

Tutto passa tranne il passato

Everything Passes Except the Past

Curated by

Jana J. Haeckel

with

Irene Calderoni

Artists

Bianca Baldi, Alessandra Ferrini,
Grace Ndiritu, Troubled Archives

What role does photography take in a culture of memory? What are the ethical implications for the use of colonial images and how do we overcome their unsettling narratives? The exhibition presents photographic and lens-based artworks by Bianca Baldi, Alessandra Ferrini, Grace Ndiritu and the collective Troubled Archives that confront, challenge and repurpose the colonial gaze. They expose the colonial image archive as being a power instrument of social regimentation and point to the potential for critical redesign.

Throughout history, photography has often been accused of perpetuating and upholding colonial stereotypes. Photography was not only a witness and document of the colonial regime, but also its tool and accomplice. In the course of colonialism, ethnological museums in the 19th and 20th century collected an enormous image reservoir of portraits of those who did not fall under the heading of the white, Western, civil subject. The strictly formalised 'race portraits' representing body 'typologies' in the field of anthropology were taken under unequal balances of power and were used as proofs of an alleged European superiority within a political relationship of dominance. Many of these images are still on display today in various collections, while new digital technologies, such as facial recognition used for surveillance purposes, continue presumptuous, racist modes of representation.

As theorist and filmmaker Ariella Aïsha Azoulay states in *Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism* (2019), photography is more than a craft or practice, but rather it is a relationship that upholds empire, enforcing and reproducing systematic racism. Azoulay highlights how photography's collaboration with the historian's craft, the museum's value, and the imperial archive serves to regulate the ways in which stories are told and power relations are established. We therefore have to unlearn the history told through colonial image making.

The artists' practices introduce multiple voices putting into question the idea of the image as a document and address the responsibility that we have toward colonial photographs, even one hundred years later. Their works use, transform and edit colonial images without ignoring or erasing the harmful objectifications of the past. They point out the close intertwining of the history of photography with the history of colonialism, whose presumptuous, manipulative mode of representation continues to the present day. By reworking and combining the biased image archive, they develop a constructively critical access to racist footage and show how colonial power structures are established and stay present to this day.

This project is part of a 2 year-long international initiative that was developed by the Goethe-Institut through a series of workshops and events which took place in Belgium, France, Portugal and Spain since 2019. The exhibition is accompanied by a rich, discursive festival which will be streamed online on October 17. Alongside a keynote contribution from Bénédicte Savoy, round-table talks with activists, artists, experts, curators and researchers from Africa, Latin America and Europe will take place.

Troubled Archives

Radiatio 1, Radiatio 2, 2020

16 mm projections on cyanotype-induced cotton (295 cm x 400 cm), sound composition.

How to show colonial photographs without ignoring or erasing the harmful objectifications of the past? In the early 20th century, the Turin-based Missione della Consolata redistributed a series of black and white anthropometric photographs produced on their missionary journeys as photo-postcards depicting “scenes of daily life”, “habits” and “types” of native people. The postcards with condescending captions are still for sale online. The *Radiatio 1, Radiatio 2* film installation reframes a negative fragment of two of these highly problematic images as a point of departure: a photograph of a Kenyan woman with her baby and one of a Kenyan man with a whiskey bottle in his enlarged ear lobe. Troubled Archives proposes an altered version of these images: the woman carrying the baby becomes a “pietà” and the carrier of the bottle is elevated to an iconic figure. Only a fragment of both bodies depicted in the photographs is shown. The installation disrupts and unmasks the colonial gaze of the photographs and tries not to repeat the violence of the original picture. The fragments are projected as two negative 16mm films onto cyanotype-induced cotton, transforming the film image through light and time into a visible imprint on the hanging tissue. Each entering visitor puts the projectors in motion and thus helps imprint the images onto the cloth. With the help of this method of consciously switching from the photographic medium to film, the originally frozen motifs of the archival photographs become dynamic and almost living portraits, in which the depicted persons appear to withdraw themselves from the viewer’s voyeuristic gaze. In addition, two newly produced sound compositions are in dialogue with the images: the sound work gives voice and tries to find answers for our contemporary society, which is culturally mixed but still stuck in postcolonial misinterpretations, and bears the wounds of the past.

Troubled Archives

The Recognition Machine, 2019 – Today

Installation, modified printer, website.

The work presents an interactive photo-installation that invites the visitors to take a selfie and upload it on a newly created website. Through facial recognition technology trained to predict emotions, the website connects the photograph of the visitor with an archive of photographs that were taken during the violent circumstances of colonialism. Troubled Archives transforms the historic colonial images from different archives, such as the Pitt Rivers Museum, the Africa Museum Tervuren or the Quai Branly Museum, via analogue ‘procedures’ that include the chemical processing of 16mm film and printing techniques. For this exhibition, images from the Missione della Consolata archive were added to the virtual archive and will remain in the collection. Contemporary algorithms, based on the technique of machine learning, use large collections of digital photos and “big data” practices that, in some way, reflect the anthropometric project of the 19th century photographs. The resulting print output links contemporary regimes of surveillance to those of a colonial past, and shows how the paradigm of the ethnic “Other” is still visible and used today by new digital technologies, for example in facial recognition systems used by governments and police. Upon discovering their colonial ‘match’, the visitor is invited to explore the archive that holds it, and to post a comment on the website. A ticket machine prints two copies of the series of photographs. The visitor can take one print home, and hang the second print on the boards.

Troubled Archives is a Brussels-based, interdisciplinary collective of which Rokia Bamba, Michael Murtaugh and Antje Van Wichelen contributed to this exhibition. Rokia Bamba is a sound artist, DJ and activist. Her artistic work mixes archival sounds with her field and voice recordings. Michael Murtaugh is a freelance programmer specializing in community databases, digital archives, and tools for new forms of reading and writing online. He contributed with the Scandinavian Institute for Computational Vandalism (SICV) to the development of the *Recognition Machine*. Visual artist Antje Van Wichelen researches the collective memories and trauma of colonial classification, through the translation of archival photographs. Using manual 16mm-film development and printing, she re-writes these images and proposes a new, contemporary perspective. Troubled Archives’ collaborative work has been recently shown at Rautenstrauch-Joest-Museum Cologne (2019) and is invited to the Dakar Biennale (2020/21).

Bianca Baldi

***Doors of Distance*, 2017**

Printed voile and wooden construction. Dimensions variable.

***Eyes in The Back of Your Head*, 2017**

Video and steel construction, acrylic one-way mirror, monitor 142 X 82 X 82 cm and video 08:23 min (looped), colour, stereo.

Bianca Baldi takes photographic documents of Western European imperial history as a starting point for her practice. In the exhibition she presents a complex installation in the form of a labyrinth that consists of photographs printed on tissue, sculptures and a video work with a hypnotizing voice-over. The installation looks at Germany's little-known colonial past and examines the role of technology as a colonising tool in the colony of Togo. During her research in the local Slovene Ethnographic Museum of Ljubljana, Baldi came across documentary photographs by Slovenian engineer Anton Codelli and a talismanic scroll from the Togo collection of his friend Leo Poljanec. The two men had joined the German company Telefunken, to install a wireless telegraph in Kamina, a town in Togoland (then a German colony), that was to radio to Nauen in Brandenburg. The works displays these images as a re-appropriation on free-floating arrangements and puts their former use-value as reliable documents into question. The installation shows how colonial power structures are established and stay present in economic infrastructures, such as communication companies. The figure (and the voice) of the talisman adds a new, non-rational quality, that takes aim at the visitor's physical experiences in the labyrinth, where Western and non-Western systems of belief and control collide and unite.

Bianca Baldi (born 1985 in Johannesburg, based in Brussels) is a South African artist who deals with hidden infrastructures and narratives in her films, installations, photographs and images. Evoking the histories of film, studio photography and trompe-l'œil, she positions carefully chosen objects and images revealing complex webs of political, economic and cultural influences. Her work has been featured in large international exhibitions such as the 11th Rencontres de Bamako (Mali), the 11th Shanghai Biennale (China), the 8th Berlin Biennale (Germany), and group exhibitions at Kunsthalle Bern (Switzerland), Extra City Kunsthal, Antwerp (Belgium), Kunstverein Braunschweig and Kunstverein Frankfurt (Germany).

Grace Ndiritu

***A Quest For Meaning - AQFM Vol. 10*, 2020**

Installation

Courtesy the artist and MACBA Barcelona.

Since 2010, Grace Ndiritu has been developing an encyclopedic archive, *A Quest For Meaning (AQFM)*. Originating through non-rational methodologies and shamanic journeys, it proposes a universal narrative spoken through the photographic image, linking seemingly disparate objects, subjects and events. The installation displays the photographs in specific frames, referring to the image and its mediality, and integrates new images as well as photographs taken from books. An important starting point were writings by Ndiritu inspired by her travels in North Africa, as well as her archival research on the Spanish Rif Wars of the 1920s, the cutup techniques of William Burroughs, and notes of Moroccan modernist poet and filmmaker Ahmed Bounanani. By making the viewers unsure of the time and reference point, Ndiritu challenges traditional concepts of the archive, mainly used as a Western system of power and control. She proposes a new model of classification that understands the images as non-rational 'documents' and develops her own, personal counter-archive – a strategy that has often been used by famous male researchers and artists, such as Aby Warburg and Gerhart Richter. In doing so, *A Quest For Meaning* is prompting us to unlearn how we look, receive, experience, and deploy images. The installation challenges us to rethink our assumptions about photography's relationship with time and asks us to contemplate what lies in between the real and the imagined.

Grace Ndiritu is a British-Kenyan artist whose artworks are connected with the transformation of our contemporary world, including the impact of globalisation and environmental justice, through her films, photography, paintings, and social practice projects with refugees, migrants

and indigenous groups. Works like *The Ark: Center for Interdisciplinary Experimentation*, the *COVERSLUT*© fashion and economic project, and the shamanic performance art series *Healing The Museum* have been shown all around the world. Recent exhibitions include Bluecoat Gallery, Liverpool (2019), S.M.A.K. & M.S.K., Belgium (2019), Eastside Projects, Birmingham (2018), CAG Vancouver (2018), Fundació Antoni Tàpies, Barcelona (2017), Laboratoires d'Aubervilliers, Paris (2016), Glasgow School of Art (2015), Museum of Modern Art, Warsaw (2014), Musée de la Chasse et de la Nature and Centre Pompidou, Paris (2013). Ndiritu has been featured in *Phaidon: The 21st Century Art Book* (2014) and in *Art Monthly*. Her work is housed in museum collections such as the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, The British Council, UK, the Museum of Modern Art, Warsaw, and in private collections such as the one of King Mohammed VI, Morocco and the Walther Collection, New York and Germany.

Alessandra Ferrini

***Sight Unseen*, 2020**

Installation, 18' video, prints on paper.

Omar al-Mukhtar (1885-1931) was the leader of the organised resistance against the Italian colonisation of Libya (1911-1943). He became the symbol of Libyan people's resilience and has been greatly celebrated and exploited both by the Gaddafi regime and the armed groups currently fighting for control of the Libyan territory. In Italy, his name remains unknown – yet, it briefly appeared in the media during Gaddafi's first visit to Italy in 2009. Indeed, the colonel emerged from his plane in Rome, wearing an image of Omar al-Mukhtar in chains, surrounded by the Fascist Army as he was taken to his execution by public hanging. While researching this event in Rome, the artist came across a controversial history of concealment and appropriation around the memory and documentation of Mukhtar's final days and spectacularised state killing. *Sight Unseen* reflects on such history through the analysis of visual and material culture that has been subject to either manipulation or obfuscation in Italy. These materials include: the most complete – but legally unpublishable – series of images of Mukhtar's capture and execution; Mukhtar's contested glasses and purse; the Hollywood production *The Lion of the Desert*; and Monumento al Carabiniere, a memorial to Italian armed forces in Turin. In this way, *Sight Unseen* attempts to portray the carefully orchestrated politics of visibility and invisibility that shape the memory of colonial trauma in Italy.

Alessandra Ferrini is a London-based artist, researcher and educator. Her practice is rooted in lens-based media, anti-colonial and memory studies, historiographical and archival practices. Her research investigates Italian foreign and racial politics, notions of resistance, positionality and reflexivity. In particular, it is preoccupied with questioning the legacies of Italian colonialism and fascism with a specific interest in the past and present relations between Italy and the African continent. Framed by the device of the 'essayistic', her work spans across moving image, installation and dialogic formats, as well as writing, publishing and collaboration. Ferrini's work has featured in international exhibitions, screenings and conferences, including: the 2nd Lagos Biennial (2019), Sharjah Film Platform (2019), Manifesta 12 Film Programme (Palermo 2018), Villa Romana (2018 and 2019), Fondazione Sandretto Re Rebaudengo (Turin 2018), the 6th Taiwan International Video Art Exhibition (Hong-gah Museum, 2018), Document Film Festival (Centre for Contemporary Arts, Glasgow, 2017), the 16th Rome Quadriennale (Rome, 2016-17).