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Ebifananyi : a study of photographs in Uganda in and through an artistic practice

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Chapter 6

Ebifananyi

Synthesising the research in two exhibitions

The correspondences with individual collections of photographs that were discussed in the previous chapters have all been presented in exhibitions that took place both in Uganda and in Western Europe. A selection of these correspondences was first brought together in an exhibition that took place in the FotoMuseum Antwerp (FoMu), Belgium. An additional exhibition based on the same content is, as I write this, scheduled to take place at The Uganda Museum, August 2018.

The conditions around exhibitions depend on socio-economic and historical circumstances that are largely beyond the scope of this research project. However, the present day circumstances that facilitated these particular exhibitions are part of my concerns as they are part of the infrastructure in which *ebifananyi* / photographs function. The earlier exhibitions, which related to individual *Ebifananyi* books, familiarised me with the differences between circumstances in Western Europe and Uganda, while also giving me the opportunity to engage with different audiences. Taking previous circumstances into account, FoMu was generous in terms of space, funding and support given in planning and production. This complicated the translation from the exhibition at FoMu to the exhibition in The Uganda Museum.

This chapter discusses the way in which the output of the research project was synthesised in one exhibition and sheds further light on the Ugandan and Western European conditions in which these exhibitions were, and will be, presented.

Exhibition venue 1 - FoMu

FoMu developed as an institution after the exhibition, ‘125 years of photography’ that took place in a provincial museum for applied arts in 1965. In 1986 the museum moved into a renovated warehouse that was remodelled to its current state in 2004.²⁷⁶ The mission of the museum is to be an expertise hub for contemporary and historical photography in all its forms and relating facets which reach a broad and varied audience.²⁷⁷ FoMu presents temporary exhibitions lasting several months, as well as collection exhibitions, which run for longer.

The Ebifananyi exhibition at FoMu was the result of a personal interest in my work expressed by curator Joachim Naudts. The exhibition was co-produced by FoMu and Paradox, a Dutch foundation that develops “projects around contemporary issues with documentary authors”.²⁷⁸ The museum budget was expanded by a grant from the Dutch Mondriaan Foundation for the presentation of Dutch artists and I received a fee for my work on the exhibition. The museum and Paradox managed costs of materials, staff, media players and other technological equipment.

²⁷⁶ Agfa_Gevaert was a producer of photographic materials with its headquarters in the town of Mortsels in the province of Antwerpen. <https://www.fotomuseum.be/en/about-FOMU/history.html> Last accessed 25-09-2018

²⁷⁷ My translation of the Museum’s Dutch mission statement as formulated on their website: <https://www.fotomuseum.be/over-het-fomu/beleid.html> Last accessed 25-09-2018

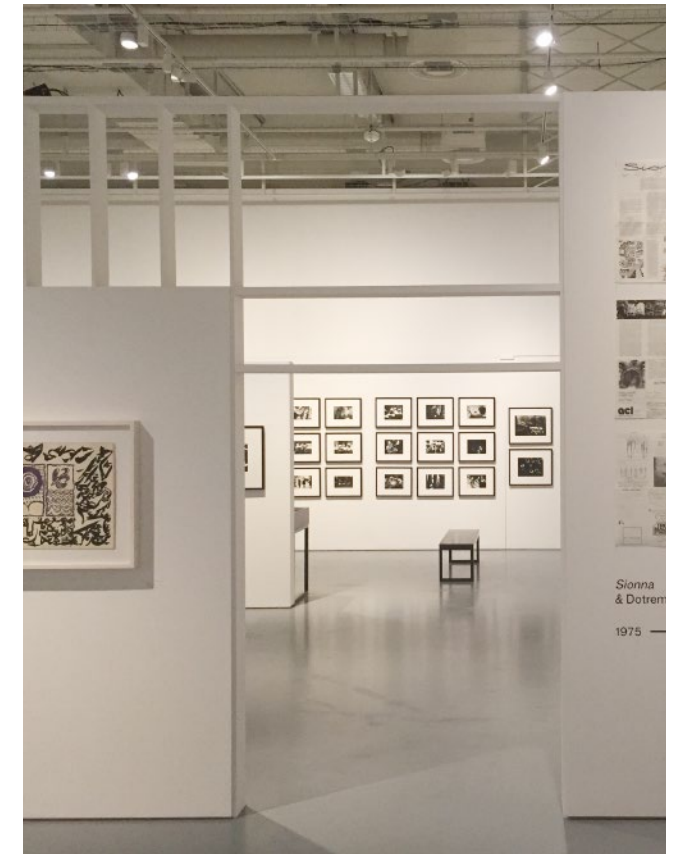
²⁷⁸ <http://www.paradox.nl/> Last accessed 25-09-2018

Exhibition venue 2 - The Uganda Museum

Collections of objects brought together by district commissioners displayed in an old colonial fort formed the first Uganda Museum that was established in 1908. In 1954 the Museum moved to a building that was designed for this purpose and additional wings and storage spaces have been added since.²⁷⁹ Ideologies, conventions and technological possibilities connected to the time periods in which the museum developed are manifest in the displays. The museum is part of the ministry of Tourism, Wildlife and Antiquities and its government funding does not include a budget for temporary displays.²⁸⁰

Two smaller presentations that were part of the *Ebifanyani* project took place in the Uganda Museum in 2016. These exhibitions were part of larger events, which were organised separately by the Uganda Press Photography Award and literary festival 'Writivism'.²⁸¹

The upcoming *Ebifanyani* exhibition at the Uganda Museum is funded by a grant I received in the Netherlands. Large numbers of school children from the region visit the Uganda Museum. Several school buses can be found simultaneously in the Museum parking, particularly towards the end of the second school term. National and international tourists also form a substantial part of the audience and in comparison to FoMu visitors mostly tour the museum with a guide. I vividly remember how uncomfortable the obligatory presence of a guide felt when I first visited the museum in 2006, as if the exhibits could not speak for themselves. I now take the presence of this guide to be part of the museum visit as an event, rather than an encounter between an individual and a stable display of information.



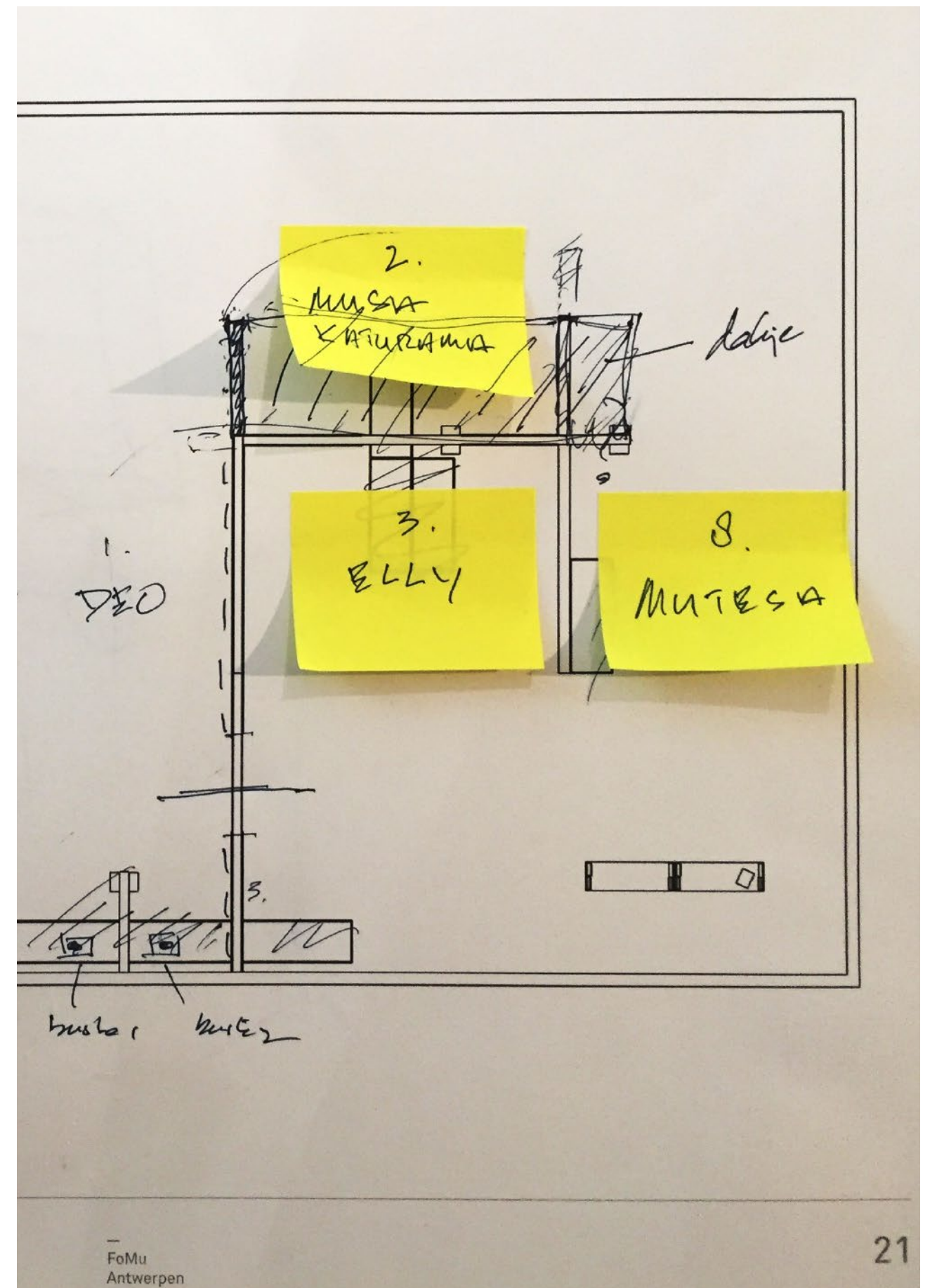
Installationshots of the Suzy Embo exhibition, that preceeded *Ebifanyani*

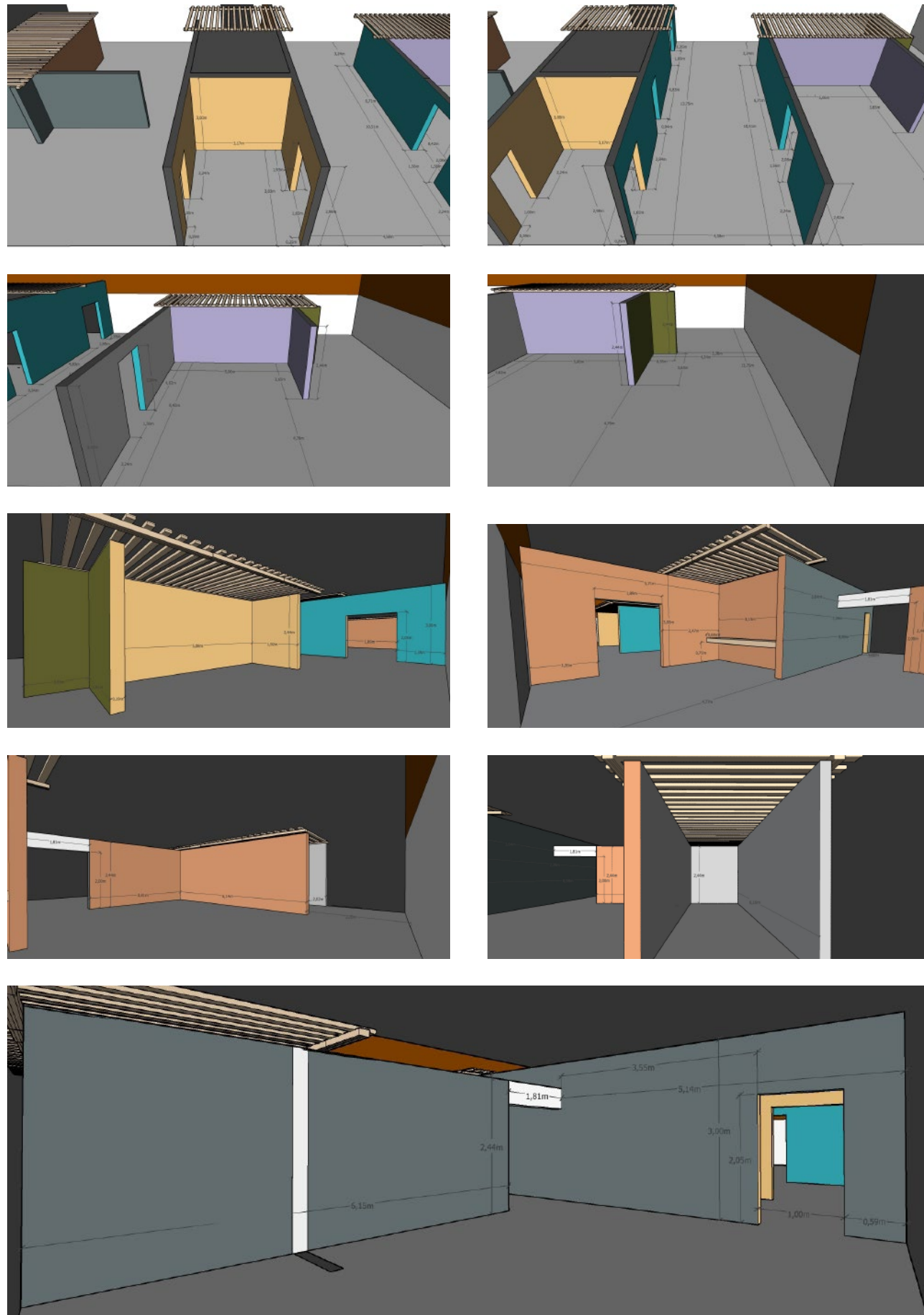
Fomu Antwerp, July 2017. Photographs by co-curator Bas Vroege

²⁷⁹ Trone (1981), p. 1, Rivet , (1984), pp. 11-12, and <https://www.britannica.com/topic/history-of-museums-398827#ref608916>
Last accessed 25-09-2018

²⁸⁰ Based on personal observations and conversations with museum staff members that took place over the years since 2007 and Ministerial Policy Statements for the years 2011/2012 through 2017/2018

²⁸¹ <http://www.andreastultiens.nl/exhibition/updates-six-investigations-use-photographs-ugandan-new-media/> and <http://www.andreastultiens.nl/exhibition/ebifanyani-6-exhibition-launch/> for documentation of these exhibitions.





3d set up of *Ebifananyi* at FoMu for carpenters, October 2017

Dear Visitor

Let us begin with a caveat: there is no such thing as one single history of a country and photographs sow confusion more often than they shed light. The exhibition that you are about to see, therefore, is not a straightforward one. You will be confronted with a multitude of images and interpretations that will raise far more questions than they will answer. So you have been warned.

Over a decade ago, researcher, artist, documentalist and curator Andrea Stultiens (NL, 1974) ended up in Uganda. There, she came across a number of historical collections of photographs and began to conduct research without knowing where it would lead. She launched the *History in Progress Uganda* platform in 2011, together with the artist R. Canon Griffin (UG, 1991), in the hope that it would give these collections a contemporary relevance. Numerous artists were invited to tackle the material.

Join Andrea and Canon for a tour through eight historical collections that coincide with eight publications. For each collection, you will also see some *derived observations*: this may be an interpretation by a contemporary artist, a filmed document of an encounter, a modern photograph of a historic site or a reproduction of an illuminating newspaper article.

Do not expect the definitive story of Uganda. Instead, this is a journey into the complexity of historiography, the universal language of photography and the all-too-often enduring, stereotypical images of Africa.

Welcome,
Joachim Naudts and Bas Vroege,
co-curators of *Ebifananyi*

Introduction text to *Ebifananyi*, Fomu Antwerp, October 2017 / February 2018

Transforming eight books into an exhibition in Belgium

In 2016 Joachim Naudts, Paradox’s director Bas Vroege and I formed the curatorial team for the *Ebifananyi* exhibition in FoMu. Each of us contributed to the process from a particular position and expertise. I was the one who had the overview of the available material and I am used to working with limitations related to space and budget. Vroege tends to think big, literally in print and display sizes as well as for example in terms of the use of multiple projections. In addition he brought an understanding of the use of a variety of media in photography exhibitions. Naudts is intimately familiar with the museum and its audience well and made me aware of how much I had become attuned to Ugandan audiences. Earlier exhibitions of parts of the project, that took place in venues in Uganda, Addis Ababa (Ethiopia), the Netherlands and Switzerland, were taken into account.²⁸² Our discussions led to collectively made decisions and as a result individual influences became hard to trace.

Based on my experiences and photographic documentation of these exhibitions we decided which earlier modes of presentation would be suitable to use again, taking the Belgian audience of the museum into account. It was decided that my voice had to be present in the exhibition to guide this audience, which we considered to be largely unfamiliar with the Ugandan context, through the different collections in brief texts.

The layout of the exhibition hall that was at our disposal usually changes with each new show. We decided to recuperate the walls of the previous exhibition. This was partly the result of my preference to respond to a given situation whilst also being a matter of cost efficiency. This meant that we started off with a network of bright white walls that was used to present the photographs of the Belgian modernist era photographer Suzy Embo.

Naudts and Vroege made a proposal for the re-use of the space and the adjustments to this network of walls. I was keen to use saturated colours, which appear in the *Ebifananyi* books, in response to the white and grey that is generally used in exhibitions in FoMu.

A synthesis was created between the content of the *Ebifananyi* books and the displays connected to them in multiple layers. In the first layer pictures presenting the historical collections were mounted onto the coloured inner walls of the exhibition hall. In these displays emphasis was placed on the different materialities in which the collection were encountered. For example, Deo Kyakulaira’s pictures, which only existed as negatives when I was introduced to the collection, therefore were presented as contemporary darkroom prints from negatives. Framed vintage prints in different sizes showed the diversity of pictures produced by Elly Rwakoma. A photograph of the interior of one of Chief Ham Mukasa’s houses was printed on wallpaper to present the collection of the elite Buganda family, while simple colour-copies of photographs showed reproductions of the 1875 photograph of Kabaka Muteesa I circulating in Uganda.

Responses to the collections formed the second layer and were placed on the outer walls that remained white. These presentations were again wide ranging in their appearance and materiality, offering the variety of outcomes of my research method, including video’s (*Ebifananyi* #2, 4, 5, 7, 8), sculptures (*Ebifananyi* #1, 4, 8), newspaper articles (*Ebifananyi* #3) and paintings and drawings (*Ebifananyi* #2, #4, #7 and #8), and reminding the visitors of the open category of pictures signified by the word *ebifananyi*.

A frieze of still and moving photographic pictures with a height measurement of 1.2 meters ran through the whole

space. The pictures in this frieze were produced as documentation of encounters and correspondences over the years and related loosely to the content of the presentations on the lower level. This third layer aimed to connect the presentations on the coloured inner walls and white outer walls and emphasises the absence of a distinct beginning or end point of both the exhibition and the project as a whole.

Given that we decided that I was to guide visitors through the exhibition, brief texts were written to accompany the displays for the first two layers. I wanted the exhibition to be what American comparative literature scholar Mary-Louise Pratt calls a ‘contact-zone’: a “social space [...] where disparate cultures meet, clash and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination – such as colonialism and slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out across the globe today.”²⁸³ The text should give visitors to the exhibition access to the other realities presented in pictures and therefore switched between tenses when referring to events in the past and collections in the present.

A member of the FoMu staff edited first drafts of these texts and framed their content in the historical present, narrating past events in present tense. The propagandistic nature of photographs made during colonialism in Uganda, and the effects of colonial language and education strategies ran through this project, and had been part of my interests since I began work in Uganda.²⁸⁴

I was now personally confronted with an appropriation of agency, effectively described by Ngugi Wa Thiong’o in relation to literature and vernacular languages.²⁸⁵ My voice was taken away from me by the use of the historical present and I strongly felt that its use created a fiction rather than the opportunity to connect to another reality. An assistant curator pointed out that this was museum policy meant to generate an ‘effect of immediacy’ for the visitor and that there was a misunderstanding about who was speaking in these texts. We now could move forward from what felt to be a painful impasse. The texts that accompanied the first layer remained in what I have come to think of as the ‘museum voice’, while the texts on the white walls were ‘my voice’. The bold and italic texts introducing the letters in chapter 3 through to 5 have remained as they were in this exhibition to demonstrate this point.

When Canon and I arrived at FoMu, just over a week before the exhibition would open, the walls in the space had been adjusted and painted. Therefore, the installation of the pictures could immediately begin and people employed by the museum were present at all times to assist us.

During the exhibition period over 38.000 people visited FoMu. This number exceeded expectations and is largely the result of the other exhibition in the museum, which presented the photographic work of renowned Chinese artist Ai Wei Wei that was accompanied by extensive media attention. Over 1.100 people attended the opening of the exhibitions. Slightly over 10% of the registered visitors toured the exhibitions as a group (including school visits) where some of these groups made use of the opportunity to do a guided tour.²⁸⁶ Most visitors then engaged with the displays on their own terms. Museum staff, in the form of a tour guide, was not part of the encounter with the exhibition. Visitors to the exhibition had to invest a certain interest in what was on show. Based on feedback from particular individuals as well as observations made during several afternoons spent in the exhibition, I can say that the strategy largely worked as intended. Nevertheless, some visitors missed factual context on Uganda despite the introduction letter by Joachim Naudts and Bas

²⁸² e.g. the sculptures in the first exhibition related to Deo Kyakulagira’s work, Mishmash gallery, Kampala (<http://www.andreastultiens.nl/exhibition/hipuganda-mishmash/>), the ‘sea of photographs’ by Musa Katuramu presented at the Noorderlicht Gallery in 2014 (<http://www.andreastultiens.nl/exhibition/musa-katuramu/>), the large size book presented at St. Mary’s College Kisubi in 2016 (<http://www.andreastultiens.nl/exhibition/ebifananyi-6-pre-launch-smack/>) and the tables with butterflies at the exhibition related to *Ebifananyi* #6 in Pasquart Photoforum in Biel (SE) in 2016 (<http://www.andreastultiens.nl/exhibition/ebifananyi-booklaunch-6/>).

²⁸³ Pratt (2007), electronic version of the book, location 344 of 6792
²⁸⁴ *Ebifananyi* #4 in particular addresses this, albeit implicitly. The discussion at the book launch, in The Uganda Museum mentioned in chapter 5 was fully devoted to the topic.
²⁸⁵ Ngugi Wa Thiong’o (1987), (1993), (2012)
²⁸⁶ Based on statistics provided by FoMu.

Vroege, which explained that this exhibition was not intended to give information about the country. I observed how this issue in some cases dissolved while visitors engaged with the displays. It was a pleasant surprise to see the amount of time that was spent in the exhibition by many visitors. Dutch photography critic Taco Hidde Bakker spoke of a,

“deeply engaging exhibition [which] cannot be considered anything close to definite – even though the book series now forms some sort of complete whole – but rather a temporary stop in an exploration in full swing.

This protean endeavour is so alive, so pleasantly unpredictable in its outcomes, so varied in its cross-medial performances, so imbued with the spirit of cross-cultural collaborations, that it serves as a preeminent example of how photography (because that’s the kernel and ultimate reference point can be an inspirational force for alternative ways of popularizing Africa’s troubled recent histories and its complex web of relations with the rest of the world.”²⁸⁷

While I was happy both with the facilities and opportunities offered by FoMu and the responses to the exhibition, the set up of the exhibition also posed a challenge as I intended to present this project overview exhibition also in Uganda. It so happened, due to the planning of the museum, that the exhibition in Belgium was the first one of the two. The solutions designed to present the variety of collections of photographs and the responses to them to Belgian audiences had to be translated to a space in Uganda and its audiences.



Adapting the FoMu exhibition for The Uganda Museum

Several options were considered for a Ugandan version of the exhibition at FoMu. There is no space dedicated to displaying photography in Uganda, and both the gallery at Makerere University as well as the commercial Afriart gallery, in which several *Ebifananyi* related exhibitions had been presented, would too be small to house the show. Larger exhibition spaces, which popped up in recent years in Kampala, would most likely only reach a small audience, while exhibiting in public space would need a time investment to prepare on the ground that was not available.

I exhibited in Uganda for the first time in 2008. This exhibition took place in the Uganda Museum and I have since stayed in touch with the director and one of the curators of the institute. The spaces in the museum were constructed in different times and by particular people, reflected both personal ideas as well as conventions on good museum practices.²⁸⁸

In 2018 the second school term will end on August 25th, making the weeks preceding this date the busiest time of the year in The Uganda museum. In addition, the third edition of visual arts festival KLAART, organised by 32° Degrees East,²⁸⁹ is scheduled for August 2018. The festival is titled Off the Record and it aims to present “hidden histories, open histories, current stories and new futures to create alternative ‘memory banks’ and new narratives”. This largely overlaps with what HIPUganda wants to achieve and with what I try to do in my artistic practice, which offers an opportunity to connect HIPUganda, to the festival and the museum. After several conversations with staff members of 32° Degrees East and the Uganda Museum I wrote an exhibition proposal that was accepted and will be realised, albeit with a limited budget. What follows are sections of the proposal for an exhibition at the Uganda Museum, addressing Rose Mwanje and Abiti Nelson, director and curator at the Uganda Museum, and Teesa Bahana and Nikissi Serumaga, director and staff member of 32° Degrees East.

An exhibition proposal

Dear Rose and Abiti, Teesa and Nikissi,

After earlier conversations and e-mail exchanges with each of you separately, I hereby send you a proposal for an exhibition at the Uganda Museum during KLAART 18. This exhibition marks the end of the first seven years of HIPUganda’s activities, the completion of the *Ebifananyi* books series, and a decade of work in Uganda on my side, a period during which Kampala has become my second home.

HIPUganda’s activities and my practice as an artist and researcher have been based on the idea that visualisations of aspects of life on the African continent, which emphasise poverty, violence and the lack or abundance of natural resources,²⁹⁰ can only be addressed by explicitly being non-conclusive and open to voices that complicate hegemonic pictures presented through mass media. This is why HIPUganda has particularly been looking for private collections of photographs, and why digitised photographs are shared on online platforms that allow comments to be added to them. In the *Ebifananyi* books these strategies resulted in the inclusion of either multiple versions of stories that accompany photographs from one source,

²⁸⁸ Trowell (1957), Posnansky (2010) and a personal e-mail exchange with Merit Posnansky, curator of The Uganda Museum between 1957 and 1966.

²⁸⁹ KLAART is “a visual arts festival which celebrates public art for, in and with the city” Statement from <http://klaart.org/> when announcing the third edition of the festival. The site has been updated since.

²⁹⁰ Campbell & Power (2010)

or different pictures from multiple sources that accompany a single story.

This proposal builds on an exhibition that took place in FoMu, a museum devoted to photography in Belgium.²⁹⁰

The proposed *Ebifananyi* exhibition at the Uganda Museum consists of different components that have two main aims:

1. To place the Belgian *Ebifananyi* exhibition ‘on the record’ in Uganda.
2. To establish a conversation between the museum displays and the use of photographs in them, and the HIPUganda collections.

The *Ebifananyi* project activated only a part of the photographs encountered and digitised by HIPUganda. These activations were initiated by me, and included contributions by many others who brought their own interests to the pictures. The proposed exhibition serves as an evaluation of the HIPUganda activities so far, but also wants to be starting point for further explorations of the production and uses of photographs in Uganda in a way that is relevant for Ugandans. I propose to bring photographs from the whole HIPUganda collection in conversation with the permanent museum displays. This will be done in combinations of photographs and brief texts. The placement of these temporary additions to the museum will, of course, be done with the museum staff.

The exhibition would ideally take place from early August until the 23rd of the month. While an opening event may be important to spread the word of the exhibition, I am particularly keen to organise a closing event that doubles as both a moment of celebration as well as evaluation with members of the art community in Kampala. This event would be an *ekyoto*²⁹¹ during which the exhibition, literally, comes to an end by burning the model of the show in FoMu in the fire. My hope is that this will be an opportunity to celebrate what was achieved and to critically assess ways forward.

²⁹¹ See the epilogue of this volume where the documentation is juxtaposed with photographs made during the exhibition in Kampala. Addressees received the documentation of the exhibition with the e-mail.

²⁹² *Ekyoto* is a bonfire, a traditional place to meet, tell stories and perform rituals. Also see the letter to Engineer Wambwa in chapter 5.

32° Degrees East responded positively to the proposal and several long distance conversations took place since. Canon passed by the Uganda Museum where the mail had arrived but the proposal was not read. Canon orally followed up and informed the director and curator of the museum of the content of the text.

The proposal was then, also by them, accepted which means that I will now continue to prepare for the exhibition.

I expect many of the final decisions only to be made when I will be in Uganda, in the weeks prior to the exhibition.

Epilogue to chapter 6: The big picture

Throughout the course of this research project I produced exhibitions that were based on one collection of photographs with different audiences in Western Europe and Uganda in mind. Doing this made the differences between the conditions in which photographic pictures were presented apparent in terms of production and reception. The experiences around these exhibitions were the basis for the evaluation of the show at FoMu and for the proposal for the Uganda Museum.

The different statuses of the exhibitions are meant to place emphasis on the emergent conditions in which they are produced. Examples of these conditions include the decline in the opportunities to fund exhibitions and other art projects in the Netherlands since I started to work in Uganda. Meanwhile, in Uganda the possibilities to make exhibition prints have increased, even though a limited level of quality control of prints is still a factor that needs to be taken into consideration.

In Belgium I was part of a trio of curators while preparing for the exhibition, and assisted by a team of technicians while installing it. I was taken to be the author of the exhibition, while the museum policy on exhibition texts led to an experience in which it felt as if my voice was taken away from me.

Based on past experiences I know that, in Uganda, I will have to make all the decisions in the production of the exhibition, while negotiating with the museum staff. Authorship is, as discussed in chapter three, rarely considered to be a factor in relation to photographs. This is no different with the *Ebifananyi* exhibitions.

I try to intervene in this situation by connecting my name to the exhibition in an effort be clear about my role, while at the same time not claiming ownership over the historical photographs that are presented. This is, and will continue to be, an ambiguous position in emerging conditions that will be informed by the proposed closing event of the exhibition in the Uganda Museum, where it is my hope that critical conversations about the future may unfold.