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

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Conclusion

The research project *Ebifananyi* was concerned with two issues. Firstly, it questioned how the conceptualisation of photographs as *ebifananyi* in Uganda differs from the way in which I, as a photographer educated in the Netherlands, understood photographs. On the artistic side of the project I worked with eight collections of photographs that I encountered in Uganda in order to gain an understanding of the historical and cultural contexts which shaped how *ebifananyi* / photographs are produced and function. Secondly, in the discursive part of the research project reflected on and analysed how my artistic practice serves as a research method and how it relates to other methods employed in the research on photographs in the interdisciplinary field in which history, art history and anthropology meet.

Azoulay's conceptualisation of the photograph as an encounter and Ingold's notion of correspondences as meaningful engagements between human and non-human actors have theoretically grounded this research. Rancière has helped me to position the things I do with photographs as an artistic practice that responds and intervenes, rather than creates. Working with photographs from the notion of encounter means that differences between *ebifananyi* and photographs are not confined to objects, but produced in encounters. This means that the research has a phenomenological approach in the sense that it attempts to understand *ebifananyi* / photographs by engaging with different points of departure that turned into shared experiences through correspondences. Since my artistic practice is the research method itself there is no boundary between me, as an artist, and the academic fields this research relates to.

The *Ebifananyi* books and exhibitions have made a wealth of previously tacit materials available, both for a general audience in Uganda as well as for additional research. The availability of historical photographs from Uganda has expanded as a result of the digitisation of photographs as part of my artistic practice. Moreover, the *Ebifananyi* books and exhibitions, led to a growing awareness of the potential of personal collections to develop collective memory²⁹³ whilst also providing a ground for further explorations of the introduction of photographic imagery in Uganda. In this dissertation the emphasis has been on the southern part of the country, due to the origin of the encountered collections of photographs. The majority of research on Uganda also stems from the south of the country in general and the kingdom of Buganda in particular as a result of the central position Buganda had in the colonial formation of the present day nation state Uganda. This

²⁹³ Signalled, next to informal feedback given to the *Ebifananyi* books and exhibitions in Uganda, in several newspaper articles published in local and regional newspapers in Uganda.
e.g. <http://www.monitor.co.ug/artsculture/Reviews/Learning-about-Uganda-through-old-photos/691232-1491726-ev7m3kz/index.html>
Last accessed 25-09-2018

should, where it concerns the past and present day production and use of photographs, be expanded upon in future research.

Working with *ebifananyi* / photographs within the context of doctoral research confronted me with the limitations, as well as with the medium specific qualities, of both written language about and visual documentation of my actions. This resulted in artistic outcomes in which texts were needed to position the photographs that were sequenced in books and spatially arranged in exhibitions. While in this dissertation photographs do not only illustrate but are necessary parts of the written arguments. They relate what is written to a reality and make it accessible beyond description.²⁹⁴

Photographs are mostly referred to and often problematised as representations.²⁹⁵ Representation emphasises an indexical mode of signification. The notion of representation makes it possible to denaturalize power imbalances at play in the production and uses of photographs, which will continue to be necessary but can also take attention away from other affordances of photographs.

Ebifananyi are pictures that look like something else. The signifying capacity of *ebifananyi* mainly relies, in semiotic terms, on their iconicity. For example, the students who posed for the remakes of the photographs in the school magazine of St. Mary's College Kisubi (*Ebifananyi* #6, chapter 5) do not represent the students they saw in the historical pictures, but simply look like them. *Ebifananyi* are then presentations rather than representations, where the emphasis is on the creation of meaning which lies between the picture and the person who sees it. As a consequence, *ebifananyi* / photographs in Uganda should be taken to be presentations rather than representations, which leads in the everyday use of photographs to an emphasis on the encounter with historical photographs in the present rather than their referentiality to particular pasts.

The conceptualisation of photographs in a category that links them to drawings and paintings in the word *ekifananyi*, while thinking of them as presentations, led to an unanticipated freedom in the generation of correspondences which resulted in an expansion to the initially outlined research method. In this expansion, that can be found in *Ebifananyi* #4 and #8, insights on *ebifananyi* / photographs are generated by the production of referential visualities by a wide variety of picture makers in any material or medium. Each picture that is made on my request and as part of an investigation into other pictures becomes part of what I have started to call Collective Making.

The rigor of this research lies in the acceptance of views on *ebifananyi* / photographs which emerged from the various correspondences I initiated. These views differ, sometimes only slightly and sometimes quite radically, from my own. The postponement of judgement on the qualities of *ebifananyi* / pictures, in terms of information and aesthetic qualities, made me aware of the presuppositions I had on photographs stemming from my position as a white European artist who was educated in photography. This is not a position I take to be problematic, but rather one that can lead to insights by allowing encounters and correspondences to

²⁹⁴ Balsom (2017)
²⁹⁵ e.g. Tagg (1988), Hall (1997)

affect me. This means that I am vulnerable, that I have to continuously and as open as possible communicate with all who were involved in - and could be implicated by - the correspondences I initiated. These are 'tasks' that generated confrontations and painful moments, and are part of a lifelong learning process. My artistic practice makes the insights so far generated by this process available to audiences in Uganda and in Western Europe, while this dissertation places them in discourses on photography that generally do not question the presuppositions from which photographs are discussed.

The *Ebifananyi* books and exhibitions are outcomes of my artistic practice, and can be seen as ongoing processes rather than conclusions. When these processes are, as Ingold states from an anthropological position,²⁹⁶ also generous, comparative and critical, the refusal to be conclusive is not a weakness. Therefore the fluid and open-ended structure of this research project renders its outcomes relevant within artistic and academic discourses. It insists that *ebifananyi* / photographs may be pictures that easily move from one context to another, but that these contexts have to be present in order not to unnecessarily misappropriate them through isolation or ideologically coloured inscriptions.²⁹⁷ My artistic practice as a research method allows both human and non-human actors in the Ugandan and Western European contexts to move beyond their outside positions in relation to the lives of others, through the continuous possibility to change and be changed by each other.

²⁹⁶ Ingold (2017b)
²⁹⁷ Latour (1985)