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Reading the world

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READING THE WORLD

Kitty Zijlmans

I didn't know where to look when I first came across Georges Adéagbo's installation at the five-yearly Documenta exhibition in Kassel in 2002. The walls were covered from head to toe with texts, newspaper clippings, pictures, photo's, posters, LP covers and calendars, while the floor surrounding the walls was filled with objects, books, pieces of clothing, everyday objects and countless African sculptures and masks. The centre of the installation was completely taken up by a wooden boat, again filled with and surrounded by many objects, texts, an anchor and a wooden totem; too many to count. It was a very colourful installation with a lot to see and read, and everything was somewhat related to Africa. But how? What were we looking at? As time passed, the answer appeared: this was Africa, but seen through the eyes of Western researchers, explorers, collectors, writers and tourists.

This was a Western construction of 'Africa'. Everything was running all over the place, with the immense continent of Africa and all of its cultures, languages and history being thrown onto a single pile called 'Africa'. A photo of the head of mythical Egyptian queen Nefertiti was happily placed next to a series of sculptures often called 'typiques d'Afrique', referring to the expectations that tourist art seeks to fulfil. And that completely matches the message this installation seemed to convey. It's title, Explorer and Explorers Confronting the History of Exploration ... ! World Theatre speaks volumes, though I didn't hear of it until a later date. This installation offered a glimpse into the history of research about and exploration of Africa, which eventually resulted in the colonization of the entire continent. The urge to explore, colonial history and tourism, all are themes that Adéagbo presented as a world theatre in 2002 – one in which all of us played a minor role. We were standing right in that mess of chaotic histories. It thoroughly scrutinized the extent of our knowledge, because we here in Europe usually limit ourselves to condensed data about Africa passed on by scientific studies, museum collections, exhibitions, travel guides, websites and tourist trips, or via developmental care. All forms of condensed knowledge, but who is interpreting it and from what perspective? Who draws the links, writes the histories, takes the

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photos and draws conclusions?



SIMRYN GILL (1959, SINGAPORE), PAPER BOATS, 2008, ENCYCLOPAEDIA BRITANNICA, 1968 EDITION. Varying sizes. Photo: exhibition Simryn Gill: Gathering, Heide Museum of Modern Art, Melbourne, 2010. Photo: John Brash.

CHANGING OUR WAY OF THINKING

This example shows exactly how important art can be in changing your way of thinking, in recognizing completely different links and coming to alternative configurations. In his work, Adéagbo shows us exactly what the process of writing history looks like, how crucial a historian's own choices are and how easily fact and fiction can be mixed up. His installations are alternative constellations that generate art and meaning while revealing the fictional character of the archive as a home for selected sources. A famous fragment from *The Analytical Language* of John Wilkins

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(1942) by Argentinian author and poet Jorge Luis Borges can be used to relativize the value of taxonomies, which are usually archived. In the story, German lawyer Franz W. Kuhn stumbles across a Chinese encyclopaedia with the telling title of Emporio celestial de conocimientos benévolos (Celestial empire of benevolent knowledge). In it, he finds a very unusual taxonomical system for the animal kingdom: a) those belonging to the Emperor, b) the embalmed, c) the tame, d) suckling pigs, e) sirens, f) mythical animals, g) stray dogs, h) those that are found in this category (sic) have become feral, j) the countless, and so on. Interestingly, 'et cetera' can also be found among the categories. Divisions and rankings, or systems of knowledge, are thus highly arbitrary and circular ("those that are found in this category"). But there are other options out there, and artists introduce us to these alternative ways of thinking.

PRODUCTION OF REALITY

'Reading' the world is as old as mankind itself, and that reading enables us to give meaning to our surroundings, to nature, to tracks and to the behaviour of man and animal alike. While our world is becoming increasingly complex, we are still 'reading' everything around us to give it meaning. We also make it easier for ourselves by starting collections of meaningful objects and by creating things, by literally giving shape to meaning. There is a very close relationship between knowing (in the sense of being familiar with it) and making. That's exactly what an artist does, learning something by making, creating. Visualization and materialization are powerful ways to produce reality. Art doesn't represent the world, but presents her, forming it and making it available. After all, works of art are reality themselves; they're actually there, and not just a text or a commentary on the world. The installations in the Global Imaginations exhibition are world shaping and underline aspects of our complex world to open new and different ways of finding meaning in nature, art, and humanity's own history. And again, the work by Adéagbo is an excellent example of this. In 'Global Imaginations', he incorporates the local history of Leiden's textile industry and connects this to his own interpretation of the famous triptych The Last Judgement (1526-1527) by Leiden artist Lucas of Leyden (1494-1533). What canvas of stories is born from this perspective? How do individual and collective narratives relate to each other and how does that form a worldview? With this installation, Adéagbo emphasizes and attacks the reality that every historical narrative depends on the person telling it.

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In his article 'World Pictures. Globalization and Visual Culture' (2011), American art theorist W. J. T. Mitchell shares a very interesting look into the way we name the world ('the global'). He takes us from the Latin word 'globus' (something round, measurable as a geometric shape, a shape made by man as the sum total of all lifeforms – taken from Wittgenstein) to the planetary (astronomical, the earth as particle in a constellation of stars), to the cosmos (the universe as seen from earth), to the world (universal and specific at the same time, meaning that the world is our planet), and finally to earth, terra, mother earth, but again specifically localized. In short, from the abstract to increasingly concrete levels, literally down to earth. Mitchell sees a worldview as a thing formed in and by the human consciousness, something that is simultaneously necessary and unavoidable, but always limited and idiosyncratic.

While some works of art in Global Imaginations explicitly imagine the world as a globe (globus), others instead refer to world in Mitchell's double sense: our world is the same as our planet. With his sculpture *Back to Fullness, Face to Emptiness* (1997-2009), Chen Zhen imagines the world as a metal system of coordinates with a diameter of four meters. At its heart is a neon red summary of the Universal Declaration of the Rights of Man, translated into Chinese. Positioned around the equator are a series of chairs from different times and cultures, with all the seats facing outwards. This means we are all looking in different directions and though we are capable of seeing each other and reaching out to each other, we can only do so with two at a time. Exactly as playful and effective is Btoul S'Himi's series *World Under Pressure* (2008-2015), which emphasizes how pressured the world has become. The world's continents and the Arabian world have been etched into her gas containers, pressure cookers and kitchen knives. Where are the weak spots of our planet? The immense colourful flag by Meschac Gaba (*Citoyen du Monde*, 2012-2015) on the front of De Meelfabriek is made up of all national flags of the world; it has become one, but our planet remains fragmented and artificially constructed.

OVERLAPPING WORLDVIEWS

Worldviews are not exclusive to visual artists, as every individual has the ability to develop worldviews and many people, including scholars, politicians, economists, and others, share these through a number of medias, including texts, schematics, notation forms and diagrams. Artists, meanwhile, create worldviews through their own specialisms that usually overlap and idiosyncratically mix with those from the fields of science, politics, religion, economy and ecology.

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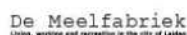
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Through that process, unique insights into countless prevailing worldviews and narratives are given, while others are questioned, altered, or even thoroughly mixed up. In her work *Nous ne noton pas les fleurs* (2009-2015), which can be found in the court outside De Meelfabriek, Tintin Wulia encourages visitors to reshape the world. Potted flowers are used to mark out all the continents, but the work simultaneously refers to the internationally renowned Dutch flower trade. By moving pots around, the public can determine the contours of the world and thus thoroughly change its appearance. Something man has been doing for centuries. Her work criticizes the indifferent way in which we deal with the world, our urge for territorial expansion and the geopolitical power struggles. Which political and economic meanings influence the map of the world? The public's actions do go unnoticed either; everything is captured by webcams and broadcast on screens. Just like the rest of the world is.

Mark Dion has been working with natural history museums all over the world for the past twenty five years. For him, as he says in his statement, "natural history collections are [...] not only vital to science, but they are also an enormous asset to visual culture and art. Natural science is as close to a religion as I could ever imagine having". He creates cosmologies, and in Leiden those are based on the scientific views that formed the basis of the collection and systems of the Naturalis Biodiversity Center. He is especially fascinated by the ideas and the foundations: how do they work, where do they come from and what are they based on? And, what's another way to do things? He chose objects from the museum that are archetypes for the scientific domains of ornithology, palaeontology and botany, all of which he wants to strip of their systems and make 'things' of again. He does so by remaking them, but this time as large and brightly coloured 3D printed objects, all gathered in the new order of a Dionian cabinet of curiosities. The chosen specimens are invaluable for our scientific understanding of the world's biodiversity, but that's exactly the problem: pretty soon all we will be left with are specimens assembled into museum collections as objects from a world gone by.

One project that crosses the borders between various worldviews in more than one way, is that of the Ghana ThinkTank. This is an initiative by the American artists Christopher Robbins, John Ewing and Matey Odonkor that – to critically look at the effectiveness of developmental care programmes – turns the world upside down. Uniquely, they are trying to solve first world

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problems with the help of a network of think tanks from less prosperous countries. These think tanks seriously try to find solutions for the issues presented to them from first world countries, and a container on the court of De Meelfabriek presents a visual report of a Dutch problem. Earlier this year, the artists visited Leiden's neighbourhoods to get to grips with local problems. Because of the special relationship between the Netherlands and Morocco and Indonesia, two new think tanks have been founded. One of the problems caused by globalization that they identified among Leiden's population is the growing fear of Islam, and with their project they try to voice their concerns for growing Dutch intolerance towards Muslims.

Central in the discussion, which the artists have had and are still having, is the realization of what intolerance is capable of and what tolerance can achieve. The Ghana ThinkTank has therefore built a small home in the flower warehouse to symbolically refer to the famous story of Anne Frank and to offer visitors the opportunity to contemplate intolerance and considerateness. Inside this Monument to the Dutch, we find countless references to the history of Dutch tolerance in relation to the Islamic culture and the Islamic religious traditions. Among them are the historical links between William of Orange and Suleiman the Magnificent, Sultan of the Ottoman Empire in the sixteenth century and known for his policy of religious tolerance. The American artists argue that the story of Anne Frank symbolizes the danger of intolerance and the importance of tolerance. The unexpected and touching connections in this work of art invite visitors to contemplate and debate a contemporary social issue on inclusion, exclusion, and respecting each other's values. All opinions are welcome and not everyone will agree with all worldviews, but we always need enough room for compassion and empathy.

ACTIVE PARTICIPATION

The twenty works of art that together form the Global Imaginations exhibition all have a unique way of showing how the connections with today's world are interwoven – our inability to separate history, from the colonial or colonized past, from dominant knowledge systems and from the contemporary political, social, ecological state of our world/the earth. The recurring theme in all is how visual artists think about and approach the 'world' and 'the global', and how this can be translated into art. The installation exists as a thing, a materialized object, but it is also a functional piece of art – functional for actively influencing visitors and conveying powerful messages. From

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this perspective, art itself becomes an event that encourages the development of new links to the world we perceive around us, which we know and in which we find ourselves as a the centre of the globe. That is exactly what we are confronted with, as these installations show new ways to think about the world. The visitor thus isn't a passive consumer. Instead, these works of art actively draw visitors into the issues through confrontation and by stimulating the formulation of opinions and sometimes even the changing of behaviour.

Visitors are also given the opportunity to fold little paper boats out of pages of the Encyclopaedia Britannica – a seemingly playful thing to do at Simryn Gill's Paper Boats (2008) installation, but what does this installation mean? What knowledge does it represent and what are we implying by choosing to fold paper boats out of it?

The gigantic installation Plastic Bags (2001-2015) by Pascale Marthine Tayou has been especially remade for De Meelfabriek and has involved numerous hands tying thousands of plastic bags to a net beneath it. Visitors come across a gracious image of bags that gently ride the ventilation waves running through the building, but that simultaneously represents unbridled pollution, rampant consumerism and even the unfortunate and countless refugees that carry their few possessions in these bags. The very development and exhibition of this installation is a catch 22 situation: by exhibiting it and revealing it to the world, we are making ourselves partly responsible. The same can be said for the choice presented to us by Brook Andrew's Jumping Castle War Memorial (2010). Do we climb on top and jump around? The bouncy castle is, as the title suggests, a memorial, but for once for the forgotten indigenous people of the world. It has been designed to immortalize the countless victims of colonialism in general, and of the Australian Aboriginals in particular.

The courtyard of De Meelfabriek also houses a remarkable construction, the OrtaWater – Purification Factory (2005) by Lucy + Jorge Orta (/Studio Orta). This water purification plant relies on water from the adjacent Zijlsingel and invites visitors to have a cup. Especially here in the Netherlands we see the availability of water as something natural, as we have been trying to keep our feet dry through drainage systems for hundreds of years. But even here, drinking water is becoming scarce. The Orta's purification plant is an answer to the world's growing shortage of

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drinking water, and it will be good for Leiden's population to get used to the taste of canal water.

Manifested in all of these works is the interaction between object and art, between dependency and mutual decisions. All carry with them the opportunity for visitors to discover that valuable unexpected meaning, which they weren't looking for and never thought about so far. To visit Global Imaginations is to journey through a world that is familiar and strange at the same time, because the artists have all incorporated unexpected and surprising links in their works to give shape to their unusual views of the world. Visitors will have to find a way to position themselves in relation to those views and will begin to question the validity of his or her own place in the world. Finally, it is up to the individual visitor to determine their own worldview.

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