

EUROPEAN GHOSTS on the representation of art from Africa in the twentieth century

“There is a cut-and-paste between the colonial past and the present situation. The dominant-dominated relationship still prevails.”

(Sammy Baloji in ‘L’Afrique à Venise: le mea culpa des Belges’, Le Monde, 6 May 2015).

The exhibition EUROPEAN GHOSTS examines the Western perception of African art in the twentieth century. Which exotic and colonial ideas lie at the origin of ‘our’ perspective on primitive art, ‘art nègre’ and ethnic art? What role have European and African artists, writers and researchers played throughout the last century? Is there a shared heritage? How much has changed since Guillaume Apollinaire’s plea *Sur les musées* (1908), in which he asked for space to be made in the Louvre for ‘exotic masterpieces’? Today, one hundred and seven years later: what image do we have of Africa nowadays, and what role does the ethnographic museum play within it? Which traces of colonial anthropology and ethnography are still at work today?

“The museum is basically an ideological construction, a ‘vehicle’ for an imperialist narrative that has been condemned by history, but which continues to exist in representations and the collective imagination.” These are the words of the artist, art historian and curator Toma Muteba Luntumbue. He correctly points out the mandatory nature of the Western museum model, in which the Other is only welcomed or tolerated as a temporary guest. Its own definitions continue to prevail, and the Other is left with no option but to accede. Have our minds been decolonised? Is it possible to talk about a shared heritage without asking the question of restitution or reparation? Or, as it was formulated by the Pitt Rivers Museum at the conference ‘The Future of Ethnographic Museums’ (July 2013): who has the right to possess and present the material culture of others?

These questions and observations lie at the heart of the exhibition. The ghosts in the title are ours, and perhaps the time has come to map the ‘forms and signifiers’ behind different perspectives and ways of looking? European Ghosts is about a century of looking and being looked at, the related interpretations and, where necessary, the confrontation of gazes.

Why has Mu.ZEE taken up the challenge of working with the collection belonging to the Royal Museum for Central Africa in Tervuren? An initial answer lies in the dialogue that the museum initiated with the artist Sammy Baloji in the summer of 2014. In his exhibition *Hunting & Collecting*, he drew together artists and scientists, and combined historical documents and economic data with the art collection of Mu.ZEE. Through this, Baloji was able to use the displays to generate 'collective subject' knowledge. The term comes from philosopher Achille Mbembe, the author of, amongst other works, *Critique de la raison Nègre* (2013). It is an invitation to join divergent forces into a logical movement. Within the context of an exhibition, a 'collective subject' can be described as a platform for reflection upon a topic. It creates space for the power of the individual artist's creation, the critical thinking of diverse individuals, and for reflection upon the operation of the museum as an institution. *Hunting & Collecting* has become a valuable gift and provided a new track for the museum and exhibition policy of Mu.ZEE. *EUROPEAN GHOSTS* has the ambition to continue this suggested way of thinking, with a focus on documents. * In this context, Mbembe speaks of 'multiple archives': "Postcolonial studies have contributed much to our understanding of the past, present and future, but they are not sufficient to enable us to grasp what is going on today. Europe is no longer the only reference point. We must enter into a dialogue with other parts of the world. (...) We need to enrich the dialogue with ideas and theories that come from other disciplines. If we take the risk, we will be faced with a completely different archive. This does not mean that we should push European archives aside. That is impossible: we are very much a part of them. And vice versa, Europe is part of our archive, through a shared history. But we need to work with multiple archives."**

Documents and texts are the starting point of the exhibition, particularly the first photographs and publications of objects and masks from Africa. The selection of more than forty-five works from the collection of the Royal Museum for Central Africa is based entirely on the earliest reproductions and descriptions, and the observations of, amongst others, Vladimir Markov, Carl Einstein, Alfred Steiglitz, Walker Evans, Michel Leiris, Frans M. Olbrechts, as well exhibitions such *Afrikanische Skulpturen* at Museum Folkwang in Essen in 1912, *African Negro Art* at MoMA in New York in 1935 and *Kongo-kunst* in Antwerp in 1937-38, to cite just a few twentieth-century examples. These moments are inseparable from political events, such as the Congo Conference that was held in Berlin in 1884-85, and which forms the departure point for this exhibition and, as provisional endpoint, *Personne et les Autres*, the entry for the Belgian Pavilion at the fifty-sixth Venice Biennale in 2015. We also look at the chronology of the twentieth century, and the overlaps between art and politics. When Picasso made his preliminary sketches for *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* in the winter of 1906, numerous diatribes against the colonial rule of King Leopold II had already been published throughout the world. Even after the Second World War, Picasso continued to show a great interest in the African continent and looked with a critical eye, for example, at the activities of the uranium king and art collector Joseph Hirshhorn. And then there's a picture from 1956, taken in the Palace of Fine Arts in Brussels: Patrice Lumumba stands before *Guernica* by Picasso. Shortly after his return to Congo, he was captured, and wrote *Le Congo est-il une terre d'avenir?*

Addressing the period after the Second World War, the exhibition looks mainly at the writings and visions of influential thinkers and writers such as Aimé Césaire, Cheikh Anta Diop, Chinua Achebe and even Édouard Glissant. The aforementioned French-Antillean writer wrote: "We hate ethnography: whenever, executing itself elsewhere, it does not fertilise the dramatic vow of relation. The mistrust that we feel toward it is not caused by our displeasure of being looked at, but rather our obscure resentment of not being seen." In 2006, Glissant was commissioned by the then French President Jacques Chirac to conduct research into a museum to commemorate slavery. For various reasons, the research funds were never effectively released and the museum has not (yet) come to fruition.

Peau noire, masque blancs by the psychiatrist and Pan-African Freedom thinker Frantz Fanon was published in 1952. During the 1980s, his study (translated into English in 1967 as *Black Skin, White Masks*) developed into one of the most important indictments of colonialism and racism. Fanon

studied the impact of colonialism on a culture, and described the colonial era in Africa as being a period of recurrent and significant psychopathology. It was not limited to a single symptom, but involved multiple, similar and repeated traumas. What kind of behaviour betrays an oppressed people? Fanon answered his question by saying: "We witness the destruction of cultural values, of ways of life. Language, dress, techniques, are devalorized... The cultural mummification leads to a mummification of individual thinking."

EUROPEAN GHOSTS also studies various exhibition models, and methods of design and representation in exhibitions and publications, ranging from the installation of the 'Congolese objects' at the 'universal exhibition' in Brussels in 1897 to the displays of today. How do presentation methods influence the ways in which objects are perceived? How was – and is – the discourse about objects and masks steered in particular ethnographic directions, both in form and content, via display cases and labels? We have invited Manfred Pernice (b. 1963, Hildesheim) to respond, from the perspective of his own artistic practice, to the plinth, the mask and exhibition furniture.

Patrick Wokmeni has accepted the greatest challenge. He has photographed artefacts from the collection of the Museum for Central Africa 'anew'. This is the first time that the Tervuren museum, and at the request of Mu.ZEE, has given an artist this permission to create new individual photos of the masks and objects, and on such a broad scale. Wokmeni's photographs are important for the exhibition. They are one of the ways through which we can add contemporary perspectives to the archives of the future. In 2013, Wokmeni made a series of photographs of immigrants waiting in Rabat, in precarious conditions, for a possible crossing to Europe. He painted an intimate picture of people languishing in Morocco, their makeshift lives, and his pictures testify to the uncertainty between the cultural context and political systems.

What do the 'silent' objects and masks tell us in 2015? In the film *La noire de* (1966), the Senegalese writer and filmmaker Ousmane Sembene tells a story about colonialism, racism and post-colonial identity from a female perspective. The woman is a domestic servant who follows a 'Mr and Mrs' when they are 'forced' to return to their homeland. There is – to put it mildly – no communication. Human relationships in the film are indirectly observed through a mask: as if the mask, like a 'slave', oscillates between conflicting relationships. In Europe, it hangs on the white painted wall and everyone projects his own version of Africa onto the mask. The mask is successively created in the film as a pseudo-fetish object for tourists, worn in performances and dances, discarded, given as a gift, stamped as 'authentic', transported to Europe, projected onto a wall, 'used' as a two-way projection screen (anthropological and aesthetic), returned as a debt to Africa and ends up as a ghost, or better, as a mirror against colonialism.

The boomerang returns us to the first half of the twentieth century, particularly the so-called humanitarian and ethnographic missions. *EUROPEAN GHOSTS* reflects upon Michel Leiris, an important French ethnographer and, in many ways, the 'liaison' between artists and writers such as Georges Bataille, Aimé Césaire and Pablo Picasso... He participated in the famous *Dakar-Djibouti* mission of 1931-33. In his recent study of Michel Leiris and other contemporary ethnographers, the researcher Joseph Epoka Mwantuali described 'the consistent plundering of a culture'. Yet he makes an exception for Michel Leiris, who wrote *L'Afrique fantôme* in 1934: for his intelligent way of looking and the creation, through his writings, of "*l'Autre qui apparaît chez vous*". It was this that inspired the title of the exhibition, *EUROPEAN GHOSTS*, and the reversal of the gaze, while the project also follows Achille Mbembe's invitation to seek multiple archives.

** It is our ambition to make a sequel to EUROPEAN GHOSTS. This summer, exploratory talks will be held on the subject of organising an exhibition of modern and contemporary art in Lubumbashi in the not too distant future. The collection of Mu.ZEE is one of the starting points. Together with Hunting & Collecting, this will mean that the third and final part of the exhibition series will be shown in Congo.*

*** Art museums, thanks to contemporary artistic practices, have become multifaceted archives. Mbembe has written about this previously, in When I Close a Book, I Open Life: “The museum is in a new experimental phase. For a long time, its function remained unchanged, and it never strayed far from its historical origins or consolidated nineteenth-century form. A range of factors has led to a revision in the role of today’s museums and, driven by artists, they have actually mutated. Contemporary artists imitate, use and tinker with all different types of historical documents and narratives. These have become their base material. They have transformed the museum, long exclusively object-based, into an archive. As a result, museums are encouraged to adapt their organisational structures, to define exhibitions as temporary collections, and to think about collection policies in much broader terms that just objects.”*

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