Berlin, 16 April 2025

DAHLEM/ HUMBOLDT FORUM
FORSCHUNGSCAMPUS DAHLEM – ETHNOLOGISCHES MUSEUM – MUSEUM FÜR ASIATISCHE KUNST – MUSEUM EUROPÄISCHER KULTUREN – INSTITUT FÜR MUSEUMSFORSCHUNG

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PRESS RELEASE
Ethnologisches Museum, Humboldt Forum
Schloßplatz, 10178 Berlin
Opening hours: Wed - Mon 10.30 a.m. – 6.30 p.m.

Manatunga - artistic interventions by George Nuku
18 May - 31 December 2025
A special exhibition of the Ethnologisches Museum of the Staatliche Museen zu Berlin
Opening: Saturday, 17 May 2025, 6.30 pm
Press tour: Friday, 16 May 2025, 11 a.m.

George Tamihana Nuku is one of New Zealand's leading contemporary artists. As a sculptor, he works with stone, bone, wood and shell, but above all with polystyrene and Plexiglass. From 18 May 2025, the Ethnological Museum will be presenting three large-scale interventions by the Māori artist in two rooms of the 'Oceania' exhibition area in the Humboldt Forum. These were created during two fellowships that George Nuku completed in March 2024 and from March to May 2025 as part of the "The Collaborative Museum" initiative.

"*Manatunga* is the Māori word given for precious objects, heirlooms and ancestral treasures. The word itself implies that they are standing - upright. It is also used in the context that these special pieces are concentrated repositories of histories and emotions." says George Nuku, explaining the title of his exhibition.

The interventions created by George Nuku especially for the Oceania section of the Ethnological Museum's permanent presentation in the Humboldt Forum will be shown in two rooms: a large-format installation in the large boat hall (room 215) will focus on the relationship between humans and the sea and the influences of climate change and environmental pollution. Two further interventions are presented in room 219, where exhibits from Polynesia and their relationships to ancestors and deities are on display.

In all three installations, Nuku takes up the theme of the exhibition rooms and establishes a connection to the objects from the Ethnological Museum's Oceania collection on display there. The contemporary artworks allow a new perspective on the historical objects, as Nuku explains: 'The inter-relationships between the past and the future, between new and ancient artworks, between a descendant of the origin families and the museum stewards of these ancestral treasures - who now reside within the institution - are brought to the light of the present."

In the large boat hall, Nuku places a *waka* (New Zealand canoe) made of Plexiglass on the large coral reef display case, steered by 5 men: the

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Māori demigod Māui and his four brothers. Māui pulls plastic sea creatures out of the sea with a large fishing hook. George Nuku takes up the theme of the boat room, showing the power of *Te Mo-ananui* - the 'big blue' - and the significance of the *waka*, which enabled humans to colonise this ocean in the first place. The five men made of Plexiglass hold historical paddles or bailer in their hands, the ends of the Plexiglass *waka* are decorated with historical sterns from the collections of the Ethnologisches Museum.

George Nuku is showing two works in room 219: The gable of a Māori meeting house made of Plexiglass surrounds three ancestor or god figures made of wood or stone from Aotearoa / New Zealand, the Marquesas Islands and Rapanui, and vis-à-vis, a Plexiglass gable construction shields the wooden figure of the god Sope from Nukuoro. The second artwork shows four ancestor figures made of Plexiglass in the style of historical Māori carvings, surrounded by specially designed display cases, that carry or hold weapons and jewellery from the Ethnologisches Museum's collections. The *manatunga* (ancestral treasures) are not presented lying down, as in the other showcases in the exhibition, but standing up. They are shown as dynamic, living actors and confront visitors with their presence.

Nuku not only combines historical and modern materials - such as wood and Plexiglass, as well as historical and modern works of art. He also relates the past, present and future to each other. Just as Māui once pulled *Te Ika a Māui* (Māui's fish), the northern island of Aotearoa / New Zealand, out of the sea with his fishhook made from the jawbone of an ancestor, he now brings plastic sea creatures to the surface. These sea creatures also 'live' in the 'sea', i.e. in the display case under the *waka*: they are jellyfish, fish, rays and corals made from pet bottles in a two-week workshop. In this way, the work also addresses the ecological challenges facing people in the Pacific and around the world. Plastic, the production and disposal of which causes us major problems, can be found in all parts of the world and in all living creatures due to global environmental pollution. We see plastic as rubbish to be disposed of. Nuku works with it and transforms it into living works of art of high aesthetic value. He confronts the viewer with a new level of the material and challenges them to perceive it anew and to engage with 'our rubbish': 'Through my Māori heritage, I try to reshape our relationship with the environment.For me, plastic bottles embody both light and water: the source of life itself. For me, the plastic bottle is evidence of divinity.This leads me to the idea that pollution itself is sacred.It's not too late to change our relationship with the environment and move closer to the plastic that influences every aspect of our lives today.'

George Tamihana Nuku (*1964 in Omahu, Aotearoa/New Zealand) is one of New Zealand's leading contemporary artists.As a sculptor, he works with stone, bone, wood, shells, polystyrene and Plexiglass.In his works, he constantly questions the relationships between humans, nature and culture, using millennia-old traditional elements of Māori culture to juxtapose them with contemporary themes such as decolonisation, repat-

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riation and reconciliation.His works are exhibited internationally, for example at the British Museum (London), the Cambridge Museum of Archaeology & Anthropology and the Musée du Quai Branly (Paris). His last major solo exhibition was organised in 2022 under the title ‘Oceans. Collections. Reflections’ at the Weltmuseum Wien.

The exhibition project is part of the **initiative “The Collaborative Museum”** (CoMuse) of the Ethnologisches Museum and the Museum für Asiatische Kunst. CoMuse aims to develop multiperspective approaches to collection-based research and test new formats for collaborative processes in order to sustainably intensify the decolonization and diversification of museum practices.

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