At a time when museums face the challenge of reassessing their collections for the global age, the centre of gravity still lies in Western Europe and North America.

Below, art historian and author of germanmodernism.org, Jean Marie Carey PhD reviews the exhibition catalogue, Hello World: Revising a Collection which looks at how the Nationalgalerie in Berlin set out to reframe its collection from a more international viewpoint and is impressed by its nuanced and innovative approach.

Hello World ran from 26 April 2018 to 28 August 2018 at the Hamburger Bahnhof in Berlin, comprised, in addition to the exhibition itself, an extensive public programme with performances, workshops, discussions, concerts, artist talks and tours.

The complexity of the current period of sociocultural upheaval that museums are helping advance has favored activists over aesthetics with an aggression that subverts one of the most compelling aspects of public art spaces, the visual power of ritual, rhythm, and repetition. This misalignment of content and style has often created unintentional tragic irony, such as the death threats made against Dana Schutz by non-artists for her Open Casket painting of 2016 along with demands she destroy the abstracted interpretation of a photograph of the murdered Emmett Till, when in fact her work was an indictment of the continuing murder of young black American men by legal vigilantism and the painting itself strongly referenced one of the 20th Century’s undisputed masterpieces, Gerhard Richter’s Man Shot Down from 1988 which showed a blurred image of a photograph of the body of Andreas Baader.
Coming across the renunciation of the historical avant-garde in the elaborate catalogue for *Hello World* braces readers for more the same:
Dadaism

Expressionism

Futurism

There is nothing as new as this.

There is nothing as frightening as this.

There is nothing truer than this.[1]

As it turns out the epigram is from the Japanese modernist Mavo collective active in the 1920s.

This evocation of the shock of temporality appears in the catalogue accompanying the already-legendary experiment at Berlin’s Hamburger Bahnhof. Like Herwarth Walden’s 1912 exhibition of Futurist and Expressionist painters (which is acknowledged in the catalogue and was referenced in the exhibition), *Hello World: Revision of a Collection*.

*Hello World* was a show for the ages, its impact only just being registered. In light of the announcement by other institutions, including just in the past month, the Museum of Modern Art in New York City, to shake up collections to address issues of representation, the Bahnhof project set a benchmark for these efforts that has already proved impossible to reproduce. In keeping with the Mavo collective’s statement the impeccably executed catalogue documenting *Hello World* serves as indictment, blueprint, retrospective, and beacon.

In the summer of 2017, three years before the planned opening of the rebuilt palace along the River Spree that was to become the Humboldt Forum Museum – a massive collection of cultural and ethnographic artifacts – provenance expert and art historian Bénédicte Savoy resigned from the Humboldt advisory board in protest of the museum’s lack of a clear plan to address the circumstances of the acquisition of many of the objects in its collection during Germany’s colonial era.

In light of this critique, which spread quickly to art collections, *Hello World* undertook to ask: How does a museum in a globalized present examine and reflect upon its ruptured past? A team of a dozen curators came up with a partial but wholly satisfying answer, by placing contemporary artworks amid and alongside transnational and European objects that refracted without distorting the upheavals of the 19th and 20th centuries. There is of course more than one way to tell this story, and there have already been some terrible examples set, notably the Walker Art Center’s reactionary handling of Sam Durant’s *Scaffold* in 2017 and, at the opposite extreme, the refusal of Amsterdam’s Stedelijk Museum to offer any type of conciliation at all regarding its holdings of Nazi-
looted art.

One thing the catalogue homage to Hello World does very well is capture the naturally cosmopolitan flow of the exhibition that was arranged through the Bahnhof’s massive interiors, which, in the case of less-adorned retrospectives (such as the sparse Rudolf Belling and ill-advised Carl André shows in 2016) can seem cavernous. A hesitant approach was simultaneously thwarted and warranted by an encounter at the door with Pierre Bismuth’s cacophonous projection of Walt Disney’s The Jungle Book, with the cartoon Kaa, Mogli, Shere Khan, and Balu mouthing gibberish, a British colonial Tower of Babel. The photographic spread that opens the Hello World catalogue [17-59] captures some of the haptic nature of this experience, though the in-situ photos are mostly devoid of people, the better to appreciate the museum’s architectural features.

Stepping into Hello World, the Bahnhof’s grand entrance represented an acropolis (documented by the visible “Agora” sign in some of the photographs), a holistic environment of simultaneous movement and contemplation. Polish artist Goshka Macuga had decorated the walls with quotes from German philosophers and busts of corresponding intellectuals such as Albert Einstein, surrounding Venezuelan favela huts, dubbed Growing Houses by Marjetica Potrč of Slovenia. A replicated scene from 1967 of a white police officer beating a black man disrupted any possibility of Epcot-esque amnesia. Alfredo Jaar’s lighting arrangement flowed and sputtered to emulated the passage of refugees into, and out of, Europe.

This one-two punch of contemporaneity was designed under organizing curator Udo Kittelmann, who oversaw the catalogue, but over and against Kittelmann’s managerial flow it is easy to see the brilliant hand of the Bahnhof’s imaginative curator, Sven Beckstette. Beckstette, an old-school and underground hip-hop aficionado who worked as a music journalist while interning at the Lenbachhaus, briefly helmed the legendary journal Texte zur Kunst before heading to the Staatsgalerie Stuttgart to reconfigure its extensive holdings of the work of Otto Dix. All that experience and, now, several years at the Hamburger, found the ideal outlet in the somatic, intellectual, and editorial components of Hello World.

In both the exhibition and the catalogue is combined social and pictorial intelligence in a way not seen in more awkward and overly “woke” similar efforts in American, British, and French museums. For all the misguided efforts of the recently formed Decolonize this Place group, the world of high art is hardly a stranger to self-criticality via cultural eclecticism going all the way back to Karl Ernst Osthaus and Fred Wilson. What makes Hello World so successful in its post-exhibition life as a catalogue is that its aesthetic inclinations were more traditional, from an optical standpoint. It harkened back to, and partially bridged, two widely divergent tendencies in social art movements: social realism and abstraction. Similarly the book, while typeset and arranged as a massive singular work – the Remembrance of Things Past of catalogues – is also a functional and useful reference,
containing not just stunningly reproduced artworks many will have never encountered juxtaposed with the familiar (in the chapter “Where Do We Come From: Arranging Sculptural Forms” Rudolf Belling's Bildnis Alfred Flechtheim (1927) peers at Seni Camara's Mama Africa (1992) [96]) but well-researched and written articles and essays about the featured artists, their origins, and their work.

As a collaborative effort Hello World is consistently surprising. Anna-Catharina Gebbers' contribution “Making Paradise: Image Building from the Age of Imperialism to Indonesia's Present” [115-143] gives the requisite post-colonial interpretation of the ravages of successive regimes manipulated by French and British interference and propaganda. However Gebbers also examines the cultural cross-pollination in the case of Pita Maha, the artists collective founded by the Russian dilettante Walter Spies. In the 1920s and 1930s sprouted the “Bali Boom” when he invited – incredibly – Charlie Chaplin, Fritz Murnau, and Vicki Baum to his island home. Here Spies influenced the Balinese artists he met with the distorted perspectival views of the paintings and objects he made and had imported. (This misadventure was referenced in the exhibition by Tita Salina’s video 1001st Iceland, which showed the giant gyre of garbage and plastic that now swirls in the Java Sea.)

On the ground, Rodin’s Thinker was installed in the sculpture hall beside Austrian sculptor Anton Puchegger’s Portrait of the Chimpanzee Missie, who survived the First World War in the Berlin Zoo. Hans-Peter Feldmann’s pastel Bust of Neferiti became one of the signature images of the show, a poke at the “exotic” influences in nearby works by Picasso and Brancusi. Echoing the literal documentation that has become manifest in Kassel’s troubled quinquennial Documenta, the Bahnhof’s halls also had display cases of bills of lading, receipts, writing fragments, philosopher’s texts, and so on that built upon the concept of the archive.

Referring to that content mostly in annotations, one of the catalogue version of Hello World’s triumphs, without ever feeling like a horror movie jump-scares, is to leap from topic to topic without narrative transition. My favorite chapter (and installation) mingled the proliferation of Herwarth Walden’s Der Sturm journal as antagonism and inspiration to Tomoyoshi Murayama and the group Mavo in Tokyo – and to determine that the avant-garde was historical outside Europe. Hannah Höch’s Dada collages were placed alongside Murayama’s constructivist images, a reminder that some of those marginalized were German, pushed aside because they were women. Tomoko Marmine’s chapter, “Dada Expressionism Futurism: The Japanese Art Group Mavo from a Transcultural Perspective” [145-161] gives the titular didactic account, supplemented with excised works from the German and Japanese groups.

Showcasing the work of contemporary artists who have never worked along historical or geographical categories is a de facto challenge to Eurocentrism, and the selection of the works (which are for the most part comprehensible and didactic) provides a sense of thematic unity that is often missing from too-eager-to-please curation endeavors such as Christine Macel’s “Viva Arte
Though the curatorial team for Hello World was hired from Mumbai, Ljubljana, Paris, Cape Town, Mexico City, and elsewhere, the Hamburger Bahnhof relied greatly on its own holdings and those in the other state museums including the Kupferstichkabinett or Kunstbibliothek collections totaling more than 400 loans of art and primary source documents. At its most idealized reception, Hello World showed what museums might look like if the acknowledgement of intercultural cross-referencing were taken up as a routine practice.

One of the most wistful components of the exhibition, was the 13-segment Mexican installation that showcased what until very recently was quotidian in Mexican visual culture, Pre-Columbian sculptural techniques merged with crafts, fabrics, and high art. This collectivist backdrop to daily life inspired the Surrealists, Frida Kahlo, and, recently, “Panorama,” the most visually compelling episode of Matthew Weiner’ The Romanoffs in which the characters in the Diego Rivera mural outside the Palacio Nacional come to life. Against this imaginative backdrop, the figures of ancient gods and goddesses by Mariana Castillo Deball were both natural and impressive. This is probably the most legible, informative, and visually educational segment of the catalogue as well, comprising a block of essays by Daniel Garza Usabiaga, Melanie Roumiguère, and Santiago da Silva under the rubric “Entangled Holdings: Arte Popular, Surrealism, and Emotional Architecture.” Facing pages contrasting the density of one of Rivera’s murals with the sophisticated typography and use of icon and space in a sequence of “Mexican Folkways” posters also from the 1930s establishes both an oblique criticism and a strong claim.

American video artist Nicholas Galanin, whose two-channel video from 2008 featured a shamanistic ritual and a hip-hop dance routine with mismatched soundtracks, said of Hello World, “We will reopen this vessel of wisdom entrusted to us for safekeeping.”

The Hello World curators were courageous enough to eliminate anything that didn’t contribute to the desired effect and also to recognise that individual works in a show of this magnitude should always be subsumed into a larger composition. The images in the catalogue retain this scrapbook quality; they are somehow nostalgic given their immediacy, even elegiac, memento mori in Hello World’s visual tone poem.

At their best, these types of museum shake-ups connect us to a state of contemporaneity, of hipness and peril, of being in the right place at the wrong time in history, and to a feeling of mild optimism. For museum patrons who are not in the mood to indulge these sentiments – the news
this week that SFMoMA would sell one of its Rothkos to purchase more trendy works is a reminder of the disastrous decision of the Metropolitan Museum of Art to sell off its Max Beckmanns for some now-forgotten late minimalist sculptures in the 1970s – this trend comes across as cynical, manipulative, as trying too hard, or, conversely, not trying hard enough.

The strength of Hello World, particularly in its refusal to diminish the significance of its own collection of works by German artists, makes it impossible to dismiss as a market stunt. The works seem alive with unforced possibility, the artists’ respective strengths are emphasized, their weaknesses shored up. This eternal present also comes with the knowledge that it has already slipped into the past, a fact Hello World acknowledged in its moment, and what makes the commemorative catalogue assured of being valuable to researchers as well as those simply seeking a concretization of memory.

— Jean Marie Carey earned her PhD in Art History and German from the University of Otago with the dissertation How Franz Marc Returns (2018). Her next project is with the Arkeologisk Museum in Stavanger, connecting Aurignacian cave paintings and Marc’s animal images through studies of Einfühlung.