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## Animating collapse. Reframing colonial film archives

Anna Seiderer, Alexander Schellow

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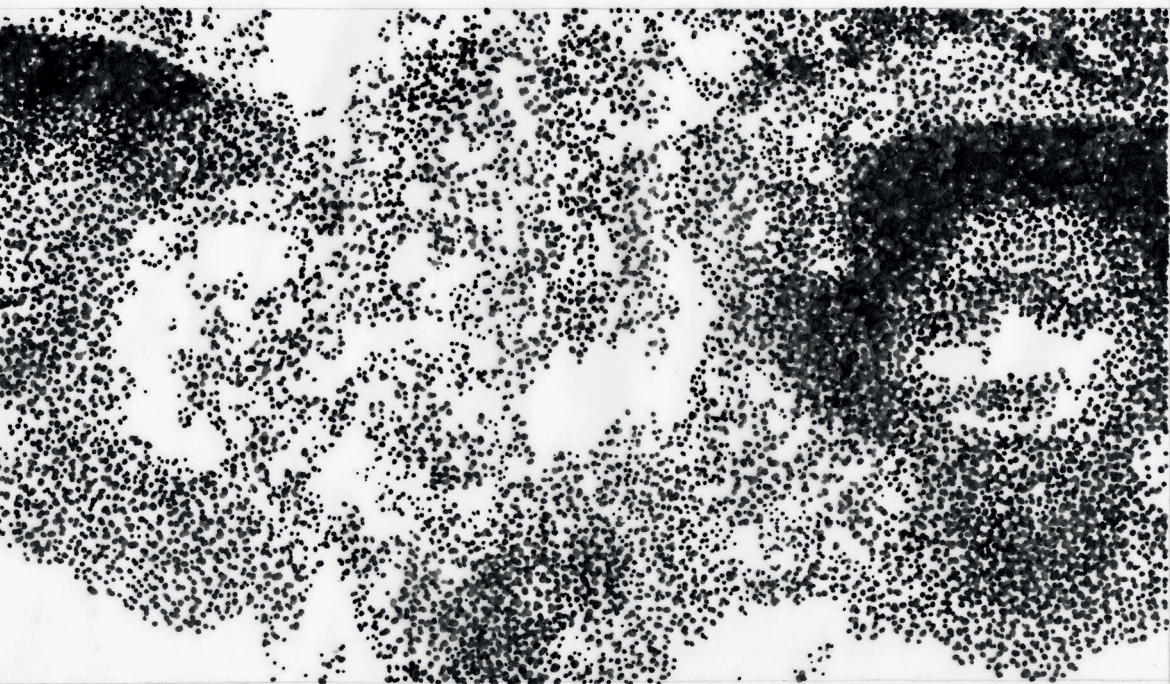


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# Animating Collapse: Reframing Colonial Film Archives

Alexander Schellow and Anna Seiderer

We see the world through other eyes, while admitting that they might as well be our own. The same world has a different look, because it was at a different time that it was looked at. We contemplate it through an image that does not appear to be invented, but which confers a duration to the gaze through which we in turn become aware of it. (Belting 2004: 287)

In February 2016, the Brussels art school *École de Recherche Graphique* (ERG) held its annual conference in the historic Henry Leboeuf Hall at BOZAR in Brussels.<sup>1</sup> It was an opportunity for the ERG and the Royal Museum for Central Africa (RMCA, Tervuren, Belgium) to engage in structural cooperation for the purpose of granting access to colonial archives for artistic engagement. The RMCA's director, Guido Gryseels, opened the session by presenting the renovation project of the museum (it reopened on 8 December 2018). Next, the head of the history and politics department introduced the colonial propaganda film collection in the form of an alphabetical primer ("A" is for "Adventure", "B" is for "Bwana Kitoko", etc.). The atmosphere had already become charged when the director was speaking, but by the letter "B", the audience seemed to explode. They implored both speakers to stop their "unbearable" discourses, which were perceived as imbued with a tone of colonial paternalism. The interruption of the session by the audience offered, paradoxically, a great opportunity to open a discussion on the forms of disseminating and rewriting such highly sensitive archives. Unfortunately, the museum representatives engaged in the project felt personally targeted and offended by the incident and refused, at that time, to pursue any form of collaboration. The protest simultaneously addressed the visual material and the language and forms through which it was de facto disseminated by the museum. While the director's words appeared to the

audience to be a kind of managerial (re)empowerment of a Belgian colonial past, the cheerful attempt by the head of the history and politics department disturbingly expressed the violence of writing history in the form of *one* story (Benjamin 2000: 441), claiming a neutrality for science, which might help one to get over the emotional charge of the images in question.<sup>2</sup>

If the productive critique of anthropological knowledge production engaged by as well as *in* the academy since the publication of *Writing Culture* (1986) has had any epistemological and political repercussions for the material collections in ethnography museums, it seems to be less relevant in regard to images. The currently contested anthropological representation to which the editors refer in this book's introduction is based mainly on the classification of cult and cultural objects as 'ethnographic' artefacts once they entered museum collections. The main debate since the Macron conference in Ouagadougou in 2017 and the publication of the restitution report by Felwine Sarr and Bénédicte Savoy (2018) is based on the political context of the objects' acquisition and their epistemological requalification as data for academic research.<sup>3</sup> By contrast, the colonial film collection produced over a period of fifty years in Belgian Congo, Rwanda, and Burundi, which we are discussing in this chapter and which was subject to the panel described above, has not been the object of any restitution request. It is worth mentioning, as was observed by a colleague, that the museum used the term 'restitution' for the first time<sup>4</sup> in the context of a project to digitise the films. In anticipation of the fiftieth anniversary of the independence of Congo (DRC), the Royal Museum for Central Africa, KADOC of the Catholic University of Louvain, and the Royal Belgian Film Library joined forces in a project to digitise some of the nearly 800 films. The aim was to 'restitute' to universities, national archives, and 'the general public' in Congo, Rwanda, and Burundi what they described as 'shared cultural heritage'. In two years, 150 films were digitised and were to be handed over solemnly to Joseph Kabila on 30 June 2010. He did not attend the reception, however, so the official 'restitution' could not happen.

Restitution was proclaimed for those objects that no one wanted back, as they are considered Belgian propaganda material. For the same reason, diaspora members and African colleagues contested the institutional designation of the films as a "shared memory" or an "asset of Central Africa".<sup>5</sup> On one side we have the rhetoric of the RMCA, now renamed Africa Museum,<sup>6</sup> and the self-proclaimed 'guardian' of Central African material culture. On the other, contemporary criticism is made manifest, expressed with vehemence by diaspora members who contest the identification of such representations with any kind of 'reality' in Congo, Rwanda, and Burundi. It is precisely this

gap, that demonstrated the necessity to reframe the work on colonial films by transforming it into an artistic project, hosted by art schools and institutions. As Boris Wastiau wrote:

In the specific cases of the Belgian museums, they have a responsibility as curators of a shared Belgian-Congolese heritage and a duty as ‘public historians’ to properly label and interpret the provenance of cultural artefacts acquired in the most inequitable context and to address in exhibition galleries all sensitive issues of colonial and post-colonial history. (2017: 461)

Wastiau reframes the idea of “shared heritage” to refer to the colonial violence that spawned the museum and its collections. The colonial violence mentioned by Wastiau denotes here the physical violence committed on the continent by Belgian soldiers and officers, which was doubled by the colonial rhetoric and the invention of the concept of “Congo”, still defined in geographical terms today (Wastiau 2017: 463). The aim is not to challenge the reality that this concept became once it had been elaborated in 1884 at the Berlin Conference, but to observe that the fiction disseminated by the museum frames the colonial images within an ontological approach that, in our view, repeats the violence and conflict.<sup>7</sup>

In ‘The Trouble with the Ethnological’ (2015), Sharon Macdonald describes the presentation of an experimental prototype exhibit for an ethnological museum – a model exhibit that aimed to challenge stereotypes inscribed in particular exhibition frameworks. She quotes the curator, who faced many epistemological and political questions from the exhibit’s visitors, as concluding that “it is so much easier if you are an art museum!” (Macdonald 2015: 211). The institutional migration of the film archive from the RMCA to African and European art institutions, which we address here in this contribution, is not based on the idea that colonial artefacts might become accessible once they are released from their historical context (such as the context of ethnography museums). Rather, their displacement from an ethnography museum into an art museum carries the risk of decontextualising and aestheticising the colonial past (Seiderer 2018). Regarding films produced in colonial contexts, the institutional displacement moreover changed how to handle and question the films and their conflictual memories.

With respect to the editorial proposal by Margareta von Oswald and Jonas Tinius (see the introduction to this volume), we observe how colonial images have been reformulated, rethought, and re practised once they moved from the institutional context where they had been framed as historical collections to an art project hosted by contemporary art institutions. This move

complicates how we approach the images, as they are not mainly considered documents or representations but empirical and temporal objects involving the viewer's body and his or her memory (de Baecque & Delage 1998; Antoine & Perret 2015). Different to a historical approach searching for the unknown within the images and to a cultural approach focusing on their narrative aspects, the artistic based research we focus on here highlights the experience of viewing them today in the context of the field of contemporary art and within the framework of ongoing artistic methods that are collectively experienced (see also Binder, Neuland-Kitzerow & Noak 2008; Schneider & Wright 2013). The institutional migrations of the Belgian colonial film archives, generated by a collapsed collaboration between the ERG art school and the Royal Museum for Central Africa, epistemologically and politically reframed our study of them.

This chapter starts by observing how the RMCA's semantic ambivalence toward the visual material is embedded in the institutional frame of the images. They are considered as a collection that the museum has to 'take care of', and on which it is tasked to produce knowledge, yet without questioning and problematising the historical context on which the archives and collections build. Subsequently, we focus on the epistemological and political reframing of that semantic ambivalence of the colonial film collection within artistic practices, such as the drawings and animation Alexander Schellow has developed in the frame of the collective project GREYZONE ZEBRA.<sup>8</sup> In order to make this tangible we witness the changes that occur once the historical film collection is 'gleaned' within its silences, fragments, and heterogeneity. We continue the analysis with a description of the artistic gestures that took place in several art institutions in France, Belgium, and the DRC Congo. The invitation of the editors offers us the opportunity to build on reflections that we first formalised in *Critical Arts* (Schellow and Seiderer 2017). Here, we centre on Alexander Schellow's notes on two films shot during the colonial expedition in northern Congo led by Armand Hutereau between 1911 and 1913. Thus, the last part of this chapter is specifically dedicated to the drawings and animation developed with the same archival film material, and suggests how it leads us to an epistemological shift – becoming non-specular images of colonial past. This process, renewed by the practices initiated within the institutions hosting it, creates a singular context through which it becomes possible to apprehend the generative and troubling "awkwardness" (Tinius 2018) of the colonial films, as museum collection and as colonial representations.

Those processes highlight the reflexivity implied in the concept of the 'trans-anthropological', developed by the editors in their introduction. The

institutional displacement of the research practices on the film collection and the specific artistic gestures – such as the notes, drawings, and animation developed within those particular frames – makes tangible the transformations of what has been stuck in a matter of representations of ethnic identities. As suggested by Oswald and Tinius, the prefix *trans-* enables a thinking “through, across, and beyond” the supposed represented identities, but it also overcomes the idea that they can only be studied as either anthropological or artistic material. The notes and the drawings, with which the animation films are made, are tools shared by both. On the one hand, the tools allow for overcoming their academic boundedness and, on the other hand, initiate a stimulating reflexive dialogue on the development of anthropological representations.

### **Institutional framing of colonial images: Ambivalent tropes**

Belgian colonial cinematographic production remains fairly unknown to a broader international public and is a controversial subject in current discussions of the colonial past. Even if, from a scientific perspective, one could consider this field of production a significant document about Belgian colonisation, its narratives and mythology constitute a very sensitive matter. After all, Belgian cinematographic production presents an ideal image of the colonial project from which any kind of violence is erased. As pointed out by Ramirez and Rolot (1990: 6), the main goal of this cinema was to build an impressive image of the “*colonie modèle*”. The erased violence, however, does not only result in sedimentation within the narrative structure of the images. That is, it is not reducible to the representation but is also inherent to the trope built on those images. Our argument is based on the fact that violent representations of the Belgian colony are already well-known and accessible in newspapers and on the Internet.<sup>9</sup> Freddy Mutombo’s process presents an example of artistic responses to the digital circulation and availability of colonial images. Since 2009, he has developed his work on Belgian colonial photographs taken in the Congo Free State and in Belgian Congo between 1890 and 1960 and reinterpreted the images, by default, as a result of not having access to the photographs at the RMCA.<sup>10</sup> His first artistic gesture is thus of a methodological nature. It constitutes a ‘second-hand’ corpus by gleaning from historical or artistic sites and works that are accessible online or have been the subject of previous publications. His second artistic gesture consists of transforming the status of these colonial photographic archives, which become, in this artistic context, images of Belgian



colonisation. Finally, his third gesture concerns the memory of the colonial past engaged by this practice.<sup>11</sup>

As the violent scenes recorded in photographs became accessible to civil society, political opponents saw an opportunity to stop Leopold II's diabolic invention of the Congo Free State (Ndaywel è Nziem 2009: 296). Thus, we align ourselves with the argument that the images of torture and mutilation perpetrated under the governance of King Leopold II had an important impact on the political opposition to the Congo Free State once they became reproducible and exportable to new political and social contexts. It is precisely these contexts which build a framework through which colonial exploitation is contested. As a consequence, we might say that the violence we explore in this artistic project is not so much focused on the narrative structures of the images – the represented violence – but rather highlights the frameworks into which images' meanings and resonances can be reflexively addressed. Therefore, the violence we are looking for in the project is invisible, it is the violence which desensitises us to the images, leading us to look at them as images of a distant past.

An other example that offers reflection on how the manipulation of the images radically changes our perception of them are the colonial photographic archives in *Congo belge en images* (2010) by Carl De Keyzer and Johan Lagae. They embedded aesthetically seductive images in the violent context of exploitation by restituting the historical context and giving voice to the protests that had occurred since the nineteenth century. As a filmic approach, we take as a reference Peter Kubelka's *Unsere Afrikareise* (1966). His extremely meticulous editing reveals the barbarism inherent to a hunting safari filmed by Austrian tourists along the Nile, transforming the meaning of the a priori hagiographical images into fierce criticism of what we can identify as colonialism and ethnocentrism.

These few examples point to the bivalence of tropes – and therefore the necessity to build specific critical frameworks – into which colonial archives can be perceived in their historical and memory thickness.

On a rhetorical level, we have already referred to certain ambivalent concepts such as “shared memory” and “shared heritage”, as they were used in a contradictory sense.<sup>12</sup> In the same way, the notion of the “showcase” is also worthy of reflection. The museum's institutional position, publicly announced by the RMCA director in February 2016 at BOZAR, was to present itself as a “showcase” for “DRC Congo,” “Rwanda”, and “Burundi”. The ambiguity of the concept “showcase” is relevant to understand the conflict related to the film collection, insofar as it is used in different senses by the institution and its critics. The institutional rhetoric considers showcasing a metonymy, while

it is perceived as a metaphor by those who contest the knowledge production that collections were supposed to serve.<sup>13</sup> As a metonymy, the museum's collections are supposed to stand for a direct link with cultural practices in the former colonies. As a metonymy, again, the colonial images are considered valuable witnesses of practices that were threatened by colonisation. As a metaphor, the collections are already considered in their fictional dimension, given that the concrete correspondence as such is impossible. Visual collections such as photography and films, like other colonial museum collections, are subject to criticism (Clifford 1997; Bouttiaux 1999; Couttenier 2005; Edwards, Gosden & Phillips 2006; Wastiau 2017). Unlike artefacts collected in the former colonies, visual collections were produced by the colonisers. In this regard, Belgian film production resembles cult and cultural objects that were classified as ethnographic artefacts once they entered into storage, even though they had mainly been collected by officers of the International African Association for Exploration and Civilization of Central Africa,<sup>14</sup> agents of the Force Publique<sup>15</sup> and, rarely, anthropologists (Couttenier 2005). Even when conducted outside explicit colonial frameworks, anthropologists collected within a positivist perspective, which gave rise to their self-criticism (Geertz 1973; Clifford & Marcus 1986). The links that the visual traditions of anthropology developed with the photographic medium, and later with film, changed from its early beginnings until the end of colonisation. The changes were linked to theoretical and singular apprehensions of the medium, which, at its very beginning, was considered a purely mechanical reproduction tool: "Because it was mechanical, photography was believed by many during this period to be a direct reflection of nature and reality" (Sherer 1992: 33). This relationship changed across contexts and over time, and even if anthropology may be considered to have distanced itself from visual mediums – when the research was dedicated to abstract themes such as myths, rituals, and social structures that were considered for their "immateriality" (Mauuarin & Joseph 2018: 6) – anthropology has always maintained a strong and complex relationship with film, photography, and drawing (Edwards 1992; Grimshaw 2001: 16; Guido & Lugon 2010; Mauuarin & Joseph 2018).

In our case, we want to underline that Belgian colonial film production was not created by anthropologists but, rather, by amateurs who progressively became professionals. Nonetheless, visual media, including photographs, offer insights for anthropological research and artistic practice (Edwards 2001: 27–50; Pinney and Peterson 2003). Artistic creations, such as those on colonial archive collections and family films, constitute a performative framework which renders explicit the interplay of various registers of memory and oblivion.

## **A gleaned archive. The GREYZONE collective's art project**

As a consequence of the withdrawal of the RMCA, the work on the Belgian film archives of the former colonies of Congo, Rwanda, and Burundi shifted into the critical debate over colonial and ethnography museum collections and their history of domination and spoliation (Couttenier 2005; Edwards, Gosden, Phillips 2006; Bouttiaux 2009). Through the collaborative work on colonial film with a collective whose emergence we describe below, the aim is to go beyond the aporetic position of a radical self-reflexivity<sup>16</sup> and to turn these highly sensitive archives into material that elaborates aesthetic forms and gestures through which “other ways of doing memory, heritage and identity” are engaged (Macdonald 2013:3). In response to the conference at BOZAR, we proposed building on the incident through an experimental workshop dedicated to the film material at the Ecole de recherche graphique (ERG) art school in Brussels.<sup>17</sup> As expressed by the audience, tensions were partially generated by the lack of spaces dedicated to critical discussions on colonial past, and the art school offered such space.

At the same time, we discussed the space-aesthetic-political setup of possible workshops and performative screening sessions, and it became clear that the institutional framework of a school<sup>18</sup> or museum, with their defined spatial codes of screening, conference, or exhibition spaces, could not offer such a flexible experimental format.

It was partially this institutional migration which led us to redefine the project, status, and aims. What was initially a hybrid process between different frameworks (a description that remains somewhat relevant today) became an artistic project sustained by art institutions whose aims are no longer to produce knowledge about former colonies that might have been recorded in images, but to address contemporary perceptions of colonial images. The project involves several artists – such as Leila Burnotte, Milena Desse, Arthur Gilles, Sandra Heremans, Maxime Jean-Baptiste, Nelson Makengo, Freddy Mutombo, and Antje Van Wichelen – and is based on collaborative practices. It is structured around moments of exchange, which are constantly reformulated by the spaces and people involved.

In this respect, we would like to highlight a workshop held in the project space Khiasma in Paris (22-31 May 2018).<sup>19</sup> Recently closed because of budgetary restrictions, Khiasma was defined by its founder and director Olivier Marboeuf as a transitory space that made no distinction between artistic, scholarly, and various other forms of knowledge production. Instead, it was based on reflecting on artistic practice as a political, economic, and social tool. During this artistic residency, sustained dialogue with Marboeuf and the

philosopher Catherine Perret provided a productive critical framework for the different artistic research projects.

The practice proposed by the GREYZONE collective is itself to a large degree based on an unstable position in relation to colonial film images. The non-availability of the film collections and their edited form intended for serving colonial propaganda led the collective to also become involved with private amateur films, which had been produced and mostly kept by private families. However, the project does not exclusively focus on the aspect of these films being made and kept by families, but rather more basically on their specification as non-edited film material created in a colonial context. These films – unlike the colonial propaganda film collection at the RMCA and the missionary films at Kadoc – do not constitute a collection responding to specific categories. They are not collected but gleaned, drawn together from various sources, such as individuals approached by members of the group, or found at flea markets or garage sales. Our practices developed in this context are based on three main axes: (i) collective (and partially public) film screenings, viewed also through the lens of note-taking, an exercise inspired by surrealist writing practices (Schellow and Seiderer 2017), (ii) long time residences during which artists engage more deeply with the film material by developing personal or collective artistic works, and (iii) the constitution of a digitalised archive hosted by several African and European institutions. It is through the lens of studying such family footage, that also readdressing specific films from the colonial propaganda film collection becomes possible for us – namely, footage such as the Hutereau film materials (more specifically, see below), which by their rather unclear category between amateur and professional, in their unedited form and time-related from a colonial gaze ‘under construction’, offer a particular porosity among this body of films.

Thus some members of the GREYZONE project, including us, aimed to constitute a reflexive device through which to understand how one views such kinds of films. We try to take into account the viewers’ imagination of that past and the different ways one rewrites, remembers, and forgets. This resonates with Jonas Tinius’ proposed mobilisation of the concept of “awkwardness”, which “describes a state of self-conscious discomfort in response to things or practices perceived as improper or unacceptable” (2018: 145). The reframing of the colonial images within the artistic project, sustained by art institutions and schools, enables us to work with such “discomfort”. Indeed, these images relay such discomfort, which is as such neglected or denied by the official institutional positions of the museum at the initial conference in BOZAR. The films we focus on are embedded in various frameworks, such as personal childhood memories, data for scientific researchers of colonial

history, and ethical questions as witnesses of the unacceptable. The difficulty, and value, of the project is based on the process by which singular images are transmitted into a critical discussion on a colonial past.

The gleaned films disrupt the idea of a collection in which the images are implicitly embedded. In this regard, the footage shot by Hutereau<sup>20</sup> is of particular relevance to our reflection on the notion of ‘trans-anthropological’, as elaborated by the editors of this volume. Hutereau, a former military officer under King Leopold II, wanted to write a book on the people of the Uele region (Hutereau 1952). As part of our practice, Schellow created animation based on this particular body of films, which formed the first artistic proposal rooted in this stage of the project,<sup>21</sup> thus transversing the different steps proposed within the GREYZONE process. The specific practice of animation performed by him allowed us to shift the debate from questions of representation – where anthropology and animation share the same critical reflections – to those about memory. According to Hans Belting, such a praxis of animation as developed by Schellow might be considered to “confer [...] a duration to the gaze through which we in turn become aware of it” (Belting 2004: 287). This awareness is that of the symbolical and physical frames, which provides meanings to colonial images.

### **Towards non-specular colonial images**

Our analysis of Schellows’ animation films leads us to reconsider critically our own assertions of a critical work engaged with the images, once they migrated from their historical institutional context, such as that of the RMCA, into an artistic ‘environment’. Methodologically, we look at the epistemological and political consequences of this migration of colonial images by focusing on two gestures: first, the impact of institutional displacement on our perceptions of those images and, next, their rewriting process through a specific practice of animation. We first try to understand in how far this displacement, ‘facilitated’ by the withdrawal of the RMCA, radically changed the form and the material of our research on images shot in colonial times.<sup>22</sup> Secondly, we focus on one specific practice developed in the framework of a project, as a continuity and singular answer to the critical approach on colonial images tackled by the artistic collective GREYZONE. The field of animation here builds an inestimable framework through which to reconsider the self-criticism engaged in by anthropology, insofar as it can offer a reflection on the ontological status in regard to photographic and filmic representations (Honest Roe 2013: 140). Having access to anthropological archives such

as colonial films through the practice of animation, therefore, can transform the fetishist relationship we have in regard of visual collections, leading us to reconsider critically the notion of anthropological representation.

The animation films developed by Schellow on the expedition of Armand Hutereau in northern Congo are put forward in the continued exercise of note-taking that we have been exploring since the beginning of the project; they thus change the status of the colonial images. No longer considered documents of the past,<sup>23</sup> as they were for anthropology at the end of the nineteenth century (Edwards 2018: 33) – a reading to which Hutereau’s images still refer – they now constitute instead a memory praxis.

### Performing images

Alexander Schellow’s animation can be discussed in reference to a debate initiated by Honess Roe, one of the most influential theoreticians in the field of documentary animation. She relates photography and drawing to memory, considering them “way[s] of accessing the past” (Honess Roe 2013: 139). While for anthropologists at the time, the images were produced in order to “rescue” and to proceed on “cultural excavation” (Edwards 2018: 33), animation as realised here plays with images in order to perform a past. In this regard, the past to which visual materials refer is considered a complex object that is always mimetic and mnemonic (Leslie 2003: 181). This notion, however, is contrary to Roland Barthes’ indexical correlation between the image and the “pro-filmic”, which Honess Roe reconnects to Benjamin’s concept of the “aura”, apprehending photographs instead as temporal objects, as “a record of a moment that would otherwise pass by, never to be seen and experienced again” (Honess Roe 2013: 140), Schellow’s practice conveys memory as a simultaneously objective and subjective one. While the temporal object mentioned by Honess Roe still refers to a “frozen moment” that the work of animation might excavate and “revive” (Honess Roe 2013: 141), we argue that the complex conception of photographs as mimetic and mnemonic, to the contrary, leads us to consider them as “an act of imagination” (Edwards 2018:32). This concept refers to a new understanding of photography: no longer as a mechanical objectivity but as a complex one taking into account the ethnographer’s body, in which the subjectivity at stake in the observation meets the distance implied by the gesture of observation (Edwards 2018: 54–55).

It is precisely from this perspective that we put forward Schellow’s practice of animation to be a drawing *of* and *by* memory, through which the

entanglement of his subjectivity at stake in the observation and the distance implied by his protocol materialise. Thus, the strict protocol defines the parameters of his practice in order to reproduce the mnemonic trace of a past experience: Set on the basis of a given situation on day 't', the artist sets a date t+1, when he undertakes to reproduce the event from memory; then again a date t+2, when he will repeat the act aiming for repetition, however, while de facto also referring to the first memory drawing; and so on until t+x, when the registered and (re)produced memory drawing will not trace any of the reference performed in t+1 any more (see Perret & Schellow 2015: 233).

In this process, countless image sequences are created from dots and shadows, building a gap between perception and memory. The protocol into which Schellow develops his drawing praxis does not create an image to remember, nor does it represent a memory. It draws the limits of its own body as an observation site. This physical limit experienced by the protocol is anchored in the incorporation of the past experience which his drawings explore progressively, frame by frame.

In one who draws, that which does the drawing is not the effort to reproduce a representation of the externalised vision but rather the power and pacing of the memory that incorporates itself instantaneously into the physical act of drawing. By taking shape in movement, by investing itself in what, before being a drawing, is a performance, memory consumes its own trace. (Perret & Schellow 2015: 234)

This specific practice of memory paradoxically materialises forms of forgetting and erasing. The very performativity of the images is based on the fact that the mimetic gesture is emptied from its mnemonic reference. Consequently, each viewer is constantly reactivating the images and confronting them with his singular perceptions of a colonial past.

### **Collapsing representation**

The drawings realised by Schellow on the Armand Hutereau expedition re-realise ethnographic scenes shot in northern Congo. For the first time, Schellow developed his praxis on a past experience of already framed images such as films. Therefore, the source and trigger of the mental images is different, while the process of materialisation follows the previously developed pattern of images referring to physically experienced sites.

Echoing such physical points of departure, however, as observed by Aleida Assmann, the resulting drawings and animation films (“Acheiropoieton”) seem to have the peculiar character of not being handmade.<sup>24</sup> In fact, their time-based construction builds a tension between the mimetic aspects of an image anchored within its geometrical structure and the granulation and flickering of the multilayered countless dots whose superposition sculpts fragmented images within the visual surface perception.<sup>25</sup>

Even if Schellow reframes the images in order to reduce the distance with the filmed person, the animations reproduce – “as not being man-made” – the structure and the materiality of the very historical images. We may in fact ask what kind of criticality such realistic images can – or do not – provide in regard to the ethnographic representations that we precisely aimed to dismantle.

One possible approach would be to consider the reproducibility of the “colonial” framing by the drawings as leading us to dissociate the images from their representation. In this way, the images cannot be considered critical or colonial as such, precisely because the historical image cannot be structurally condemned or rescued. It is the *topos* framing the images, which provides (and renders perceivable) their political and epistemological meanings.

In this regard, we can state that our position has changed since we started the GREYZONE project. We were initially searching for the colonial violence within the images, convinced that they were reflecting the epistemological and political frameworks in which they were produced and which they had to serve. Due to this position, we were based in a functionalist perspective that Edwards deplors among anthropologists themselves, considering “the photographic technique only a crude metaphor of the colonial relationship, embodied for example in the relationship between focal length and cultural distance, or in the functionalist implications of the wide angle” (Edwards 2018: 53).

Schellow’s animation facilitated the development of a critical position towards our own theoretical a priori. While we were still dealing with the structural construction of the colonial images in the works that we engaged in via the note-writing process published in *Critical Arts* (2017), his animation, created in the tension of the mimetic and mnemonic, emptied the representations of any substantial content. This sedimentation of ethnographic representations operates on the drawings as such, which are, taken individually, abstract deposits of points, as well as on their superposition building the three-second sequence.



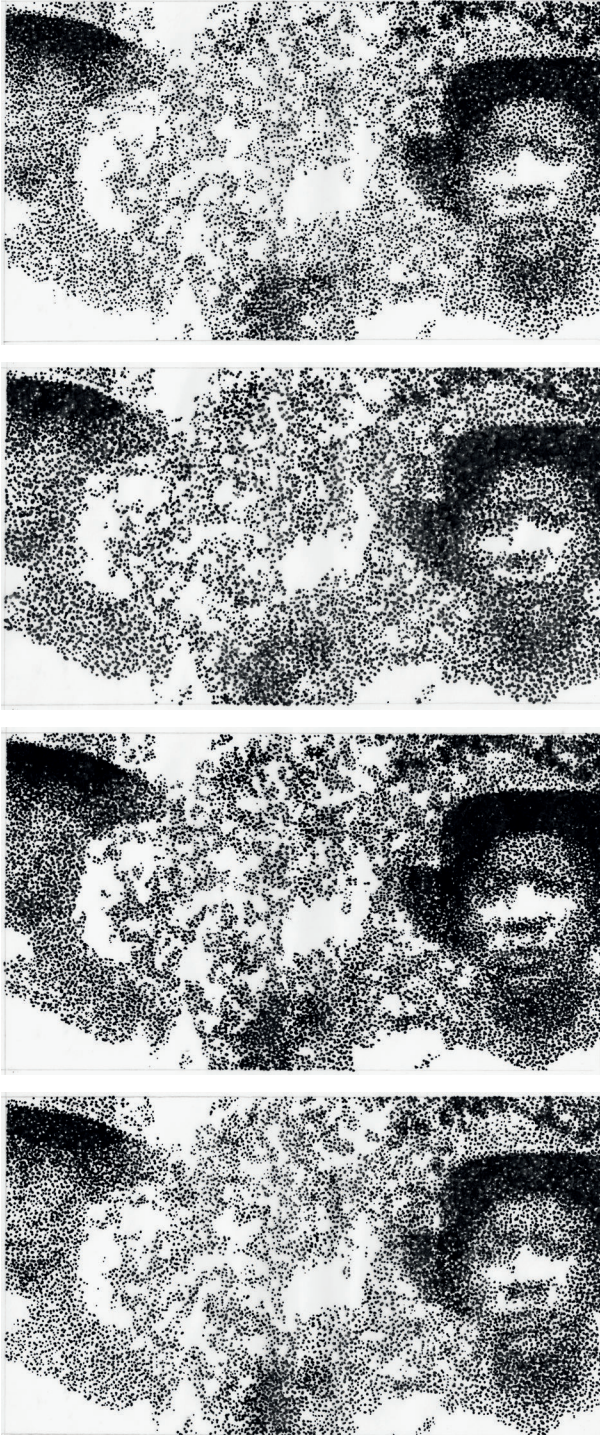


Fig. 6.2-5 Stills 007/021/044/061  
[from: series of animations,  
work in progress / since 2015 /  
3+3" - loop / 16:9 / BW / silent.  
Each sequence: approx. 36  
drawings, 29,7x42cm, ink on  
paper

This short time frame by which the images are visible constitutes fragments that articulate a temporal window of a short-term memory span, paradoxically transposed into permanence. The images can only be maintained by persistent enforcement of a permanent, constructive, and perceptibly artificial act, namely their representation. In other words, in the irreducibly interlocking of the various layers of such representational act to create what is remembered, the situation induces uninterrupted overstrain of one's own perceptual apparatus. It is this overburdening that sets in place, albeit on a minimal and temporary level, a controlled delay in our ability (and necessity) of objectification. Thus, by performing the collapse of Hutereau's ethnographic representations, Schellow confronts viewers with their own perceptual apparatus, triggered to rebuild representations of the fleeting images.

## Conclusion

We developed the 'trans-anthropological' as a critical approach based on practices that layer representations within the ethnographic frameworks of the images.

The first workshop initiated in the ERG art school helped generate experimental approaches to the images and test some hypotheses we progressively elaborated, complexified, or abandoned. We started to explore the practice of note-taking during screenings, inspired by the "automatic writing" developed by surrealist artists. We took notes on silent film footage as well as on the edited colonial propaganda films and analysed the colonial ideology within the images. We screened some films by cutting up the sound in order to focus exclusively on the images, trying to understand if one could trace their embodied colonial representations or if they could not be identified with it.

We were stuck in an indetermination, balancing between our desire to dissociate the images from their colonial framework and our incapacity to get over the strong and oftentimes unbearable ideological narratives. We kept in mind Ramirez and Rolots' observation about the supremacy of the scripts that colonial images were supposed to illustrate. In some way, we secretly hoped that they would have recorded elements that could escape or even deny the colonial propaganda they were supposed to serve and legitimate. Therefore, the practices we developed in the framework of the experimental workshops – such as the note-taking during and after the screening – aimed to crystallise the relationship between the viewer, the visual archives, and the colonial representations. The workshop at Khiasma offered the possibility of

experiencing other forms and practices for exploring the material. It offered the opportunity to engage in practice-based research whose first steps were publicly shared and collectively discussed. Contrary to the format of the BOZAR conference mentioned in the introduction, the Khiasma public event built an 'agora'<sup>26</sup> where experiences, doubts, and emotions could be shared without hierarchy or attempt to knowledge production. The strong political statement of the place offered the possibility to materialise the embodied memory engaged in the viewing process.

The collective experiences on that visual material within different institutional contexts – such as in ERG, Khiasma, the Mechelen Biennale CONTOUR, WIELS and Picha in Lubumbashi – enabled us to grapple with the concern over knowledge production on the colonial past through practice-based research. The notes, the ensuing discussions, and the artistic works engaged in these frameworks expressed a dystopian aspect of these images linked to their status as representations of the past.

Conceived in this way, the gestures engaged in by the collective have a performative character that prevents these specific images from making sense in and as representations.

Schellow's animation on the Hutereau expedition films prompted us to delve further into that epistemological and political rupture we pursue with the GREYZONE project. His work proposes a disconnecting of the images from their representations, emptying them of any substantial content, such as a past that should be 'excavated' and 'rescued'. The numerous 'abstract' drawings – sequenced as animation films that appear alternately with black frames also projected at the same length – provide critical elements to the research undertaken on the notes by materialising the process of memorisation and oblivion at work in our perceptions of such images of the colonial past. In this respect, we consider Schellow's animation on the Hutereau expedition a work that engages the viewer in a reflexive process through which we become aware of the act by which images are constantly reframed as colonial representations, serving thus quite different political discourses.

Writing those last lines of the chapter we might mention that the ongoing process of the collective work of the project brought up some irreconcilable assumptions. While the Khiasma residency enabled us to embed the experimental proposals of the colonial images within an artistic frame through its exhibition and the moderation of the discussion, the other venues appeared as much more problematic. The transposal of experimental gestures into public artistic events (modifying or at least specifying what was written above) generated tensions that were not only linked to the symbolic violence of the images. A general enthusiasm crossed with the different intentions of

the various members of the project. Travelling around several places in the world, the latter considered the reproduction of the note-writing techniques on those colonial films to be problematic, echoing Hal Foster's critique (1995: 302).

The way in which a development workshop of the Lubumbashi Biennale was framed, for instance, could have been read in perspective as replaying the staged categories of a 'we' turned into 'executioner expiators' and a 'them' as 'eternal victims'. It is also in this respect that Sandrine Colard de Bock, the curator of the Biennale, finally declined the participation of the collective at the event. In such context, the images seemed stuck in a colonial identity which the organisers precisely wanted to avoid – a process amplified by some of the artistic and social 'techniques' proposed to the participants.

The ambivalent positioning of being the reference by which to 'repair' the historical injustice and violence is strongly challenged by both of us. We do not consider ourselves as being *out* of history. In this sense – when for instance sharing Schellows' drawings and animation films within the winter school '*Arts and Anthropology, Heritage-making, Uses and Museumification of the Past*'<sup>27</sup> at the Iziko Museum in Cape Town – we focused our reflection on our different perceptions of Schellows' artistic proposal. The performed dialogue was not offering 'a solution' or 'empathy', nor did it follow any therapeutical intention, but instead it inscribed our position in an ongoing process that was theoretically and artistically enriched by the collective discussion with the participants of the school – only in such a mirrored way echoing matters faced and debated since the end of the apartheid regime.

## Notes

1. The image on p. 186 is Figure 6.1 Still 1/021 [021 from: series of animations, work in progress / since 2015 / 3+3" – loop / 16:9 / BW / silent. Each sequence: approx. 36 drawings, 29,7x42cm, ink on paper.
2. This sovereign position of science, by which fight against affects and 'croyance', has recently been expressed at the conference 'De l'ombre à la Lumière. Pour une politique de gestion des collections coloniales de restes humains dans les universités', at the Université Libre de Bruxelles on 15 February 2019. Alain Froment, a doctor and anthropologist at the Musée de l'Homme in Paris, built his entire presentation on the argument that positivist sciences such as bio-anthropology – unlike human sciences like social anthropology, which are too deeply engaged with the colonial past – were able to deconstruct racial theories.

Maarten Couttenier, a historian and anthropologist at the Royal Museum for Central Africa, observed that, to the contrary, the heritage of physical anthropology is still embedded in emotions, which is important to take into account. In the meantime, he distances himself from what sometimes took the form of a sterile “process of intention”.

3. [https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/video/2017/11/28/retour-sur-le-grand-oral-africain-d-emmanuel-macron-au-burkina-faso\\_5221665\\_3212.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/video/2017/11/28/retour-sur-le-grand-oral-africain-d-emmanuel-macron-au-burkina-faso_5221665_3212.html) (last accessed 27 October 2019).
4. We thank our colleague Damiana Otoiu for mentioning the irony of this semantic change.
5. “Central Africa” is the designation given by the institution (RMCA) to the Belgian former colony of Congo and the trust territories of Rwanda and Burundi.
6. The official name is still Royal Museum for Central Africa, but Africa Museum is used in all publicity and communications. The choice of the new denomination is quite paradoxical in that the institution decided to dedicate the ‘new’ permanent exhibition exclusively to its former colonial territories. This choice ignores research conducted in the museum concerning several African countries that have no links with the Belgian colonial past. As mentioned by Anne-Marie Boutiaux, the former head of the ethnography division, this political choice was motivated by the need to disrupt the quite ambivalent relationship that Belgium continues to foster with its former colonial territories, as well as by the pretence that it could claim any kind of “expertise” regarding them. Given the institution claims to be confronting its colonial history, the new name is quite improper.
7. From this perspective, we refer to Valentin Mudimbe’s deconstructivist conception developed in *The Invention of Africa* (1988), in which he insists, as Towa and Houtondji do, on the dynamics of imposed European knowledge on African colonies and the intercultural fictions it generated on the continent.
8. In 2017, by crossing our different practices, our primary research on note-taking protocols led to the foundation of the GREYZONE ZEBRA project. It builds a collective of various students, artists, and researchers, and at this point frames also our own collective work on those methods, among other things. At first, the project worked on official colonial and missionary propaganda films, ethnographic works, and private film archives, yet without regard to such categorisations, which were not always clearly distinguishable.
9. Michel Bouffiuoux’s *Paris-Match* article on Lusinga’s skull: <https://parismatch.be/actualites/societe/144771/lusinga-et-300-autres-cranes-dafricains-conserves-a-bruxelles-partie-2-le-pauvre-diable-de-lulb>; the well-documented amputation of hands: [https://www.google.com/search?q=mains+coup%C3%A9s+du+congo&source=lnms&tbm=isch&sa=X&ved=oahUKEwjlyOX2hsrgAhWG\\_qQKHUX-ARYQ\\_AUIDigB&biw=1920&bih=937](https://www.google.com/search?q=mains+coup%C3%A9s+du+congo&source=lnms&tbm=isch&sa=X&ved=oahUKEwjlyOX2hsrgAhWG_qQKHUX-ARYQ_AUIDigB&biw=1920&bih=937).

10. Freddy Yombo Mutombo, born in Kinshasa in 1978, is a member of the group *Eza Possibles*. Since his residency at l'Ecole Supérieure des Arts Décoratifs (ESAD) in Strasbourg, he has focused on the Belgian colonial past and worked with colonial images. He worked despite the impossibility of accessing the visual archives of the Africa Museum. In April 2019 he secured access for the next two years.
11. This work has been presented by Anna Seiderer at the Journée d'Etude 'Contemporary artists and colonial photographic archives in contemporary art', organised by Sandrine Colard and Maureen Murphy, at l'Institut National d'Histoire de l'Art (INHA), Paris, 24 May 2017.
12. As mentioned in the introduction, the notion of "shared memory", which was used in the colonial film digitisation project, was highly contested by diaspora members, because it erases the very violence to which Boris Wastiau refers.
13. Wastiau uses the term as a metaphor when he defines the Congo Museum as a "showcase of a colonial system" (2017: 462).
14. International African Association for Exploration and Civilization of Central Africa (AIA) was founded by Leopold II in 1876 at the Geographical Conference in Brussels.
15. The Public Forces were Congolese police agents who served the Independent Free State of King Leopold II and after 1908 Belgian Congo.
16. We explicitly refer to the debate initiated by Clifford & Marcus in *Writing Culture* (1986), and while we acknowledge the theoretical self-criticism of anthropological research, we agree with Dawson, Hockey & James (1997) that the critical position should not be an end in itself.
17. From its beginning, the project had been linked with ERG (see, for example, the initial anecdote of this text), and in its development over time has integrated several actors connected with the school, from one of the initiators of the entire process, Corinne Diserens (previous ERG director); to the founding member and coauthor of this text, Alexander Schellow (currently a professor); to the president of the ASBL Laurence Rassel (currently its director); to more than fifty percent of the current members, who have entered the framework originally through their network as former ERG-students. As a consequence, we considered defining the ERG as our main partner institution. In the end, however, based on several doubts concerning the (in)stability of school structure (personal, institutional, and political frameworks), as well as the fact of its politically embedded structure as a public academic institution in Wallonia, we abandoned the idea.
18. That is, even if the ERG defines itself very much as a place for experimentation on pedagogical forms and functions.
19. <http://www.khiasma.net/rdv/pratiquer-les-images-coloniales/?lang=en>.

20. This, however, is not part of our gleaned film stock but forms a dimension of the primarily digitised body of films in the RMCA collection.
21. Since we started to work on the paper, a workshop was held at Picha in Lubumbashi, but the artistic proposals are still in process.
22. An important aim of the project is to build a digital artistic archive of films shared by several institutions that are already project partners. The institutions' aim is to reflect on differences in the perceptions of colonial images when situated within the former colonial museum or institutions dedicated to contemporary art in Belgium, France, Democratic Republic of Congo, Benin, and Senegal. In the European context the spaces hosting this project are specifically dedicated to contemporary art, i.e., in Belgium: *École de recherche graphique* (ERG), *WIELS Centre d'Art Contemporain*, *Biennial Contours*; in France: the Department of Plastic Art of the University of Paris 8, the *Centre d'art Khiasma*; in DRC: Picha and the *Biennial de Lubumbashi 2019*; in Benin: *École du Patrimoine Africain*; in Senegal: *IFAN*. The different perceptions will be realised in a multilayer indexical entry built through notes, images, and gestures proposed during the several workshops we plan to organise with the partners.
23. Elisabeth Edwards recalls the ambivalence that anthropologists of the early twentieth century still associated with the documentary capacity of photography, even if they expressed their doubts – as Haddon did – about the nature of proof and the role of ethnography embedded in natural sciences (2018: 31–57). The way Hutereau practiced ethnography is still embedded in natural sciences, and he did not provide, as did the authors to whom Edwards refers in her paper (Everard im Thurn, Maurice V. Portman and Alfred Haddon), any critical attempt to consider the supposed objectivity of the recorded images.
24. Personal communication by Aleida Assmann in 2010.
25. See, for example, the following link: <https://vimeo.com/370506469> (last accessed, 20 February 2020).
26. We employ the term in the metaphorical sense for conveying the square from Antiquity, which is a political, religious, commercial and sometimes topographical meeting point, closely linked to the main traffic routes of the group.
27. <https://heritages.hypotheses.org/doctoral-school-cape-town-johannesburg-2019> (last accessed 20 January 2020).

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