

Still Present! – 12th Berlin Biennale for

Contemporary Art

Curated by Kader Attia in collaboration with Ana Teixeira Pinto, Đỗ Tường Linh, Marie Helene Pereira, Noam Segal, and Rasha Salti

Akademie der Künste, Hanseatenweg and Pariser Platz, Dekoloniale Memory Culture in the City, Hamburger Bahnhof Museum for Contemporary Art, KW Institute for Contemporary Art, and Stasi Headquarters, Campus for Democracy, Berlin, 11 June 2022 – 18 September 2022

Reviewed by Maria Walsh, University of the Arts London

CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS

Maria Walsh is reader in artists' moving image at Chelsea College of Arts/UAL and author of *Therapeutic Aesthetics: Performative Encounters in Moving Image Artworks* (Bloomsbury, 2020). She is reviews editor of *Moving Image Review & Art Journal (MIRAJ)*.

E-mail: m.walsh@chelsea.arts.ac.uk

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9228-5186>

Where does one begin to review the enormity of a biennale consisting of 82 artists, including some collectives, whose works, on display across six venues in Berlin, are, according to Kader Attia's curatorial statement, a survey of two decades of decolonial work? One could begin with a process of

elimination: one of the venues, the Dekoloniale Memory Culture in the City office, displays one underwhelming work: Nil Yalter's *Exile is a Hard Job* 1983/2022, a series of overlapping, low resolution black and white posters with graffitied text covering the storefront windows. The images are derived from video images of interviews with Portuguese and Turkish migrants, both posters and videos being shown at KW Institute for Contemporary Art. Given that moving image is the biennale's medium of choice, a superhuman quantity of hours stack up, which, in conjunction with the exhibition's weighty but necessary political themes of coloniality and decolonisation, makes for an overwhelming experience. A loose focus at some venues somewhat aids navigation. For example, at Hanseatenweg, the emphasis was on topographically mapping and investigating connections between coloniality and extractivist capitalism in relation to 'nature'. At Pariser Platz, restitution was a mainstay, while at Stasi HQ, unsurprisingly, a surveillance thematic predominated. That said, many artists appeared in multiple venues and themes overlapped, the biennale's central focus being on the naming and making visible (literally in some cases) of colonial and imperial violence and their continuing legacies of oppression.

The emphasis on naming was a little surprising given the motif of repair that characterises Attia's own artistic practice in which the wounds and fractures of colonial modernity are brought into dialogue with and as reparative gestures. It's not that these latter were absent, but they were more evident in static medium works, for example, the montage of ink drawings by Florian Sông Nguyễn, *Les Chiens Errants (The Stray Dogs)* (2022) that addressed ecological savagery in relation to animals but through

a fantastical graphism that punctuated tracts of empty wall space. Tammy Nguyen's 'Jesus' paintings beguiled. Their green-hued delineations of foliage embossed with metal leaf attracted from a distance but on closer viewing revealed miniature drawings of helicopters and insects, the main iconography being derived from the stations of the cross. The work was inspired by a Catholic park in a Vietnamese refugee camp on an Indonesian archipelago, religious missionaries being another arm of coloniality that exacerbated its toxic effects while simultaneously providing comfort for some. Works such as these had a more immediate affinity with Attia's curatorial statement about the necessity in decolonial discourse of not only reclaiming the present from algorithmic governance, but de-automatising our dreams.

Dreams or ways of imagining otherwise were far from my mind as I sat through the abundance of 'desktop aesthetic' works using state-of-the-art graphics to display topographic and numerological data as well as surveillance footage and satellite imagery. I am of course referring to works by Forensic Architecture and the groups affiliate or one-time collaborators, Susan Schuppli and Lawrence Abu Hamden respectively. Videos from Schuppli's research on how temperature is weaponised by the state against migrants and indigenous peoples appear at three of the biennale venues, their titles testifying to their subject-matter: for example, *Icebox Detention Along the U.S.-Mexico Border* (2021-2022) and *Freezing Deaths & Abandonment Across Canada* (2021-2022). Taking up three walls of a large gallery space at Hamburger Bahnhof, Abu Hamden's *Air Conditioning* (2022),

an installation of digital prints of clouds whose densities, derived from data assembled from the United Nations digital library, represent instances of noise pollution of Israeli fighter jets and drones over Lebanon over a fifteen-year period from 2007 to 2021. At first glance, the images evoke the sublime or the romantic, but closer inspection reveals digital compositing — each cm representing a day of ‘atmospheric violence’ (Abu Hamden, n.pag) — and the annual dates are rendered in silver vinyl on the floor. In lending aesthetic form to the infomatics given in an accompanying short demonstration video, the installation powerfully spatialised the invisible violence (and trauma) of living under constant military threat. By contrast, the effect of Forensic Architecture’s *Cloud Studies* (2021), a large-scale curved screen at Hanseatenweg’s Akademie der Künste, led to a deadening of the senses, that is, if a viewer lasted the course through the bite-sized accounts of several of the group’s investigations from Grenfell Tower, London, to the toxic spraying of crops along the Israeli-Palestine border and the clearance of Indonesian forests. (On my visit, visitors did not linger.) In a review focussing on this strand of the biennale, Ben Davis makes the interesting argument that the exhibitionary popularity of these forms of ‘investigative aesthetics’ (2022: n.pag) is connected to our post-truth era in which facts become newly desirable and reassuring. However, while consciousness may be raised, I would hazard that it is only to the level of short-term memory. The accumulation of one example of ecological warfare after another, culminating in instances where the State used teargas, another toxic cloud, to break up protests, rendered the viewer as helpless as those captured on pixelated satellite footage.

That said, some clever curation at Hanseatenweg offered a glimpse of resistance. Imani Jacqueline Brown's *What remains at the end of the earth?* (2022), a circular screen situated on floor, and partly surrounded by a print suspended from the ceiling, is one of the first moving image works one encounters on entering the exhibition, and due to its central positioning, is inevitably re-encountered on exiting, where its poetics potentially mitigate the information overload of engaging with most of the rest of the exhibition. An equally horrific investigation, Brown's mellifluous voiceover recounts the crimes of extractivist capitalism, in this case, petrochemical companies poisoning of the air over the Louisiana wetlands, an area largely inhabited by descendants of enslaved people that has the highest levels of cancer in the nation. (Straddling the Mississippi River between New Orleans and Baton Rouge, it is nicknamed Cancer Alley). Brown is currently a researcher with Forensic Architecture and uses similar topographical mapping techniques and data, but she puts the abstraction of infomatics into dialogue with histories of creative resistance: the satellite imaging locates the traces of magnolia trees that were planted by enslaved people to mark their graves (stone being forbidden them); and her visual mapping of the galactic topologies of the stars and the subterranean topologies of water evoke multi-dimensional speculative temporalities of planetary survivance. Trees also featured in Dana Levy's evidentiary documentary, *Erasing the Green* (2021/2022), which included talking heads interviews, as well as documents and maps showing further ecological warfare on Israeli-Palestinian fronts. Documentary images of a desert terrain scattered with the decimated trunks and roots of olive trees, an important

symbol of Palestinian homelands, spoke volumes: the clearance is to facilitate targeting the enemy.

At Bahnhof Hamburger, Basel Abbas and Ruanne Abou-Rahme's *Oh Shining Star Testify* (2019/2022) incorporates footage taken by Israeli military surveillance cameras to choreograph minoritarian resistance as well as the violence it incurs. Distributed across several hardboard screens placed in front of three main projections, the images became as layered as the politics of the background story. Black-and-white surveillance footage capturing Palestinians crossing the West Bank was intercut with close-up colour footage of plants (akkoub) blowing in the wind. Akkoub is central to Palestinian cuisine, but there is a law against foraging for it. The surveillance footage captures Yusef Al-Shawamreh, a 14-year-old who crossed over the West Bank to forage and was shot dead by Israeli forces. I did not know the specifics of this story while watching, but reading about it afterwards, I acutely felt that the montage of images, text and sound (the work includes subwoofers) had conveyed its tragic, yet resistant, meanings. The film is both indictment and memorial, its dispersive nature testifying to territorial dislocation, but inclusion of footage of Palestinian people celebrating and lamenting with dance and song conveyed the force of everyday resistances.

While naming a crime is an important step towards justice in legal and juridical contexts, often in an art exhibition, naming can be a spectacular gesture as is the case with Jean-Jacques Lebel's *Poison Soluble. Scènes de l'occupation américaine à Bagdad* (2013), a labyrinth of large-scale, in-your-face, digital blow-ups of the iconic images from Abu Ghraib

depicting the vile abuse performed, and recorded, by US soldiers against Iraqi prisoners. To re-stage these images without a discursive context other than crudely juxtaposing them with black-and-white media images of war-torn Iraqi towns, is hardly, as the artist claims, a provocation ‘to meditate on the consequences of colonialism’ (Lebel in Ströbel et al, 2022: 104) but is rather a further and crude addition to the hyper-circulation of unjust images across media.

Clément Cogitore’s *Les Indes Galantes (The Amorous Indies)* (2017) pierces the theatrics of spectacle. The compelling video features a group of mixed heritage/diasporic young people dancing violently – krumping - to music from Jean-Philippe Rameau’s titular opera from 1735 in which performers of African descent were brought to the stage for the first time. The stark stage-lighting, the proximity of the camera to the energetic bodies and the inventiveness of the muscular strikes without striking (akin to martial arts) combined to make this detournement a joy to watch. Interestingly, in his introduction to *Imperial Ecologies*, one of two academic conferences in the biennale’s extensive events programme, Attia invoked Frantz Fanon’s clinical observation that the colonised other lives in a dream that is not their own and, as a reaction to this, their actual dreams are often muscular, bound up with running, escaping, and flying etc.. Cogitore’s amorous dancers could be said to have enacted a creative muscular resistance to bodily subjugation, the jubilant cheers of their diverse group of on-screen supporters further inviting the viewer in.

Creative invention also occurs in the documentary *Considérant qu’il est plausible que de tels événements puissent à nouveau*

survenir (Considering that it is plausible that such events may occur again) (2015) by PEROU - Pôle d'Exploration des Ressources Urbaines, a collective who work on social and architectural activist projects. The film is a lively record of how, inspired by Roma inhabitants' attempts to transform their encampment on vacant land in the Parisian suburb of Ris-Orangis, the group worked with them to improve sanitary and cultural conditions from building showers to a cinema. The various activities in the fast-paced video are introduced repeatedly by the qualifier 'Considering that...', for example, 'there is no running water', the cumulative point being that, although the community's living conditions were dire, they desired to enhance them, although they were eventually evicted, and their refuge raised to the ground.

While PEROU's video avoided subjecting its protagonists to an othering gaze by keeping the camera on the move and focussing more on actions than persons, in short experimental documentary *The City Limits* (2014), Layth Kareem focuses on persons but within a frame that encourages the viewer to be an attentive witness to the traumatic effects of living with violence, e.g., the threat of car bombs. On a site of such violence, a junkyard in Baghdad, Kareem designated a van as a temporary 'psychotherapeutic' shelter for local people to express their feelings in singular performance-to-camera style cameos. The responses from people of all ages ranged from wailing and anger to silence and the kind of nonchalance (or dissociation) that can be a symptom of PTSD, but that is rarely rendered in the media as it does not speak in the latter's heightened emotional terms.

An unassuming video by Sajjad Abbas documents an activist act of resistance in which the artist spanned a banner with the phrase “I Can See You” across the largest building he could scale in Baghdad’s Green Zone, which was home to the United States-led coalition forces during the occupation of Iraq. Under the banner, he hung a large-scale image of his eye, a work which was remade and resurrected during the youth-led Iraqi uprising of 2019. In the Hamburger Bahnhof, video and banner are separated, which might have been a dynamic reflection on the relation between the act in the real and its documentation in an art exhibition had the separation not been bridged by Lebel’s ‘provocation’, which seemed more in danger of re-traumatising a large part of the audience than anything else.¹

This further raises the question of who this biennale is addressed to. I would hazard that most biennale visitors will have experience of one form of colonial wound or another, either first-hand or as second and third generations of artists, art workers, art students and other interested parties. Decolonial archaeologist Uzma Z. Rizvi’s words are worth recalling here:

If, due to your body experience, you have never had to question how the world looks at your race/class/ethnicity/gender/body, or if that has never impacted the way the world identifies your research or work, you should know that that is a privileged experience (in Pais and Strauss 2016: 86).

¹ I completed writing this review on 12 August 2022. On August 18, an email from the Berlin Biennale mailing list alerted me to a series of letters published in *Artforum* addressing the problematic inclusion of Lebel’s installation, the outcome being that on August 16, Kareem, Abbas and fellow Iraqi artist, Raed Mutar, withdrew their work. One of the curatorial team, Ana Teixeira Pinto, earlier resigned in objection to *Poison Soluble*. More information on this can be found here: <https://www.artforum.com/slant/regarding-torture-at-the-berlin-biennale-88836> Accessed 18 August 2022.

While there exist art world and art audience ‘settlers’ whose world views may never have been unseated, whether naming crimes encourages a decolonial attitude in the privileged is questionable. Also, decolonial attitudes crucially need to be invented by those suffering from the haunting legacies of colonisation. As Ariella Aisha Azoulay – whose archival wall installation *The Natural History of Rape* (2017/22) is included at KW Institute – asserts, the historical process of legislative decolonisation was simply a different phase of the colonial enterprise.

The termination of the colonial project with the proliferation of nation-states and of organized national joy continued to be inseparable from the proliferation of the crimes perpetrated in order to nationalize societies of different formations and compel them to embrace the struggle for establishing the nation-state as their interest and founding myth (2019: 307 ebook).

Art can critique the continuity of coloniality in liberated nation states, but it has more of a role to play in the decolonisation of the mind, to paraphrase the Kenyan novelist and post-colonial theorist Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o. This decolonisation necessitates detachments from dominant power and recoveries of lost worlds at a more imaginary, perhaps unconscious, level. As well as naming the crimes, the biennale also attempts to explore how art can help to re-imagine a truly decolonial world. Restorative memory work is crucial here.

A standout work in this regard is Tuấn Andrew Nguyễn's *The Specter of Ancestors Becoming* (2019). The four-screen installation revolves around three intersecting dramatic narratives about the Senegalese soldiers, tirailleurs, who were deployed to Indochina to suppress the Vietnamese uprising against the French. After the war, some were considered traitors and executed, some returned to Africa, often bringing the children they had with Vietnamese women, many of whom remained behind. While I learnt a lot from the film about the trans-colonial connections between countries that are not often spoken about in relation to each other, i.e. Africa and Vietnam, this 'knowledge' was secondary to the film's affective force. Using theatrical staging and archival footage, the discontinuous gaps between the screens and the disjunctions between the three circulating narratives—recounted by actors in a studio and lip-synced in the dramas—echoed the difficult resurfacing of memories of abandoned and forgotten mothers. All footage undulated in a hypnotic slow-motion pace that was strangely comforting in the midst of the forcefield of pain generated by this work's embodiment of how ancestral traumas, the results of colonial disruption, haunt future generations.

Speculative restitution also materialised in Deneth Piumaksi Veda Arachchige's photographic series *136 Years Ago & Now* (2019-22), in which she 'returns' to their original geo-locations the ethnographic portraits that were not only taken of her ancestors, the indigenous Adivasi people of Sri Lanka, but also carelessly miscategorised in colonial archives. The violence cannot be undone, but the montaged portraits, included both at KW Institute and Pariser Platz, memorialise the specificity of indigenous life-

worlds. Another interesting take on restitution at Pariser Platz, was Khandakar Ohida's *Dream Your Museum* (2022), a fictional documentary-style film whose slow burn conveyed a poignant care for fragments and objects as signs of lost worlds. A sculptural display of various objects pouring out of and arranged around a metal storage trunk accompanied the film, but the latter's dreaminess was, to my mind, more compelling than the melange of curiosities. Shot at a distance that put the viewer in the position of an eavesdropper, the film followed an elderly man, classified in the wall texts as a hoarder (and based on the artist's uncle), and a child who questions him about the various objects and debris he collects in a ruined enclave of buildings. Passing on an inheritance beyond borders, the man advises the child of the freedom of preserving one's objects in an imaginary museum of the mind, including the animal or fish bones they find by the river.

The Kwanza River in Angola is as much a main character in Mónica de Miranda's *Path to the Stars* (2022) as the visionary female freedom-fighter rowing along its banks. Displayed at KW Institute, the film exemplified the decolonial feminist perspective foregrounded in the press release in that it assembled multiple temporalities and transgenerational relations between women in relation to ecological and liberational struggles. Journeying downriver, initially dressed in military camouflage gear, the female visionary recollects memories of her country's violent colonial past, these visions being enacted by other characters who intermittently appear on the riverbanks in largely static vignettes. As part of her odyssey of healing, she interacts with some of these characters, especially with an older and a younger woman,

the saga culminating with the younger woman, dressed in a vintage astronaut suit, seeming to acquire a transhistorical role of caretaker of the area's natural resources. While meandering and somewhat obscure, it was inspiring to see women in the roles of seers, healers and time-travellers.

If, in previous decades, global art exhibitions showing work from former colonies and/or continents and communities marginalised by dominant US-European axes² might have implied a demand to be included, the decolonial as it is currently being rethought, has more to do with the refusal to be included and the demand to shift perspectives altogether. The 'decolonial horizon', as Mexican sociologist Rolando Vásquez puts it, is not a fight for being recognized within the dominant epistemic and aesthetic framework of modernity, but rather, an invention or recovery of forms of healing and 'dreaming the dreams of other worlds of sensing and meaning' (Vásquez 2020: 127). *Still Present!* remains more on the side of naming and acknowledging the crimes and legacies of colonial modernity, but it also made tentative forays into imagining otherwise. While it is 'still' necessary to keep the realities of colonial wounds in full view, art's capacity to provide symbols of poetic justice is as essential to the work of decoloniality as is the activist work of social justice elsewhere.

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² Given the expertise of the curatorial team, some geo-political locations predominated in *Still Present!*: France, Africa and Vietnam; Israel-Palestine; and also the inclusion of many Arab and Indian artists.

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