – the collective name that big-game hunters give to elephants, rhinos, buffalos, lions, and leopards – which makes it a further threat to the elephant’s survival. At the beginning of April 2021, Kabelo Senyatso, director of the Department of Wildlife and National Parks in Botswana, confirmed that approval had been granted for a total of 287 elephants to be shot during the upcoming hunting season, with interested “clients” coming from all over the world.

VALUABLE CULTURAL ASSET MEETS BIOLOGICAL RESOURCE: IVORY'S PAST AND PRESENT

The history of ivory also constitutes a history of humankind, for its allure is verifiably as old as humanity itself. As long as 40,000 years ago, in pre-historic times, tusks were used to make the oldest known artefacts, cult objects, and musical instruments, often accompanied by the first figurative depictions of mammoths. While other materials often rotted away or were repurposed and transformed over time, objects produced from tusk ivory have often survived for centuries, if not millennia.

Later, the material was prized by Egyptians, Romans, and Greeks, as well as Chinese, Indians and other Eastern peoples, who were inspired to produce exquisite ivory carvings. In medieval Europe, it was increasingly used for religious images, some of which were made in smaller formats. Ivory similarly featured on the African continent as a medium for creative sculptural design. It was also deployed on occasion for down-to-earth functions that were ancillary to a purely aesthetic appeal or ascribed spiritual meaning. In addition to its use for teapot handles, ivory is known for providing the first joint and jaw prostheses and a sex aid that could produce an ejaculation with the help of a plunger, dating from the 19th and 20th centuries.

Ivory had been traded on the African continent even before Europe's colonial expansion. However, the systematic harvesting of this animal resource was primarily linked to the history of colonialism from the 15th century on. The Belgian King Leopold II had the hands of Indigenous people chopped off as readily as the tusks of the elephants. But the colonial expansion emanating from Germany that occupied what is now Tanzania, Rwanda, and Burundi (so-called German East Africa) similarly led to oppression and exploitation – going even as far as genocide. As a raw material that could be an object of speculation on the markets, thousands of tons of tusks were transported by land and sea – mainly to Europe and Asia, as well as to America from the 17th century on.

This intercontinental trade began 5,000 years ago – and persists to this day. The high regard in which the material is held has meant that objets d'art made of ivory have passed from one person to another. Such objects have served as commodities or gifts, although in many cases they have been looted or plundered. This made it possible in certain settings for them to become media of cultural exchange – or indeed cultural appropriation. They bore artistic styles and formal idioms with them to other regions of the world, thereby altering the local tastes and aesthetic sensibilities. The history of ivory objects thus also reflects the process of cultural exchange, as well as added capital value, acts of violent appropriation, and unequal power gradients.

TERRIBLE BEAUTY

EXHIBITION AND EDUCATION PROGRAMME –

PROGRAMME OF EVENTS (DISCUSSIONS / FILM SERIES)

The Humboldt Forum's exhibition, discussion, and film project *Terrible Beauty: Elephant – Human – Ivory* tackles a complex topic that is bound to polarize opinion.

The accompanying programme takes up the themes of the exhibition in a series of events centring around art and discussion. These will complement and extend the content, operating on the principle that it is important for multiple voices to be heard, and will be hosted in the event spaces and other parts of the Humboldt Forum during the temporary exhibition.

TERRIBLE BEAUTY

The exhibition



Mammoth. © bpk / Archäologisches Landesmuseum Baden-Württemberg / Manuela Schreiner

Be it as a mythical ritual or cultural object or as a status symbol conveying seigneurial power and prestige, ivory always has a great deal to say about the coexistence of humans and animals both in the past and in the present and about the relationship between nature and culture. Such objects invariably speak volumes, providing information about how things migrate when they have not only travelled across long periods of time but also entwined their way through global (trading) spaces and different hierarchical spheres of influence.

The main focus is on the exhibition and its interdisciplinary design. It unfurls the cultural history of ivory across the millennia on the basis of carefully selected exhibits drawn from different periods and with a wide variety of provenances. It also traces their functional and aesthetic usage through to the present day: from ivory thrones, breast ornaments, and hunting horns to crucifixes and prayer beads, from Art Nouveau paperweights to pearl jewellery and jewellery boxes, from miniature elephants as tiny figurines to Austrian lidded tankards and Chinese chopsticks, from elephant dung to a Toyota trampled by an elephant. It has all been turned into an exhibition by the Stiftung Humboldt Forum im Berliner Schloss in cooperation with the Staatliche Museen zu Berlin and the Museum für Naturkunde, and in collaboration with the National Museums of Kenya. There are more than 200 exhibits on show from world-renowned museums like the

British Museum in London, the Museum of Applied Arts (MAK) in Vienna, the Musée du quai Branly – Jacques Chirac in Paris, and the Germanisches Nationalmuseum in Nuremberg.

In terms of presentation, the most important consideration here is to take a sensitive approach to the exhibits and the scenarios relating to their provenance. Reflecting on this intriguing nexus – ivory's eminent significance within cultural history alongside the natural history dimension and socioecological ramifications of its use – in a way that can be clearly seen and understood is a consistent thread running right through the exhibition. The staging of power and dominion, of the superiority asserted by one culture or species over another, can be viewed as a key underlying factor. The exploitation of humans and animals, of nature and its resources is not just a national or continental phenomenon but one that spans the globe.

TERRIBLE BEAUTY

The route through the exhibition

The *Voices of Ivory* project



© Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Ethnologisches Museum / Martin Franken

THE ROUTE THROUGH THE EXHIBITION

The exhibition explores ivory in terms of many different aspects of cultural history, a few of which are listed below:

“His belly is as bright ivory”: This is how the Old Testament’s Song of Solomon extols the flawless body of the beloved. Ancient love poetry is replete with comparisons equating smooth, fair skin with ivory, a racist motif that can still be found in modern-day advertising. A plethora of ivory nudes also bear out this ideal of beauty, which is based on a racist ideology that identifies white skin with beauty. In the Old Testament too, we find kings boasting of their ivory thrones as well as couches and entire palaces hewn from it. In many cultures, owning and displaying ivory objects were reserved for the upper echelons of society. In European antiquity, ivory was the most popular material for images of divine beings, due in part to the extreme ease with which the

material can be worked. Mother goddesses and fertility deities, polytheistic images of gods, and depictions of Christ on the Cross exemplify how far-reaching the use of ivory was in religions and cults across the world. Ivory was also a popular material for portraiture: when rulers had their likenesses made, these could both include ivory and be created from it. Unlike monuments, many of these portraits were more private in character. Once ivory eventually became easier to obtain in Europe, it was used as a surface for painting miniature portraits and became a phenomenon in the 18th century, particularly as a vehicle for the growing middle-class penchant for self-presentation. Authentic historical documents such as illustrations, maps, postcards, and posters show how the material was reflected in the media of the time in Europe, while also mirroring the conditions surrounding the production and trade of ivory objects.

One stopping point on the route through the exhibition is a video artwork by artist Liesel Burisch (b. 1987), a student at the Städelschule, who reminds us once again, amidst all the controversies and conflicts, of where the story starts and ends: with the dying animal and the agonies it suffers. Its heavy breathing fills the exhibition space.

The dramatic staging of the exhibition follows the story and use of ivory, designed as a narrative that reaches round the globe and spans the ages. The route around the exhibition takes us from ivory fragments and the motif of the tusk through to the animal in its entirety. The themes range from ivory as a material and the process of working it to the colonial connotations of the tusk, from the use of ivory in medicine and cosmetics to its role as a symbol of cultivation, from the elephant as an animal to be hunted to a species to be protected, and from acknowledging the elephant as a “keystone species” and an important link in the cycles of nature to its symbolic role in religion, myth, and artistic reflection. Each of the exhibition areas makes concrete reference to the present day and the world we live in, taking into account the need for inclusion and interaction. The diversity of the types of object on display and the transdisciplinary approach make it possible for ivory-related themes and questions to be presented in a distinctive manner, thereby appealing to a broad cross section of the public.

THE VOICES OF IVORY PROJECT

The documentary project *Voices of Ivory*, which is presented as part of the exhibition, invokes a wide range of voices in exploring ivory and its past and present. This installation comprises video interviews with conservationists, customs officials, and ivory collectors in a way that lets them all have their say, brings controversial questions into focus, and presents a plurality of perspectives on current approaches to ivory as a resource as well as on concerns for elephants and their habitat. Their statements allow us to position this assortment of themes relating to “elephants and ivory” in the appropriate ethical, global, and political contexts, while encouraging viewers to form their own opinions. This provides a vivid reflection of the fraught relationship that exists between nature, humans, and animals, as well as the challenges involved in thinking globally.

Against this backdrop, the exhibition also consistently looks at the core question of how and whether ivory can and should be presented or displayed in a museum at all. Who does ivory belong to, what is appropriate museum practice, and what are the prospects for presenting such a theme – both in the countries that once colonized the region and in the countries where the ivory originated?

The exhibition is produced by the Stiftung Humboldt Forum im Berliner Schloss in cooperation with the Staatliche Museen zu Berlin and the Museum für Naturkunde, curated by Grit Keller, Alberto Saviello, and Daniel Tyradellis, in collaboration with Anika Winge, based on an idea by Raffael Dedo Gadebusch. In cooperation with the National Museums of Kenya.

TERRIBLE BEAUTY

Education on all levels



Afrikanischer Elefant (*Loxodonta africana*) mit abgebrochenem Stoßzahn, Chobe-Nationalpark, Botswana
© Okapia / imageBROKER / Marc Rasmus

The varied educational programme is aimed at visitors with a range of interests and needs. One focus of the programme is on ivory and its particular material properties, which are covered by the audio guide and hands-on tour. The workshop “Stand Up for Elephants!” focuses on the conflict between elephants and humans and the question of how consumers can help defuse the conflict by being aware of the issues and modifying their retail behaviour and travel habits. School groups in particular are encouraged to reflect upon the issue critically in greater detail so that students can come to their own conclusions.

The guided tours can be booked by members of the general public and contextualize the theme of “Elephant – Human – Ivory” in ethical, global, and postcolonial terms. The tours, which are offered in different languages, make the topic and the problems associated with it accessible to people of different age groups.

Different options for taking in the exhibition content through the senses are prominently integrated into the space so that they are accessible for all visitors. The route through the exhibition, which is consciously designed to be optimally barrier-free, has a guidance and orientation system that is geared to people who are blind or visually impaired.

Integrated information and interactive installations offer a barrier-free experience of the ivory, bringing out its tactile dimension with the help of a selection of objects that can be touched. Visitors can also feel the seismic signals that elephants use to communicate and appreciate the differences between the various species of elephant by touching their ears, backs, and tusks – this experience is available to all visitors, with or without disabilities:

TERRIBLE BEAUTY

The discussion forum

Focus day



Piles of African elephant ivory set on fire by the Kenya Wildlife Service (KWS). This burn included over 105 tons of elephant ivory, worth over \$150 million. Nairobi National Park, Kenya, 30th April 2016, © Nature Picture Library / Alamy Stock Photo

THE DISCUSSION FORUM

The discussion forum will treat popular, socio-political and scientific discourses equally, and relate them to opportunities for political and scientific activism. International perspectives from the regions where the animals live, where they are protected or, indeed, hunted, will similarly be included.

In association with the Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, the animal welfare organization IFAW, and other voices from civil society, the discussion programme considers a wide range of ways of looking at the relationship between elephants, humans, and ivory, presenting it as a case study of the association between nature, humans, and the environment. It consists of a series of six moderated evening events as well as a special day devoted to the theme. Participative formats that draw in the audience such as

fishbowls, round tables, and debates will throw light on the issues: What options are there for changing our approach to nature? What form does animal welfare take today, and who stands up for the creatures' rights? What might an ecologically tenable kind of tourism look like? It is questions like these which will be addressed by the programme. Dedicated animal conservationists, high-profile experts, and knowledgeable scientists will all come together to discuss these matters and talk through the controversies.

Invited participants include: Bernhard Gißibl, Leibniz Institute of European History, with a research focus on European imperialism and colonialism, environmental history, and international nature conservation in the 20th century; Jenny Kasten, political scientist and sociologist, who conducts research on speciesism and human-animal studies; Amir Khalil, veterinar-

ian, project manager at the international animal protection organization Vier Pfoten; Dr. Ben Okita-Ouma, representative of the organization Save the Elephants; Katharina Trump, animal ecologist and programme manager for the trade in illegal species, WWF Germany.

FOCUS DAY

The focus day in autumn will concentrate in particular on the discursive potential of the topic. This one day focussing on the exhibition is an invitation not just for the whole family but for everyone who would like to explore the topic from a wide range of perspectives that incorporate artistic and discursive aspects. All over the building, from the foyer to the staircase to the workrooms there will be tours, talks, workshops, theatre, performances, and music. Anyone interested in the natural sciences can find out all about the chemical process involved in producing artificial ivory, the building will be filled with performances, videos will question the way we view ivory, and children will be able to attend workshops throughout the day.

Curators: Ibou Coulibaly Diop and Julia Schreiner

TERRIBLE BEAUTY

The film programme



© MICHAEL CUTHBERT / Alamy Stock Photo

The film programme “The Elephant as Movie Star – Highlights of an Animalistic Film Career” presents a selection of cinematic examples that show just how much these pachyderms, which we know and love from TV and film, have always been figures that people have identified with and projected their desires onto. This series of films, accompanied by comments from elephant specialists and film experts from four continents, presents the elephant as a cinematic protagonist in the most diverse set-ups.

In *The African Queen* (1951), the elephants play a notable supporting role alongside Katharine Hepburn and Humphrey Bogart while also putting in an impressive performance rounding off the ostensibly mythic stereotype of Africa, reproduced here in best Hollywood fashion. In the film “*Elephant Man*” (1980), David Lynch presents the authentic story of a 19th-century man whose anatomical deformity and resulting

resemblance to the animal forced him into a life of humiliation as a sideshow attraction—yet it culminates in his redemption. *Babar: The Movie* (1989), the film version of the well-known children’s story, attempts to overcome the relics of colonial thinking that are present in the book. In the film “*Sisters of the Wilderness*” (2018), South African filmmaker Karin Slater accompanies five young women on a hike through the country’s oldest national park. Along the way the protagonists experience the stunning natural world of a “game reserve”, which, like most Black South Africans, they had only known about from TV. The adventure allows them to see things from astonishing new perspectives, revising their views of themselves, of their background, and of the world in which they live.

In the documentaries that Professor Bernhard Grzimek made about animals in the 1950s and 1960s, he was one of the first to call for suffi-

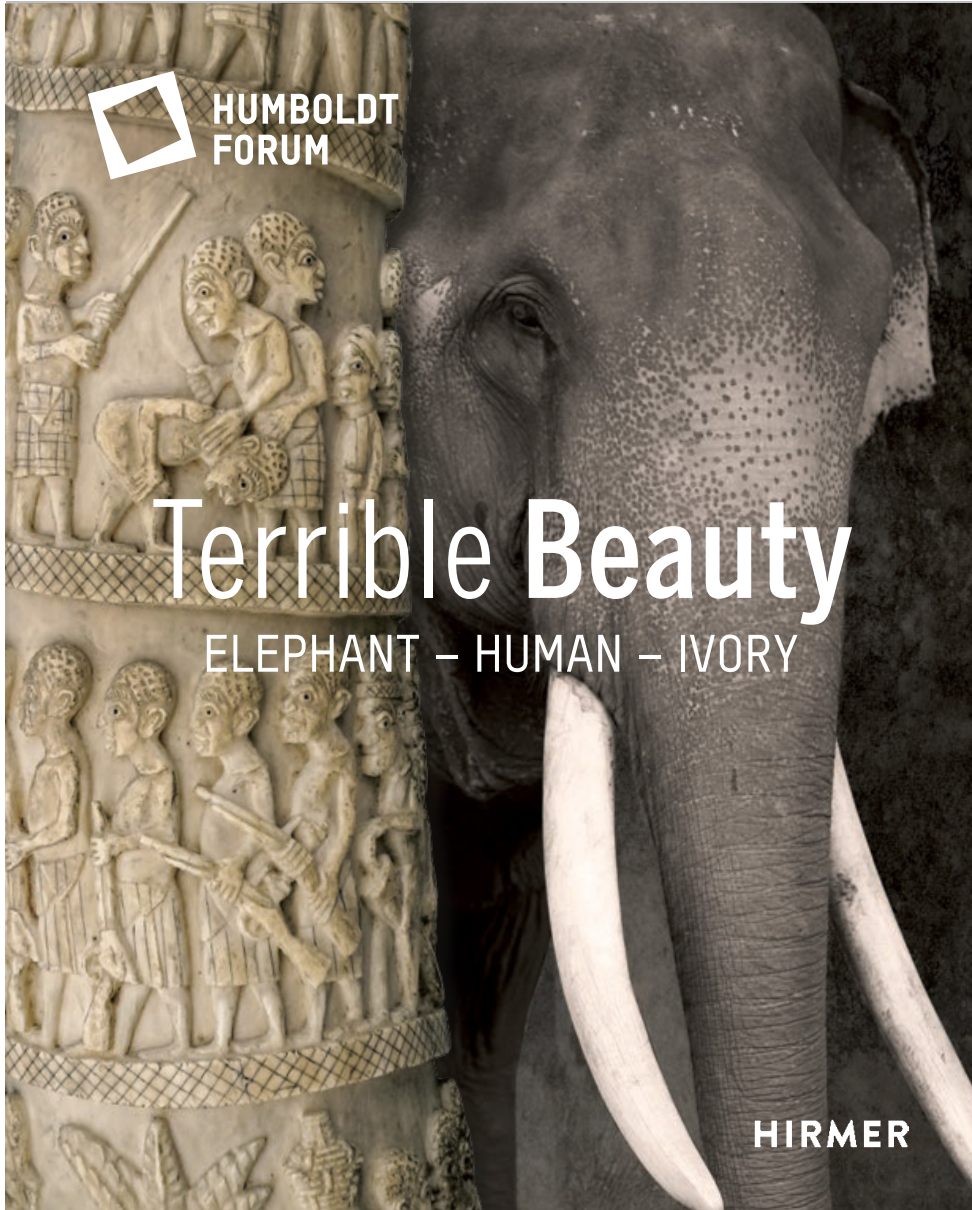
cient “room for wild animals”. As a zoologist, zoo director, filmmaker, and author he played a unique part in shaping the image of Africa – admittedly a dubious one that had its roots in an arrogant presumptuousness – in post-war Germany. *No Room for Wild Animals* was ultimately awarded the Golden Bear for Best Documentary at the 1956 Berlinale film festival. The value of the film today lies in its specific contemporary insights into the early days of the German ecological movement and how it viewed itself.

In the cinema an elephant always plays roles that are geared to the human audience or even involve anthropomorphism. The silver screen allows for so many different creative options: there may be no other animal that has been “cast” so heterogeneously. The programme comprises a total of twenty-four feature films, animated films, and documentaries based on the themes of the exhibition and focusing on elephants and people. Around half of the films are aimed at a family audience, and thus explicitly at children and teenagers too. Each film will be screened twice – in the original version with subtitles and/or live translations. The films are a mixture of classics, historical discoveries, and current productions from Europe, North America, Africa, and Asia. Before each performance we will be showing 5 to 10-minute-long “Eye-to-Eye” introductions that have been specially produced for the occasion and are presented by people with a particular connection to that film. In addition to international film experts, we have invited guests such as a South African ranger, who will introduce the film made in “his” national park. And there’s the Tamil shop assistant from Berlin, who watches *Chandani: The Daughter of the Elephant Whisperer* and gives her thoughts on biographical parallels between herself and the protagonist. The “Eye-to-Eye” introductions supplement the film programme by setting it in context from a range of perspectives.

Curator:

Dorothee Wenner, in conjunction with Jan Linders, head of programming / events at the Humboldt Forum

THE PUBLICATION ACCOMPANYING *TERRIBLE BEAUTY*



The richly illustrated publication *Terrible Beauty: Elephant – Human – Ivory* takes up all the different thematic areas covered by the exhibition. It includes essays and visual materials by international authors and artists that question our responsibility to the animal itself as well as our approach to history. The book is also a standalone work that epitomizes the idea of the Humboldt Forum and the aspirations it espouses. With contributions by Asher Jay, Nanette Snoep, Ai Weiwei, and many more.

Terrible Beauty: Elephant – Human – Ivory
Hirmer Verlag, 200 pages, 180 illustrations,
German and English edition, €29.90 in bookshops.

CONTRIBUTORS

IBOU COULIBALY DIOP

is a literary theorist and curator. In the course of completing his doctorate exploring the global(ized) dimension in the writings of Michel Houellebecq (in particular) and the globalization and universalization of literature (in general), he showed that globalization and universalization are being classified as entirely new elements even though the first president of Senegal, Léopold Sédar Senghor, first raised the theme of universality long ago. He is interested in the question of how we can grow closer together despite our differences, and the approaches to this that are contained within literature.

HARTMUT DORGERLOH

has been the General Director and Chairman of the Board of the Humboldt Forum Foundation in the Berlin Palace since 2018. From 2002 to 2018 he was general director of the Stiftung Preußische Schlösser und Gärten Berlin-Brandenburg (Prussian Palaces and Gardens Foundation). An art historian and cultural manager) he has also taught at the Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin as an honorary professor since 2004.

GRIT KELLER

has studied history and French philology. At Humboldt Forum she is the curator of education and mediation and part of the curatorial team for *Terrible Beauty: Elephant–Human–Ivory*. She has created projects on political-history education, exhibitions, and publications at the Jewish Museum Berlin, the Haus der Geschichte Baden-Württemberg in Stuttgart, the Gedenkstätte Berlin-Hohenschönhausen, and elsewhere.

ALBERTO SAVIELLO

has a doctorate in art history and is an assistant lecturer at Goethe University in Frankfurt am Main. As a freelance collaborator, he was part of the curatorial team for the exhibition *Terrible Beauty: Elephant–Human–Ivory*. Among his research interests are the origin and function of ivory artefacts in transcultural and transreligious negotiations.

JULIA SCHREINER

studied theatre, culture, and cultural management. She has worked for the programme departments of institutions such as Goethe-Institut Abidjan, Berlin Biennale 2003, HAU – Hebbel am Ufer, Theater an der Parkaue, Arctic Opera Festival Tromsø, jtw spandau, Theaterhaus Gessnerallee, and the Junge Akademie der Künste. Since 2005 she has been an independent production dramaturg, active in projects that emphasize international cooperation, local connections, and inclusive events.

DOROTHEE WENNER

is a freelance filmmaker, writer, and curator at Berlin's International Film Festival and elsewhere, as well as a member of the African Movie Academy Awards, Lagos, Nigeria. For Humboldt Forum she curated the film program for the special exhibition *Terrible Beauty: Elephant–Human–Ivory*.

TERRIBLE BEAUTY

Details and facts

Place	Humboldt Forum (ground floor, temporary exhibition space 1)
Dates	20 July to 28 November 2021
Opening times	Wednesday to Monday 10 am to 6 pm
Admission	Register and book tickets online from 13 July onwards at humboldtforum.org . The first 100 days are free of charge.
Information	Humboldt Forum Schlossplatz Tel: +49 30 99 211 89 89 www.humboldtforum.org
Exhibition curators	Grit Keller, Alberto Saviello, and Daniel Tyradellis, in collaboration with Anika Winge, based on an idea by Raffael Dedo Gadebusch
Discussion programme curators	Ibou Coulibaly Diop and Julia Schreiner
Film programme curators	Dorothee Wenner, in conjunction with Jan Linders, head of programming / events at the Humboldt Forum
Exhibition design	Holzer Kobler Architekturen
Publication	Terrible Beauty: Elephant – Human – Ivory Hirmer Verlag, 200 pages, 180 illustrations, German and English edition, €29.90 in bookshops.
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