

AIMLESS

03.02.2023 – 21.01.2024



CONFRONTING IMIAGO MUNDI

Participant artists: Ignasi Aballí, Cresques Abraham, Andreu Alfaro, Kader Attia, Irma Blank, Dineo Seshee Bopape, Andrea Büttner, Miguel Ángel Campano, Juana Francés, Meschac Gaba, Ferran García Sevilla, David Goldblatt, Shilpa Gupta, José Hernández, Erika Hock, Iman Issa, Alfredo Jaar, Voluspa Jarpa, Steffani Jemison, Tadashi Kawamata, Kcho, Bouchra Khalili, José María de Labra, Moshekwa Langa, Richard Long, Ibrahim Mahama, Ángeles Marco, Manolo Millares, Joan Miró, Robert Motherwell, Wangechi Mutu, Guillem Nadal, Miquel Navarro, Ernesto Neto, Gabriel Orozco, Jorge Oteiza, Claudia Peña Salinas, Gala Porras-Kim, Hassan Sharif, Nida Sinnokrot, Joaquín Sorolla and Adriana Varejão

Cresques Abraham, *World map*, 1375. Facsimile, 1983, 66 × 50 cm. Biblioteca Nacional de España.

DISORIENTATION STRATEGIES IN CONFRONTING THE IMAGE OF THE WORLD

Agustín Pérez Rubio

The image of the world or *Imago Mundi* constitutes in and of itself a way of projecting desires, attitudes and aspirations that are rooted in ways of thinking and acting in any given moment. Unsurprisingly, many of these images were created for concerns related to military conflict, imperialist longings and the urge for domination and wealth. Geographers were individuals who almost magically observed the stars and knew about the tides, who perceived territories by drawing the contours of their coastlines; in the end, they were those who constructed knowledge and ways of seeing “in service to”. They influenced the narrative of what we have called History (with a capital H), which implied that this discipline is not merely the legacy of winners, men, monarchs and the monied class—all notions of cis-heteropatriarchy and class are implicit. It has furthermore enabled the expansion of knowledge according to their way of understanding and perpetuating it, with its colonial, racist and sexist matrix expressed in the full range of its possibilities.

The medieval geographers were an excellent example of what we refer to. They were visionaries who understood that their task would be to set down in the broadest way possible what was involved with being in the world. The techniques they employed went further than what was simply objectifiable, as to a certain degree they became narrators or chroniclers of the image of the world that existed beyond their own geographical constraints. For this reason, astrology, astronomy, the study of wind, geology, as well as biology, botany and even anthropology and sociology were of interest to them. Then, as an integral part of various societies in the same historical period, they came to be part of this study and representation, for as shown through the art of miniaturised drawing, they were presented

as *logos* and *rhetorica*, information and representation, both being qualities used to this end.

Indications of what we have observed can be provided by the fine example of the famous *Catalan Atlas* by Cresques, from 1375, currently conserved in the French National Library. The labour of cartographers as a guild was constituted on a minor scale, in a system connecting the maestro to the apprentice or disciple. In this case, the artifice was Cresques Abraham, a Jewish man who resided in the Aljama in Palma de Mallorca. As for the reasons that might have led him to the creation of this atlas, we know that it could have been drafted for the purpose of advising King Peter IV, called the Ceremonious, in his interest in expanding commerce to the East, an attractive, immensely rich region that he was keen to have direct trade with.¹ As for Cresques's son, it should be noted that after the revolts brought on against the Jews in various cities of the Crown of Aragon in 1391, he chose to be baptised, residing in Barcelona under his adopted name, Jaume Ribes. This biographical detail allows us to understand something of the anti-Semitic notions, and views against the Arab world, which at that time would find support in the Catholic Monarchs Isabella and Ferdinand, in connivance with the Holy Inquisition. Everyone who was not white and Christian was expelled from residing in the territories of the Crown, given that our nation, as now constituted, was founded with this expulsion of Arabs and Jews and the search for riches in the New World. It is a nation that since the Inquisition has obsessively aspired to whiteness of skin and purity of Christian blood, perpetuating visceral hate for certain skin tones along with xenophobic beliefs to the present day—through Francoism, which then shifts into the most conservative part of the current Spanish population—where racialised immigrants are vilified.

1. Hernando, Agustín. *El Atlas Catalán de 1375: una representación del mundo en la Mallorca de la Baja Edad Media*. In: *Paratge*, 2018, no. 31, p. 25, <<https://raco.cat/index.php/Paratge/article/view/366602>>.

In any case, what most concerns us about this atlas is how, on a small Mediterranean island, they were able to gather and transmit such knowledge. As for the information gathered there, it offers a rather impressive depiction of parts of the world quite beyond the then-known limits that had been set out by merchants, pilgrims and sailors. Some of these were extremely novel for the time it was made, such as in relation to the Asian continent; it represented a veritable revolution for the mentality of the time, rejecting as it does widely-held beliefs in a fantasy world, as seen in other cartographies. While indebted to monastic precepts and other maps created in monasteries, this atlas, with its geometric way of understanding the world in terms of the designs of God, is a fine example of certain currents of the time set somewhere between empirical and monastic, given that it brings together and conciliates these two stylistic cartographic traditions, which normally would be in opposition to each other, respectively grounded in two different imaginations or conceptions of reality: the nautical one, forged in empirical culture, in maritime experience and practice—recalling that this map has the first depiction of a wind rose—and the monastic one, with its urge to heighten the visibility of events described in the holy scriptures, taking them as true and localisable.²

With the passing of the centuries, the vessel of knowledge and belief would shift towards greater rationality. This, on the one hand, gave us what is presumed to be secularisation, which together with empiricism left behind other ways of believing and understanding the world, finalising in a single unequivocal form. In doing this, it did not seek to minimise the importance of research and artistic studies that led to the creation of a document as important as the atlas. However, in the wake of the conquest of the New World, terms such as *equality* and *inequality* did not begin to be used in normal speech until the early seventeenth century, under the influence of the doctrine of natural law. A doctrine of natural law that emerged, to a great degree,

2. *Ibid.*, p. 26.

in debates related to the moral and legal implications of European discoveries in the New World.³ In a certain way, the atlas is the concrete proof of the way of representing the world as normalised, without understanding the inequalities and asymmetries of this representation, which has to do with Eurocentrism.

It was the Enlightenment that pressured the most in seeking to understand that there cannot be anything beyond what is rational, offering apparent interpretations of everything that was not objective and unequivocal. Furthermore, in protecting what was empirical and scientific, it paved the way for the comprehension of other realities and organisational methods. There were those like Thomas Hobbes, in his 1651 *Leviathan*, the foundational text of modern political theory, or years later Jean-Jacques Rousseau, in his 1754 *Discourse on Inequality*, who seemed to be laying out the foundations for an evolutive study of history. While each came from a completely different starting point, the result is fairly similar. We are speaking of a form that has been hotly debated as well, up to the present, by other social agents and studies, and even more so when we comprehend that it was the final result of a diverse influx of ideas that came to Europe after European intellectuals were conflicted by their exposure to other civilisations and social, scientific and political ideas (due to colonialism) that they had never been able to imagine previously. In any case, even while knowing that various social and legal forms brought from the colonies were tested, translated or copied, this served to even more fully erase the mark of all forms of knowledge and experience outside of Europe, renaming them as such and upholding the status quo to safeguard timeworn Europe. Yet what would have happened if all this had not taken place as it did? What other narrative would we have today? What forms of political, legislative and social engagement would constitute us? How might we be able to understand everything that surrounds us? Would we be able to continue to speak of inequality, if this concept had

3. Graeber, David; Wengrow, David. *El amanecer de todo. Una nueva historia de la humanidad*. Barcelona: Ariel, 2022, p. 47.

not existed? These are just some of the questions that arise if we delve into the postulates of the Enlightenment, leaving behind other kinds of non-Western cosmogonies and knowledge.

When speaking of the curatorial task within a museum, as an enlightened construction with its colonial matrix, it is convenient to comprehend other strategies that challenge, speak to and resist the institution itself. As Rolando Vázquez has observed, museums work as processes of subjectivation for those who might be encompassed by them normatively, while at the same time wielding forms of subjugation by denigrating or erasing all those who have no place in their given epistemic or aesthetic canon.⁴ For this reason, the actions and desires of artists, along with the potential ways of approaching these works in their aesthetic and formal resistances, constitute the driving force of this confrontation. This refers both to silenced histories that are now heard directly, in all their literalness, and to invisibilisation in registry and lack of understanding of their artistcity, or those based on other approaches, not only rational ones but those with emancipating capital. We refer to forms that artists have laid out in resisting the colonial order where the Museum and our ways of thinking, learning, communicating and producing are grounded. In many cases, in a resilient manner, this entails understanding that getting lost, not arriving to a specific direction, is part of a strategy, of a new form of apprenticeship.

In this guidebook entitled *Aimless*, the walls seem to catch a glimpse of a horizon that moves randomly in meridians and parallels, insisting even more in the notion of time as the material of our collections. Time as a usurped material, what Aníbal Quijano⁵ speaks of when referring to the Conquest as a

4. Vázquez, Rolando. *Vistas of Modernity. Decolonial aesthetics and the end of the contemporary*. Amsterdam: Mondriaan Fund, n. 14, 2020, p. 14.

5. Quijano, Aníbal. "Colonialidad del poder, eurocentrismo y América Latina". In: *Cuestiones y horizontes: de la dependencia histórico-estructural a la colonialidad/descolonialidad del poder*. Buenos Aires: CLACSO, 2014, pp. 219-264.

circumstance of pillage. What was stolen was not only material goods and lands; rather, coloniality obliged the conquered to adopt an altogether different time from the one the defeated cultures had, eradicating whatsoever notion of temporality that was not linear, along with the calendar that controlled the lives of the conquerors. In this sense, in our spatial loss another temporal loss is implied, where the past and the future might greet each other, where temporal strategies have no clear linearity and a feeling of disorientation placidly invades us, as a way of ridding ourselves of this colonial, Eurocentric matrix.

Transcending the Copernican Turn

In the first gallery, the blue line divides the horizon between sky and earth, while at the same time looking like the equator—the imaginary line dividing the planet into two hemispheres, North and South—that has distinguished the history of humanity. This line, to which Adriana Varejão refers to, is written as destiny on the palm of our hand; it was identified by the French-Spanish geodesic expedition of 1736 in the city of Quito, at just 13 kilometres from the city centre, although previously the local native communities had made offerings to the Sun in that same vicinity. A line that transformed scientific studies, as carried out from the haughty perspective of Europeans towards local, colonised communities.

In this regard, the gallery composes another way of understanding the historical image of the world, constricting time and proposing other possible representational projects. Guillem Nadal is an example, questioning the Mercator map of the world we have grown up with: it does not have accurate projections of dimensions, the land positions are not right, and Europe is always in the centre with Africa diminished, for example. Along with this, in the exhibition there are chronological leaps as a strategy of confrontation and dislocation between the *Atlas* and later social realities, such as the persecutions inflicted on Jews by Torquemada, as recalled by Manolo Millares in his works and poems. Or Jewish beliefs such as the Kabbalah,

as recalled by José María de Labra Suazo with his *Sephiroth*, in reference to the Kabbalah's ten attributes and emanations, where infinity reveals itself in the form of abyss, as Miquel Navarro proposes.

Since the Middle Ages, and through the Enlightenment, the idea of the spherical shape of the Earth, along with calculations, geometries and precise analysis, gave rise to a way of framing positivism. Yet art has ensured other, more open perspectives to understand new relationships with these shapes, whether through calculus, the use of algebra and arithmetic, or in equivalences and percentages—Ignasi Aballí—or through spherical geometry, which at that time led to so many concerns. This relationship with the roundness of the planet, which is close to the vision we use in our day, began to take on a greater role in the world system of Copernicus (1473–1543), to be subsequently modified by Kepler (1571–1630) and Galileo (1564–1642), who studied the majority of projections to understand this registry as a geometric play of shapes, related to astrology. A similar relationship can be found in *Hillargia. La luna como luz movediza* [Hillargia: The Moon as Moving Light] (1957–2003), by Jorge Oteiza, found on the outside of the building.

Moving planes, or those exchanging rotations—whether lunar or planetary—are found in other works, such as those of Ángeles Marco. They are also present in the balls floating like planets in the Joan Miró painting, like a constellation or galaxy, and in Gabriel Orozco's spheres, referring us to a journey on a boarding card for one of the artist's flights. Yet if we move towards a legendary beginning, to worlds where beings or entities who lived in the waters were an integral part of a universe of non-human species, they are present in the Juana Francés water series, and even more specifically in the work of Hassan Sharif, with the title *Ammonite nº1*. His sculpture recalls both fossilised molluscs in spiralling shells and, more materially, those knotted ropes used for tying down moored ships. The very history of navigation has been fossilised, as we come to consider more active and less extractive forms of navigation.

In the gallery of the conflict between sky and earth, between horizontality and verticality, this very ambivalence is found in Ernesto Neto's work, as well as in that of Miguel Ángel Campano, who through apparent forms or utensils laid out on a surface, alters the order and tricks the eye. However, we are held by a dual emotion in the gallery, for if on the museum esplanade Richard Long proposes various options for us to take a path or escape, in the stones of *Five Paths* (2004), inside the space we are confronted, in a manner that is not rectilinear but multidirectional, with a past that we would prefer to erase or see disappear. This is what Ferran García Sevilla sets out for us: in painting, stains or traces, he exposes us as well as the censors of history, pointing in multiple ways to the path to be followed through the use of arrows. The ductility of painting makes it ideal when it comes to exemplifying this iconography, this material conception, just as Ferran García Sevilla presents it in his open way of taking on forms and directions. It might seem we have completely changed direction, that we are fully caught up in a "Copernican turn", a radical change of perspective as found in the general position laid out in the philosophy of Immanuel Kant. This is the reason that the Prussian philosopher is present in the gallery, at the very end, as a backdrop that holds together a good part of the gallery's content, leading in turn to the gallery that follows. Kant's "turn" is similar to Copernicus's, so that the viewer is the one who is turning instead of the stars. Kant's Copernican turn demonstrates that greater knowledge can be had if the place where we are, the time and the conditions of the starting point itself are taken into account. For this reason, we must recognise the respective conditions of an image if we wish to understand what it represents.

Still, do we really want to join the sure path of knowledge and follow Kant through all these changes? With Andrea Büttner we are simultaneously thrown off by her play of support and literalness. This is why, at first, the German artist renders homage to the philosophy of Kant, which at the same time seems odd to us, given that one of the most attractive

aspects of Kant's corpus is its systematic nature, while Büttner opts for kind of system conceived to challenge the will to systematise, while dualities and conventional distinctions are complicated. It might seem that Büttner's *Kant's Critique of the Power of Judgment* is also a kind of systemless system, a heterogeneous unity of challenged and challenging dualities where the images are literal. In their literality, then, they interrupt as much as they support; they perturb from out of a space set somewhere between putting in check and paying tribute. When all is said and done, Büttner is questioning the way of conceiving art, destabilising the very system it is escaping from, just as occurs with the directionality of this exhibition's aimless journey.

*Dismantling the Linguistic Turn:
The Invisible History*

How can history be humanised, if it is not with imagination and rewriting strategies that call for the imagination to be set free, for the creation of grafts, or by short-circuiting the way that history has been told until now? With Kant as the backdrop, notions of his turn made their way to the philosophy of language, from Wittgenstein and Gustav Bergmann all the way to Richard Rorty,⁶ in 1967. His "linguistic turn" gave rise to a new way of understanding it, however much it retains a certain universalist character, even in opposition to the previous tradition, as it affirms that the ideal language that had been conceived until then was systematic, merely descriptive and with limitations, influenced by supposed theoreticians of metaphysics, analytical philosophy and positivism, to which it was opposed, just as it rejected the notion of objective truth.

With Rorty as our starting point, and attempting to shift him to the visual aspect of writing, we observe in this space

6. Rorty, Richard. *The Linguistic Turn: Essays in Philosophical Method*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967.

that the work is in confrontation with historical thought and writing, grounded in various forms of resistance. A simple example is the way that Robert Motherwell used collage from a 1966 newspaper in *Guardian nr 3*, where he employs the newspaper sheet to break with the narrative of news, leading to a temporary collapse caused by the fissure in time in the months the news story refers to; it is a type of temporary distortion and opacity that reading, and this work, take on as a strategy. This impossibility to practice writing is also presented in the work of Irma Blank, who, faced with the condensation of the sign in a hyper-informed, computerised society, proposes intelligible handwriting as a way of negating and blinding certain content, rather than the very fact of the possibility of reinventing another writing and a new hypothesis for the future creation of a more diverse narrative.

The use of signs that apparently have no logic, or where our rationality is blocked when seeking to address them, is part of the research activity explored in the work of Steffani Jemison. The artist delves into the case of the codified, illegible writing of Ricky McCormick; an Afro-American man found dead in 1999 in a field in Missouri, he had codified notes done on paper in his pockets, which the FBI was never able to decipher. The artist presents a micro-history—in the most authentic style of Foucault—as a way of humanising the narrative of traumatic events, at the same time separating us from them as a feeling of uncertainty or ambivalence of signs and history. This leads to the energetic gesture, like a tag or graffiti, which is here made to work in parallel to the dominant culture, to legible writing, opposed to it in ways that are both subtle and head on. In her opposition, Jemison presents ways of disorienting the dominant flow of history, and even more so in the case of Afro-American studies that she explores more completely.

In a more direct manner, Chilean artist Voluspa Jarpa confronts written history through burnt paper, which has been abused and stretched like a body, thus constructing a work-device composed of encyclopaedias of Latin American

history, along with documents from the United States intelligence services on the countries in the region, and tools for daily uses and trades. The work alludes to the phantom halo of the history of violence that ravaged the region during the military dictatorships the referred-to documents speak of, exposing American collaboration with their elites. The book, submitted as it is by the tools of labour, addresses the impossibility of writing history in these countries because of geopolitical dependency and the fact that this information is secret. The work constitutes a reflection on the need to visualise history as a history of “contaminations” of internal and external powers, as produced in the past by our very lives, as well as in contemporaneity’s future prospects.

There are other oppositional strategies to the linear narrative and manner in which history is written, though implemented with images. Publications, magazines or photographic traces serve in themselves to gather and condense information, making it possible, depending on the given point of view, to understand a new narrative on the basis of the literalness of micro-history or through the fixation of an untold history. This is the realm that Alfredo Jaar’s work operates in, interested as he is in how the visual narrative of certain publications might define the symbolic and universal capital of an era, however tendentious—in this case we refer to Africa, exposing the negative press given by the American magazine *Life*, with the African continent minimised on its covers. Another case is that of South African photographer David Goldblatt, who in his photographs of specific places makes reference to untold microhistories that have been part of some important narrative. His images capture public and private spaces where processes of death, oppression and healing are present. While it is true that Goldblatt became known as a photographer opposed to apartheid, his images deal with subject matter that goes beyond apartheid’s violent events, reflecting in turn the conditions that facilitated it. His strategy when photographing, as he himself has labelled it, is “dispassionate”, making it possible to avoid and eradicate facile judgementality.

In entering into this space, the illusion is aroused of being in a veritable history museum, where various sculptures, textiles, silverware objects and tapestries accompany us in a contemporary way. The artists open Pandora's box as they set out to address the vestiges of history, its colonial tradition and what it implies, as we see it. The curatorial narrative quite deliberately includes the painting of Joaquín Sorolla, with the Virgin, symbol of Christianity, along with offerings of other objects, such as silverware, gilded embroidered textile and others, all told recalling that all this gold and silver was taken by the conquistadores in the name of religion and culture, under the protection of an imperialist, monarchical state. Quite appropriately, and despite the fact that the painter's expressivity from the early twentieth century recalls Romanticism (with a certain folkloric quality), we cannot simply ignore the violence wielded against the bodies of an entire hemisphere, the Americas, and the exploitation of primary resources and objects under the influence of the Christian church. It appears that history has only been told from an imperialist, Eurocentric point of view, while the achievements of culture are solely attributable to the Greco-Roman tradition.

Many of the objects, buildings and artistic works that have come to us have the implicit function of rendering homage, whether for religious festivities—such as the sculptures and silverware we referred to earlier—or in remembrance of battles or other military feats entailing a victory over others, although the passing of time means they have become like fossilised bodies in a state of ruin. This occurs as well with triumphal arches, such as the one presented to us by José Hernández in his post-modern painting. With the title *Histórica II* [Historical II], we might comprehend that there is a gap between the image representing it, the architecture itself and historical knowledge. It might make us recall that there are other ways of narrating and other stories to be told; that there is also a degree of hybridity in the way colonialism

affected certain cultures, even impacting other empires and monarchies. This is why this hybrid quality is a concept that is often used in post-colonial studies, given that it describes the blending of cultures pertaining to the colonised and the coloniser, possibly leading to more novel understanding, frequently disruptive of cultural identity. The work of Wangechi Mutu speaks from out of this framework. One of her most recurring themes is the violence of colonial domination, especially in her native Kenya. In *Crown* (2006), she renders homage to all those women who have suffered under this domination. Mutu presents this work as an artistic space in exploring a consciousness informed by the fact of being an African woman, in a kind of genealogy that honours without forgetting to engage in embittered, decolonial critique.

Artists do not limit themselves to critiquing the narrative of history and its construction through representation and symbolic capital. They also do it while questioning the original purpose of these objects that have spent centuries in our museums, as well as the classification systems they are subject to. Gala Porras-Kim explores and researches this heritage, applying pressure on these systems of classification, conservation, exhibition and knowledge that our museums boast, constituting what are now our very conventions. The objective of these works is to challenge museums to be worthy of their mission, although perhaps they are also forcing us to conceive our protocols, rules and commandments from another point of view, frequently questioning the idealness of these objects inside of representational and constructive spaces, whether institutional or national. Many of these queries have also been made evident in *Heritage Studies*, by the artist Iman Issa, who by wandering aimlessly through museums, allows herself to be charmed by objects found in encyclopaedic collections and the way they are exhibited: the descriptive words on museum information cards, or the nomenclatures used to classify ancient objects. The work is then conceived as a union between text and object. The artist interrogates whatever has to do with the past, property and the way and comprehension of History's use. Issa uses

the discipline of heritage studies to expose the relationships between contrasting cultures, objects and times, observing and setting up relationships based on interest and relevance in our contemporary context, and addressing clear needs in the present as well as ensuring they might also have a present-day function.⁷

Our modernity has played at being a kind of curtain, a penetrable backdrop which, while perpetuating the colonial power of the Conquista's orders, also conceals its consequences, which we all too often forget. This is how *Curtain (wave / figure with mouth)* (2020), by Erika Hock, works in the centre of the gallery, taking the famous Café Samt & Seide by Lilly Reich and Mies van der Rohe as its starting point and allowing for movement both around this curtain and "through" it. If the work were to operate like a modern space, perpetuating coloniality, we might imagine that there are cracks and spaces through which this coloniality can be penetrated and intersected, benefiting the understanding of other cultures. This is the case of the Mesoamerican forms that Claudia Peña Salinas works with, as she establishes how geometry has been previously used by ancestral cultures (in her case Aztec or Mesoamerican), all the while relating existing extractivism with the aesthetics adopted by modernity—in this case, the eye of God or Tzicuri—in the world of art, in pieces like *Homage to the Square* by Josef Albers, together with many others.

The penetrable curtains of modernity can be associated with hair, its loss, length or weight, and so on. This might be an indicator of age, authority or social or religious status in various contexts. Even in certain African cultures, locks of hair are used as powerful substances with supernatural powers. Fascinated by African braided hair in the West, and inspired

7. O'Neil-Butler, Lauren. "Iman Issa talks about her work in Sharjah Biennial". In: *Artforum*, 4 March 2015, <<https://www.artforum.com/interviews/iman-issa-talks-about-her-work-in-the-sharjah-biennial-50485>>.

by architecture and technologies, Meschac Gaba presents us with two apparently different products of humanity, hair and architecture, which appear here as equally meaningful symbols of modern culture, reassigning the meaning of architectural forms and cultural experiences. His appropriation of the touristic imagination allows viewers to deconstruct Western iconography and alter the representational modes of contemporary art, affecting other forms of cultural production that have not held sway in Western art.

The massive shadow of modernity is what has led us to the current collapse, through hyperproduction and supported by avantgarde progress. We can see this in the arts as well, and in the underlying themes of Kader Attia's work. Types of spectres, in the form of African masks, are the packaging and residue of our current technified society, since in the last three or four decades there has been a tendency that we might describe as the amnesia of consumer societies. They are alive solely in the moment, and believe that everything is a sort of state of things that exist just as they are. We seem eager to omit that the primitive arts have had a notable influence on modern art, especially in the case of Cubism, while pretending that this has no importance at all.⁸

*The Future of the Past:
When Consequence Becomes Cause*

Continuing on this aimless voyage, and looking backwards, we realise—just like in the end of *Planet of the Apes*—that we are not speaking of the past, but of a preterit future. Stories and events we have experienced are still part of our existence, where the works reflect socio-political situations that we cannot stop looking at, given that they are part of the history of inequality, which continues into our present. For this reason, entering

8. *L'Empreinte de l'Autre. Interview with Kader Attia*, 2016. In: *Point contemporain*, 2017, <<https://pointcontemporain.com/focus-kader-attia-lempreinte-de-lautre/>>.

into this gallery space involves brushing up against some of the cruellest aspects of existence in real time: slavery, misery, violence and resistance just to stay alive. When we speak of such concepts, it could be said that we are in a feudal stage, that we are still moving in the thirteenth century, that we have just set out on this journey, all the while knowing that we are well into the twenty-first century.

One of these consequences of colonial history is enslaved labour—which the work done in jute by Ibrahim Mahama refers to—both in the past and with global industrialisation, with its readily available manual labour. By using material directly related to the production of cacao in Ghana, Mahama situates these debates front and centre, making it clear that we are all connected, apart from our complicity in unequal power relationships in the production of goods.⁹ Denise Ferreira da Silva¹⁰ refers to these inequalities—in relation to the mechanisms of extractivism and expropriation that the post-Enlightenment has left us—in the case of slaves, as well as when referring to racialised workers in colonial repression. In many contexts, these actions triggered movement from the country to the city of individuals who were forced to live in precariousness, founding spaces featuring informal architecture, like the favelas in Brazil (as Tadashi Kawamata reveals), with their different social, political and economic orders outside the control of laws—and more likely in a relationship of resilience and resistance against such orders. Looking then towards order, but taking the favelas as the paroxysm of inequality and the annihilation of human rights, we come to situations like those experienced with Nazism and fascism in the concentration camps. We have also seen this in contemporary form in the twentieth century, as in South Africa's apartheid. That terrible period in the history of this African nation is made evident as

9. Amarica, Sarah. *Jute, Entangled Labour, and Global Capital*. In: *Esse*, no. 94, Autumn 2018, pp. 52-59.

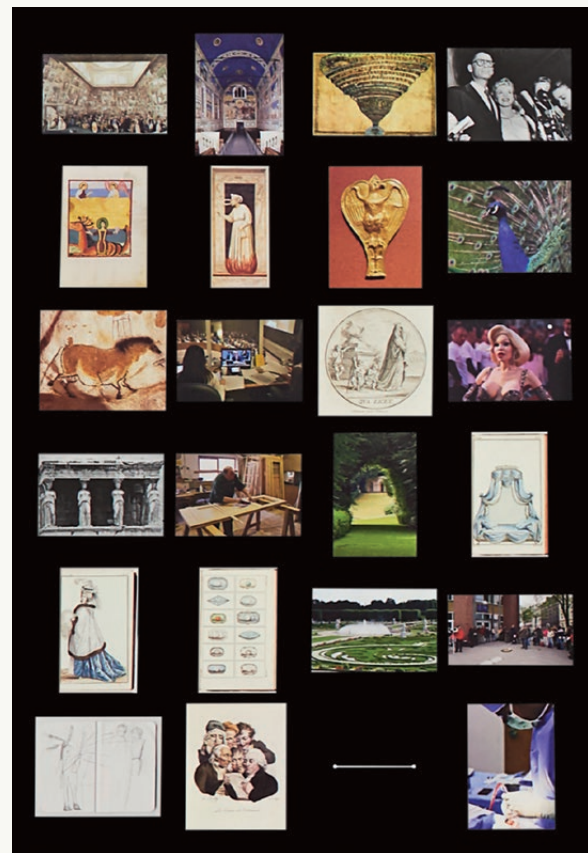
10. Ferreira da Silva, Denise. "The most perfect hallucination". In: *Unpayable Debt*. London: Sternberg Press, 2022, pp. 83-161.

an allegorical narrative in the work of Moshekwa Langa, who ironically reveals how that time of racial segregation and the suspension of freedom was really a non-allegorical hell, much more so than the reference to the Eden of Hieronymus Bosch that the artist refers to with the work's title.

One of the most perverse realities of international politics is the creation of borders, given the interest of the new global order to ignore the reasons behind each given migratory circumstance. Just one of these borders, with its problematics, is found between Pakistan and India. A barbed wire barrier is being built by India, 150 metres inside the zero line along the border it shares with Bangladesh. This is what Shilpa Gupta speaks to us of, using precise data as well as deliberately obscure notions—in this case, the names of the two nations involved—to serve as a warning that the passing of time, as with the movement of human beings, make any attempt to schematize and simplify the facts futile. Quite often, borders attract conflict, and the repression with rubber bullets of voices that speak out against the given order, as recalled by the sculptural work of Nida Sinnokrot. Made with refuse, with used balls and cable gathered in Jerusalem, they seem like projectiles that have acquired anthropomorphic features just before impact, in a moving reference to martyrdom. As we have seen, the construction of borders leads to conflict, just as the equator itself leads to a shift in meanings and migratory movements, both as a formal effort and proposal, as Andreu Alfaro shows us in his line sculpture, and in opening up to the need to escape from a given context and struggle against the degree of submission forced upon the Global South. This is what the sculpture of Kcho refers to, showing us the difficulty of keeping afloat, whether in a small ocean launch or surviving in difficult conditions for a community. This is what likewise occurs to the undocumented immigrants in the project by Bouchra Khalili, by way of resistance. *Mapping Journey #2* creates a counter-cartography of the Mediterranean that unites personal histories with frontier politics. The minutes we spend listening to these "undocumented workers"

enable us to comprehend the barbarity and violence their circumstances reveal, providing us a lesson in politics, economics and humanity.¹¹

Perhaps we might only escape, and as resistance strategy listen to the sound cartographies of the continental rivers of Africa in the work of Dineo Seshee Bopape, or just as well invoke cosmological beliefs and voodoo priestesses as an act of empowerment and confrontation. With a poetic use of language grounded in personal meaning, Bopape refers to esotericism, spiritism and the African diaspora. What at first might seem hopeful and transitory, the image of freedom and escape, could be transformed into mourning and loss. The artist intentionally leaves these dense associations open to interpretation—healing, nature, cosmology, movement—by scaling them individually, collectively and globally. This is because the colonial scar remains open for BIPOC communities and sexualities in a relationship of dissidence to cis-heteropatriarchy, who in the past and still today have had to suffer the violence of colonial religious doctrine and its consequences. This is the reason that this journey is a trajectory that in its alterity shows up the privileges in order to transform the inequalities affecting a *Rising majority*, seeking greater sustainability in commitments, working methods and visions when it comes to telling the history of what is yet to come.

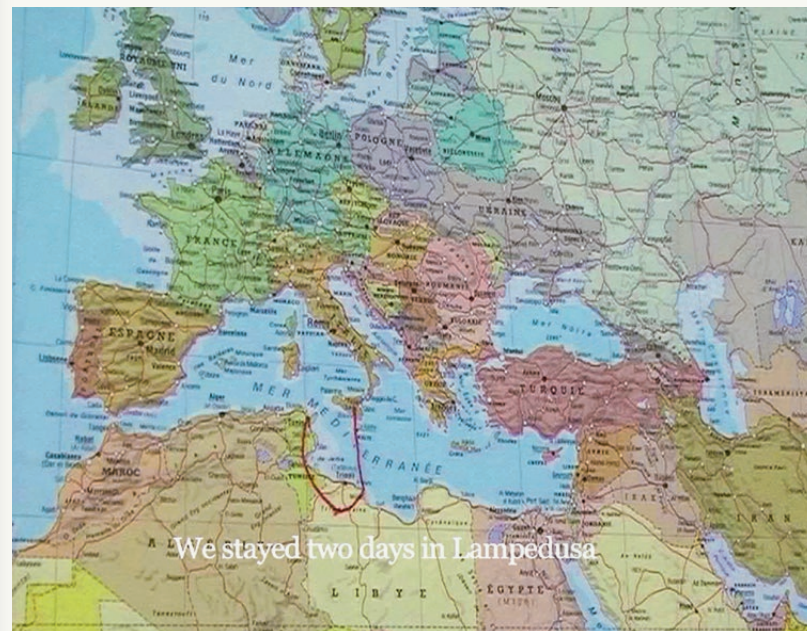


Andrea Büttner, *Kant's Critique Of the Power of Judgment*, 2014 (detail). Set of eleven offset prints, 178 × 118 cm each. Edition: 5 + 2 A.P. Es Baluard Museu d'Art Contemporani de Palma, Juan Bonet collection long-term loan

11. Berrada, Omar. "Bouchra Khalili. Four selected videos from The Mapping Journey Project 2008–2011". In: *Memórias inapagáveis. Um olhar histórico no Acervo Videobrasil*. São Paulo: Edições Secs São Paulo | Videobrasil, 2014, p. 233.



Guillem Nadal, *Projecte per a un mapa 33* [Project for a map 33], 1971. Mixed media on canvas, 114x146 cm. Es Baluard Museu d'Art Contemporani de Palma, Fundació Caixa de Balears long-term loan



Bouchra Khalili, *Mapping Journey #2*, 2008 (video still). Video. Beta SP transferred to DVD. Pal, colour, sound. Duration: 2' 46". Es Baluard Museu d'Art Contemporani de Palma, Juan Bonet collection long-term loan



Iman Issa, *Heritage Studies #7*, 2015. Wood, painted wood and vinyl text, 198 × 60 × 48 cm. Edition: 1/3 + 2 AP. Es Baluard Museu d'Art Contemporani de Palma, Juan Bonet collection long-term loan

I, THE ARTWORK

Iman Issa

Encyclopedic, world heritage or ethnographic art museums are largely qualified as spaces concerned with imparting knowledge. They are thought of as museums that present insight into other times and places, with displays geared towards that goal. Historical artifacts displayed in these museums are presented within them as material evidence of those other times and places, which upon closer observation can lay such times and places bare, allowing viewers to learn about them. The authenticity of these artifacts and the ability to trace their provenance is key in lending them the authority to serve that goal. Under this presumption, the real test of a museum's skill is whether it can translate their displays into material that can be absorbed by a viewer. It is no wonder that a common critique of such museums is that they fail to provide an adequate context for their displays, thus denying viewers the chance to situate the objects on view within their frame of reference and to link them to the people, times, and places from which they supposedly emerge. In such cases, museums are expected to supply a more comprehensive or truthful context through which these artifacts can be deciphered and/or enjoyed.

Moreover, over recent decades, many ethnographic museums and collections have been grappling with the issue of how to reconsider and part with their inextricable ties to the colonial project and its extractive practices. The mainstream remedy to this dilemma has been to try to revise the captions and historical information accompanying historical artifacts to provide less biased or more culturally sensitive descriptions, or to find more locally derived sources when writing these captions, or even, more rarely, to mention and account for the fact that these objects were at times illegally or forcefully taken from their original habitats prior to being acquired by or gifted to the museum.

However, what is hardly ever contested in any of these cases is the ability of these artifacts to impart knowledge, to

speaking about the people, times, and places from which they derive—times and cultures which, even when continuing to exist in proximity, are relegated to the past and to far flung places, as in the case of many indigenous artifacts in United States museums, for example. Moreover, under this logic, an object's ability to speak is linked to the very nature of the museum: it is believed to be easily shaped by it and is highly dependent on the sensitivity and accuracy of the material the museum attaches to it. There is a presumed naïveté to artifacts, where they are expected to bear witness to something beyond themselves. They have no power to resist or affirm this goal of their own accord; on the contrary, they are believed to be highly susceptible to and shaped by the context in which they find themselves, victims to the occasionally prejudicial historical information, captions, and material attached to them, unable to reflect upon or bypass such material, pried open against their will for viewers to consume and to extract whatever confirms or challenges their perceptions about them and the places, times, and cultures they supposedly stand in for. Under this logic, historical artifacts are victims that can only be rescued by the conscientious curator or museum director who can furnish them with a more "authentic" context.

It is perhaps this legacy of ethnographic museums and their relationship to their displays that has led many artists over the last decades to attempt to redefine their relationship to museums as spaces in which their artworks are shown—from refusing to accept the museum's *de facto* educational role to insisting on asserting control over how their work is displayed, contextualized, and received at any given moment. Many also take it upon themselves to contest and redefine the very idea of a work of art and the nature and manner of operation of the institution showing it.

Indeed, this has created a figure, that of the (savvy) artist who takes control over all aspects of their work. A figure who is able to sense, decipher, and lay bare the system under which they operate. A figure who may employ tricks, use pretense, and invent characters and stories, all as a means for creating

a space for reflection that coincides with the artist's own vision for their work and how it should be received. A figure whose intention, wit, humor, strength of perception, and intelligence become matter to be contemplated and studied. A figure whose name a viewer has become eager to learn, along with their biography and other markers of their overall practice. And it is this name, which helps the artist set the parameters for their work on their own terms, while simultaneously allowing the museum and its viewers a manner of bracketing the work under that name. Situating the work within the person of an artist may have allowed a figure to claim control over how the work may be positioned, but it has also guaranteed the means to ideologically position works within a context where they can be made sense of on an aesthetic, historical, social, and political scale. The potential for an artwork to escape or reflect upon its context can be said to be closely related to the agency of its maker. It often relies on their strength of character, identity, talent, interests, and concerns, as well as their ability to provoke and make apparent. Artists can now expect that their viewers will ask themselves: What is the artist attempting to show me? And many of them may choose to build their work around this expectation, using it to address their viewers, affirming or contesting the expectations they may have. It is also one reason why knowledge of an artist's name and biography is considered a necessary addition when it comes to contemplating and viewing an "artwork," as opposed to an artifact (which, unlike the artwork, may be sufficiently contextualized through the use of museological texts with no necessary allusion to a particular maker, even when that maker is known).

This might help better situate the common critique of heavily thematized or geographically focused art exhibitions. Such exhibitions are often accused of stripping artists of the power over their work and of treating artworks in a manner more similar to the ethnographic approach, where the works are meant to speak despite themselves and regardless of their makers' intentions. Like ethnographic artifacts, these are thought to be works with no ability to reflect on or overturn

their contexts of display or their reception. They are presumed to lay bare for a viewer who can consume them as proof of an idea or sources of knowledge for the places and cultures they are standing in for. Control over the presentation and interpretation of the works appears to shift from being partly located in the hands of the artist to being fully found in the hands of the art historians, curators, or institutions showing the work, who can take the liberty to situate the work in a manner that might ring false to its maker. This is similar to how film director John Cassavetes often proclaimed to be more interested in filming what his actors ended up showing in a given situation despite themselves than in what they were meaning or attempting to show (for many a sign of his genius, for others confirmation of his allegedly manipulative tendencies). A similar dynamic seems to be at play in many of these exhibitions, where the curators may feel they are better equipped at generating content or affect from a work, regardless of the artists' knowledge or intentions, or how reductive that content or affect may sound to them. Whether one finds oneself on one side of the debate or the other, the common presumption to both positions is an artwork's lack of ability—of its own accord, and with no help from either its makers or exhibitors—to assert control over its context and define the means of its reception.

Yet, rare as it is, one has also encountered and knows of such an artwork: an artwork which is neither interested in being viewed as a victim to its context or in following the intentions of its maker. An artwork which hides or reveals itself at will, frequently changing its date and place of conception. An artwork which, when relegated to history, brings that whole history into doubt and, when attributed to the identity, likes, or dislikes of its maker, decides to attribute itself to a different maker, one that may have been invented by itself or who lived in a different time more suited to its current outlook. An artwork which may even take it upon itself to keep its maker's name but reshape their identity, linking it to other views and attributes more suited to itself—a self situated in a particular time and place but which reserves the right to change along with the change of that time

and/or space. An artwork which attributes itself to a lawyer, historian, craftsman, or any such figure, knowing full well that it is and can only ever be made by an artist. An artwork which reshapes the institution into which it is housed: one day exonerating it, standing proudly behind its mission statement, another day embarrassing it out of its wits, loudly disavowing it, making it impossible for it to follow what it had previously been engaged in. An artwork which reserves the right to occasionally participate in ongoing current debates, affirming a curator's line of thought, at other times remaining mute despite all efforts directed at making it speak. An artwork which, when called an artwork, eschews the name in favor of something else, insisting on being called a document, artifact, object, film, story, or news item. An artwork which can exist in any kind of venue, be it an ethnographic, city, folk, modern, or contemporary art museum, or something else entirely. An artwork which can assume any look, sound, feel, material, or immaterial presence and which only upon eclipsing all of its conditions of display, interpretation, classification, and reception can, proudly and without hesitation, proclaim itself an "artwork". A proclamation, the artwork's discerning maker may now sense an urgent need to adopt for themselves as well, and may indeed choose to do so, warily seizing the name *I, the Artwork*, pausing shortly before adding *an artist showing (myself) sometime in the year 2023*.



Dineo Seshee Bopape, *Renelwe (we are given)*. From the installation “Sedibeng, (It comes With the Rain)”, 2016. Painted steel, wire, rope, herbs, charms, feathers, wood, vinyl stickers, mirror, structure, 223 × 128 × 40 cm, mirror 34 × 0,6 cm. Edition: 3 + 2 A.P. Es Baluard Museu d’Art Contemporani de Palma, Juan Bonet collection long-term loan.

Aimless:
Confronting Imago Mundi
From 3rd February 2023
to 21st January 2024

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Contemporani de Palma

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Imma Prieto

Curator

Agustín Pérez Rubio

Exhibition Coordination

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Mareike Tocha. Courtesy of
Hollybush Gardens and David
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David Bonet, p. 22, 24

Courtesy of the artist, p. 23

Courtesy of Sfeir-Semler Gallery, p. 30

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