

Archival Present: Contemporary Artists at  
Work With Colonial Archives in  
European Exhibition Spaces  
Volume I

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15 May 2026

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## Abstract

This thesis examines the practice of a range of contemporary Indigenous, diasporic and Global South artists who work with colonial archives to make archival art in museums and galleries in Europe. Informed by the context of conceptual art in the 1960s, the decolonial turn in the 1980s, and the archival turn in the 1990s, archival art is presented as a practice of collage, assemblage and re-assemblage, enabled by the digital and the new openness of museum archives, together with a renewed interest in photography, at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Through a close study of the works of Carrie Mae Weems, Sasha Huber, Kiri Dalena and Rajkamal Kahlon, archival practice is presented as enabling forms of repair and redress thanks to the reworking of colonial archives. Central to this study are works by Brook Andrew and George Nuku which are read through concepts of archival alterations and museum adaptation as a means to create personal retellings of history as well as to engage in a critique of the museum institution and its practices. By looking at the residency of the Centre for the Less Good Idea at the Fondation Cartier pour l'art contemporain in Paris, this thesis considers working with and displaying archives outside of their original institutions, in the space of the buffer zone, as a form of freeing. Overall, this thesis considers archival art as a method for the dissemination of colonial archives outside of their storage spaces (analogue or digital) by means of their exhibition, offering new meanings to the archives and chances of encounter and experience by the public.

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## Content warning

This thesis addresses themes of slavery and colonisation. It contains imagery showing human remains and people forcibly photographed naked that might harm or disturb readers and viewers.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people should be aware that this thesis may contain images and names of deceased people.

## Ethics

This research, the visits and the interviews for this thesis were conducted under the approved Ethics application ETH2122-0236.

## Acknowledgements

This research was generously supported by CHASE (the Consortium for the Humanities & the Arts South-East England) through the award of an AHRC CHASE PhD studentship which not only allowed me to conduct fieldwork, attend conferences and go on research visits across Europe, but also gain valuable professional experience during a six month placement at the Fondation Cartier pour l'art contemporain in Paris. I am also grateful to the Sainsbury Research Unit for the Arts of Africa, Oceania and the Americas for the provision of a bursary during my fourth year which supported me during the final writing months of my thesis.

I arrived at the University of East Anglia for my undergraduate degree in September 2017 and, after looking through my email history it seems that it did not take me long to reach out to Professor Karen Jacobs, as I first emailed her on 13 October 2017. At this time, she probably did not suspect that I would hold onto her as my supervisor for the following eight years. Not only has Karen been my primary supervisor for my PhD, but also for my undergraduate and master's dissertation. Throughout this journey, Karen has encouraged and supported me in ways that were always beyond any expectation one might have of their supervisors. Not only was she always available, she has always been kind, funny and trusted that I could make it even in the moments when I was doubting myself. From crying sessions in her office when morale was low, to laughing out loud at the pub, or dancing ceilidh together at a conference in Scotland, Karen has been a guide throughout my time in Norwich, at the University of East Anglia and at the Sainsbury Research Unit. There is no word that seems quite enough to encompass the ways in which Karen has been here for me throughout this period of my life, and I am eternally grateful and indebted to her for it. I am extremely thankful to my secondary supervisor Dr Aristoteles Barcelos Neto who, from my MA at the SRU in 2020 has championed me and my PhD research project and has always offered insightful critique and comments. He has been a positive and encouraging presence throughout my time at the SRU and was instrumental in guiding me towards the completion of this PhD.

I am deeply appreciative of the kindness and time that both George Nuku and Brook Andrew have shared with me in helping me research their work and practice. Without them, this research could not have been possible. My appreciation goes to all the staff and volunteers at the Weltmuseum Wien in Vienna that I met during my time there, and especially Reinhard

Blumauer, Claudia Augustat, Doris Prlić and Nora Hass. I would like to also thank Claude Stéfani and Séverine Bompays at the musée Hébre in Rochefort, Agustina Andreoletti and Paulina Seyfried at the Rautenstrauch-Joest Museum in Cologne, and Christine Barthe at the musée du quai Branly-Jacques Chirac in Paris for taking the time to answer my questions by email and during interviews.

I would like to extend my most sincere and appreciative acknowledgements to Professor Steven Hooper who, like Professor Karen Jacobs, was part of my UEA experience before I even joined the SRU, allowing me and my Oceania-enthusiast friends to attend the Pacific Arts Association Conference in Norwich in 2016. Not only did Steve act as my probationary review examiner in the first year of my PhD, offering constructing feedback, but he has always supported me in my professional endeavours throughout my time at the SRU. My gratitude also goes to Pat, Laura, Lexi and Abi at the SRU library, who ensured I could have access to all the necessary books for my research and were always here to help with any out-of-the-ordinary referencing queries. I would like to thank Antonella Foglia and Lesley Snell for taking care of me and everyone at SRU, and for always having or finding the answer we are looking for. As everybody who has spent any time at SRU knows, we are all more like a family than any other research department. For this reason, I would like to thank all members of faculty for their generous feedback during work in progress sessions. From the art history department, Dr Edward Krema was extremely generous in sharing insightful reflections in the final months of my dissertation and for it, I am grateful.

My recognition goes to all my friends at SRU with whom I have shared the past five years and without whose support my PhD journey would have been so very different: Leonie, Lucia, Samuele, Olivia, Luiza, Deborah, Alba, Melissa, Benjamina, Claire, Greine, Manon, Zélie, Abdulmalik, Kala, Jacob, Liam, Yoanna, Haochen, Na'Ankwat, Anahí, Anya, Laetitia, Anna, Amy, Amélie, Jacopo, Bolaji, Nick, Léa, Hope, Séverine, Hamsha, Shahba, Tomi and Umar. Special thanks go to Giulia Nazzaro for being my mentor and friend. The hours she spent reading my work and mostly listening to me were instrumental and inspirational not only for my research but in shaping me as the person that I am today.

Beyond SRU, the list of friends that have supported me is long. To Clara and Adèle, even from afar you have been the most supportive and cheering throughout this journey, I am so very lucky to have you both in my life and love you dearly. To Enzo and Garance, the French House, while our kinship is often questioned by people, you are both like a brother and a

sister to me, although I may at times take on the mother role. I could not have made it this far without you. To my Unio pals, Georgia, Issy, Lana, Maddy, Carmen and Emily thank you for always providing me with a safe space in Norwich, with special thanks to Maddy for proofreading part of this thesis. To all my friends who have been part of my journey in Norwich, Fenella, Areti, Marianny, Florence, Jorge, Felix, Tanya, thank you for the laughter and for making my time here unforgettable. To all my CASOAR family, our love of Oceania is partly what has led me here today. I appreciate every single one of you, Elsa, Margot, Alice, Morgane, Margaux, Soizic, Margot and Camille. Marion, thank you for being the friend that you are, for making me embark on the ICOM journey with you, for being my museum buddy and for all your invaluable feedback on my thesis. To Gee and Shane, and everybody at The Yard, thank you for giving me a space where I could write my thesis when I needed a change of scenery, but mostly for never saying no to my crazy drinks requests and being the most wholesome of friends.

Finally, this journey would have never been possible without my family. Thank you to my mom, Fabienne, for being a force of nature, the kindest and most supportive person, always. To Nadette and Guy, merci pour tout. I could have never made it here without your support and encouragements. To Béatrice, four-year old me said I would *never* do a PhD while watching you finish yours. Without you, I may never have liked museums, or art, or the UK, so it is fair to say I would not be here today. Thank you for the sleepless nights spent reading my essays and this thesis, and the many life adventures we have been on together. To Martin, thank you for always being a kind and supportive figure in my life. Merci Pierre for allowing me to be the tornado little sister, and to Ma Mie for the endless cuddles.

# Introduction

## *Foreword*

In the summer of 2020, between lockdowns, I visited the exhibition *À toi appartient le regard et (...) la liaison infinie entre les choses* (30 June – 1 November 2020), at the musée du quai Branly-Jacques Chirac (mqB-JC) which was the first large exhibition dedicated to contemporary imagery (photography, film, installation) in the history of the institution. In the exhibition, I encountered the work *Horizon II* (2020) by contemporary Australian artist Brook Andrew, which is an eight-channel video installation made with colonial films from the archives of the mqB-JC. This work stirred my interest and was the starting point for this thesis together with my knowledge and interest in museums of ethnography and the contemporary global art scene. After tracking the recent and upcoming exhibitions and displays of contemporary Pacific artists – including Andrew's – that had taken place or were about to take place in European museums, together with my specialism in the arts of the Pacific formed during my undergraduate and master's degrees, I first aspired for this PhD to be solely focussed on the work of contemporary artists originating from the Pacific who were working with colonial archives in European museums of ethnography. At the time, I learnt that George Nuku, who had been working with museums and ethnographic collections in Europe since the beginning of the 2000s, was about to open an exhibition with a focus on the Dumont d'Urville exploration voyage prints in Rochefort, France. After the cancellation of one of the original artistic projects I had chosen as a central case study to my thesis, coupled with my visits to museums and exhibitions across Europe, I realised that the artistic practice of working with and exhibiting colonial archives in European exhibition spaces was not restricted to artists from the Pacific but was rather a practice common to many diasporic, Indigenous and Global South artists. In turn, I decided to use Brook Andrew and George Nuku's works as central case studies informed by my specific knowledge of the colonial context of Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand, and consider the artistic reworkings of colonial archives as a phenomenon informed by the ongoing decolonial reflections and discussions in both the art world and the museum sphere.

## I) Situating archival art today

This thesis aims to study the contemporary art practice of archival art in European<sup>1</sup> museum institutions, specifically archival art that makes use of colonial archives, in light of decolonial museum practices and the global turn in art history, museums and galleries. Although the archival turn in art where archives have become a common medium to use in the making of artworks, and archival practice as something to think with and through, have been studied (Simon 2002; Foster 2004; Merewether 2006; Enwezor 2008; de Jong 2016; Nardin *et al.* 2017; Carbone 2020; Callahan 2022; van Alphen 2023a), little has been written on the specificities of *making* artworks with colonial archives. At a time when museums are reconsidering their practices in terms of collection, conservation, dissemination, display, research and management, and are engaging with their photographic and archival collections, it is essential to consider how these changes impact contemporary art practice and its display. Furthermore, this study will investigate the role of the digital in the development of archival art practices through time, as well as the impact of postcolonial literature and thinking on influencing the representation of Indigenous, diasporic and Global South artists in European institutions. In this thesis, I will analyse the practices of archival art and consider archival art as a method fit to work with colonial archives and alter colonial tropes and as a means to transform practices in museum institutions. I will look into the ways in which artists are engaging plastically with and altering colonial archives by using digital and analogue methods, and study how they enable forms of redress or retelling, while drawing on archival, visual, photographic and art historical literature.<sup>2</sup> Together with this visual and material analysis, I will study the role of museum institutions in the creation of archival artworks enriched by museology literature on the history of museums of ethnography and museums working with communities and artists. I will specifically study how displays and exhibitions of archival art in turn disseminate archival material. I will do so by creating parallels between photography, a medium for dissemination, and the (re)exhibition and adaptation of archives through the redisplay of archival artworks according to specific environments. Finally, I will explore how different types of institutions can have different types of impacts on the exhibition of archival artworks and thus generate ranges of experience of archives by audiences. I will now proceed to explain the historical context which saw the rise of archival

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<sup>1</sup> I include the United Kingdom when talking about Europe.

<sup>2</sup> References to specific literature in these scholarly fields will be mentioned below.

art, more specifically of colonial archival art in light of decolonial movements, and a rise in the representation of Indigenous, Global South and diasporic artists in museum institutions.

## II) Archival art history

In 2004, in a now famous article, art historian and critic Hal Foster declared that “an archival impulse [had been] at work internationally in contemporary art” (2004:3) since the 1990s. More than twenty years after this identified impulse, Foster acknowledged it as “hardly new” (2004:3). Indeed, it took its roots in the prewar period with an increasing development in the postwar period which, in fact, had been ongoing and grown exponentially “since the invention of photography” (Enwezor 2008:22). In practice, the archival turn saw a rise in the engagement of artists with archival material as a way “to make historical information often lost or displaced” (Foster 2004:4) known through the use of mostly photography and film as “critical instruments of archival modernity” (Enwezor 2008:12). Another form of engagement by artists was with the conceptual aspect of the archive through the referencing of “archival practices such as collecting, arrangement, description, classification, and preservation or [by adopting] archival forms such as inventories, boxes, storage systems, or labels” (Carbone 2020:261) which was mostly explored through the installation format (Foster 2004:4). In the 1990s, this archival impulse also emerged in literature and philosophy with the French post-structuralist writings of Michel Foucault (1969) and Jacques Derrida (1996). Respectively, Foucault thought of the archive as a “system that governs the appearance of statements as unique events” (1974:129), a powerful tool to control enacted by the State. However, Derrida thought of this controlling figure in terms of “the archon”, “the documents’ guardians” (1996:2). Derrida separated the documents of the ‘archive’ from those of the ‘monument’ which he presented as inheriting from the *arkheion*, where magistrates live (Derrida 1996:2). Their theories explore the different aspects of the archive which Ann Laura Stoler refers to as the ‘archive-as-subject’ and the ‘archive-as-source’ (2002a:93) and which I will discuss in further detail below. Derrida and Foucault’s work coincide in their acknowledgement of the archive as intrinsically bound by the law and as a mechanism for ruling and control. The archival turn in literature was tied to discussions on memory which had happened slightly earlier – for example in the work of French historian Pierre Nora (1984). According to Kathy Carbone, it is also this “question of memory in the archive” that has led to this archival impulse in contemporary art (2020:257). Indeed, as put by Nora,

“Modern memory is, above all, archival. It relies entirely on the materiality of the trace, the immediacy of the recording, the visibility of the image. [...] What we call memory is in fact the gigantic and breathtaking storehouse of a material stock of what it would be impossible for us to remember, an unlimited repertoire of what might need to be recalled.” (1989:13)

Nora emphasises the visual and material aspect of memory encapsulated in archival material and collections, as well as the “storehouse” or the museums and the monuments of archives. Through these traces of memory kept in the form of archives, artists can “look beyond the present moment and understand the wider context of a family, a community or a society” (Millar 2010:19), giving rise to archival art practice. In 2002, art critic and artist Cheryl Simon was already acknowledging the move of the archival turn into the sphere of contemporary art. She argued that the archival turn was tied to the “millennial nostalgia, the cultural anxieties of post-modern time-space compression, the emergence of an evidentiary aesthetic in the information age, or the expansion of visual culture, in both social and institutional life” (Simon 2002:102). In the 1990s, both the internet and the digital world considerably developed and spread. While the internet became the archival tool *par excellence*, the digital enabled the digitisation of art and archives as well as the creation of multimedia and digital creations through digital tools. This inherently changed the art world, opening up possibilities of making and practice as well as access. Henry M. Sayre refers to this period of digital expansion in the art world and in art practice as an “intermedia constellation” (2006:121). While this is relevant, arguably, the decisive element that enabled archive art to take such a turn is its incorporation in large exhibitions by curators who recognised it as a trend, presented and theorised it as a specific art practice. There is no consensus as to how to describe the artistic practice of working with archives in specialised literature. I have decided here to use the term archive art, which I consider to be the most encompassing terminology to address the range of practices it entails. Later in this introduction, I will explain in further detail why and when I chose to use the term ‘archive art’ as opposed to ‘archival art’, as well as other derived terminologies.

In 2002, Nigerian curator Okwui Enwezor directed the *Documenta 11* in Kassel, Germany. It is often considered one of the earliest examples of the display of archive art – one which Enwezor later solidified with his exhibition *Archive Fever: Uses of the Document in Contemporary Art* shown at the International Centre for Photography in New York in 2008. The exhibition was accompanied by a catalogue which has become the ultimate reference on the archival turn in art (Enwezor 2008). In the exhibition, works such as Marcel Duchamp’s

*Boîte-en-valise* (1935-41) (Fig. 1), Gerhard Richter's *Atlas* (1964-2013) (Fig. 2), Christian Boltanski's *The Reserve of Dead Swiss* (1990) (Fig. 3), Vivan Sundaram's *Performing 'Indians' on the Danube* (2002) (Fig. 4) and Zoe Leonard's *The Fae Richards Photo Archive* (1993-6) (Fig. 5) were exhibited. These works can all be classified as archive art as I will explain later in this introduction. In the catalogue's article titled *Archive Fever: Photography between History and the Monument*, which of course echoes the title of Derrida's work *Archive Fever* (1995; 1996), Enwezor explored the ties between archive and photography. In the exhibition, each of the works, though classifiable as archive art, could also be considered as part of photographic practice – mostly because of the photographic or paper materialities of the works and because the exhibition was held in a photography centre. From the beginning of the archival turn, the link between archives, photography and film has been essential mostly because of their shared classifications as archival material (Enwezor 2008:11). As stated by Enwezor, “because the camera is literally an archiving machine, every photograph, every film is *a priori* an archival object” (2008:12). This principle will be a common thread throughout this thesis where most of the works are based on colonial photographs and films, and classified as photographic artworks. What is more, the ties between archives and photography/film lie in their joint status as “historical site that [exists] between evidence and document, public memory and private history” (Enwezor 2008:26) where the “photographic document is a replacement of the object or event, not merely a record of it” (Enwezor 2008:23). Thus, photographs and films stand in history as the past being alive in the present – a characteristic which Roland Barthes calls the “awareness of its *having-been-there*” (1977:44). Furthermore, the intrinsic similarities of the archival and the photographic as expressed by their “material force” (Edwards 2002:74), mediums, technologies and meanings were the true enabler for the archival turn to be transferred into the art sphere and take form as an art practice *per se*. This dialogic aspect of archives and photography has been explored beyond Enwezor's exhibition *Archive Fever*. Indeed, the relationship of archives and photography/film has been developed largely in contemporary art (Groys 2002; Simon 2002; Connarty & Lanyon 2006; Merewether 2006; Enwezor 2008; Seiderer 2017; Haeckel 2021) and in museums of ethnography, especially when it comes to colonial archival material and ethnographic photographs and films (Edwards 1992; Edwards 2001; Edwards 2003; Banks & Vokes 2010; Mauuarin & Peltier-Caroff 2022; Sealy 2022) in museum collections which are at the core of this thesis.

### III) What is archive art?

In 2022, Art Historian Sara Callahan published *Art + Archive: Understanding the Archival Turn in Contemporary Art* in which she studies how archives, through materials, themes and concepts, have made their way into the realm of art throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century and increasingly so at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. According to her, there is no consensus on which term is best to use, whether ‘archive art’, ‘art of the archive’, or ‘archival art’, though she more consistently chooses the term ‘archive art’ (2022:20). The difficulty to define and associate a single term with this practice is due to how diverse both practices and what we understand as archives are:

“At times the contrast between archive and collection is important, but at times they are treated as synonymous. At times the archive is closely identified with how Michel Foucault defines it in his book *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, at other times it is more aligned with structures of provenance and traditional ideas of history writing. At times it is a fully metaphorical concept, at other times it refers to tactile materials or the physical space where these materials are housed. At times the archive is seen as active and radical, but it is also associated with dead matter and oppressive and exclusionary procedures. And, to further complicate matters, several different understandings of the archive frequently coexist in the same artwork or text.”

(Callahan 2022:7)

This diversity in understanding the themes and concepts of what the archive is, which I will define further in Chapter One when thinking about museum archives, also transpires in the diversity of practices of ‘archive art’. Indeed, there is not one single art practice that fits the category of archive art as it is a multifarious concept: whether it uses archives in the research process of the artwork creation, whether it creates archival structures made of shelves and boxes or incorporates archival material in the finished artwork, it can be considered as archive art. As archive art is not practice-specific it can take the form of paintings and drawings, installations, performances, and digital creations, and will often include photography and/or film as one of the archival materials *par excellence*. Returning to Callahan’s discussion of terminology, she emphasises how most of the theories of archive art rely on archival theory from outside the art field, each reused by art historians and curators for the purpose of their argument (2022:1-2; 8; 56-57; 72; 85-86). Thus, Callahan decides to refrain from defining what archive art is, and rather sheds light on its diverse meanings, conceptually, practically

and materially. However, for the purpose of this thesis, while not denying the diversity of archive art, I specifically aim to analyse the variations of terms used to discuss archive art in order to map the range of practices encompassed in this art form. For this reason, I would argue that ‘archive art’ is an encompassing term referring to the wide range of practices, as described above, and variations of using the archive or archive-related media, while ‘archival art’ requires actual archival material to be present in the final artwork. As for ‘art of the archive’, I believe it to be more suitable to describe the installations that deploy the classifying form of the archive. An example of ‘art of the archive’ is Boltanski’s artwork *Reserve-Detective III* (1987) (Fig. 6) which uses the codes of the archive storages, filled with cardboard boxes on shelves. This aesthetic of the archive is also visible in the practice of Candida Höfer who photographs empty interior spaces, such as the *Sächsisches Staatsarchiv Dresden* (1999) (Fig. 7). The work *The Repair from Occident to Extra-Occidental Cultures* (2012) by Kader Attia (Fig. 8), presented at the Hayward Gallery in 2019 as part of his monographic exhibition *The Museum of Emotion*, evokes the stylistic ambiguity of archive and museum storages, pointing to the parallels between, and sometimes interchangeability of archives and collections. To these existing terminologies I propose to add the term ‘artchive’ to both describe an artistic archive, similar to the principle of the *catalogue raisonné*, as well as the archive that is created by an artist for an artistic purpose. For example, Marcel Duchamp’s *Boîte-en-valise* (1935-41) (Fig. 1) which consists of a suitcase filled with miniature replicas of some of his works, could be classified as an artchive. Arguably, retrospective exhibitions and artist museums can also be classified as artchives, for they represent the range of practice of artists throughout their careers and attempt to present and collect through encyclopaedic means in the case of art museums.

I will use the term archival art rather than the broader categories described so far. In this thesis, archival art will not be used to describe artworks that use the archival material in the conceptualisation of the artwork. Rather the term implies that archival material is present in the artwork’s final form. Because archival art incorporates the archive in the final artwork for the public to see, it is often classified as photographic art production due to the materialities it contains – paper materials, whether written printed or photographed –, even when it takes the form of an installation. In a series titled *Legend I-V* (1999) (Fig. 9), artist Pia Arke collaged together family photographs and colonial maps of Arke’s birthplace in Greenland, her work commenting on the Danish colonisation of Greenland and the impact it had on Indigenous populations. The series *Portraits Against Amnesia* (2003) (Fig. 10) by Hulleah J. Tsinhnahjinnie is another example of archival art. Through digital manipulations,

she gave new contexts to ethnographic photographs by inserting them in contemporary compositions as a means not to forget and for these people not to disappear from collective memory, an ‘anxiety’ that is tied to the archival impulse (Schaffner 1995: para. 22). Between 2022-23, artist Hew Locke was commissioned to create a large installation for the Duveen Galleries of the Tate Britain titled *The Procession* (Fig. 11). On the bodies and clothes of the sculptures in Locke’s procession, the visitor could see printed archival records that revealed the links between Tate’s ties to sugar plantations and slavery. In Locke’s practice, the archival element is often shown through prints on paper or textiles. Thus, the term archival art helps delineate the thesis by determining what kind of artworks will be analysed.

‘Archive art’ refers to a broader range of art works. For instance, it can refer to works such as Gordon Bennett’s *Possession Island (Abstraction)* (1991), Yuki Kihara’s *Paradise Camp* (2022-ongoing) and Isaac Julien’s *Once Again... (Statues Never Die)* (2022). Indeed in all three of the works, though no archive is materially included, there are direct references to other works, in the manner of what Yuki Kihara defines as “upcycling” (Childs 2022: 113). While Kihara included what she calls a *Vārchive*<sup>3</sup> (Fig. 12) in her project *Paradise Camp*, the core of the installation is a series of photographs of the Fa‘afafine and Fa‘atama<sup>4</sup> community of Samoa (Fig. 13) which are ‘upcycled’ – new and updated – versions of Gauguin’s paintings. While the medium of Kihara and Gauguin’s works are different – photographs and paintings –, Kihara directly quotes Gauguin’s works through staged compositions. Similarly in *Possession Island (Abstraction)* (Fig. 14), Gordon Bennett referenced the 1865 etching *Captain James Cook taking possession of the Australian continent on behalf of the British Crown A.D. 1770* made by Samuel Calvert (Fig. 15). By creating a new version of this moment captured in time, Bennett referenced both the traditional style of Aboriginal painting, dot painting, and the Aboriginal flag as means to shine a light on the colonial past of Australia. Finally, in *Once Again... (Statues Never Die)* (Fig. 16), Isaac Julien referenced the 1953 film *Statues Also Die* (Fig. 17) by Alain Resnais, Chris Marker and Ghislain Cloquet, in the work’s title and in reproducing several shots of the original film. While *Statues Also Die* questions the museum and the different exhibition politics by comparing the way African art has been exhibited at the musée de l’Homme and the musée du Louvre, Julien’s *Once Again...*

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<sup>3</sup> The *Vā* is a Samoan concept which refers to the space between which is not a space that separates but rather links things together (Wendt 1999:402-3) which Kihara uses to define the archive she has created. Kihara’s *Vārchive* presents some of the research she did for the creation of her exhibition *Paradise Camp*, gathering photographs, activist material, pamphlets, books (etc.). To learn more about Kihara’s *Vārchive*, see Fusco 2022; Kihara 2022; Sentence, Poll & Gissell 2023; Jacobs 2026.

<sup>4</sup> Fa‘afafine and Fa‘atama are the third and fourth gender of Samoa, where people assigned male at birth live as female and assigned female at birth live as male.

*(Statues Never Die)* was filmed at the Barnes foundation in Philadelphia (USA). It highlights the impact of Alain Locke, an African-American philosopher and writer, onto the foundation – and its founder Albert C. Barnes – in light of the Black cultural movement and the African artefacts in the collection of the institution. Through these examples, I will therefore argue that the art of referencing other artworks, especially when it is a critique of history through postcolonial critiques of the works and visual retellings, can also be classified as archive art. As a category that is “both elastic and porous” (Callahan 2022:35), archive art with its variants of ‘art of the archive’, ‘archival art’ and ‘artchive’ is multiple and diverse both in form and approach. This thesis’ focus will be on ‘archival art’ only, and more specifically on colonial archival art.

#### IV) The archive buzzword<sup>5</sup>: a method

After this overview of archive art which points out how broad the category is, I would like to circle back to the terminology of the archival turn or impulse. Whether this surge of archives in the art world has been classified as an archival turn (Simon 2002; Basu & de Jong 2016; Jorgensen & McLean 2017; Carbone 2020; Callahan 2024), an archival return (de Jong 2016), an archival impulse (Foster 2004) or an archive fever (Enwezor 2008; Artspace Editors 2014), it points to a precise moment in time with a culmination which is likely to considerably decrease and eventually, perhaps, fade away. However, this moment of popularity of the archive has been ongoing for over thirty years, pointing to a practice that is here to stay. In a recent article, Sara Callahan asked whether the archival turn was still turning (2024) and it seems evident that it is, as exemplified by the artworks mentioned previously. Yet, my view is that it is unsatisfying to keep talking of it as a turn, when admittedly it started in the inter-war period and was fully developed by the 1990s. I first thought of this extensive growth of the practice of archive art by artists to be akin to an artistic movement. But unless we reframe what an art movement is, this argument does not seem to be tenable. Indeed, when thinking of 20<sup>th</sup>-century art movements such as the Surrealists to only cite one, their classification as a movement was due in part to the stylistic similarities in their practice, but it was mostly due to their continuous discussions and collaborations in projects together with a common philosophy, which extended to a whole network of thinkers, artists and writers alike, in a given place (mostly Paris) at a given time (1920s-1940s). To some extent, today’s

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<sup>5</sup> Sara Callahan talks of the archive as “a buzzword at a particular point in time” (2022:5).

globalisation of art defies this very principle of art movements being tied to a form of locality alongside the sharing of a common philosophy, genre and style. One can wonder whether a similar approach in concept, style and practice removed from geography and engagement in a conceptual network is enough to allude to an artistic movement or whether the relational aspect as well as the locality of its actors are essential elements to think of archive art as an artistic movement. Though I am not asserting that archive art *should* be considered as an art movement *per se*, attempting to define it beyond the ‘turn’ or ‘impulse’ has led me to formulate that question. As for Callahan, she talks of a “phenomenon of archive art” (2022:4) as a means “to refer to the inclination to connect artworks and artistic practices to the notion and terminology of archives, and the prevalence and staying power of these archival references among artists, writers and other actors in the art world” (2022:5). So, if no one is ready to move on from the use of the archive in art, how can we describe it beyond the trend, fashion, or phenomenon?

Returning to what constitutes most works of archival art, it can be understood as a form of visual narrative. With it, artists re-read and tell new stories from existing visual histories in a way not dissimilar to how documentary photography is “a method of visual storytelling that aims to instigate social change by exposing unseen or ignored realities” (Huhn & Anderson 2021:357). Arguably then, archival art is a method for historical retelling through artistic practices rather than a trendy phenomenon which, from its inception as a derivative of conceptual art, has offered new discursive possibilities with history. Furthermore, and especially when considered in the economical network of art and its institutions<sup>6</sup>, archival art as a method is one of the ways in which the research carried out by artists in museum archives can be made visible to the public. Thus, archival art – when it takes place in a museum whether through research and/or exhibition – also speaks to the institution, its history and desire to be involved in a social justice movement (Huhn & Anderson 2021). Indeed, it acts as a means to reveal what is kept in the collections but rarely shown, therefore “highlighting marginal and radical narratives” in a “critical approach to historical truth-claims” (Callahan 2022:40). Let’s also mention that by putting archival material on display through the means of archival art, artists are not only revealing what is kept in the museum’s stores, but are also playing with the very codes of the institution to give and/or reveal the aesthetic and political qualities of these ‘documents’. When discussing

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<sup>6</sup> Art historian and critic Nicolas Bourriaud speaks of “art as a state of encounter”, “a human activity based on commerce”, where the exhibition of the art and its circulation in an economic sphere of display and exchange is part and parcel of its creation (2002:17).

photographs, (though this argument stands for any archive), Allan Sekula explains that “when [they] are uncritically presented as historical documents, they are transformed into aesthetic objects” (1999:189). This means that the incorporation of archives in archival artworks, where they are incorporated into a dialogue rather than solely for an aesthetic outcome, has become one of the ways for artists to engage critically with museums and their collections, in light of the changing role of museums regarding multivocality and social justice. According to Callahan, this change in the art field for an embracing of the archive has been a way to “theorise fundamental issues relating to the shifting notion of art, and the function of art institutions, documents and discursive systems in the era post-1960” (2022:102). To think of archive art in this light reinforces the idea that it has imposed itself as both a museological and artistic method at a time when, informed by decolonial and global movements, the museum institution – and with it the art world as they are related and interdependent entities – is changing its paradigm.

One of the most significant of these changes in the 1980s was the New Museology movement (Vergo 1989; Desvallées 1992; Desvallées 1994) which argued for a museum in the service of society and with a strong tie to the communities both local and those represented in museums. As stated in the *Declaration of Santiago of Chile 1972*, the museum had to take part in social changes by being a truly educational institution which conveys information and knowledge to its communities (Desvallées Mairesse & Bergeron 2011:367-8). In the 1990s, the involvement of so-called source communities or communities of origin in museums<sup>7</sup> became a common practice following the recognition of how important their role as an audience was in museum representations, and “as authorities on their own cultures and material heritages” (Peers & Brown 2003:1). These new engagements with communities, often discussed under the term of ‘contact zone’ (Pratt 1991; Clifford, 1997; Pratt 2008; Boast 2011; Schorch 2013), led to a reconsideration of the power dynamics that are part and parcel of these relationships in order

“to reinvent the museum as an institution that can orchestrate new relations and perceptions of difference that both break free from the hierarchically organized forms of stigmatic othering that characterized the exhibitionary complex and provide more socially invigorating and, from a civic perspective, more beneficial interfaces between different cultures.” (Bennett 2006:59)

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<sup>7</sup> On communities and museums, Karp et al. 1992; Peers & Brown 2003; Golding & Modest 2013.

In working towards truly reciprocal relationships between museums and communities – particularly in the context of museums that hold colonial collections working with First Nations communities –, Bryony Onciul has suggested talking of ‘engagement zones’ in order to reflect “the inter-community work that occurs in cross cultural engagement and is prominent in community controlled grass-root community developments” (2015:82). That these relationships are built is one thing, but the transcription of these collaborations must also be made visible inside the museum for the public to attest to them and recognise that the work done inside museums is not that of the museum institution alone. Indeed, museum specialist Nina Simon argues that the museum should be an “audience-centered institution” where visitors can “create”, “share” and “connect” “around content” in order for it to be a participatory institution (2010: preface, n.p.). By truly embracing participatory practices and the sharing and questioning of meaning-making with participants external to the museum, there is a potential to work together in the making of a “post-museum” which goes beyond the modernist museum as known since the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Hooper-Greenhill 2000:8). Ruth Phillips talked about the “collaborative paradigm of exhibition production” as one of the new forms of “power sharing” (2003:157) between museums and communities.<sup>8</sup> Exponentially with time, this collaborative paradigm has grown between museums and contemporary artists, where working with Indigenous, diasporic and Global South artists has become a form of collaboration that shares similarities with museums and communities, especially when it takes place in museums of ethnography. Thanks to residencies and exhibitions, artists allow museums to get involved in the “narrating [of] a global history” (Möntmann 2023:16). However, these collaborations have their own complexities as noted by Australian artist Julie Gough:

“Within the museum an individual artist can feel an agent of change, but the reality is that the artist is a visitor, and the museum goes back to ‘normal’ when artists depart. Something more durational, more reflective, more than being subsumed into the enclave of accessioned artworks is needed for an artist to interrogate the museum and move its relationship, its staff’s relationships, and accumulating relationships with Indigenous communities over time to be a valued, shared process.” (2016:98)

Julie Gough emphasises the importance of allowing long periods of time for artists to access museums in order to create meaningful working relationships that benefit both parties. The

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<sup>8</sup> This hints at a larger debate about museums as discussed by Golding and Modest in *Museums and Communities: Curators, Collections and Collaboration* (2013) and Raymond A. Silverman in *Museum as Process: Translating Local and Global Knowledges* (2015).

term of ‘institutional critique’ (Putnam 2009; Alberro & Stimson 2009; Robins 2013; Jeffery 2015; Marstine 2017) has been used to refer to the practice of museums inviting artists to work inside their institutions to make a critique of the institutions’ legacies through working with their collections. However, museologist Janet Marstine warns of the danger of artistic interventions being instrumentalised by museums (2017:10), which curator Miwon Kwon (2002:47) claims turns the artist into a commodity where the museum has the power to ‘purchase’ the artist’s “criticality”. Similarly, anthropologist Haidy Geismar insists that this somewhat systematic invitation of artists by museums has become “a palliative to the political problems of collections with roots in nineteenth-century ethnology” (2015:185). In this thesis, I will look at several case studies of artists working with and inside museums in Europe<sup>9</sup>, with a special focus on the artist/institution dynamic and relationships in Chapter Two and Chapter Four.

Going back to archival art and tying it to collaborative practices inside museums, it offers itself as a method for the museum: when considered as a practice of storytelling as mentioned before, it can elicit empathy in visitors to help them apprehend the artworks and museum collections, and help the museum to truly become “a place of encounter” (Nuku 2024:59). In getting access to museum collections and archives, artists can “sit with the past as the wound that keeps bleeding, oozing, hiding reappearing and rupturing but still reach for Aliveness” and use the space as “sites of speculation for forensic listening and spiritual attention, as sites that continue to hold the rapture” (Mbongwa 2023:12). When given the space and time to work with archives inside museums, artists can use archival art as a method to read “records of destruction as proof of persistence and right to survive”, as understood in Ariella Aïsha Azoulay’s concept of potential history (2019:187). When artists re-read the archival material kept in museum collections, they interact directly with a past that was partially recorded. Through these documents which stand “as mediators between past and future” (Dot & Santa Olalla 2020:183), artists can critically engage with history in ways that are more meaningful in the present (Callahan 2022:36). Like archives, “contemporary art mediates between the present and recent past in the gallery” (Giblin, Ramos & Grout 2019:480), asserting why the method of archival art serves the museum to discuss its legacies, especially when they pertain to the colonial.

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<sup>9</sup> For further literature on artists and museums, and more specifically on artists working with colonial collections, see Deliss 2012; Bodenstein et al 2014; Deliss & Mutumba 2014; Noack et al. 2018; Plankensteiner 2018; Modest et al. 2019

## V) On archives: colonial archival material

In a recent article, Sara Callahan questioned the tenability of the archive terminology as a defining system today. Indeed, she asserts that to talk of all archives under the same umbrella-term is not representative of the embedded differences in archives — in terms of collecting to retrieving processes and access — such as historical, state or digital archives (2024:88). Though diverse and extremely broad, I will now present some basic principles of the archive before moving onto colonial archival material. While this thesis is only concerned with material archives (written, photographic or filmic), it is important to acknowledge that a range of archives exist that take different forms, including intangible archives. First and foremost, archives exist in institutions and also belong to individuals and families and are, in this case, personal or family archives (Zeitlyn 2012:462). As mentioned earlier with Foucault's and Derrida's theories, the archive is both the archival document and the monument in which it is kept over time. The forms that these documents take is varied – written and visual archives; sound archives (not examined in this thesis); digital archives which can be digitised versions of material archives, or fully digital archives which exist only in codes, without tangible counterparts, though Jessica Berenbeim argues that “even preserved digital codes have a physical existence” (2021:221). As records of the past, historian Antoinette Burton also points out that things as different as “the Rosetta stone, to medieval tapestry to Victorian house museums to African body tattoos” (2005:3) have all been seen or understood as archival sources. This thinking of archives as objects of all sorts is aligned with John Randolph's argument that “archives as objects gather meanings over time – in their exchange and physical transformation [... but] as objects [they] are also subjects of history” (2005:210). Regardless of their nature, these records are sources in the writing of history due to the assumption that they convey truths about the past because they are from the past (Dirks 2002:50). As ‘portals’ into the pasts (Berenbeim 2021:232) which “can be seen as a valuable means of extending the temporal and spatial range of human communication” (Foote 1990:379), there is a danger to accept the archive and the information it conveys as it comes, without questioning its political and institutional formations, thus working with archives uncritically, simply as an archive-as-source. Stoler argues that not only should we think of archives-as-subject, in order to “distinguish fiction from fact” and mostly “track the production and consumption of those facticities themselves” (Stoler 2002b:85). To do so, she suggests archives be read “along the grain” (2009) as opposed to against the grain, in order to uncover the technologies of rule that

they contain (Basu & De Jong 2016:8), in a practice similar to Dirk's call to do ethnographies of archives (2002). These different theories explain that archives exist through their materiality of course, but mostly in the relational networks of people who collect, classify, preserve, read and engage with them in a range of ways which, according to artist Jayce Salloum, are all means to become "part of the extended archive" by "taking on a responsibility for the representations that are consumed" (2006:186). This relational aspect of archives is even more present in intangible or embodied archives. Indeed, people and bodies, as the sources that retain ancestral knowledge to pass on, also exist as archives. Li'Tsoanelo Zwane discusses how within African communities, "the matriarchal figure [...] functions as an archive of knowledge" with a "dual role of being a keeper and disseminator of knowledge" (2023:63). Similarly, reflecting on Indigenous Australia, historian and curator Margo Neale speaks of people who can convey the traditional knowledge and history "embedded in the natural world, in the country, oceans and cosmos", as 'human archivists' (2017:270). Neale talks of an 'ur-archive', "a living and breathing personage" (2017:283) that is ancestral to the place and binds people and environment together. While I offer these perspectives on the notions of archives in order to give a sense of its diverse meanings, especially from a range of perspectives outside of the Global North, this thesis will be concerned with the Euro-North American concept of archive as introduced thus far. The scope and focus of this thesis is only on colonial archives through the study of archival art, a practice where archival material is part and parcel of the final artwork and visible to all, and, in this thesis, reuses colonial archives in artworks.

While colonial archives were created in colonised countries from the 19<sup>th</sup> century onwards "for the collection, storage, ordering, retrieval and exchange of knowledge as an instrument of colonial governance" (Basu & De Jong 2016:5), it is not these institutions that this thesis offers to study. Rather, it proposes to consider the archival documents – written and photographic records – that were created either in colonial context or through the discipline of anthropology. Ann Laura Stoler speaks of these colonial archival documents as "cultural artefacts of fact production, of taxonomies in the making, and of disparate notions of what made up colonial authority", but also of archives "as monuments of states, as well as sites of state ethnography" (2002b:85). This relationship between the anthropological discipline and its production of colonial documents has mostly been addressed through the study of colonial photography (Edwards 1992; Edwards 2001; Banks & Vokes 2010). According to Isabelle Dion and Amélie Hurel (2024:VII), there are no specific categories in the 'archival doctrine' that separate colonial archives other than their historical definitions through the writings of

Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida and Ann Laura Stoler (their work, alongside further literature on archives and colonial archives specifically, will be discussed further in Chapter One). In this context, most of the colonial archival material used by artists in their practice consists of ethnographic photographs and films, though some prints and written sources are also used. Furthermore, most of the archival material used by the artists at the core of this research does not come from the colonial archives of nation-states, but are kept in European museum collections, mostly ethnographic museums but also natural history museums and botanical gardens, and at times in archives created by the artists themselves.

Without challenging the central concept of what an archive is, I will use its variations, both as document and monument, as well as ‘archive-as-source’ and ‘archive-as-subject’ (Stoler 2002a:93) to examine how the Euro-North-American conceptions of archives are intrinsic to an effective re-reading through artistic means. The duality and ambivalence of archives as both documents and monuments will prove essential in the third and fourth chapters of this thesis whose focus is on specific archival art practices such as alteration and adaptation. Indeed, according to Jacques Le Goff, one of the main differences between monuments and documents resides in the fact that monuments “are the heritage of the past” and documents “are the products of the historian’s selection” (Le Goff cited in Ceserani 2019:15). However, there is an interchangeability between documents and monuments where Cesarini argues, based on Foucault’s theory, that “the new historian must try to turn documents into monuments, in contrast with the traditional historian who made monuments into documents” (2019:17). With regards to the archive, I explained earlier how Derrida and Foucault consider it as both documents and monuments, and how Achille Mbembe emphasizes this point by stating that “there cannot be a definition of ‘archives’ that does not encompass both the building itself and the documents stored there” (2002:19). This idea can be transferred to the definition of artworks too which stand both as documents of history and monuments. According to art historian Alois Riegl, “every monument of art is, without exception, a historical monument as well, since it represents a particular stage in the development of the fine arts for which no entirely equivalent replacement can be found.” (1996:70). He carries on by stating that “the modern viewer of old monuments receives aesthetic satisfaction not from the stasis of preservation but from the continuous and unceasing cycle of change in nature” (Riegl 1996:73). This idea of the ever-changing state of monuments, which here can be understood as artworks generally speaking, will be essential later in this thesis to conceptualise the integration of colonial archives within contemporary artworks.

Due to its “controlling and mapping” (Callahan 2022:67) functions, the archive has always been tied to colonial history and stands as a site with the potential for “redress and reconceptualisation” (Rensing 2025:25). Through the examinations of archives kept in museum storages, both digitally and in-person, artists can work towards colonial redress and bring the past into the present, as a means to “reanimate” the “dead” archives by giving them new lives and meanings, even if only temporarily (Dot & Santa Olalla 2020:179). The different ways that archives are used by artists will be at the core of this study, in an attempt to identify a set of methods and principles through which the colonial archive is altered.

## VI) Altering colonial archives in the digital age

As mentioned earlier, it is widely recognised that the archival turn in art emerged from an interest in conceptual art by the artists of the 1990s and early 2000s (Callahan 2022:9). The freedom of form in conceptual art gave way to new artistic practices which were increasingly diversified by the development of the digital. As put by Ernst van Alphen, in the past, the archive was “only considered as a tool used by historians” until the internet and digital media transformed it to give it a dominant position with ranges of possibilities for storytelling (2023a:13). In parallel with the rise of postcolonial theory in the 1980s and 1990s, postcolonial art offered “to give voice to subjects previously silenced by the institutions of colonialism itself” (Crimson 2006:459), and expanded the range of stories that could be told or retold in art. At the crossroads of postcolonial and archival turns, the digital offered these new possibilities for retelling through the quotation of existing artworks or colonial archives. With the development of the digital, a new relation to artworks rose, with a blurring of the original and its representation (Klinke 2020:33). This blur between “production and consumption, creation and copy, readymade and original work” is what Nicolas Bourriaud described as ‘postproduction’ (2007:13). According to him, artists who make use of this quotation method, which he calls ‘postproduction artists’, “invent new uses for works, including audio or visual forms of the past, within their own constructions. But they also reedit historical or ideological narratives, inserting the elements that compose them into alternative scenarios” (Bourriaud 2007:45). This method of ‘postproduction’, enabled in part thanks to the digital, has been recognised as part of the archival turn in art since Hal Foster’s *An Archival Impulse* article (2004:5). Since the 1990s, the digital allowed for artists to work with and *on* archives in ways that were not detrimental to the materiality of the archive thanks to the range of techniques

and forms offered by digital reproduction. Dore Bowen argued that digitisation allowed “former memory-objects to be reformulated into algorithms and circulated in a manner unknown in the analogue age” (2006:547), therefore allowing for “new relation[s] between past and present to emerge” (2006:551). Similarly, digital art specialist Harald Klinke explained that the insertion of the digital into art history and museums has had the potential to not only open up the museum but also reveal untold stories and put under the spotlight understudied artworks, in our case archives or photographic collections (2020:38). By “allowing further accessibility as well as possibilities for remix” (Dot & Santa Olalla 2020:179), the digital has generated new ways of engaging with archives where both the analogue and the digital are amalgamated, which can be defined as a form of “digital liquefaction” (Bowen 2006:544). Beyond the reworking of analogue archives, the digital has also enabled the assemblage or reassemblage of artefacts or collections that are not kept together, opening up the possibilities of encounter in exhibition spaces.

## VII) Exhibitions

While archives and museums are similar in many ways, and especially through their collecting and storing practices, Neil Cummings and Marysia Lewandowska offer “the exhibitionary imperative” as the sole differentiating practice between archives and museums (2002:86), though archives like the Archives Nationales in Paris also have an ongoing programme of temporary exhibitions. This thesis focuses on temporary exhibitions rather than permanent museum displays. In today’s museum economy, exhibitions are “the museum’s premier product” and one of the reasons why people go, or return to the museum (Phillips 2003:155). Exhibitions are also essential for the circulation of artworks and the display of contemporary art as a means for artistic recognition on the global art scene. Nicolas Bourriaud spoke of the exhibition as an “arena of exchange” (2002:17) where the presentation of a selection of works creates unique dialogues between the works, the institution and the viewers. While artworks do not live exclusively in museums, the possibilities of their encounter is mostly contained to the museum and the art gallery, although at times it can also be through art fairs. Outside of these institutional frames, public art is one of the only institutions of art commission that is visible outside of institutions. While we get to encounter art everywhere through digital reproduction, whether on our phones, in the street through publicity, on television and in the cinema, the museum and the art gallery will remain, despite

the rise of NFTs, the ultimate place to encounter art. Similarly, Enwezor argues that the archive is also always contained and, most of the time, bound to institutions. For him, “the archive rests in a state of historical incarceration, played out in media experiences, museums of art, natural history, and ethnography, in old libraries, in memorabilia concessions, as popular entertainment, in historical reenactments, as monuments and memorials, in private albums, on computer hard drives” (Enwezor 2008:40). Although this thesis will show how artists subvert the colonial archive by means of their artistic alteration, the archive is never really escaping its institutional containment. Some case studies will show how artistic residencies and partnerships can allow for the archive to be freed from its institution, even if only partially. Indeed, the escape of the archive’s original containment by means of transference into the artwork mostly moves between institutional spaces. Whether it is the exhibition of archival art or of archival material – especially when it comes to ethnographic photography –, both have gained popularity in the past twenty years. For the larger part of the public, exhibitions and museum displays are the only way to encounter this material. While archives are meant to be accessible to all – whether institutions or archival collections in museums –, Elizabeth Povinelli argues that this “sense of limitless public access to knowledge” in archives is “based on the assumption that free access is free of social figuration” (2011:158). Though the same could be argued for museum institutions, their public facing role as “in service of society”<sup>10</sup> brings larger numbers of visitors than archives do. Like most visitors would do, it is through the visiting of museums and art galleries that I encountered archival artworks in museum displays and exhibitions for the purpose of this research. Before looking into the exhibitions dedicated to or highlighting archive art, some of which I have visited, I will first look at the increase of exhibitions dedicated to ethnographic photography. I will demonstrate that their expansion correlates with the development of archive art exhibitions linked to the colonial, pointing to a general interest and investment in photographic collections across different genres of museum institutions, through ethnographic and contemporary approaches.

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<sup>10</sup> As stated in the first part of the definition of museum by ICOM: A museum is a not-for-profit, permanent institution in the service of society that researches, collects, conserves, interprets and exhibits tangible and intangible heritage.

## 1. Exhibiting ethnographic photography

One of the earliest exhibitions of colonial photography in the context of museums of ethnography in Europe is the creation of a photothèque<sup>11</sup> at the musée du Trocadéro in 1932. Though colonial photographs have been exhibited and acquired since the creation of ethnographic and natural history museums, an interest has grown since the 1990s, in part due to the expansion of provenance research as explained later in Chapter One. This has given new “conditions of visibility for photography” (Azoulay 2008:167) through the creation of spaces dedicated to their exhibition. Though revolutionary in the 1930s it is now more common for museums that hold photographic collections to have dedicated spaces as part of their permanent galleries for the sole purpose of photographic and archival displays.<sup>12</sup> In 2013, the Boîte d’art graphique opened at the mqB-JC in Paris (Fig. 18) and has been dedicated to the exhibition of photographs and archives from the collections of the mqB-JC with thematic exhibitions renewing every three to six months. In 2018, the Victoria & Albert Museum opened its Photography Centre (Fig. 19) with the display *Collecting Photography: From Daguerreotype to Digital* on photography as a means for “collecting the world”.<sup>13</sup> Although the Photography Centre at the V&A focusses on the technological history of photography alongside the work of illustrious photographers, colonial photography is recurrent due to the nature of the collections. From its opening in 2021, the Humboldt Forum in Berlin has incorporated a display which also relies on the use of photographs, films and archives, through their reproduction and accumulation in a metallic structure to address the *Matter(s) of Perspective* (Fig. 20) connected to the colonial and the practice of collecting during the colonial period. These examples, which are far from an exhaustive list of photo-specific displays in European museums, point to some of the ways in which photography collections in general, but especially when it comes to its links to the colonial period, have been showcased in museums recently.

Alongside these displays, exhibitions dedicated to colonial photography have grown exponentially in the past twenty years. In 2007, the mqB-JC held its first photographic exhibitions on a specific photographic expedition to Yucatàn, *Le Yucatàn est ailleurs* :

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<sup>11</sup> A photothèque is a photo library.

<sup>12</sup> Sophie Hackett has also attested to this increase of dedicated spaces for the exhibition of photography in art museums. See Hackett 2016: 256-263.

<sup>13</sup> [https://www.vam.ac.uk/blog/news/our-new-photography-centre-is-now-open?srsltid=AfmBOoqfSm9UI\\_XMpOQee5zQdxIsuaA7r4iEG-s9jrPTb\\_d\\_57WQ1noQ](https://www.vam.ac.uk/blog/news/our-new-photography-centre-is-now-open?srsltid=AfmBOoqfSm9UI_XMpOQee5zQdxIsuaA7r4iEG-s9jrPTb_d_57WQ1noQ), last accessed on 25/09/2025.

*expéditions photographiques (1857-1886) de Désiré Charnay*, and on the first daguerreotypes portraits in history, *Camera Obscura: Premiers portraits au daguerreotype (1841-1851)*. Later the exhibitions *Par les images: patrimoine photographique équatorien (1900-1930)* (2016) and *Ouvrir l'album du monde: photographies (1842-1911)* (2023) both explored the role played by photography in the representation of people and the world outside of a European context. Since the opening of the mqB-JC in 2006, a series of photography displays and exhibitions were also organised around the *Biennale des images du monde PHOTOQUAI* (literally the biennale of images of the world) which lasted from 2007 to 2015. Alongside the exhibitions, the biennial fostered a range of artistic residencies. Similarly, a range of exhibitions focussing on colonial photography have taken place in museums of ethnography in Germany alongside photography biennials and triennials like at the Museum am Rothenbaum – Kulturen und Künste der Welt (MARKK) in Hamburg and at the Rautenstrauch-Joest Museum (RJM) in Cologne. In Cologne the Photoszene Festival has been partnering with the RJM, amongst other museums in Cologne, for the organisation of artists residencies called *Artist Meets Archive* since 2018. The *Artist Meets Archive* project has so far given the opportunity to four artists to work with the archives of the RJM and exhibit their resulting works at the RJM. In 2022, the partnership between the 8<sup>th</sup> Triennial of Photography in Hamburg and the MARKK led to the exhibition *Archive of Experiences (Archiv der Erfahrungen mit Kelvin Haizel* in its original title). Here, photographs from an album from the MARKK's collections were exhibited as reworked prints by contemporary artist Kelvin Haizel. In 2022-23, the exhibition *Recaptioning Congo* took place at the Fotomuseum (FOMU) in Antwerp and presented photographs of Congo as a colonised country between 1882 and 1960. In 2020-21, the Wereldmuseum in Rotterdam presented the exhibition *Dossier Indië* with photos from the Dutch East Indies from the 19<sup>th</sup> to the early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. In 2022, the Wereldmuseum in Amsterdam, which is part of the same coalition of museums, launched its programme "Tag the Picture" where people are invited to look at photographs from the museum's collections dated from 1850 to the present and add descriptive tags to help train an algorithm on how to associate words and visuals and therefore develop a more comprehensive approach to photographs which does not solely rely on colonial and museum records, taxonomies and typologies. Such projects testify to the new investments of museums into their photographic collections, not only through exhibition but also research, to build new ways to engage with these collections and broaden their access through dissemination principles. As seen with these examples, these projects and exhibitions are not solely tied to museums of photography but also bleed onto photograph dedicated spaces and events. In

2014, the Centre Pompidou in Paris – the French national museum of modern art – opened its dedicated photography gallery in the lower level of the building. All the exhibitions of this gallery highlight the photographs in the collections of the Centre Pompidou. In 2022-23, the exhibition *Décadrement Colonial* presented photographs and documents in the collections which dated from 1910-1947 and were created by renowned figures of the Surrealist movement such as Man Ray, Henri-Cartier Bresson and Eli Lotar. The archival and photographic material in the exhibition reflected the different travels of these figures around the world as well as some more specific moments like the anticolonial action of the Surrealists against the Exposition Coloniale Internationale which took place in Paris in 1931. The exhibition also proposed to show that although a lot of the photography at the time was thought to be halfway between art and journalism, it borrowed from and continued the practice of ethnographic photography (Amao 2022:47). Though this overview does not claim to be comprehensive, it shows that the interest in ethnographic photographs has been growing beyond the study of object collections in museums. Furthermore, while the role of photographs in museums has been extensively studied, especially when it comes to ethnographic photographs, the research has mostly focused on the collections, their principles and specificities (Morton & Edwards 2009; Edwards & Morton 2015). There has also been ongoing discussion about the exhibition of these photographs, especially with regards to their display alongside artefacts or as contextual visual elements, but an historiography of exhibitions dedicated solely to ethnographic photographs is yet to be undertaken.<sup>14</sup>

## 2. Exhibiting archival art

The presentation of exhibitions of ethnographic photographs above has shown that most of these exhibitions took place in museums of ethnography, where these collections are stored. Yet, a specific exhibition has marked archive art and presented African ethnographic photography together with contemporary archive art: *Distance and Desire: Encounters with the African Archive*. Curated by Tamar Garb in 2012, and first exhibited in New York at the Walther Collection's Project space in a three-part series, it was shown at the Walther Collection in Neu-Ulm in 2013 and later showed at C/O in Berlin in 2015.<sup>15</sup> The exhibition

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<sup>14</sup> Anaïs Mauuarin did work on the history of photographic exhibitions in Paris at the musée de l'Homme, but her research focuses on the beginning of these exhibitions between 1930 and 1950 (Mauuarin 2022).

<sup>15</sup> The Walther Collection has organised a series of exhibitions that displayed ethnographic photographs alongside contemporary photographs as the foundation is dedicated to "the critical understanding of historical and contemporary photography and related media" and they form the core of the institution's collection. Some of

presented photographs, postcards, *cartes de visite* and photo-albums from the 1870s to the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century which are part of the Walther Collection. Alongside these, archival artworks were displayed in the second part of the exhibition entitled “Contemporary Reconfigurations” in order to create a dialogue and engage critically with the ethnographic photographs and the colonial tropes inherent to them (Garb 2013a). The exhibition offered to read so-called ethnographic photographs alongside contemporary photographic works which inherently offer to question the very category of what is or is not ethnographic. Another earlier exhibition showed archive art, the UNFIXED Projects which was held at the Center for Contemporary Art (CBK) in Dordrecht (The Netherlands) in 2010-2012 and engaged critically with archival materials as tools fit for the narration of artists’ personal stories. The project, which resulted in the publication *UNFIXED: Photography and Postcolonial Perspectives in Contemporary Art* (Blokland & Pelupessy 2012), consisted of an artist residency, an exhibition, a workshop and a symposium which aimed to confront “photography’s historical connection to this fixation of identity” (Blokland & Pelupessy 2012:6). In this exhibition, artists Charif Benhelima, Hank Willis Thomas, Hulleah Tsinhnahjinnie, Keith Piper, Otobong Nkanga and Naro Snackey used, in at least one of their works, archival material as a means to look back on history and frame questions of identity and representation thanks to the “elasticity” of the photographic medium, which “can be pushed and pulled into a variety of discursive sites and institutional spaces” (Mercer 2012:72-3). Thanks to the different aspects of *UNFIXED* and the accompanying publication, spaces for discussions were created to address the role of photography as a colonial method that ‘fixed’ “the image of non-Western people as ‘other’” (Mercer 2012:73). The project, mixing exhibition and dialogue spaces enabled all participants to the projects, artists included, to discuss the means through which we can engage with these images, especially when re-read by contemporary artists as identity markers. In this thesis, I will explain how artists such as Brook Andrew and George Nuku use archives mixed with visual codes from both Wirardjuri and Māori culture to bring to life Indigenous stories that merge the past with the present.

As mentioned earlier, most of the exhibitions that presented ethnographic photographs or archive art, have tended to take place either in museums of ethnography, galleries of photography, or contemporary art galleries, though some have also taken place in natural history museums and botanical gardens. The exhibition *À toi appartient le regard (...) et la*

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these exhibitions were *Self: Portraiture and Social Identity* (2010) curated by Okwui Enwezor, *Appropriated Landscapes* (2011) curated by Corinne Diserens and *Recent Histories: Contemporary African Photography and Video Art* (2016) curated by Daniela Baumann, Joshua Chuang and Oluremi C. Onabanjo.

*liaison infinie entre les choses* which was crucial in the creation of this research project, took place at the mqB-JC in 2020. Although it was not the first exhibition of contemporary photography at the museum<sup>16</sup>, it was the first one which offered a global approach of contemporary photography by exhibiting the work of twenty-six artists from around the world. It was also the first photographic exhibition to take place in the largest exhibition space of the museum. Out of the twenty-six artists, almost half of them included photo and film archives in their creations, therefore falling into the defined category of ‘archival art’: Katia Kameli, Dayanita Singh, Ho Rui An, Dinh Q. Lê, Brook Andrew, Rosângelo Rennó, Mariana Castillo Deball, Santu Mofokeng, Oscar Muñoz, Carlos Garaicoa, Sammy Baloji, Shiraz Bayjoo. For the other half, though it might not have been physically present, the archive still informed the works. Artists such as José Alejandro Restrepo used archival pictures to inform his research, rendering his artworks definable as archive art. This exhibition offered a glimpse of the range of photographic practice realised by artists from the Global South by giving them a dedicated space in a national institution. This was a testimony to the practices of contemporary photography. The range of artists who include archives in their photographic practice, whether in the research process or the final artwork shows that archive art is part and parcel of today’s photographic practice; and particularly in the case of artists from the Global South who are actively engaging in a critique of colonisation by following postcolonial and decolonial approaches.

Similar to *À toi appartient le regard (...) et la liaison infinie entre les choses*, the exhibition *A World in Common: Contemporary African Photography*<sup>17</sup> which took place at Tate Modern in 2023-2024 presented the contemporary practice of photography but this time solely focusing on the work of African artists. Organised in seven sections, the exhibition showcased the work of thirty-six artists. While many artists included the colonial archive in their artworks, the exhibition highlighted the role of the archive in the production of these works by dedicating a section of the exhibition to “Counter-Histories”, itself divided into “Family Portrait” and “The Living Archive”. Some of the archive artworks in these sections were *Casing History* (2016) by Kelani Abass (Fig. 21), Santu Mofokeng’s *The Black Photo Album / Look At Me* (1997) (Fig. 22), and *A History of a City in a Box* (2019) by Ndidi Dike (Fig. 23) and Malala Andrialavidrazana’s series *Figures* (2015-2021) (Fig. 24). By presenting

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<sup>16</sup> The first exhibition dedicated to contemporary photography at the mqB-JC was the exhibition *Nocturne de Colombie: Images Contemporaines* which took place in 2013-2014.

<sup>17</sup> This exhibition inserts itself in a tradition of exhibitions on contemporary photography, including the exhibition *In/sight: African Photographers, 1940 to the Present* (1996) curated by Clare Belle, Okwui Enwezor, Danielle Tilkin and Octavio Zaya which took place at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York.

the archive as a means to “create counter-narratives through which new histories are brought to light” (Bonsu 2023:150), the exhibition situated the archive in the history of art, more precisely in the history of contemporary photography where “archival material is ‘rediscovered’ as art” (Mercer 2012:77).

Beyond contemporary photography there is another exhibition project which has focused on the reworking of colonial archives by contemporary artists. In 2024, the exhibition *Silent Archive* curated by Emma Nicholson took place at Inverleith House in the Royal Botanic Garden Edinburgh. The exhibition presented sixteen contemporary artists who uncovered hidden stories of botanical archives. This exhibition revealed the ongoing decolonial initiatives conducted by or together with Botanical Gardens (von Zinnenburg Carroll 2017b; Nielsen 2023; Leonard 2024) and how looking into their archives is one of the ways to address institutional legacies.

Finally, a range of solo exhibitions of artists whose work with archives is central to their practice have taken place. In 2022-23, the exhibition *Sasha Huber: You Name It* at Autograph in London<sup>18</sup>, displayed a range of the artist’s works that she did around the figure of Renty Taylor, which will be further discussed in Chapter One. In February 2024, the exhibition *Pia Arke: Silences and Stories*, realised in collaboration with the KW Institute in Berlin where it travelled afterwards, opened at the John Hansard Gallery in Southampton (UK). This exhibition was the first major survey of the late Greenlandic-Danish artist whose practice was based on photography and the reuse of colonial and personal archives to address the colonial relationships between Denmark and Greenland (Carter & Krogh 2024). From 2024 to early 2025, the British Museum presented the exhibition *Hew Locke: what have we here?* (Locke et al. 2024). After spending months working in the storage of the British Museum, contemporary artist Hew Locke chose a range of objects, books and archives from the museum’s collections to bring to the fore the history of the British Empire. By bringing together this material and adding his own creations and questioning, using his voice in sound showers in the space, Locke created his own critical museum storage in the exhibition space. He did so by creating a display that had all “the storage codes with packing boxes, gridded racks, shelving and MDF wood casing” (Debrosse 2025 np). The exhibition testified to the desire of museums to research their own collections and revealed the importance of exploring objects and archival documents together, as is shown in provenance research. This artistic take-over demonstrated how museum storages as archives can be used for both telling and re-telling history. These

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<sup>18</sup> This exhibition was first shown in Toronto at The Power Plant Contemporary Art Gallery in Toronto in 2022. It later travelled to the Turku Art Museum in Finland in 2023 and at the Ferme Asile in Switzerland in 2024.

exhibitions show the increasing number of artists being invited by museums to the re-read their collections in full, including archives and institutional histories as well as object and art collections. Testifying to this ever-growing presence of contemporary artists within museums and galleries in Europe, this phenomenon was essential in inspiring the exhibition-focused aspect of this thesis.

## VIII) Method

This thesis is informed by a range of methods, including visual and theoretical analyses of exhibitions and artworks, interviews with museum professionals and one artist, and fieldwork in museums. Throughout this research project, a core aspect of my practice has been to visit exhibitions, museums and events such as biennales, primarily to see the exhibitions and artworks which constitute the case studies of this project, but also to visit exhibitions and institutions that relate to the broader topic of this thesis. These visits were often scheduled around interviews I conducted, conferences I attended, or where I was based at the time. For these reasons, and due to the focus of this thesis being on European institutions, my visits took place in France, the United Kingdom, Germany, the Netherlands, Austria, Switzerland and Italy. They have informed my understanding of the studied artworks and exhibitions from my perspective as a visitor, rather than through the lens of a larger and varied group of visitors. In this sense, my research will not address the broader reception of the works and exhibitions. However, and specifically in the case of George Nuku's exhibition at the Weltmuseum Wien in Vienna, it will address the collective experience of exhibition making during my short fieldwork at the museum on 15-23 June 2022.<sup>19</sup>

Though not at the core of the theoretical framework of this thesis, this research was strongly informed by the decolonial agenda and discourse developed by museums. Indeed, some of the studied institutions like the Weltmuseum Wien had at the time a budget for "decolonizing the museum"<sup>20</sup>, while the MEG in Geneva had a 2020-2024 strategic plan working towards the decolonisation of the institution. This engagement of institutions in such programmes reflects the work of artists working with archives studied in this thesis. Indeed, as the 'de' in decolonisation signifies "that it is only by addressing the past and how it still

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<sup>19</sup> I created an online questionnaire that the public visiting the *George Nuku. Oceans. Collections. Reflections.* exhibition at the Weltmuseum Wien in Vienna could access through QR code in the exhibition space. This attempt at collecting data on the reception of the exhibition was inconclusive as no visitors filled the form.

<sup>20</sup> Personal interview with Claudia Augustat, Nora Haas and Doris Prlić at the Weltmuseum Wien on 20/06/22.

lingers on today, that it is possible to move onwards” (L’internationale 2015:6), artists use archives (from the past) and question them in the present as a way to move forward. As put by Indigenous consultant Crystal Fraser and anthropologist Zoe Todd, “a decolonial sensibility is necessary to attend to the complex relationships between archives and Indigenous peoples” (2016:38). The potential for decolonisation to be performed within institutions is discussed in this research through the understanding that the decolonial paradigm comes out of the “modernity/coloniality” compound expression as presented by scholars Catherine E. Walsh and Walter D. Mignolo (2018:4). The relationality of both terms is revealing of the imperial and colonial contexts of modernity within which archives and museum institutions alike grew across the North-Atlantic. According to Mignolo, decolonization was originally used to refer to newly independent states (2018a:121). On arguing instead for decoloniality, Walsh states that the concept “seeks to make visible, open up, and advance radically distinct perspectives and positionalities that displace Western rationality as the only framework and possibility of existence, analysis, and thought” (2018a:17). Furthermore, it encapsulates Afro-Columbian thinker Adolfo Albán’s concept of “re-existence” (cited in Walsh 2018b:95) which articulates a creativity that is “using the imaginary of modernity” (Mignolo 2018b:146). Thought of as a tool towards decoloniality, it can be paralleled with the practice of archival art as a method for the dissemination of the archive beyond its original frames of references. While my research reveals that despite museums’ decolonial programmes artists are not always working for the decolonising of institutions, the idea of decoloniality is key to understand the work of Indigenous, diasporic and Global South artists in working with colonial archives.

Earlier in this introduction, I have presented the role of exhibitions and exhibition-making in the expansion of the archival turn in art. In this thesis, I will focus on the practice of curating and exhibition-making to understand how the archival art phenomenon has become part and parcel of museum programming. To do so, I will rely on the data I have collected while visiting exhibitions, where I considered museums and specific exhibitions as places of fieldwork. Together with the analysis resulting from this fieldwork, my practice followed Anita Herle’s idea of exhibitions as sites of research (2008; 2013), in line with Ruth Phillips’ conceptualisation of “the museum as a research site” (2003:158). Unlike Anita Herle whose works comes from her perspective as curator at the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology in Cambridge, I conducted my fieldwork as a visitor rather than a museum insider – albeit as a biased museum visitor as I also have experience in working in museums. Thus, one of the limits of this thesis is that it mostly engages with the finished product of exhibitions and does not engage – or only minimally – with the various steps and negotiations

involved in the creation and production of the projects or with the financial aspect of exhibitions and residencies – both in production costs and remuneration of artists. In order to understand how these exhibitions play a part in the growing phenomenon of archival art, I will jointly look at the roles of the artists and their artworks with that of the museum based on Nicholas Thomas' idea of the 'museum as method' (2010), and in light of the concept of the museum "as a site for the production of new knowledge" (Phillips 2003:161) whereby collaborative projects can have a radical impact on the museum's educational mission. Based on this fieldwork and my positioning, I will not only think of the artworks and exhibitions in what they can accomplish for the institution and the artist, but also consider how I, as a visitor, experience archival art and the impact it can have in time through what museologist Andrea Witcomb calls "a pedagogy of feeling" (2015:322), revealing the affective role that exhibition devices may have on a sensorial and embodied visitor response. This will, in turn, enable me to consider how "emotional structures" (Hooper-Greenhill 2000:9), created by the multiplicities of people involved in the display of artworks in museums, impact their reception. Following theories of museums and communities (Karp et al. 1992; Peers & Brown 2003; Golding & Modest 2013; Onciul 2015) and museums working with artists (Deliss 2012; Deliss & Mutumba 2014; Geismar 2015; Modest et al. 2019; Möntmann 2023), this thesis will consider the role of museums and exhibitions as an intrinsic part of the making of archival art.

Alongside museum studies, this thesis is written following an art historical and visual approach. In a similar way as how Elizabeth Edwards discusses photographs as both "images and physical objects which exist in time and space and thus in social and cultural experience" (2002:67), I will study works of archival art through their visual and material components. A double analysis, of the archive and the final artwork will be conducted for each example in order to contextualise and reveal the layers of each archival artwork. Borrowing from the notion of object biographies (Kopytoff 1986) and the "social biography of image content" (Edwards 2002:68) I will study the practice of altering the archive's format to incorporate it within an artwork, as well as, at times, the different versions and formats of the archival artwork. While I will consider the archives within the artworks as documents of history – representing both truths and fictions –, I will also consider how the works of archival art enable – through the processes of alteration and adaptation (see Chapter Three and Chapter Four) – to become monuments, by relying on the works of Michel Foucault (1969), Jacques Derrida (1996), Alois Riegl (1996), Ann Laura Stoler (2002a; 2002b) and Achille Mbembe (2002). The various processes of alteration will be studied through detailed analyses of the

range of components in each artwork, referring to practices of collage (Taylor 2004), reproduction (Benjamin 1955; Berger 2008) and post-production (Bourriaud 2007). By using interdisciplinary methods and literature from museum studies, art history, visual and photographic studies and the conceptions of archives, this thesis aims to use the existing research on archive art and the archival turn as a steppingstone for the understanding of archival art as method. At a time when decolonial questions are very popular (but not necessarily efficient) when museums and archives are questioning their institutional histories and collections, what role do artists who choose to work with colonial archival material play? What are the diverse practices that they use? What is the role of museums in granting/guaranteeing access to their archival collections and ensuring their dissemination, with artists and the public? Finally, this thesis will examine how artists are using archival art as a method for colonial repair and redress, as well as for personal storytelling.

In the first chapter, I will be looking at the ties between archives and ethnographic photography, especially in relation to archival and photographic collections that are kept in museums, particularly in museums of ethnography. By reflecting on the different status of the archive as document and monument, this chapter will show how both these aspects are essential in the critical re-reading of these archives in artistic interventions. By considering both regimes of the archives and the museum, this chapter will highlight how archives, especially photographs are inherently considered truthful documents. After looking at the development of archive art at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century and the context in which it took place, this chapter will reveal some of the artistic means and processes involved in archival art, especially when reusing colonial photographs. Informed by the discussion on archives and colonial photographs kept in museum institutions, this chapter will end with an analysis of the reworking of one ensemble of daguerreotypes kept at the Peabody Museum in Harvard by two contemporary artists, Carrie Mae Weems and Sasha Huber.

The second chapter will focus on museums, specifically on the practice of artists working inside museums. By first looking into the history of museums of ethnography, this chapter will examine how intrinsically embedded colonial and imperial regimes were with these institutions. These museums have now been working to confront their legacies, especially through collaborations with communities and artists. I will consider these collaborations in relation to the constant recalibration of the concept of ‘contact zone’ in museology literature. This chapter will also shed light on intermuseum collaborations, especially through the study of the European Network of Museums of Ethnography. After

considering the roles of museums through the lens of the new museum definition by the International Council of Museums, I will look into two collaborations between artists and museums of ethnography. I will first study the residency and exhibition of Rajkamal Kahlon at the Weltmuseum Wien in Vienna in 2016 which occurred as part of the European project SWICH. Finally, I will reflect on the *Leaky Archive* project (2020-2022) which took place at the Rautenstrauch-Joest Museum in Cologne, Germany, especially through the lens of the artistic residency of Kiri Dalena. This chapter will show the significance of contemporary artistic engagement in today's museum of ethnography, as a method for the re-reading of their collections, and more broadly as part of the critical engagement with their colonial legacies.

The third and fourth chapters will consist of the main case studies of this thesis. They will deal with the work of contemporary artists Brook Andrew and George Nuku by considering two principles: alteration and adaptation. Rooted in principles that are familiar to print and photographic material, the concept of alteration will be used to first study the artistic processes through which colonial archives are altered by artists and made into new creations. By looking specifically at Brook Andrew's *Horizon II* (2020) and *SMASH IT* (2018) and George Nuku's exhibition *George Nuku l'aventure Maori de Dumont D'Urville* in Rochefort (France), the third chapter will define a range of altering practices (collage, assemblage, re-assemblage, cropping, editing) that can be used to transform the archive in order to not only disrupt the colonial legacies they represent, but also appropriate these archives to tell personal stories and transform them into new originals and artworks.

In the fourth chapter, focussing on adaptation of archival artworks, I will study how, through curatorial strategies, George Nuku and Brook Andrew are adapting their archival artworks to the environments of museums in order to tell stories adapted to local geographies and histories. By considering the work of George Nuku as travelling museums, focusing on the study of his exhibition *George Nuku. Oceans. Collections. Reflections.* at the Weltmuseum Wien in Vienna (2022-2023) as a segue to his French exhibition (2021), I will establish parallels between the different conceptions of the museum institution by Māori people and in Europe. I will look at the variations of display across Europe of Brook Andrew's work *Vox/Anatomy of a Body Record: Beyond Tasmania* (2013) and consider how it has been adapted to reflect local environments as well as comment on precise colonial histories, while at the same time expanding on the works' previous versions. Finally, this chapter will reflect on the role played by audiences in the work's adaptations.

While the first two chapters are framing the concepts of archive and museum with regards to the development of archival art in the 1990s and reveal the processes that have led

to archival art practice in museums today, the third and fourth chapters examine in detail the practice of archival art as a method through the concepts of alteration and adaptation. In the final chapter, focusing on the study of the Centre for the Less Good Idea's residency at the Fondation Cartier pour l'art contemporain in Paris in May 2024, I explore how the art of performance – considered here as archival art – can reveal the ghosts and spectres kept within the archive. This chapter offers to reflect on the idea of the institution as a buffer zone whereby the situational encounter of the archive can become a signifier for the freeing of the archive, following a form of institutional transfer.

# Chapter 1 – Museum Archives: Places and Sources for Reparation Through Archival Art

## I) Introduction

From the 1960s, a postmodern movement rose in Europe across fields and disciplines. In philosophy, what is sometimes referred to as French theory emerged from a group of French thinkers. Key figures such as Jean François Lyotard (1924-1998) and Michel Foucault (1926-1984) developed theories engaging with ideas of knowledge, truth and memory. Informed by the French colonial context in Algeria, they aimed to be critical of modern times and its ethnocentric views and knowledge conceptions (Lyotard 1984; Foucault 1969). At a similar time, authors such as Frantz Fanon (1925-1961), Edward Said (1935-2003) and Gayatri Chakravorti Spivak (1942-) wrote essential texts for the theorisation of postcoloniality theory (Fanon 1968; Said 1979; Spivak 1988) which not only aimed at critiquing a West-centric colonial modernity, but also offered an inward look into the Global South by highlighting colonial power dynamics. In the 1990s, these discussions crystalized into the works of Jacques Derrida (1996), Pierre Nora (1984) and Homi K. Bhabha (1994) which address the ambivalence of the relation between past and present and their embodiments in archives and *lieux de mémoire* in light of postcolonial movements. Together, these literary movements offered tools for a critical rethinking of history, which often takes place through a reading of historical sources, visual or textual, of archives from the past read through the present's lens. With their dual status of documents and monuments, archives as regimes of power embed these discussions.

Although the discussion of archives first took place in philosophy and literature, it considerably grew inside museum institutions. In the past thirty years, not only have museums given more importance to their archival collections through research and exhibition, but they have also become essential to museums functioning in light of recent restitution calls. Following French president Emmanuel Macron's commission of a report *On the Restitution of African Cultural Heritage, Toward a New Relational Ethics* in 2018 conducted by Senegalese writer Felwine Sarr and French art historian Bénédicte Savoy, the already-in-use practice of provenance research took centre stage. The principle of provenance research aims at identifying the ties between creation, ownership and possession (Tompkins 2020:20-3). Though used in various contexts, including in researching Nazi-looted art, provenance

research has become essential for ethnographic museums in the inspection of their “contested holdings” (Bodenstein, Oțoiu, Troenlenberg 2022). It has revealed the importance of the archival material kept in museums as essential documentation to trace the histories of their collections (Edwards 2003:96). In fact, contrary to administrative archives, museum archives are constituted as adjacent to object collections for the writing of their biographies (Kopytoff 1986). Moreover, the very organisation of archives and their materialities is different in museums from state archives. While in state archives most of the content is stored in archival boxes on shelves and compactors, museum archives are often kept in specific rooms, with specific light, climate and pest control based on conservation needs for photographs, drawings and films which form the largest part of museum archives. In the past years, this material has not only been used as documentation for provenance research work, but also as objects *per se* which can be exhibited independently from the rest of the collections.

This ambivalence of object/archive/document status is particularly well encapsulated with colonial photographic collections. As stated by Allan Sekula, “photographs are seen as sources of factual, positive knowledge, and thus are appropriate documents” (1999:187). Yet, in museum collections they exist as material objects, each defined by their double existence in storage and on the museum database. From the 1990s onwards, museums have been working towards the digitisation of their collections’ catalogue, creating online databases and with them, a “digital avatar of the object from the collection” (Beltrame 2015:114). This digitisation has opened up a new type of interaction with museum objects and archives both for museum professionals and people external to the museum, whether communities, artists, researchers or the general public. While the digitisation of collections has created a form of distance where people interact less with objects in their material forms, it has also allowed for a form of closeness — especially in the case of photographs as visual material — to be created thanks to a wider online access. Furthermore, the digital has also allowed for a new kind of artistic creation. Coupled with this access to museum collections, the use of editing digital tools has given artists the means for artists to “invent new uses for [existing] works” thanks to a digital “postproduction” (Bourriaud 2007:45).

Based on archive-specific literature, this chapter will reflect on the different concepts of the archive, especially when considering museum archives that pertain to the colonial. Rather than presenting a broad understanding of the archive from a historiographical point of view, this study will be anchored in the museum sector as a way to show its specificities. By reflecting on its status as both document and monument, the chapter will delve into how the archive can be engaged with critically, through textual, institutional and visual re-readings.

Focussing specifically on collections of colonial photographs, I will delve into the materiality of the archive as a conveyor of truth and consider its intrinsic power to not only bridge past and present times, but also create postcolonial temporalities which encompass diverse narratives and perspectives.<sup>21</sup> In the second part of this chapter, I will pursue my enquiry into the archive through an art historical perspective. Looking first at the development of archive art at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, I will then consider the context in which the archival turn took place in art, and study the various artistic means and processes used for its creation. Finally, this chapter will highlight the work done by artists Carrie Mae Weems and Sasha Huber on a series of daguerreotypes kept at the Peabody Museum in Harvard. While the rest of this thesis will use examples of artistic residencies in museums and art galleries in Europe, this chapter will highlight how archival artworks can be realised by artists outside of the frames of institutions and without their invitation.<sup>22</sup> This case study will not only reveal how archive art can transform one archive differently at different points in time and by different artists, it will also reveal how it is part and parcel of a social justice movement in light of reparations and restitutions.

## II) Regimes of the museum archive

Although museums and archives exist as separate institutions, they bear resemblances as “spaces of contested histories and contested practices, negotiation, restatement and repossession” (Edwards 2001:11). But more than similarities, in the case of museums of ethnography, the archive is part and parcel of the repository of cultures through collections of treasures and artefacts as well as through written and photographic documents adjacent to these collections which are often stored separately. Together, museum collections and archives constitute the site where work done with archival material can start, where the material is “taken out of its box to be rediscovered, reactivated and rethought” (Mauuarin & Peltier-Caroff 2022 np). This site of the archive is dual as it stands both in the document itself and in the archive as monument. Before being thought of as assemblages of documents, the term

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<sup>21</sup> To read more on the potential of postcolonial temporalities within museum institutions, see Nyssen, Hamel & Debrosse, forthcoming.

<sup>22</sup> While the archives used by Weems and Huber were kept in a museum in the United States of America and thus outside of the European delimitation of this thesis, I encountered the works of Huber in London at Autograph. This dissemination of archives through art practice and institutions is what allowed me to encounter the reworked Zealy daguerreotypes, thus testifying to the role of archival art in ‘freeing’ archives from their institutional frames as will be explained in the last chapter and conclusion of this thesis.

'archive' referred to the monument where these documents were stored, tying them to their institution (Hiller 1994; Mbembe 2002). As argued by anthropologists Ann Laura Stoler (2002a; 2002b) and Elizabeth Povinelli (2011), archives are monuments of states. This idea of the archive as monument comes from Derrida's etymological study of the word archive, relating it to "the Greek *arkheion*: initially a house, a domicile, an address, the residence of the superior magistrates, the *archons*, those who commanded" (1996:2). From this definition, Derrida refers to the archive as a place and also to its intrinsic link to power, as "monuments to particular configurations of power" (Stoler 2002a:96) and as "technologies of rule" (Stoler 2002a:98). This "regime of the archive" (Azoulay 2019:169) is governed by the *archons*, the archivist, librarians and museum curators who have power over what the archive is and will be, by legal frameworks and ultimately by the people who work with them. Indeed, the archive does not just exist. It is *made*, by means of "discrimination and of selection", granting or refusing "the status of archive", only to what is deemed archivable (Mbembe 2002:20). In this regard, the archivist is the ultimate orchestrator of the "set of rituals" that take place within the "temple" that is the archive (Mbembe 2002:19). Thus, the archivist governs the various archiving principles, and therefore, what Stoler calls the "archive-as-subject" (2002a:93). This entanglement of the archive as a place, a regime and a material is represented in Michel Foucault's concept of "power-knowledge" (1980) where "knowledge produces power and power produces (or delimits) knowledge" (Jorgensen & McLean 2017:VII), also explained by Derrida when he argues that the archive's "documents state the law" (1995:10). The power and law that is embedded within the regime of the archive also extends to the documents contained in the archive's other aspect, the "archive-as-source" (Stoler 2002a:93). The archive-as-source, which is concerned more with the document than the monument, is mostly made of and in paper – though not limited to it – which acts as the ultimate "proof in support of a fact" (Briet 2006:9). This ambivalence of the archive is not only represented in its dual aspect of document and monument, but also in the interchangeability of these roles. Indeed, through what it shows and represents, the document can be seen as a monument in the memory of imperialism as well as a way to create new ways of memorialisation through the "unstitching" of the archive (Banks & Vokes 2010). Similarly, the monument that is the archive is a document of the imperial institution, "evidence of subjugation" (Payne & Thomas 2002:119) which is written in the building's "motifs, columns, the arrangement of the rooms, the organisation of the 'files', the labyrinth of corridors" (Mbembe 2002:19) that are all part of the imagery and imaginary of the archive, together forming a "grammar", "an ethics of seeing", (Sontag 1979:3) an archival aesthetic.

This aesthetic of the document which is symbolic of the archive is encapsulated in its materiality. Indeed, not only is the archive a tactile portal through time but one that is also textual and visual. Its allure resides in the experience of the archive through the senses that allow one to “come into contact with the material of history” (Wallen 2023:48), and therefore with history itself (Mbembe 2002). Created to safeguard the then present (now past) for the future (now present), the “there-then” and the “here-now” as coined by Barthes (1977:44), the archive brings together the “material traces of the past” (Lydon 2017:363) in the form of records, files, letters, notebooks, photographs, lithographs, engravings, books and more, which testify to the colonial empires themselves and their various recording methods. However, because what was created in the past still exists in the present, its original layers of meanings have been complemented and supplemented with new ones in our reading of the past through our knowledge of the present. Yet, the awareness and understanding of both past and present times is not always sufficient to challenge the materiality of the archival document which lures us *into* the past. As put by Ariella Aïsha Azoulay (2019:185-6):

“How can we question what is reaffirmed through the dates on the documents, the type of paper, the ink, the signs of aging, the crumbling paper in the researcher’s hands, the smell of old glue, the carts of boxes and files, the way they are indexed? Because it can be touched, it feels true; but this is part of the archive’s ontology.”

Therefore, materiality acts as one of the agents of truth that makes the archive a “truth regime” (Foucault 1991) that is governed by a set of beliefs where one only trusts what they see, therefore elevating the document to the status of relic (Echevarría 1990; Stoler 2002a; Stoler 2002b). However, despite this tangible link to the past, the constitution of archives through processes of selection means that what the archive preserves is always a partial and biased reality of the past. Thus, one must “[remain] sceptical about interpretation” (Taylor 2002:245) of the archive’s embedded truths.

### III) Visuality of the archive: colonial photographs

The materially embedded truths of the archive are even more present in the photographic archive than in the textual/paper archive for it is a visual “recorded reality” (Edwards 1990:237). Indeed, as stated by Azoulay, a photograph “attest[s] to what ‘was there’” and therefore testifies to a moment which we know uncontestably happened (2008:126-7).

Furthermore, it inscribes itself as a key document of the archive by means of the camera which curator Okwui Enwezor defines as an “archival machine” (2008:12), working alongside the filing cabinet as part of the “bureaucratic-clerical-statistical system of intelligence” (Sekula 1986:73) that forms the archive. In the case of photography, the camera is only one of its elements. As “the product of an encounter” (Azoulay 2008:13), photography also requires “a photographer, a photographed environment, object, person, or spectator” (Azoulay 2008:85) together forming the social relations which testify to and are “contained in the very photographic situation”, (Azoulay 2008:126-7) even though they are not directly visible in the photographic object. Yet, what *is* visible in the photograph was purposefully chosen for helping someone remember the moment that was captured and frozen in time on the photographic plate and on paper, before becoming digital too. In *When Is a Photograph Worth a Thousand Words?* (2003), Native American photographer, curator and Professor Hulleah J. Tsinhnahjinnie responds to the tension contained in colonial photography. Although she feels that these images are tainted by the objectifying and dehumanising gaze of expedition photographers, colonial officers and ethnographic researchers amongst others, they are nonetheless “significant in filling the empty pages of [her] family album” (Tsinhnahjinnie 2003:41). Indeed, Tsinhnahjinnie mentions how despite having memories of her family and her community, she has very few photographs to tie these memories to. Instead, she says that the oral history that she received from family and community lives on in her mind as “imagined photographs” (2003:40), binding photography with memory. Thus, photographs are memories of and from the past, which give the chance for family and community members, artists, activists, historians and researchers to remember, to learn, to acknowledge, to question and to see in the present the photographs as well as the history and subjective stories that are bound to the photographs in the archive. As argued by archive specialist Ernst van Alphen, the archive enables “the production of memory in the present” (2023b:94) through its records, but it is limited in the memory it can produce, as it is only conveying the stories of the people and things that are present inside the archive. Although this presence can be seen in photographs, or read in records, the archive and its systemic archiving is not always speaking in the limited and expected ways the original *archons* planned to, but rather contains histories that can be uncovered.

Because colonial photographs were taken as a means to document peoples, cultures and societies, effort was made to organise the photographed subjects in types and categories. This paragon of the colonial archive led students of the colonial and the postcolonial from the late 1970s onwards to want to study these types and categories by undoing them, by reading

the archive ‘against the grain’ (Stoler 2002a:99) in order to uncover the stories that were hidden. By reading the archive ‘against the grain’, there is the hope to find the hidden and erased stories of the archive, those that were involuntarily recorded. However, Ann Laura Stoler argues that before being able to read ‘against’ the grain, one has to learn to read ‘along the grain’ of the archive first, in order to identify the “regularities”, the “logic of recall, the “densities and distributions”, the “consistencies of misinformation, omission, and mistake” (2002a:100). If one fails to identify these signifiers of the colonial archive, one is at risk to “[bypass] the power in the production of the archive itself” (2002a:101). Following Stoler’s argument, one should therefore first study the archive-as-subject and all its power ramifications, not to ‘fall prey’ to a colonial system but to be able to understand all of its ins and outs in order to then be able to deconstruct it, and find the “signs of fracture, anxiety, and unease” (Garb 2013b:26) at the very core of the archive. While a lot of these arguments were conceptualised with written records in mind, similar methods can be used for the reading along and against the grain of visual archives.

#### IV) Colonial photographs in museum collections

Following a first look into the different regimes of the archives, especially in the museum context and the material and epistemological aspects of colonial photographs, we will now look in greater depth at the interdependency of both categories in a museum institution. In their article *Photographs of ethnology: exhibits, projected objects* (2022) art historians specialised in ethnographic photography Anaïs Mauuarin and Carine Peltier-Caroff address the different roles played by the photographic medium in relation to the ethnographic museum, both as a medium held in a collection and a tool used for the creation of contextual environment in exhibitions, as well as a means to document these exhibitions. Interacting with a photograph in a museum archive,

“it’s not so much a question of taking the visual document out of its box, of diverting it from its primary scientific purpose, as of rediscovering, reactivating and rethinking the power associated with it” (Mauuarin & Peltier-Caroff 2022 np, my translation from French).

Museums of ethnography are filled with photographs that are described as ethnographic. Their production is rooted in the practice of anthropology and collecting, and also in commercial photography practices (Edwards 1992; Edwards 2001; Morton & Edwards

2009; Pinney 2012). These photographs taken during fieldwork in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries were involved in exchange networks that were intrinsic to the documentation of cultures tied to the practice of salvage ethnography (Clifford & Marcus 1986; Edwards 1992; Edwards 2001). Furthermore, the aesthetic of these photographs captured in an “ethnographic genre” (Edwards 2001:40) translated visually specific times, places and peoples, “as precious witnesses” (Mauuarin & Peltier-Caroff 2022 np). The technology provided by photography as a recorder of reality was part of the anthropological method developed by colonial empires that allowed for the recording of peoples throughout the globe (Edwards 1990; Boetsch & Savarese 2000). Born from the use of photography by the state as a tool of “surveillance and control” (Sontag 1979:5), salvage ethnography used photography as “the salvage tool *par excellence*” (Edwards 2001:165) to capture a so-called authenticity of “people and [...] objects on a visual continuum of focused vision and scientific gaze” (Edwards 2001:164). Used in conjunction with textual sources in the form of fieldnotes, official records, scientific studies and more, photographs came as a visual addition to this text, often not only as a documentation of the living or the ‘real’, but as a visualisation and enhancement of the textual document. The photographic medium became so important that it led to projects of salvage ethnography which were mostly photographic.<sup>23</sup> Between 1909 and 1931 for instance, together with operators, French philanthropist Albert Khan endeavoured to document the world through both fixed and animated images in order to create a visual inventory of the world titled *Les Archives de la Planète* (The Planet’s Archives) to capture a changing world (Petiteau 2025). Constituted of 72,000 autochrome photographs, 183,000 meters of film and the operators’ notebooks, the archives are today kept at the musée départemental Albert-Khan (Boulogne-Billancourt, France). Such a project exemplifies how photography, as “miniatures of reality that anyone [could] make or acquire” (Sontag 1979:4), allowed for a rapid development of this practice from the 19<sup>th</sup> century onwards which in turn created a new type of artefact for museums to collect.

When considering colonial photographs in museum collections, it is interesting to think of the specificities of archival collections in museums. According to art historian Anaïs Mauuarin and head of the iconothèque (photo-library) at the musée du quai Branly – Jacques Chirac Carine Peltier-Caroff, the photographs that are to this day kept in museums are “akin to documentation rather than archives” for “their interest lay more in what they showed than in the process by which they [were] constituted” (2022 np). With this claim, Mauuarin and

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<sup>23</sup> On salvage ethnography, see Clifford & Marcus, 1986.

Peltier-Caroff make a clear separation between the ‘archive-as-source’ and the ‘archive-as-subject’ (Stoler 2002a; 2002b), stating that the museum is concerned *only* with the photographs as archival documents (the archive-as-source) and not the practices of archiving (the archive-as-subject) which is echoed in the adoption of the term ‘photo library’ over that of ‘archive’ to refer to the photographic collections held in museums (Mauuarin & Peltier-Caroff 2022). While it is not true for all, much of the archival material held in museums, whether photographic or written, tends to have been acquired alongside artefacts or art objects as documents attached to the latter, even when their acquisition postdates the object’s entry into the collection. According to historians Krista McCracken and Skylee-Storm Hogan-Stacey, “materials with the same provenance are kept together to preserve their context, history, and origin” (2023:31), as explained by the archival principle of *respect des fonds*. However, the museum as a “classifying machine” (Azoulay 2023:154, my translation from French) is often organised through typologies and categories which, when used, separate the documents from the objects because of their different materialities and conservation needs: both paper and photographs require specific temperatures, lighting protection and pest control as well as specific containment due to their format, fragility and photo sensitivity. Furthermore, this material separation is embedded in museums of ethnography and visible through the dedicated positions of photographic or media curators, librarians and archivists as opposed to curators organised by regions such as curator for the arts of Africa or Asia for instance. Finally, Mauuarin and Peltier-Caroff argue that unlike an archive, the document collections of museums can be “consulted, [...] reproduced, disseminated and used, in different ways, outside the walls of the photo library and the museum” rather than just be an “inactive reserve, to be ‘preserved’ carefully after being collected” (2022). With this statement, they then consider these collections as “a ‘living’ material, capable of inserting itself into different types of discourses and presentations” (Mauuarin & Peltier-Caroff 2022). Though museums are indeed open to the public, access to collections which are not on display is not so straightforward and not granted to all. Furthermore, archives in the strict sense of the term, like the *Archives Nationales* in Paris, are nonetheless public-facing institutions: not only are they often closely connected to their own museums which create exhibitions for the public, but they also welcome people in their reading rooms for access to material, similarly to museums. Where Mauuarin and Peltier-Caroff argue that photograph collections are more documents than they are archives, the development of provenance research carried out by museum institutions in the context of restitution requests show that the classifications embedded in the documents are *as* essential as the source in revealing “different narratives of

the same events” (McCracken and Hogan-Stacey 2023:9). This role of photographs and other documents held in museum collections show that this apparent divide between the archive and the collection is not so clear-cut, and that both the materiality of the documents of museums (whether photographic or other) and their “[bringing] together with some purposeful intent, if only for storage” (Banks & Vokes 2010:338) make them akin to an archive and certainly to archival material.

## V) On Archival Art

Though the archive has been a general topic of interest from the moment it was created, it started taking more importance in the arts in the 1930s. It carried on developing in the 1960s before it really took prevalence in the 1990s, growing considerably through the early 2000s to become what art historian Sara Callahan has called “archive art” (2022). This “archival impulse” as specified by art critic and historian Hal Foster (2004) saw the increasing use of documents and photographs by artists in their creations and by museums as part of their exhibitions. Even though the field of artists working with archives was not completely new, the intent of use of the archive had changed with time, influenced in part by the postcolonial movement. When working with archives, conceptual artists were bringing to the fore the material of the archive in a way not dissimilar to the *readymade*. Indeed, the very principle of the *readymade* was to use found objects in a way that was “disturbed or *détourné*” in order to create “alternative knowledge or counter-memory” (Foster 2004:4). Like will be explained in chapters 3 and 4 of this thesis through the concepts of alteration and adaptation, readymades and archival art alike are not playing on their uniqueness, but rather both belong to their categories because of their “lack of uniqueness” (Duchamp 1961:142), where their originality lies in their replicability. Another shared quality of the readymade and archival art is how they both are commodities “transposed from one productive sphere [...] to another productive sphere” (Roberts 2007: 25). Where the readymade goes from the found object to the artist studio and art gallery, archival art goes from the commodification – specifically when using colonial photographs – of colonial imagery across colonial empires to a direct critique of this commodification by recoding it into a critical artwork. In turn, archival art can be thought of as a ‘reciprocal readymade’ (Duchamp 1934:32), where the *readyfound* (Duchamp 1934:26) object (the archive) becomes an artwork, while the archival artwork becomes a newly created fictional record, part and parcel of the archive. In working with archives, artists brought

together assemblages of archival material through installations, addressing the gathering and presentation of these artefacts as an ensemble, therefore questioning the processes of archiving. However, Enwezor highlighted that the difference between the use of archives in conceptual art and the later archival turn of contemporary art was the use of the photographic medium, as “a replacement of the object or event” of history, and “not merely a record of it” (2008:23). In using these documents and photographs as the “*ready-mades* of the colony” (Seiderer 2017:111), Enwezor argues that “artists have interrogated the status of the photographic archive as a historical site that exists between evidence and document, public memory and private history” (2008:26). This in-betweenness of the colonial archive, which testifies to and unpacks colonialism, allowed artists to use the archive as both documents *and* monuments on which to build counter memories and counter histories, offering a possibility to attest to and resist history at the same time.

This use of the archive, and specifically of the colonial archive, in contemporary art was not only due to artistic creations. Similarly to how “the readymade needed to be curated” through “public exhibition” (Filipovic 2017:10) for its transformation from everyday object into art, the use of archives in art was also the result of the curatorial problematisation of the archival tropes through exhibitions such as Okwui Enwezor’s *Documenta11* which took place in Kassel, Germany, in 2002 and became a historical landmark in the exhibition of both European and non-European artists in an internationally renowned biennale. As presented in the introduction to this thesis, the exhibitions *Archive Fever: Uses of the Document in Contemporary Art* at the International Center of Photography in New York (2008), *Distance and Desire: Encounter with the African Archives* at the Walther Collection in Neu-Ulm in Germany (2013) and its later occurrences until 2015 focussed on the different uses of photographs as archives and archival documents, putting to the fore artworks such as Carrie Mae Weems’ series *From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried* (1995-6) (Fig. 25) and *The Black Photo Album* (1997) (Fig. 22) by Santu Mofokeng. In *From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried*, Carrie Mae Weems makes new photographic work with old colonial photographs as a means to critique not only the role of photography in the colonial project but more broadly colonisation, slavery and racism. With *The Black Photo Album*, Santu Mofokeng displays eighty photographs of Black families in South Africa which were not taken as part of ethnographic and colonial practices but instead commissioned by the sitters. *The Black Photo Album* showed the collating together of the photos in a ‘photo album’ that is embodied by a projector which shows photos one by one, yet as part of a curated series. What is more, the visuality, or the visual presence of the photographic archive, and its reworking, its

“postproduction” (Bourriaud 2007) and its “appropriation” (Tuminas 2023) could be attested to in both *From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried* and *The Black Photo Album*.

In either of the forms that archive art takes, “it continues the production of the archive” (Tuminas 2023:137) yet attempts to bring to the fore and undo the underlying “imperial condition” (Azoulay 2019:178) of the archive. The various means by which the archive is being altered and transformed in form and/or in essence are either the presentation of the archive as “an *objet trouvé* of colonial commodification” (Owens 2003:189), keeping the ‘original’ document of the archive and turning it into a monument; or in a somewhat opposite practice, to visually — and at times materially — alter the document through a multitude of manipulations (cropping, cutting, layering, painting, colouring, resizing, framing, printing, collaging, etc.) that also transform it into a monument of the archive. Both practices, though taking different approaches, transform the original archive and its newly made archive art version into postcolonial emblems *par excellence*.

The increasing development of archive art at the turn of the century is largely tied to the digital takeover that took place in the late 1990s. Not only did the digital concern computers and internet, but it also entered into the realm of photography with a shift from the analogue to the digital camera. According to art historian Sara Callahan, this burst of the digital into photography created a shift that “resulted in a heightened artistic attention to qualities perceived to belong specifically to the medium that was about to be superseded” (2022:117). This threat of a digital takeover of the analogue, not only with regards to photography but more broadly too, led to an artistic reconsideration of the analogue material, albeit often taking place digitally rather than materially. Although the interest in the analogue archival material was growing, the archival turn also reinforced the value of the archive, and with it, the necessity of its conservation. The first insertion of the digital inside the archive came as a solution to protect the documents from possible alterations or destructions by ‘fixing’ in time their visual content (text and/or image) through a process of digitisation. Ironically, this process that gives permanence to the archive with the promise of a longer life as well as a ‘new’ life, as the archive gets regenerated into its imperishable digital form, is the one that ‘kills’ the materiality of the archive and its intrinsic ties to the past. But the digitisation of archival material is not only helpful to the survival of the archive. It also acts as a means to “provide archival users with a range of ways to access records beyond how they are physically organized” (McCracken and Hogan-Stacey 2023:40). Although the digitisation of the archive erases some of the possibilities to “stumble upon unintentional historical documents” because of the “various layers of metadata” (Callahan 2022: 71) on which the

researcher has to depend, it opens up a whole realm of accessibility that goes beyond the limits of the institution's geographical location. Thanks to the ongoing process of archival digitisation alongside the implementation of better archival practices, archives "can have imagined futures beyond uses for the colonial state" and "exist beyond the structures created through the legacies of white supremacy, and become a part of decolonial power" (McCracken and Hogan-Stacey 2023:61). The infiltration of the digital into the archive has allowed for the institution to explore new possibilities for retaining its content in perpetuity without the risks of time. Furthermore, it has given the artists the means to use and reuse the archives indefinitely by giving them the freedom of changing the archive by giving it new forms.

While the digital undoubtedly transformed both the museum and archive institutions, it equally changed the artworld and art creation. Similar to how photography transformed the practice of art by being a tool that was able to create an illusion of reality, giving at once less and more credit to any art form that was not photography, the digital led to never-before-seen art creations. Art could be made from scratch with digital tools; cameras and software opened up the possibilities of photography to go beyond the limits of authenticity, which gave way to endless format options when it came to reproducing existing artwork. It also reignited discussions and debates about what should be considered as art or not. As the digital pushed the possibilities of art further, it gave new tools for artists to re-examine the archives in ways that were otherwise impossible (Lucie-Smith 2001:263). With the possibility to digitise, print and reproduce an archive as a duplicate of its original, artists were able to engage with the archive's materiality by creating an illusion of the real, yet keeping the integrity of the original document. With the endless possibilities of reproduction also came the endless possibilities for art and artists to re-read, revise and re-work archival material, therefore forcing the archive to unravel all the stories that it contains rather than sticking with the one it presents. Through this practice, the archives are presented with new forms and new meanings that enable the humanity of archives to be revealed instead thanks to public engagement through art.

## VI) Historical reparations: Carrie Mae Weems' and Sasha Huber's archival transformations

In 1976, a series of photographs<sup>24</sup> which had been commissioned by palaeontologist, glaciologist and geologist Louis Agassiz (1807-1873), director of the Museum of Comparative Zoology at Harvard University to photographer and slave owner Joseph T. Zealy (1812-1893) were rediscovered in the collections of the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology in Harvard by Peabody Museum staff Ellie Reichlin and Laura Condon (Lanier 2025:134-139). These daguerreotypes show seven enslaved men and women of African and American descent posing half-naked in a studio. Father and daughter Renty and Delia, Jem, Fassena, Alfred, Jack and his daughter Drana were all photographed in South Carolina in 1850 in an endeavour to support Agassiz's theory of polygenesis which consists of thinking that racial difference testifies to the different origins of populations. Curator Pelumi Odubanjo argues that Zealy would have specifically chosen these seven people "for reasons pertaining to their appearances" (2024:32) in order to support Agassiz's theory. This series of photographs exhibits many of the tropes of ethnographic photography: the men and women are portrayed from the front or the side in the manner of convicts, exposing all sides of themselves for truer identification. They had to undress to show their bodily features to Zealy and his camera. They posed in front of a plain background sitting or standing on or next to a chair or a stool. The daguerreotypes have been kept in leatherette cases small enough to be held in the palm of a hand, with on one side the photograph framed in a geometric ornamental golden frame and on the other, a burgundy velvet embossed with "J. T. Zealy Columbia S. C" surrounded by a floral crown motif. Though created to serve as an object of scientific study, the small size of the photographs and their curation into these cases turn them into precious objects and prized possessions for their owner. With these photographs, Agassiz and Zealy are presenting a 'racial type' where "the specimen is in scientific isolation, physically, and metaphorically" by means of the plain background which "accentuates physical characteristics and denies context" (Edwards 1990:241). According to visual anthropologist Elizabeth Edwards, "the meaning and 'reality' of the subject can be given only by those who interpret the visual evidence" (1990:241). Following her argument, the power of

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<sup>24</sup> In this thesis, I will only show Carrie Mae Weems' and Sasha Huber's reworked versions, not the original daguerreotypes because of their racist and objectifying nature, and their already wide dissemination online.

interpretation then lies in the viewer of the photograph rather than the photographer themselves.

In 1992, American artist Carrie Mae Weems used the Zealy daguerreotypes for the first time in her *Sea Island Series* (1992) (Fig. 26) after she first visited the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology in the early 1990s where she encountered the Zealy daguerreotypes. In 1994, she was commissioned by the J. Paul Getty Museum to respond to Jackie Napoleon Wilson's collection of 19<sup>th</sup> century photographs showing African American men and women. Consequently, Carrie Mae Weems created her work *From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried* (1995-6) (Fig. 25) with the Zealy daguerreotypes she photographed at the Peabody Museum, despite originally signing a contract committing not to use them (Murray 2020:115-6). Constituted of 28 chromogenic photographic prints, the series shows 26 portraits of men and women tinted with a red colour and framed in a black circle as a direct reference to the camera lens. These photographs are framed by the same, blue-tinted portrait of a royal Mangbetu woman facing right at the beginning of the series and left at the end, as a way to encapsulate all the portraits in between.

In the first print can be read "From Here I Saw What Happened", opening a discussion with the viewer as to how America saw African American people. The first four portraits (Fig. 27) of the series are Zealy's portraits of Delia, Renty, Jack and Drana, adorned with the following words (in order): "You Became A Scientific Profile"; "A Negroid Type"; "An Anthropological Debate"; "& A Photographic Subject". Together, these four portraits form a series within the series that echoes the trope of anthropological photography. By referring in her words to the profile pose, the racial type, the discipline of anthropology and the use of photography to subjugate people, Carrie Mae Weems stresses the ways in which "these images have come to define generalities of identity and meaning as attached to particular people" (Willis & Williams 2013:212). With her circular reframing, resizing, colouring and text addition of Zealy's daguerreotypes, Carrie Mae Weems reinforces all the different elements that pertain to anthropological photography as a way to stress the violence of the lens on a naked body for racial documentation. She does so by changing, or rather adding a narrative to the photo, as a way to label and state the obvious, making it impossible for the viewer not to see the truths contained in these photographs. Finally, the red colouring of the print undoubtedly echoes the bloodshed of all enslaved African and African American people. Once more, it also brings to the fore the practice of photography, showing the portraits in a red light akin to that of the darkroom where photos are printed on paper and slowly revealed through chemical processes. According to Edwards, "colonial accounts, both verbal and

visual, emerge from situated bodily encounters, with different ideas of truth or objectivity and varied degrees of visibility and authority” (2013:51): with *From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried*, Carrie Mae Weems unravels a critique of history in her own darkroom, not by means of chemicals but “by confronting the archive” as a way to create “new systems of knowledge” (Walther & Garb 2013:21). Twenty years after Carrie Mae Weems first encountered the photographs at the Peabody Museum, Tamara Lanier was to learn about their existence.

After the passing of her mother Mattye Pearl Thompson Lanier in 2010, Tamara Lanier (1962-) researched her genealogical history to find traces of her “Papa Renty” whom she had been hearing stories about since she was a child (Lanier 2025:1-2). That same year, with the help of Rich Morrison, who worked at the ice cream parlour and café in Norwich (Connecticut, USA), Lanier found her ancestors, Renty and Delia, in the form of photographs which were kept at the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology in Harvard.<sup>25</sup> Though she went to see Zealy’s daguerreotypes and informed the museum of her ties to the photographs asking to be informed of any work or research connected to the photographs, Harvard failed to implement procedures to ask Lanier’s permission to use her relatives’ portraits, considering that the daguerreotypes were and had always been their property (Azoulay 2022:88-9; Lanier 2025). On several occasions, the photograph of Renty was used to advertise University events and to illustrate the cover of a book<sup>26</sup> which led to Tamara Lanier filing a lawsuit against Harvard University and the Peabody Museum in 2019 for “wrongful seizure, possession and expropriation of photographic images” (Azoulay 2022:88) of her ancestors Renty and Delia. She began a fight for Harvard “to relinquish the daguerreotypes [...] to their descendants” (Lanier 2025:174). In 2021, the court dismissed Lanier’s lawsuit and with it the hope for a reparative justice to be served to Lanier, and first and foremost to Renty and Delia who were enslaved and forced “to be photographed *as slaves*” (Azoulay 2022:92). Over the years, Lanier and her family carried out extensive research which was beneficial to Harvard in that they tied Renty’s history to that of their family and with it, real-life stories and memories that had been handed down through generations. However, Harvard dismissed the proof of Lanier’s genealogical ties to Renty and Delia and preferred to hold onto these photographs “as symbols of enslavement” (Lanier

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<sup>25</sup>Tamara Lanier tells the detailed story of how she reconstructed her genealogical history and proved her ties to Renty and Delia in her book Lanier, Tamara, 2025. *From These Roots: My Fight with Harvard to Reclaim My Legacy*. New York: Crown.

<sup>26</sup>Banta, Melissa, Curtis M. Hinsley, and Joan Kathryn O’Donnell (eds), 2018. *From Site to Sight: Anthropology, Photography, and the Power of Imagery*. Thirtieth anniversary edition. Cambridge: Peabody Museum Press.

2025:233) rather than recognize their humanity. By doing so, Harvard went against the Belmont Report which protects ‘Human Subjects of Research’ and perpetuated the objectifying treatment that Agassiz and Zealy exercised on Renty and Delia (Meredith McKinney in Lanier 2025:184-9). While the USA was one of the first countries to have a detailed and legal framework for the restitution of cultural objects and human remains with the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act, Tamara Lanier’s case shows that a lot of consideration still needs to be given with regards to what can and should be restituted. What is more, the legal framework is not restricted to the protection of Native Americans and their descendants as it also offers support for Holocaust survivors and their descendants. Yet, there is no such framework for the descendants of enslaved men and women (Lanier 2025:234). After Harvard failed to honour the principle of provenance<sup>27</sup>, Ariella Aïsha Azoulay has argued that Renty and Delia’s daguerreotype should be returned to Tamara Lanier on several grounds:

“photographs taken to support violent regimes or acts [...] continue to sustain the original act of violence well after the image is produced” (2022:90); photographs are the outcome of encounters [...] and their fate cannot be determined by the conditions of their original production”; “the daguerreotypes of Renty and Delia cannot be discussed using legal terms usually reserved for photographs, as they could only have been produced as part of a regime that perpetrated crimes against humanity” (2022:91); “restituting these daguerreotypes to descendants, who are also survivors of this regime of slavery, would accomplish far more than displaying them to white audiences ever will” (2022:92); “we should think about [the daguerreotypes] as we would a family member who needs caretaking from close relatives” (2022:94).

From 2019 when the case was filed, to the first trial which took place in 2021 and the second trial which took place in 2025, Lanier and her attorneys Benjamin Crump and Joshua Koskoff sought for reparations, demanding that Harvard stand by the words of its seal and shield *Veritas* (Truth) and right the wrongs of American chattel slavery (Lanier 2025:128; 216). In May 2025, Tamara Lanier won her battle against Harvard which relinquished the property of the daguerreotypes which will be transferred to the International African American Museum in South Carolina, as decided by Lanier herself. However, the six years of trials and fifteen

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<sup>27</sup> The principle of provenance is a basic archival principle which is often associated to the principle of *respect des fonds* “which means that materials with the same provenance are kept together to preserve their context, history and origin” (McCracken & Hogan Stacey 2023:31). The principle of provenance aims at tracking the origin of each record by defining a “clear chain of custody” (Lanier 2025:238).

years of fight with Harvard reveal that where many cases of restitution are based on the custodial ownership and relationship of people with objects, and with people in the case of human remains, the same does not apply when it comes to photographs. In 2019, Harvard responded to Lanier's claim of property of the daguerreotype and stated that "there is no support for the proposition that a person, in any circumstance, derives a property interest in a physical photograph (or painting or sculpture) because that photograph contains his or her image" (Cited in Lanier 2025:224). Indeed, Harvard thought of the daguerreotypes as photographs and therefore argued ownership based on photographic copyright where ownership rests with the person who took the picture. Yet, as put by American writer Yxta Maya Murray, Harvard's actual ownership of the copyright to a series of photographs of enslaved people taken in 1850 is highly questionable (2020:118). Interestingly, when Carrie Mae Weems took photographs of the daguerreotypes in the early 1990s, Harvard wanted to sue her for her unlawful use of the photographs. Weems then replied that they should indeed sue her, because "this issue of who owns the rights to these images of slaves would be a very interesting thing to play out in public debate" (Weems 2020:33). Though Harvard did not sue Weems at the time, they acquired her work *From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried* and, in so doing, kept control not only of the daguerreotypes but also of their transformed versions (Lewis, Weems & Golden 2020:44; Lanier 2025:210). However, what Azoulay argues for in the case of Lanier and the daguerreotypes of Renty and Delia is that the "daguerreotypes are not property that can be owned, but ancestors who need caretaking" (2022:89), as they are embodiments of Lanier's ancestors, in this way rather aligning with the principle of restitution but complemented by the principle of reparation.

Before Harvard relinquished the daguerreotypes, Tamara Lanier was not alone in her fight against the institution. She received support from artist Sasha Huber who created works with the pictures of Renty and Delia as a means to liberate them from Harvard's many attempts at keeping them "captive" (Lanier 2025:183). In 2007, Huber started the "De-Mounting Louis Agassiz" campaign alongside historian Hans Fässler and researcher Hans Barth. With this action, their goal was to rename Agassizhorn, a mountain pike in Switzerland, Rentyhorn (Fig. 28) – named after Renty Taylor, Tamara Lanier's ancestor – as a site of protest against Agassiz' implication in racial theories and practices. Sasha Huber's activism is core to her art practice and was the *fil rouge* of her multi-site exhibition project, *You Name It*. First shown in 2021 in Rotterdam at the Kunstintituut Melly, the exhibition then travelled to Toronto (The Power Plant Contemporary Art Gallery), to London (Autograph), to

Turku (Finland – Turku Art Museum) and to Sion (Switzerland – Ferme Asile) through 2022, 2023 and 2024.

At the centre of this exhibition was the series of works *Tailoring Freedom* (2021-3) (Fig. 29) which is a retelling of Zealy's daguerreotype portraits of Renty, Delia, Jem, Fassena, Alfred, Jack and Drana. Printed on 97x69 cm wood panels, the portraits' status shift from the realm of the private – kept in a small leather and velvet case that fits in the palm of a hand – to the realm of the public by making them life-size, in this way enhancing their humanity which, because of the size, can be experienced by several people at once. While Carrie Mae Weems' rereading of the portraits equally allowed for this human experience, her work disclosed the violence of the portraits to the public. With her series *Tailoring Freedom*, Huber does not deny the violence but hides aspects of it by dressing each person with clothes. Indeed, *Tailoring Freedom* (Fig. 30) show the pictures of Renty, Delia, Jem, Fassena, Alfred, Jack and Drana printed on wood and adorned with their 'Sunday's best' attire inspired by people like abolitionist Harriett Tubman and Frederik Douglas made from staples.

While these shiny gun-metal armours first allow for hiding each person's nudity, they are also a way for Huber “to stitch traumatic wounds together” (Alé & Huber: 119). The very act of shooting staples is at the core of the creation of these “pain-things”, which is evocative of “the impact caused by violent piercings of the flesh that occurred during the lifetime of the sitters” (Odubango 2024:35), but also of the very act of ‘shooting’ the photograph in the first place. By repetitively striking the wood with the staplegun, Huber substitutes the original ‘shooting’ of the photograph to give it a new life (Debrosse 2023b:45). Following the dismissal of Lanier's lawsuit in 2021, Huber decided to make Renty and Delia's portraits for the Lanier family so that they could own the portraits of their ancestors. For Tamara Lanier, Huber's creations are not only transformative in their forms and meanings but truly “reformativ”:

“it's almost as if the Agassiz daguerreotypes don't exist anymore. When I see Delia's dress, it resembles a wedding gown. And Renty is in his Sunday best. It's transformative, like day and night. And it's just amazing because their expressions haven't changed, but their outlook has. You see hope instead of despair...”<sup>28</sup>

In his essay *Archival Impulse*, Hal Foster argues that “archival artists seek to make historical information, often lost or displaced, physically present” (2004:143). While Renty and Delia's photographs were now rediscovered in Harvard 50 years ago, it is only since 2010 that we

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<sup>28</sup> Interview between Tamara Lanier and Sasha Huber, 21 November 2022. In Alé and Huber 2022: 120.

know who they were as people, as opposed to enslaved people. With her work, Huber therefore builds upon what we knew and what we know now of Renty, Delia, Jem, Fassena, Alfred, Jack and Drana to free them from the racist and exploitative gaze that was forced upon them, in an act that she describes as being akin to “critical fabulation” (Alé and Huber 2022:119). By means of her treatment which can be described “as much [as] preproduction as it is postproduction” (Foster 2004:144), she offers a new point of departure for Renty and Delia’s photographs. Going back to Edwards’ argument according to which “the meaning and ‘reality’ of the subject can be given only by those who interpret the visual evidence” (1990:241), the work done by Carrie Mae Weems allows for the daguerreotypes to transcend their documentary photographic status to become “relics of the violent past” (Murray 2020:123), and true family heirlooms when it comes to Huber’s works. Both artists’ observations and transformations of the photographs’ visuality and materiality helped to alter how we engage with the daguerreotypes. Furthermore, Murray argues that this type of work done by Weems and Huber where “artists [...] appropriate existing works in order to witness and showcase the violent past should be recognized by law as levying constructive social critiques that come within the fair use ambit” (2020:131). Indeed here, artistry served a broader purpose for social action and reparative justice to be proclaimed and acted upon.

## VII) Conclusion

Rooted at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the archive art movement emerged from a conglomerate of archival discussions which took place in philosophy, the museum and the art world and were informed by the postcolonial movement as well as a newly represented globalisation inside museum institutions. Although some works of archive art like Duchamp’s *Boîte-en-valise* are used by artists as creative reflections on their practice, many of the works that can be considered as archive art challenge the very nature of the archive as a powerful regime. In this light, diasporic artists and artists from the Global South often critique this system by directly using colonial archives. Though not exclusively, when artists work with colonial archives, these archives often consist of ethnographic photographs that come from ethnographic museum collections. With the development of a New Museology in the 1990s, alongside an openness of museums to welcome artists and communities inside their institutions at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, which I will be discussing in the following chapter, has come the production of numerous artworks. This practice not only repurposes colonial

archives and photographs, but rather re-reads and transforms them in order to offer critical and alternative readings of the archival material as well as, at times, of the institution where it is kept. By way of example, I used the work made by artists Carrie Mae Weems and Sasha Huber with the series of daguerreotypes commissioned in 1850 by Louis Agassiz to Joseph T. Zealy of Renty and Delia, Jem, Fassena, Alfred, Jack and Drana. Their work, and the part they played in the legal case of Renty and Delia's descendant Tamara Lanier for reparative justice, illustrates the role that artists have embraced in the retelling of history by means of the archival material which often stands as the ultimate "proof in support of a fact" (Briet 2006:9), as mentioned earlier. Although Weems' use of the daguerreotypes was 'unlawful' according to Harvard, her role was instrumental in the dissemination and propagation of the images of Renty and Delia. While in this case the artists took it upon themselves to work with the daguerreotypes, this work is often instigated by museums in light of decolonial efforts.

## Chapter 2 – When Museums of Ethnography Invite Contemporary Artists: Access, Time and Process of Working With Colonial Archives

### I) Introduction

Starting in the late Middle Ages and expanding during the Renaissance, European private collectors amassed rich collections which, over time became owned by the state. In turn, these joined royal cabinets were full of “exotic tributes, such as rare and precious gifts received from foreign ambassadors and other goods royalty seized as their natural right” (Ames 1992:17). In the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, this practice led to the creation of *Wunderkammer* and *Kunstkammer* as crucial sites for ‘worldmaking’ where “collecting, depicting and imagining other places and other peoples around the globe served to define both the other and the self” (Bleichmar 2021:435). Later in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, these cabinets of curiosities were turned into museums, some of which became museums of ethnography, and led to new more systematic collecting practices (Bolz 2007:175). Started in the Renaissance, exploration voyages first went to the Americas and Asia before a considerable expansion in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries with colonial endeavours in search for ‘undiscovered’ lands, new trading routes and astronomical trajectories amongst other things, thus transforming private collecting into an imperial and institutional type of collecting. Led by figures like Sir Joseph Banks, James Cook, Alexander von Humbolt, Louis-Antoine de Bougainville and Jules Sébastien César Dumont d’Urville to only mention a few, the collecting practice during voyages was organised to bring back significant objects and artefacts for patrons. In the United Kingdom, part of these collections first went to the Leverian Museum before becoming part of Sir Hans Sloane’s collections which were seminal in the creation of the Museum of Mankind in London (King 2003:234-6; Newell 2003:248-50). Concomitantly in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, the concept of ethnography was born in Germany and Russia when the neo-Greek terms *ethnographia* and *ethnographie* “were used as synonyms for the German *Völkerkunde* – literally the science of peoples” (Bouquet 2012: 64). The practice of ethnography followed and led to a systematisation of collecting as a method for the gathering of artefacts. Seen “as the outcome of processes of metropolitan identity formation, of a compulsion to classify, or as an aspect of material consumption” (O’Hanlon 2001:1), collecting was specifically

represented through world fairs and Great Exhibitions<sup>29</sup>, where visitors could “travel around the world in one day” in the fashion of Jules Verne’s Phileas Fogg, (L’Estoile 2007:9) and in museums of ethnography which were emerging. By 1837, when the Rijks Japansch Museum Von Siebold – today’s Wereldmuseum – was established in Leiden in the Netherlands, museums of ethnography became a must-have type of institution for every European country, and even more so for every big city (Bouquet 2012:66). In 1851, the first of the Great Exhibitions took place at the Crystal Palace in London. While ethnographic objects had been part of the British Museum since its foundation in 1753, it is only after the 1851 Great Exhibition that an ethnographic department was created. Indeed, museums of ethnography rose alongside natural history museums and the organisation of universal exhibitions with an expansion period from the 1840s to the 1890s (Stocking 1985:7). While the Museum für Völkerkunde (1873), the Pitt-Rivers Museum (1884) and the musée de l’Homme (1937) opened respectively in Berlin, Oxford and Paris, Great Exhibitions developed partly in Paris, London, Vienna, the USA, Barcelona, Belgium, Australia and Milan. Both Great Exhibitions and museums of ethnography shared similar display practices where all that was exhibited, whether people or objects, became specimens (Dahl & Stade 2000:159). It is the “combination of imperial circumstance and intellectual currents” (O’Hanlon 2001:6) of the 1870s to the 1930s which, together with the development of ethnography, led to an expansion of the practice of ethnographic fieldwork. Following in the steps of imperial collecting, ethnographic collecting through fieldwork expanded across the 20<sup>th</sup> century and came to constitute large percentages of museums’ collections which were documenting and displaying people and cultures of the world. As voiced by Benoit de l’Estoile (2007), they were and to some extent still are, museums of others (*musées des autres*). However, it is important to note that ethnography was not solely used for the documentation of the ‘Other’. It was also meant to document ourselves, especially from the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century onwards (Plankensteiner 2018:29). Today, considering this foundational history, museums of ethnography stand as “visible signs [...] of colonial afterlives in the present” (Modest 2019:11), in part due to their powerful architecture as put by Bénédicte Savoy (Savoy in Haeckel 2021:36).

Built or repurposed to house collections of objects, photographs and documents, museums of ethnography first and foremost appeared to be grandiose architectural gems acting as “urban landmarks in capital cities” (Bouquet 2012:36). Whether they were built

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<sup>29</sup> On Great Exhibitions, see Bennett 1995; L’Estoile 2007; Blanchard 2008; Cantor 2013; Bancel & Blanchard 2020.

alongside universities or reused colonial buildings such as the musée de l'Homme which was installed in the Palais de Chaillot itself created for the 1878 *exposition universelle* and reused for the 1937 one, museums of ethnography were often housed in buildings literally displaying colonial powers in their very foundations and aesthetics. This type of architecture is not only the symbol of the museum institution which people go to visit – sometimes even the sole reason for their visit. It is also a conveyer of the “collective imagery” (Desvallées, Mairesse & Bergeron 2011:28) surrounding what museums should look like. Generally, there appears to be three types of architecture: a historical building (palace or temple looking); a contemporary construction (made of glass, metal and concrete); or a hybrid of these two forms. Intrinsic to the structure of these institutions is also the display styles of each of these museums. Indeed, the display of artefacts has changed throughout time, moving from one museological trend to the other, adding tactile screens and new technologies, redisplaying historical showcases, but also changing the narratives around these objects, transferring their status from that of ethnographic artefacts to that of art objects. This phenomenon has been particularly apparent in France with the creation of the Pavillon des Sessions inside the musée du Louvre in Paris in 2000, followed in 2006 by the opening of the then newly built musée du quai Branly – Jacques Chirac (Price 2007). This transformation is, according to Felwine Sarr, a way to “neutralise and conjure up the radical questioning of the Other's culture in the face of our culture” (Sarr & Ayélé Durand 2022), reinforcing this exotic vision of the other. It is against this “ethnographic and aesthetic writing of the Other [...] that the postcolonial critique has been objecting” (Seiderer 2014:197 my translation from French) in the past ten to fifteen years.

Indeed, while the process of decolonisation of museums has been around since the 1980s (Bodenstein and Pagan 2014:39), it has been used across institutions more recently. In his book *The Anti-Colonial Museum*, Bruno Brulon Soares (2024) argues that one of the problems of the notion of decolonisation when applied to museums is its restricted focus on the last part of a “threefold and interrelated process” – “deconstructing, reconstructing and redistributing” – a process essential for a true decolonisation of an institution aiming to become an anti-colonial museum (2024:6). Furthermore, Wayne Modest points out that this ‘urgency for decolonisation’ originated from activists and Indigenous communities and was not instigated by museums themselves (Modest in Oswald & Tinius 2020:69), highlighting that even in their deconstruction, Western institutions have been inspired by theories and practices originating from the Global South. In this regard, Lotte Arndt warns of the danger for state institutions to ‘co-opt’ decolonisation rather than truly engage with it because of their

deeply rooted history and power structures (2021:89). The only route to decolonisation seems to be the true implementation of radical changes at all levels of the institution: “from recruitment to representation, audience engagement to repatriation, acquisitions to architecture, design to labelling, conservation to storage, and so on” (Giblin, Ramos & Grout 2019:472). While these changes take time to be enacted, they are essential “to overcome the dichotomies inherited from the colonial division of the world – between *us* and *the other*, colonisers and colonised, human and non-human, the West and the rest” (Brulon Soares 2024:2). By looking at the history of museums of ethnography as well as their changes in practices through time, especially at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century with the development of decolonial movements and new museology movements, this chapter will show the direct correlation between collaborative practices in museums and communities and institutional critique realised by artists. More specifically, this chapter will focus on invitations to artists by museums to work with their archival collections with a focus on the role of exhibitions in restituting these collaborations. While extensive scholarly work has been done on collaborations between museums and communities, especially in settler colonies such as Australia, Aotearoa New Zealand and Canada (Karp et al 1992; Peers & Brown 2003; Golding & Modest 2013; Onciul 2015; Silverman 2015), this chapter will be focused solely on artistic collaborations within European museums of ethnography as they are the site of most of the works created by artists with colonial archives today.

The first part of this chapter will delve into the practice of museum collaborations with communities through specific literature, starting in the 1990s. The second part of this chapter will look at collaborative projects between museums of ethnography in Europe, communities and artists. By considering the European museums of ethnography network projects *RIME*, *SWICH* and *TAKING CARE*, I will highlight the importance of collaborations for museums of ethnography in order to enact change, not just by working with external parties, but also by working together as institutions founded on similar practices and principles. These collaborations will be discussed in the framework of the changes in the definition of the ‘museum’ by ICOM through time, especially how the collaborative aspect has recently been included. Finally, this chapter will be looking at two examples of invitations to contemporary artists by European museum institutions to work specifically with their archival collections. In doing so, I will outline the specific processes and outcomes of these invitations, generating a different type of artist/institution relationship from the one presented in the first chapter of this thesis. I will first look at Rajkamal Kahlon’s residency and exhibition at the Weltmuseum Wien in 2017 as part of the *SWICH* European project. I will then look at the project *Leaky*

*Archives* that was conducted at the Rautenstrauch-Joest Museum in Cologne between 2020 and 2022 by focussing on the work of contemporary artist in residence, Kiri Dalena. These case studies will reveal the specificities of working with colonial archives in museums of ethnography, especially thinking in terms of access, time and artistic alterations.

## II) Museums of ethnography, museums of Others

In a seminal essay, Jean Jamin asked whether we should be burning museums of ethnography.<sup>30</sup> He criticises this idea that museums of ethnography should disappear and rather advocate for a true reinvention of these museums which have become nothing but *lieux de mémoire*, acting as places for the conservation of artefacts (1998:66). His argument testifies to the decolonial initiatives started in the 1980s which, informed by the new museology movement in the 1990s, moved away from the museum being solely considered as a repository for objects (Karp et al. 1992) to a social space of human interactions and relations (Desvallées 1992;1994; Vergo 1989). While the museum of ethnography as a place of conservation came first, the museum as a space of exhibition which created a discourse on the ‘other’ by means of, in Tony Bennett’s words the ‘exhibitionary complex’ (1988;1995), came second. Indeed, after accumulating objects from the colonies, museums of ethnography started to “broadcast the [imperial] messages of power” by displaying to a public sphere what was originally meant to be shown in a private domain (Bennett 1988:74). This process led to the exhibition of objects as well as of people who were exoticized by this very process. Considered inherently modern in their opposition between ‘civilized societies’ and ‘primitive societies’ (Seiderer 2014:20), museums of ethnography switched to new modes of representation of the ‘primitive’ which Svetlana Alpers called the ‘museum effect’, consisting of “the tendency to isolate something from its world, to offer it up for attentive looking and thus to transform it into art like our own” (1991:27).<sup>31</sup> This leads us to ask, “who is charged with representing a culture”? (Baxandall 1991:39). It is in this dynamic that a whole series of conferences were held. The discussions and reflections later became books: *Exhibiting Culture* (Karp & Lavine 1991), *Museums and Communities* (Karp et al. 1992), *Museum Frictions* (Karp et al. 2006). Each of these publications questioned the current role of

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<sup>30</sup> The essay is titled ‘Faut-il brûler les musées d’ethnographie?’.

<sup>31</sup> In its art-focused approach, the musée du quai Branly – Jacques Chirac is a good example of the ‘museum effect’ as put by Alpers. Each artefact on display is transformed into an artwork in a unified dramatic and dark display with information highlighting as much (if not more) the collecting as the cultural use.

museums of ethnography in the present in order for these to move towards better practices and processes which would make these museums become inherently contemporary institutions as opposed to modern institutions rooted in past practices (Bennett 2006:59). As part of this evaluation of museums of ethnography, Ivan Karp pointed out that it was about time “to examine museums systematically not only in terms of attitudes toward the ‘other’, but also in terms of how the strategies of exoticizing and assimilating fit with public culture in the West” (1991:379). Indeed, museums have been considered as core “educational instruments” (Boast 2011:58) which “can compensate for the failures of other cultural institutions” (Karp 1992:9). But to do so, they should not speak with a unified single voice about the history of colonisation, but rather show the multiplicities of the colonial by giving space to communities to have their voice heard. However slowly, the 1990s did see a rise in community engagement inside museums which finally gave them some space to act and speak up.<sup>32</sup> This finally allowed for museums to be places of “*conVersation* among objects and actors, instead of museums as places of *conServation* – as territories of exchange, contradiction, interaction, and experience”, as argued by Nanette Snoep (Snoep in Oswald and Tinius 2020:334). Part of this conversational process happened through the invitation of communities for consultations on collections or by starting collaborations around exhibition projects (Karp 1992). Mary Louise Pratt (1991) used the phrase ‘contact zone’ to refer to the space that allows “power relations between the post-colonial [museums] and the post-colonised” (Bennett 2006:61). The ‘contact zone’ was then brought in the museum sphere by James Clifford (1997).

## 1. Museum zones

The ‘contact zone’ as defined by Pratt is “the space of colonial encounters, the space in which peoples geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations, usually involving conditions of coercion, radical inequality, and intractable conflict” (2008:8). This space has several similarities with “the museum-as-collection” which, according to Clifford, functions in the same way as Pratt’s frontier does: assuming “a center and a periphery [with] the center [as] a point of gathering [and] the periphery [as] an area of discovery” (1997:192-3). In the ‘museum as contact zone’ as seen by

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<sup>32</sup> See Peers & Brown 2003 for a full understanding of the different discussions on museums and communities, and Golding & Modest 2013 for a look at relationships between museums and communities through the lense of curation.

Clifford, the concept of ‘reciprocity’ is essential and should be especially applied to human relations inside the museum (1997:197). However, according to Robin Boast, both Pratt and Clifford fail to really engage with the “neocolonial nature of these contact zones” which are intrinsically “unequal exchanges” (2011:57). Indeed, although the ‘contact’ zone’ allows for collaborations to take place between museums and so-called source communities, institutions “remain sites where the Others come to perform for us” under a set of rules and conditions set by institutions (Boast 2011:63). Bryony Onciul has subsequently attempted to find a term which not only goes further than ‘contact zones’, but is also a way to encourage institutions to go beyond a surface level type of engagement and relation with communities. Indeed, she argues that museums “create *engagement zones* which are conceptual, physical and temporal spaces in which participants interact in an unpredictable process of power negotiations” (2015:72). To a certain extent, the changes which have been happening inside museums in the past forty years are reflected in literature which has been re-assessing terminologies and concepts so that they reflect the new forms of relations established within museums more accurately. While Clifford considers the ‘contact zone’ as a form of ‘first encounter’ between museum professionals and communities, Onciul writes in a period when this format has been democratised and has become systematic, as I explain later in this chapter using the examples of the projects initiated by the European network of museums of ethnography. These ‘engagement zones’ have become commonplace inside museums of ethnography in the form of “co-produced exhibitions, museum programming, employment of community members, collection loans and/or repatriations, community inclusion on museum boards and changes to museum practice and ethos” (Onciul 2015:72). Though some of these practices have been particularly applied to museums located in settler colonies such as Canada, Australia or Aotearoa New Zealand, community and artist engagement has been happening worldwide as a “common museological strategy for developing new exhibits” (Onciul 2015:72).<sup>33</sup> This theory and vision has recently been reinforced by the work of Sylvia Cockburn who understands the role of Pacific artists working inside museums of ethnography “as a bridge between the museum and their communities” (2020:243). However, Brulon Soares (2024) warns that by applying the concept of ‘contact zones’ to the museum, the focus is put on the temporary actions taken by the museum rather than on their long-lasting effects towards ‘decolonisation’. He argues that in most of the research conducted on the museum as a space of collaboration, the focus is always on the possible outcomes for the museum over the

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<sup>33</sup> On ‘engagement zones’, see also Onciul 2013.

impacts that these collaborations might have on the other parties involved. Ultimately, Brulon Soares requests that museums do not use the ‘contact zone’ as a way to tick off the collaboration box in their decolonial program, but rather to recognise that museums are in fact conflict zones, “places where disputes can be fought, and the past can be contested thanks to the emergence of alternative histories and subaltern forms of narration.” (2024:109). In this way, by embracing the uneasiness of the conflict zone and the frictions that arise from it, “historical wounds can be reopened to reassess their continuous healing” and “build new hope for the future” (Brulon Soares 2024:109; Kratz & Rassool 2006).

In order for these relationships between actors from inside and outside the museum to not fall short, Clémentine Deliss has argued for the museum to become a truly interdisciplinary space, in many ways similar to a university. With a concept that she calls the ‘metabolic museum’, Deliss argues for museums “to transition into a new architectonic venue for students and researchers from all over the world” thanks to the implementation of research and education spaces inside museums (2020:111). Through this process, Deliss hopes to make the museum unequivocally inclusive and accessible to anyone despite their curriculums so that they can become “sites for transborder art production and disciplinary transgression centred on these anxious and contested collections” (2020:119). Through projects like *Object Atlas* (2012) and *Foreign Exchange* (2014-15) which took place at the Weltkulturen Museum in Frankfurt (Germany), she implemented these spaces of research as part and parcel of the exhibition projects, in order to enable the different participants involved “to meet, exchange, learn, and develop contemporary knowledge together” (Deliss 2020:112). This engagement of artists, researchers, communities and museum professionals within spaces of research, study and discussion inside the museum allows for a range of people to get access to collections and to “be actively involved” in changing institutions, therefore creating what Anne-Marie Bouttiaux calls “insertion zones” inside museums whereby communities are not bound to “stereotypical roles” anymore but rather considered as “full partners” (2013:53). Echoing many of these concepts and practices, museum specialist Eilean Hooper-Greenhill argues that embracing principles of “responsiveness”, “nurturing partnerships” and “diversity” is the only way to move beyond the modern museum, and instead jointly build a “post museum” (2000:153). Such projects and concepts exemplify the changes in practice in museums over time, though it took time to make them become core principles of museums as understood in the definition of museum by ICOM.

## 2. A new definition for the museum

Between 2007 and 2022, the International Council of Museums (ICOM) defined the museum as follows:

“a museum is a non-profit, permanent institution in the service of society and its development, open to the public, which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits the tangible and intangible heritage of humanity and its environment for the purposes of education, study and enjoyment.”<sup>34</sup>

However, ICOM members realised that the definition needed updating as they felt it was no longer representative of what museums were. In 2016, the process of creating the new museum definition started in Milan, with the designation of the *Museum Definition, Prospects and Potentials* (MDPP) committee. Following the analysis of trends in the museum world, a new definition was proposed at the General Conference of ICOM in Kyoto in 2019.<sup>35</sup>

However, it was deemed not satisfactory for most and the vote was postponed to 2022.

According to French museologist François Mairesse, there is a series of reasons for the refusal of this proposal: it was more a value statement than a definition; the terms were too vague and confused considering the expectations of a definition from a lexicographic point of view; it was too long and complex; the use of the definition could have had important consequences from a legal point of view in both national and international law; and, finally, the many criteria risked to exclude most museums who are current members of ICOM due to a focus on desirable qualities for museums to acquire, as opposed to ones they already share (2020; Mairesse & Guiragossian 2020; Guiragossian 2024). Following this first attempt by the MDPP committee, ICOM Define started working on the new definition with a new methodology in December 2020, hoping for a truly collective definition, constructed through global dialogue reflecting the diversity of people and museums that are part of ICOM (Bonilla-Merchav & Brulon Soares 2022). After an eleven-step process happening over

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<sup>34</sup> <https://icom.museum/en/resources/standards-guidelines/museum-definition/>, last accessed on 26/09/25.

<sup>35</sup> The proposed definition in 2019 in Kyoto, as can be found in Mairesse 2020:76, was as follows: Museums are democratizing, inclusive and polyphonic spaces for critical dialogue about the pasts and the futures. Acknowledging and addressing the conflicts and challenges of the present, they hold artefacts and specimens in trust for society, safeguard diverse memories for future generations and guarantee equal rights and equal access to heritage for all people.

Museums are not for profit. They are participatory and transparent, and work in active partnership with and for diverse communities to collect, preserve, research, interpret, exhibit, and enhance understandings of the world, aiming to contribute to human dignity and social justice, global equality and planetary wellbeing.

eighteen months, two versions of what was to become the new definition of the museum were drafted.<sup>36</sup> On 24<sup>th</sup> August 2022, ICOM's new and current museum definition was voted:

“A museum is a not-for-profit, permanent institution in the service of society that researches, collects, conserves, interprets and exhibits tangible and intangible heritage. Open to the public, accessible and inclusive, museums foster diversity and sustainability. They operate and communicate ethically, professionally and with the participation of communities, offering varied experiences for education, enjoyment, reflection and knowledge sharing.”

Compared to the previous definitions that were reworkings of the earlier versions (1946, 1951, 1961 and 1974), the 2022 definition exchanged old words for new ones – collects instead of acquires – and brought in fully new concepts such as ‘accessibility’, ‘inclusivity’, ‘diversity’ and ‘sustainability’, together with ‘ethics’, ‘community participation’, ‘interpretation’, ‘reflection’, and ‘knowledge sharing’. The inclusion of these terms and concepts reflects the practices that have been emerging in the past fifteen years. It especially points out what “the minimal conditions, resources and values to be prioritised by institutions that call themselves ‘museums’” are (Bonilla-Merchav & Brulon Soares 2022:138). As Wayne Modest has put it, this new definition can be seen as “a horizon that museums could reach” (Humboldt Forum 2021:156), a goal to work towards for museums to truly be contemporary institutions. It is indeed interesting to consider and reflect on these changes in the light of what museums of ethnography and world cultures are nowadays. While they are all institutions which conserve, research, communicate and exhibit, the engagement of museums of ethnography with these ‘new’ concerns might be yet to happen or are still part of ongoing strategic plans for the decolonisation of their institutions. In this way, the new definition can be seen as a guiding tool for the development of concepts which Barbara Plankensteiner considers as essential for museums of ethnography – ‘citizen science’, ‘collaborative research’ or ‘polyphonic research’, all echoing the necessity for the museum to be multivocal (Plankensteiner in Humboldt Forum 2021:166). In this light, I will now look at a series of European projects which took place within European museums of ethnography between 2007 and 2023 and involved both communities and artists in order to rethink museums of ethnography, their origins and their longings.

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<sup>36</sup> To learn more about the detailed process of the making of the new definition: Bonilla-Merchav & Brulon Soares 2022.

### 3. A European network for museums of ethnography

In 2007, European museums of ethnography had built a network with the help of the company CultureLab and some funding from the Creative European programme of the European Union. The initial project *READ-ME (European Network of Diasporas Associations and Ethnographic Museums)* lasted until 2010 and was given a budget of €400,000. The institutions taking part in the project were the Musée royal de l’Afrique centrale – now Africa Museum – (Tervuren), the musée du quai Branly – now musée du quai Branly-Jacques Chirac (Paris) – the Museo Nazionale Preistorico Etnografico “Luigi Pigorini” (Rome), the Etnografiska Museet (Stockholm) and the Österreichisches Museum für Volkskunde (Vienna). *READ-ME* aimed at “promoting a new relation to the ‘other’ within ethnographic museums by reflecting on a multicultural European society through diaspora engagement”.<sup>37</sup> In a second phase, between 2010 and 2012, the project became *READ-ME II – [S]oggetti migranti* with a budget of €400,000. It involved a collaboration between the Musée royal de l’Afrique centrale, the musée du quai Branly, the Museo Nazionale Preistorico Etnografico “Luigi Pigorini” and the Österreichisches Museum für Volkskunde. The project’s focus was on “the real-life experience of the Diaspora and the subjective value of the ‘migrant object’ [...] as useful evidence for mediation and to discuss the issue of self-awareness in relation to [our] own past and the intercultural relations of the present”.<sup>38</sup> From 2008 until 2013, the project *RIME (International Network of Ethnographic Museums)* focused on the two major themes of ‘modernity’ and ‘first encounters’ in order to question the perception of populations of other continents.<sup>39</sup> *RIME* had a budget of €4,840,000 and involved the Musée royal de l’Afrique centrale, the musée du quai Branly, the Pitt Rivers Museum (Oxford), the Rijksmuseum voor Volkenkunde (Leiden), the Museo Nazionale Preistorico Etnografico “Luigi Pigorini”, the Världskulturmuseet (Stockholm & Göteborg), the Linden-Museum (Stuttgart), the Museo de América (Madrid), the Museum für Völkerkunde – now Weltmuseum Wien – (Vienna), and the Náprstek’s Muzeum (Prague). From 2014 to 2018, the Weltmuseum Wien (Vienna), the Musée royal de l’Afrique centrale, the Rijksmuseum Volkenkunde Foundation – now Wereldmuseum – (Leiden), the Superintendence of the Museo Nazionale Preistorico Etnografico “Luigi Pigorini”, the Slovenski etnografski muzej (Ljubljana), the Linden-Museum, the Musée des civilisations de l’Europe et de la Méditerranée (MUCEM, Marseille),

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<sup>37</sup> <https://culturelab.be/archive/read-me/>, last accessed 21/09/25.

<sup>38</sup> <https://culturelab.be/archive/read-me-2/>, last accessed 21/09/25.

<sup>39</sup> <https://culturelab.be/archive/rime/>, last accessed 21/09/25.

the Institut de Cultura de Barcelona (ICUB) and the University of Cambridge collaborated during the *SWICH (Sharing a World of Inclusion, Creativity and Heritage)* project which was given a budget of €2,000,000. The project aimed at “increasing the role and visibility of Ethnography and World Cultures Museums as centres of cultural encounters, open discourse, creative innovation and knowledge production based on transnational and international collaborations”.<sup>40</sup> Finally, this network of museums worked on the *TAKING CARE – Ethnographic and World Cultures Museums as Spaces of Care* project between 2019 and 2023. The budget allocated by the Creative European programme of the European Union was €2,000,000. The institutions involved were the Weltmuseum Wien, the Africa Museum (Tervuren), the Linden-Museum, the Museum am Rothenbaum Kulturen und Künste der Welt (MAARK, Hamburg), the Nationalmuseet (Copenhagen), the Museu Etnològic i de Cultures del Món (Barcelona), the MUCEM, the Museo Nazionale Preistorico Enografico “Luigi Pigorini”, the Research Center for Material Culture (RCMC, Wereldmuseum, The Netherlands), the Slovenski etnografski muzej, the Världskulturmuseet, the museum of Archaeology and Anthropology (Cambridge) and the Pitt Rivers Museum. *TAKING CARE* “explores the connections between ethnographic collections and questions regarding the climate crisis and the Anthropocene, addressing issues related to the afterlives of colonialism.”<sup>41</sup>

*READ-ME II*, *RIME*, *SWICH* and *TAKING CARE* were all legacy projects of *READ-ME* funded by the European Union, which showed a constant support and interest by public funding bodies in the creation of a network of European museums of ethnography and world cultures in order to address the issues and questions surrounding these institutions. The continuation of the network shows how successful it has been, especially with its expansion, starting with five museums involved in *READ-ME* to more than thirteen museums in *TAKING CARE*. It is also interesting to note that there is a continuity in the participation of institutions in these programmes: three of the funding institutions of *READ-ME* (the Weltmuseum Wien, the Africa Museum, the Museo Nazionale Preistorico Enografico “Luigi Pigorini”) have been part of all the projects, including *TAKING CARE*; another three institutions have taken part in three of the programmes (the Världskulturmuseet, the Linden-Museum, the Research Center for Material Culture). Except for two new participating institutions (the Museum am Rothenbaum Kulturen und Künste der Welt and the Nationalmuseet), all of the institutions

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<sup>40</sup> <https://www.swich-project.eu/about/index.html>, last accessed 21/09/25.

<sup>41</sup> <https://takingcareproject.eu/>, last accessed 21/09/25.

which took part in *TAKING CARE* participated in at least one of the previous European projects. Over the sixteen institutions which took part in the European projects, twelve took part in at least two of them. This consistency in the involvement of institutions in the recurrent European projects demonstrates that the network is something that museums wanted to be part of. But it also shows that while work has been ongoing since 2007, there is more to address in museums of ethnography.

At the core of all these projects was the study of post-colonial practices in European museums of ethnography with a focus on the importance of collaboration, co-creation and co-curation in order to make the voices of the people represented by the artefacts held in these museums heard. In these projects, the museum of ethnography was the case study (Seiderer 2014:8): museum institutions looked at themselves in order to implement better practices for their institution to reflect on their legacy. But in order to question their core, they first started by questioning their very identity as ‘museums of ethnography’ by changing their names. As explained earlier in this chapter, ‘museums of ethnography’ are rooted in the practice of ethnography developed in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries which is intricately tied to colonisation. To distance themselves from this practice, many museums of ethnography became instead ‘museums of world cultures’ as is now the case in the Netherlands (Wereldmuseum grouping Amsterdam, Leiden and Rotterdam), Vienna (Weltmuseum Wien, Austria), Göteborg and Stockholm (Världskulturmuseet, Sweden) and Frankfurt (Weltkulturen Museum, Germany). Museums such as the Museum am Rothenbaum Kulturen und Künste der Welt in Hamburg and the Rautenstrauch-Joest Museum – Cultures of the World in Cologne (Germany) have also become museum of world cultures, most often using their acronyms: MARKK and RJM. The same is true for the Musée d’Ethnographie in Geneva which mostly uses its acronym MEG. Other museums, however, like the musée du quai Branly-Jacques Chirac or the Humboldt Forum have decided to choose other names related to the location of the museum or the history of the country. This practice of name changing shows how these museums are “still considered, unconsciously, as a form of metonymy of the colonised past crystallised in the ethnographic object” (Seiderer 2014:9, my translation from French). Yet a form of distance has been taken, also as a means to reflect the change in museum practice.

It is precisely to question this legacy of colonisation embedded in museums of ethnography that the project *RIME (International Network of Ethnographic Museums)* decided to focus on the concepts of ‘modernity’ and ‘first encounters’. Indeed, these concepts were chosen because they represent the modern period which saw the emergence of museums of ethnography, and the period of the first encounters which is both a symptom of the colonial

period and often the period highlighted in museums of ethnography. It is this past temporality, which is always associated to museums of ethnography, which *RIME* discussed and unpacked in order to question the means used by museums of ethnography to display this constructed image of an Exotic Other (Ferracutti, Frasca & Lanzi 2013:XIII). After numerous workshops and discussions, the network created the travelling exhibition *Fetish Modernity* (2011-2014), a collaboration between six museums (Musée royal de l’Afrique central, the Rijksmuseum voor Volkenkunde, the Världskulturmuseet, the Museo de América, the Weltmuseum Wien, and the Nàprstek’s Muzeum). The exhibition was the occasion to address this ‘modern’ temporality which generated the exoticised vision of the ‘other’, and a way for the “ethnographic museums [which took part in the exhibition] to position their visitor *vis-à-vis* spatial, but also very much temporal cultural difference (Feest 2013:193). Indeed, as reinforced by Elena Delgado’s statement, museums

“should make clear that [they] are speaking from the present time to interpret the history behind [their] collections, and that [they] are presenting them to understand not so much the past as it was, but the interest it holds for those who are trying to tackle a future that is not yet written” (Delgado in Ferracutti, Frasca & Lanzi 2013:81).

In order to address these historical clichés, the network of museums decided to include the work of contemporary artists within the exhibition organised around several discursive themes such as ‘desire for modernity’, ‘fabrication of clichés’, ‘made in...’, all engaging with the various aspects of what modernity is in order to “develop a critical thinking on the colonial heritage of museums of ethnography” (Seiderer 2014:33; my translation from French).

It is worth noting that the use of contemporary artworks and artists in dialogue with museums of ethnography and their collections has been central in all the legacy projects of *READ-ME*. For example, *SWICH* (2014-2018) organised ‘co-creation labs’ in the participating institutions, which involved museums hosting artist residencies “in order to create innovate designs and experimental exhibition formats to engage differently with the public” (Noack et al. 2018:6). Learning from *Fetish Modernity* organised during *RIME*, *SWICH* organised both residencies and collaborative exhibitions in order to foster “the exchange between artists, museum, staff, migrant communities and other cultural institutions” (Lim, Paderni & di Lella 2018:9). The latest legacy project of the network of museums of ethnography, *TAKING CARE* also engaged with artists by creating residency opportunities.

With the systematic engagement of museums of ethnography with artists, community members or diasporas, museums have been working towards including the voices of the

people who were once only depicted in these institutions. Furthermore, residencies are a way “to promote a creative response to the museum’s existing heritage by revisiting, interpreting, decolonising or reappropriating it” (Ekete, Tsimba & Bluard 2018:52). Artists in museums are essential in order to foster change because they have the particularity to be able to ‘sidestep’, therefore allowing for “practices, habits and working methods of a museum [to be shaken up]” (Palma, Bouiller & Mohamed 2018:103). There is a consensus that museums of ethnography need to be updated, revisited, renovated, decolonised and, according to the latest version of the ICOM definition, more ‘inclusive’, ‘diverse’ and ‘sustainable’. Systems of collaboration such as co-creation and co-curation have appeared over the years, and as shown by *RIME*, *SWICH* and *TAKING CARE*, have been considered by institutions as successful methods which not only allow for people external to the museum to engage with its content, but also for museums to be confronted with their own legacies and histories unapologetically. Undoubtedly, the involvement of artists or communities within museums of ethnography allow for these institutions to be more contemporary. Indeed, as specified by Paul Rabinow, “contemporaneity [...] can only be activated through teamwork. You can’t be contemporaneous on your own” (Rabinow cited in Oswald and Tinius 2020:139). This also reveals the interdependency of museums and artists/communities relationships. Where museums rely on these collaborations to help them create “new methods of knowledge production and dissemination” (Phillips 2003:163), it is essential for artists to be actors within museums and galleries as a means for recognition. In this light, I will now look at the residency and exhibition of artist Rajkamal Kahlon at the Weltmuseum Wien in Vienna. Subsequently, I will look at the project *Leaky Archives* that took place at the Rautenstrauch-Joest Museum (RJM) in Cologne.

### III) Artists inside museums of ethnography: two case studies of artistic collaborations

#### 1. Rajkamal Kahlon: staying with the trouble of the ethnographic museum

As part of the co-creation labs of the *SWICH* project, contemporary artist Rajkamal Kahlon was an artist in residence at the Weltmuseum Wien in Vienna for two months in January and February 2016 (Fig. 31). During this project, Kahlon was expected to comment “on contemporary issues the museum is dealing with such as migration, [the] colonial past of

museum collections, cultural diversity and transnational identities in Vienna or new forms of collecting in a post-migrant society”<sup>42</sup>. She was chosen for her “ability to transform the results of profound research into elaborate artworks” (Prlić 2018:125). After one month, she proposed to create a body of works for an exhibition that was to be jointly part of the reopening of the Weltmuseum Wien: *Rajkamal Kahlon – Staying with Trouble* (25 October 2017 – 8 January 2019). While not requested in the original call for applications, Kahlon felt the need to leave more than just a “few traces and half-musings” in order to “care for, rehabilitate, and transform the traces of these people and the cultures that have for so long been distorted, maligned, and erased by institutions like the Weltmuseum Wien” (Kahlon 2019:105). As part of her residency and working towards the exhibition, Kahlon produced a variety of works including a ‘colonial travel diary’ that she titled *Field Work: An Artist’s Reflection Among Her Time With the Natives of Vienna* (2016), as well as an online blog entitled *Staying with Trouble* that acted as a “companion” to the diary and that were both available for consultation through a digital display in the exhibition (Kahlon 2018:126).<sup>43</sup> This diary was structured like a colonial travel diary and was composed of both illustrations and texts to create relations between both elements and let a subtext emerge. While some of the notes are Kahlon’s personal reflections, she also quotes feminists writers like Donna Haraway (2016) – whose work inspired her exhibition title *Staying with Trouble* – and Saidiya Hartman. The visuals in her diary were both archival clippings and reworkings of colonial photographs and drawings. This practice of reworking colonial imagery in conjunction with text is characteristic of Kahlon’s work and was visible in her installation *Die Völker der Erde* (People of the Earth, 2017) (Fig. 32) titled after the German zoologist and biologist Kurt Lampert’s eponymous book (1902) (Fig. 33) which she found in an antique bookshop in Vienna during her residency at the Weltmuseum Wien (Tali 2022:95).

Typical in its colonial depiction of people in ‘types’, the book is organised in different parts or chapters which are each dedicated to one region such as Polynesia, the Malay Archipelago or Siberia. It is noticeable that it does not present any regions from neither the African nor the American continents. It is heavily illustrated with portraits of people with at least one image for each double page which are a mix of photographs, drawings and prints. Except for the cover and the title page which is flanked with a colour illustration – which was

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<sup>42</sup> These expectations were stated in this way in the call for applications that Kahlon applied to as explained in Prlić 2018:125.

<sup>43</sup> The blog created on Tumblr could be found at the url <https://stayingwithtrouble.tumblr.com> but cannot be accessed anymore.

reworked and reused by Kahlon for the poster of *Staying with Trouble* (Fig. 34) –, the rest of the book is exclusively in black and white. Although for the creation of her work *Die Völker der Erde* Kahlon tore the book apart, it was still formally present in the installation in Vienna but deconstructed and laid flat on the wall, without a beginning and an end but as a constellation of pages surrounding the flattened book cover. By creating a new manner to consume the book – different from a traditional beginning to end –, Kahlon rejected the original order imposed by the book format and thus emblematically “suggest[ed] a different course to colonial histories” (Tali 2022:97). Furthermore, this installation itself was not fixed as it has been re-exhibited on multiple occasions and at various venues following the exhibition in Vienna. Each time, the assemblage was not only rearranged but also expanded, with additions of more book pages.<sup>44</sup>

This appropriation of the book by means of its ‘de(con)struction’ as a book was complemented by the visual transformation of the pages in their adornment with colourful drawings and paintings that created new situations and environments for the people depicted in them (Tali 2022:97). In her reworkings, Kahlon makes explicitly visible the “physical violence of colonialism that is invisible in the photographs” by painting the “violence and torture, of grotesquely fragmented body parts as independent figures of bandages and blood” (Stamm 2022:104). Her transformation of the book in all its aspects (visually and formally) led to its complete alteration which is, as I will argue in the following chapter, one of the key characteristics of archive art and a means for artists working with archival material to challenge the colonial narratives embedded in the material they are working with.

In thinking of Kahlon’s *Die Völker der Erde*, the concept of constellation as elaborated by Walter Benjamin is very helpful as a visual and formal description, but also to understand the work through the relations it creates. By considering Benjamin’s analogy, “ideas are to objects as constellations are to stars” (1998:34), in relation to Kahlon’s work, we can explain how this radiating assemblage is interspersed with a range of relations. The first set of relations was created by the artist herself in her creation of the work and selection of the illustrations within the book. The second set of relations comes through the curation and display of the work with a special arrangement of each page alongside other pages, as well as the collating of certain pages together to make a larger piece. These relations in the curation are not only specific to the display as they also expand to the labels and the other works

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<sup>44</sup> The project now exceeds 300 pages, representing an almost complete re-reading of the book through her practice as the book totals 404 pages. <https://rajkamalkahlon.com/people-of-the-earth>, last accessed on 21/09/2025.

exhibited in proximity. Finally, different sets of relations were also created by visitors themselves when looking at the work, based on their own interpretations of what they see from their personal knowledge and experiences. In this way, it is helpful to think of *Die Völker der Erde* as a constellation which is both fixed – with a defined set of elements – and mobile – in the infinite possibilities of assemblages and displays of the work’s hanging and its location. Constellations and specifically assemblages are defined by their “composition, structure and function” (Harrison 2013:20), yet where constellations are made of a fixed set of elements, assemblages can be deconstructed and reconstructed endlessly. Thus, Kahlon’s version of *Die Völker der Erde* bears both characteristics of the constellation and the assemblage: at once it is immutable as it is comprised within the remits of the original book *Die Völker der Erde*, yet variable in its endless possibilities of ‘reassemblage’ (Byrne 2013). This two-folded aspect reveals the power of the work to address and critique the book itself and its author, as well as the disciplines of anthropology and ethnography that led to such racial categorisations present in the book and in museums which inherited this categorised system. Furthermore, it is the book’s alteration and transformation through Rajkamal Kahlon’s tearing apart, painting over, and reassemblage in a new format which conveyed her critique of the colonial paradigm by playing with its very own signifiers.

In the exhibition (Fig. 35), *Die Völker der Erde* was presented alongside digital versions of *Field Work: An Artist’s Reflection Among Her Time With the Natives of Vienna* and the blog *Staying with Trouble* as well as portraits from the *Do You Know Our Names?* (2017) project and the series of portraits *Dear Sir, I Regret to Inform you...* (2017). The first portrait series (Fig. 36) consisted of enlarged prints of some of the portraits of women that could be found in the *Die Völker der Erde* book. Contemporary clothing and hairdos, accessories, make-up and jewellery were painted over them. But contrary to the assemblage of the various book pages, the drastic change in scale of these portraits forced the visitor to be confronted with their faces and more specifically their gazes which looked sad and defying at the same time (Tali 2022:103). This body of work is reclaiming the agencies and identities of the women depicted in these deeply objectifying images which were presented in the centre of the exhibition space. Almost as a counterpoint to these humanised portraits, the second portrait series *Dear Sir, I Regret to Inform you...* (Fig. 37) showed people depicted in the manner of ethnographic portraits<sup>45</sup>, except that this time they were of scientists, ethnographers and

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<sup>45</sup> Here, ethnographic portraits refer to the practice of portraiture that was conducted during colonial and ethnographic expeditions, especially during the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries where people drawn or photographed were portrayed according to physical and racial types. See Edwards 2001; Clifford 2013.

museum directors who were all men related to the Weltmuseum Wien. Kahlon adorned them with different types of facial tattoos to exoticize them in the same way as tattooed people were exoticized, documented and classified under the colonial rule. With this practice she reversed the roles of the ethnographer and the object, further enhancing these power relations by displaying these portraits in glass cases. By visually confronting the portraits of women on the wall with the portraits of museum men in the case, she also brought out the gender inequalities that were at the core of anthropology as a discipline as well as inside museum institutions where most positions of power are held by men.

This practice of looking inside every corner or aspect of the museum institution was at the centre of Kahlon's residency where she embraced the role of artist as ethnographer as discussed by Hal Foster (1995; 1996) in order to "view the natives up close" in their environment (Kahlon 2019:104). She conducted her fieldwork inside the museum by spending time with both the people, who she photographed, as well as the various museum collections that she listened to, not short of provoking "deep emotional responses" (Kahlon 2019:103). However, her will to see and experience as much as possible of the institution and its collection was challenged by the very institutional structure. Coordinator of the *SWICH* and *TAKING CARE* projects in Vienna, Doris Prlić explained in one of the *SWICH* project publications that it was not an easy task to bring answers to Kahlon's research questions because of her inter-disciplinary interests (2018:127-8). Indeed, it is not only the disciplines of ethnography and anthropology that are bound by categories, but also the way museum collections are still cared for today, binding to these categories the titles of the specialists, curators and scientists that work with them. In this sense, when Rajkamal Kahlon

"was searching for visual similarities in images from different researchers, who travelled to varying regions in different decades, there was not one specific curator who could be consulted but rather the whole scientific team of the museum. [...] On a practical level, this meant that even more time was necessary than expected as numerous meetings needed to be arranged and all of these meetings resulted in new questions" (Prlić 2018:127).

Although systems and categories are needed in institutions in order to create order and be able to practically access and locate collections, their very existence is rooted in 19<sup>th</sup> century collecting practices and "grew out of attempts to categorize the natural world" (Turner 2020:29). These categories often become more restrictive than helpful, especially when people who are external to the museum come into the institution, and with time constraints due to the length of their residency for example. These classification systems are

based on what Hannah Turner calls “legacy data” which “includes names, places, and stories that collectors and museum workers assigned to objects in the past” which “can be both ‘dirty’ and ‘clean’” (2020:7). Therefore, anyone who is researching museum collections, whether museum staff or people external to the museum, have to navigate these classifications in the database hoping to find what they are looking for. The people who are invited to work with and inside museums of ethnography are “anthropologists, artists, fashion designers, historians, curators, sociologists, lawyers and writers of very different cultural backgrounds and nationalities”. Curator Yvette Mutumba calls them “the strangers” (2014:16). As ‘strangers’ to the institution, they have to play by the rules and familiarise themselves with the systems in place – including that of the database as mentioned above. However, as was the case with Kahlon’s residencies, it is sometimes their very projects which reveal the extent to which “ethnographic collections are out of sync with current geopolitics and questions surrounding global citizenship”, highlighting the need to redefine “the museum as a discursive field, which includes the actual architectonics of the institution” (Deliss and Mutumba 2014:96). Thus, new modes and practices have to be thought of and put in place in order to facilitate innovative research that will be beneficial for the museums and artists. In the case of Kahlon’s residency in Vienna, her interdisciplinary outlook on the collections created unprecedented connections between materials and histories, revealing the shortcomings of the information known to and recorded by the museum (Prlić 2018:127). Her research was recorded in the museum database and conveyed to the public through her exhibition *Staying with Trouble*. However, while the length of the exhibition was considerable for a temporary exhibition (fifteen months), the space that was dedicated to it was rather small. Kahlon added that the size restriction was encapsulated within the restriction of the location of this space, which was decided in advance by the museum, with no room for negotiation (Kahlon 2018:128). It seems necessary to stress that by adding this exhibition to the reopening program of the Weltmuseum Wien, the spaces to choose from must have been limited. This demonstrates that like the categories that bind ethnographic museums, the way that museums operate is hard to shake, making it difficult to do justice to the full extent of a project like Kahlon’s.

So what did such a project bring to the museum and what did it bring to the artist involved? During a discussion with curator for South America collections and head of the *TAKING CARE* project, Claudia Augustat expressed that though none of the projects that they do can directly impact the institutions, they can be impactful for the people who work *in* these institutions. She argued that for a project to have a large impact depends on the number of

people from the museum who are involved in such projects so that their habits at work can be challenged and new practices can be put into place.<sup>46</sup> As for Rajkamal Kahlon, this residency in Vienna not only led her to the book *Die Völker der Erde* and making the eponymous installation. It also gave her some time and space to encounter “the people [she] found trapped inside the Weltmuseum Wien’s photo archive [that] kept calling [her] closer, asking [her] to speak with them, asking for a way out” (Kahlon 2019:105). It is beyond her original residency contract that she “crafted a love letter to the men and women who are still in that archive, and ultimately to the museum itself” (Kahlon 2019:105). In a public address she gave in Vienna at the Kunsthistorisches Museum shortly after her residency, she said:

“I’m no closer to unravelling the contradictions that are at the heart of a museum like an ethnographic museum. I’ve only been able to witness them close up but I do feel certain that the act of going through the archive, making connections, rehabilitating the voices and the visual representations of those that have been so distorted and defamed, has meaning and worth.”<sup>47</sup>

By doing such work subsequently displayed by the museum, Kahlon also challenged the visitor to question their own attraction to this colonial imagery. Why is the violence in this imagery so intriguing or alluring? The same question can be asked of museums of ethnography. One of the answers is that they stand as spaces of hope where uncomfortable discussions can take place to embrace them as “conflict zones” (Brulon Soares 2024) where the colonial is intrinsically part of their history and where innovative and decolonial practices can be created. When artists like Kahlon create critical works which encourage the visitor to interact with and engage “around content”, she ensures that the museum enacts its role of ‘meeting ground for dialogue’ (Simon 2010: preface n.p.), giving space for meaning to not be imposed by the institution but rather co-created with the visitor in a participatory idea of the museum.

As previously mentioned, Kahlon’s work is based on Haraway’s collection of essays titled *Staying With the Trouble* (2016). In her work, Haraway advocates for a multi-species and collective positioning in the multiplicity of times past, present and future, with an emphasis on the present time, as the only means to envision a possible future:

“Staying with the trouble does not require such a relationship to times called the future. In fact, staying with the trouble requires learning to be truly present, not as a vanishing pivot between awful or edenic pasts and apocalyptic or salvific futures, but

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<sup>46</sup> Personal interview with Claudia Augustat, Nora Haas and Doris Prlić at the Weltmuseum Wien on 20/06/22.

<sup>47</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E1G-vhS8hjw>, last accessed on 26/09/2025.

as mortal critters entwined in myriad unfinished configurations of places, times, matters, meanings.” (2016:1)

“Staying with the trouble requires making oddkin; that is, we require each other in unexpected collaborations and combinations.” (2016:4)

“Staying with the trouble, yearning toward resurgence, requires inheriting hard histories, for everybody, but not equally and not in the same ways.” (Haraway 2016:89)

Though Haraway’s work mostly speaks to environmental and ecological concerns, a parallel can be established. Kahlon argues that “staying with the trouble” is the best motto for museums of ethnography. Indeed, by staying with their own trouble in building a true awareness of the past’s legacies and their meaning in the present time, together with the creation of new forms of collaborations as an active way of making oddkin, museums of ethnography will not be decolonised – as Claudia Augustat argues that they cannot be separated from their colonial roots<sup>48</sup> – but rather become contemporary institutions actively engaging in changing museum practices and debate.

## 2. Leaky archives: sharing beyond the fortress walls

Looking into the history of the collaborations between artists and museums of ethnography has so far shown how these encounters have become part and parcel of the ecosystems of museums. Reflecting on the new definition of the museum, it is stated that institutions are expected to be engaging with a diverse community of people in order to offer a variety of experiences for the public that comes into contact with the museum. While museums are first and foremost a physical structure and space, most museums today are also digital and intangible entities that exist through their websites, social media, databases and networks. The importance of the digital space of the museum was certainly reinforced during the Covid-19 pandemic with a sudden urge to make the museum experience exist beyond the walls of the institution. This desire for openness of institutions, as shown with Clémentine Deliss’ Museum-Universities as part of her Metabolic Museum concept (2020), led museums to engage with digital-focused project such as *Leaky Archives* organised by the Rautenstrauch-Joest Museum (RJM) in Cologne (Germany), which started in 2020. Though not exclusively, one of the project’s foci was the photographic collections of the RJM. At the start of *Leaky*

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<sup>48</sup> Personal interview with Claudia Augustat, Nora Haas and Doris Prlić at the Weltmuseum Wien on 20/06/22.

*Archives*, the RJM collaborated with Philippina visual artist and filmmaker Kiri Dalena on their collections of photographs taken during a twenty-year period between 1887 and 1907 in the Philippines. Alongside *Leaky Archives*, this collaboration was part of the exhibitions *Resist! The Art of Resistance* (April 2021-January 2022) and *Counter Images – Prologue* (December 2021-May 2022). *Leaky Archives*' ambition was "to work collaboratively on the collection in digital and analogue spaces in order to make both content and structure more democratic, open and polyphonic."<sup>49</sup> The core of the project consisted of several "Digital Fellowships as well as some Online Access Tours through the digital collection, transdisciplinary work sessions and edit-a-thons, and a Camp\* on programming, theater, design and gaming at the museum for youth" which were "meant to transform the colonial archives and collections of the RJM into a multiperspectival-multivocal platform."<sup>50</sup> But prior to any of the Digital Fellowships that constituted the core of *Leaky Archives*, the project started with Kiri Dalena's digital residency, when she was given access to the 3,781 photographs from the Philippines photographic collection while she was herself in the Philippines during the Covid-19 pandemic.

After receiving all the digital files and information related to this part of the photographic collection, Kiri Dalena started researching the colonial period and the different figures tied to the photographic collection: Dean Conant Worcester who was both a zoologist and the Secretary of the Interior of the US Colonial Administration of the Philippines, and Georg Küppers-Loosen, a Cologne merchant who owned the photographic collection of photographs from the Philippines that was transferred to the RJM in 1911. From this research, she rapidly decided to involve two other artists, Lizza May David and Jaclyn Reyes and create the project *Snare for Birds* (2020-). This project led them to creating a blog (Fig. 38)<sup>51</sup>, [snareforbirds.com](https://www.snareforbirds.com), where they published journal entries as well as some of their first tests when it came to working with the photographs. The blog was also a space to display a bibliography which was used as reference for the project.

With the help of Agustina Andreoletti who was curator of the *Leaky Archives* project at the time, they created a new database – in the form of an Excel table<sup>52</sup> (Fig. 39) – of the RJM photographs that could become a useful tool for Dalena, David and Reyes in their research project. Out of the 3,781 photographs, Kiri Dalena selected 622 photographs and started

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<sup>49</sup> <https://www.rjm-leakyarchive.de/EN/main.html#About%20Leaky%20Archive>, last accessed on 21/09/2025.

<sup>50</sup> <https://www.rjm-leakyarchive.de/EN/main.html#About%20Leaky%20Archive>, last accessed on 21/09/2025.

<sup>51</sup> <https://www.snareforbirds.com/>, last accessed on 29/09/2025.

<sup>52</sup> <https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1UIPWab90r6lSyicoFV6H6lGJLccQ76h-/edit?gid=1661456947#gid=1661456947>, last accessed on 21/09/2025.

reappropriating these photographs by creating her own series therefore undoing the museum classifications. The museum categories consisted of Inventory numbers, Island, Photographer, Measures, Location, World Region, State, Region, Research, Place, Ethnic Group, Date of Recording and Collection. These are very evidently focused on the geographic connections to the photographs, reinforcing the colonial and ethnographic nature of these photographs. Ariella Aïsha Azoulay spoke of how violent these ethnographic categories are in archives and that they undoubtedly need readers and spectators to make them ‘speak’ in order to reveal this violence and allow for a restoration of the “potentialities of the archive” (2019:163-4). In this light, the categories that Kiri Dalena created were based on her own visual analyses of these images, creating her own assemblages. Close to one third of the photographs in her selection (299) were ‘The United Filipino People’. The second largest category, totaling 116 photographs were ‘Nude’ and the third largest category, composed of 63 photographs, were all the photographs shot against a plain white background that Dalena called ‘White Balance’. Some of the other series she defined were called ‘Exemplar of Americanism’, ‘Something Akin to Resistance’, ‘Insurgent’, ‘Miscellaneous’, ‘Before and After’, ‘Snare’, ‘Camp’, ‘Ladrones’, ‘Prisoners’ or ‘Criminal’. With these series, Dalena highlighted the violence of the colonisation by subverting it and placing the people in the photographs as subjects of resistance rather than objects of the colonial governance.

During an ‘Online Access Tour’, Dalena spoke to the emotional difficulty of taking part in such a project. Not only did she have to face the violence of these images she was working with, but she had to do so alone due to the pandemic lockdown. During this online discussion, Dalena expressed how several photographs, especially those of young women forced to pose nude, made her angry and made her cry.<sup>53</sup> As a means to subvert these violent images, she decided to use a technique of digital layering of several images of the same person in an attempt to either change the person’s facial expression and show their defiance to the colonial or hide their imposed nudity (Fig. 40). When the travel restrictions were lifted, Dalena was able to travel to Cologne to see the photographs and encounter more than their digital avatars, their material counterparts.

Although it is the digital aspect of *Leaky Archives* that facilitated this project to take place, Dalena expressed how seeing the tangible photographs was a different experience which had a different type of impact on her. After seeing the photographs, she wanted to work

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<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YbcEoooBK6I&list=PLJnqrNodqBulViSArbuPLiDRU53GjNPuc>, last accessed on 21/09/2025.

on the photographs. While it was impossible to alter the materiality of the original photographs, she was able to print copies of the photographs on which she was free to intervene. In her series *Tagalog Women (Black)* (Fig. 41) she gave traditional black dresses to the young naked women by painting them directly onto their bodies. In her *Strikethrough* series (Fig. 42) which consists of pictures of naked women which she covered with black horizontal lines over both figures and captions, she felt the need to draw these lines as signs of errors, cancellation or erasure. About working *on* photographs she said: “there is something about doing something by hand, it makes you feel it. You feel like you are really destroying something when you work by hand, or you work on paper”.<sup>54</sup> This urge to ‘destroy’ the colonial archives is recurrent in the work done by artists – comparable to how Rajkamal Kahlon tore apart the book *Die Völker der Erde* – and conveys this desire to alter the narratives by creating ‘Counter Images’ by means of ‘Resistance’ as expressed through both exhibitions where Dalena’s work was exhibited in at RJM.

Throughout most of the digital residency time, the work that was carried out by Dalena was accessible to the public online, both through *Snare for Birds* and the reworked database which became the first attempt of how to work digitally, collaboratively and in a way that was helpful and beneficial not for the museum, but for the artist in residence. This became the starting point of *Leaky Archives*, to create spaces for digital mediation and find a structure “to leak the whole collection outside [of] the institution”.<sup>55</sup> As opposed to traditional artist residencies, the scope of the digital residencies was broader in terms of accessibility, both for the artist and the public. In its original name, ‘Fortresses with open borders’, which was a direct node to the fortress-like aspect of the RJM’s architecture<sup>56</sup>, *Leaky Archives* expressed how the museum’s initiative was to open its doors and get rid of the physical barriers of the institution, by engaging with the fluidity of the museum enabled by the digital. Curator Agustina Andreoletti explained to me in an interview how this name came to be: “the collection [and] the objects are fluid” and it is helpful to think of it as a “vase”. Within this container (the collection), this fluidity is embedded through the idea of the “leakage”, as something which is inherently “connected to a structure”. So when leakage starts happening, “you might not notice [it], but there are drops everywhere, it debilitates the structure, it is a process of change, even like a composite of the material, and it can leak both ways, inside and

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<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YbcEoooBK6I&list=PLJnqrNodqBulViSArbuPLiDRU53GjNPuc>, last accessed on 21/09/2025.

<sup>55</sup> Personal interview with Agustina Andreoletti at RJM in Cologne, 22 November 2022.

<sup>56</sup> Personal interview with Agustina Andreoletti at RJM in Cologne, 22 November 2022.

outside”.<sup>57</sup> This idea is akin to the theory of the ‘liquid museum’ as explained by Fiona Cameron where she stresses that institutions as “hierarchical, solid, and unchanging entities [...] must now operate across sectors and scales and be more fluid and adaptive” (2015:350). Exhibition projects such as *Resist! The Art of Resistance* and *Counter Images – Prologue* were attempts at viewing the RJM’s “collection through the lens of colonial violence and resistance” as a means to hear a “progressively louder cacophony of voices from freedom fighters, artists, thinkers, activists, musicians, and visitors from the past and the present” (Snoep 2024:11). *Leaky Archives* took this attempt at resisting the modern museum foundations further by shifting the mind-set “from a world of facts and categorizations to a fluid world of processes” (Cameron 2015:353). With the time given to Kiri Dalena’s digital artist residency-lab – over a year –, she was able to use the RJM collections in various ways, including research, artistic practice, digital trials, in-person encounters, and new creations. The Philippines collection was already granted multiple lives within the scope of the RJM between 2020 and 2022, but it has since reached other physical spaces and been returned to the Philippines thanks to three exhibitions: *Snare For Birds: Passages Through the Colonial Archives* at the Ang Panublion Museum in Roxas City, Capiz in August 2023; *Snare For Birds: Decolonizing Perspectives from the Colonial Archives* at the Alfredo F. Tadiar Library in San Fernando, La Union in September and October 2023; *Snare For Birds: Rereading the Colonial Archive* at the Ateneo Art Gallery in Quezon City, Manila from September 2023 to February 2024. On the dedicated page to the project on the Goethe-Institut in the Philippines website, this series of exhibitions is described as neither “a conclusion nor culmination of the research; rather, it is perceived to be a preamble for more avenues of conversations to ensue”.<sup>58</sup> In this sense, the project has its own fluidity and can be adapted and expanded in order to be further disseminated in both physical and digital spaces. The terms of this ‘dissemination’ – a concept I will expand on later –, remains with Kiri Dalena, Lizza May David and Jaclyn Reyes rather than with the RJM. Indeed, Dalena stated in the context of the *Resist! The Art of Resistance* exhibition that

“To hide or to reveal, to awake or to let slumber, to intervene or not to intervene?  
What to make of these photographs and the thousands of questions that they carry?  
The choice should never be yours alone. It should have always been ours” (2024:160).

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<sup>57</sup> Personal interview with Agustina Androletti at RJM in Cologne, 22 November 2022.

<sup>58</sup> <https://www.goethe.de/ins/ph/en/kul/sup/sfb.html>, last accessed on 21/09/2025.

## IV) Conclusion

Started in the 1980s and more common at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, collaborations between museums and communities have showed how new practices can be implemented within museums. Involving communities was a way for museums to stop being museums of others, and make space for the incorporation of different voices and narratives, so that communities could be heard within institutions that hold their treasures – whether at institutional level with internal discussions or publicly with a translation of the collaboration into displays, exhibitions, museum texts and multi-media footage. One of the preferred modes of collaboration or of translation of museum collaborations is often the exhibition, as it is “the museum’s premier product” (Phillips 2003:155). As shown in this chapter, the series of projects from the European museums of ethnography all led to publications, specifically to exhibitions as tools to explore the colonial entanglements to the projects but also as a means to publicly translate their findings. As put by Ruth B. Phillips, “the collaborative paradigm of exhibition production involves a new form of power sharing” (2003:157) which is the best way for institutions to act upon their colonial legacies. Due to the commodification of collaborations through exhibitions, which are both communication tools for museums as well as means to bring in revenue, increasing effort has been dedicated to their organisation. Furthermore, the forms that these exhibitions have been taking have been diversified, with a growing involvement of contemporary artists. Thanks to people, spaces, time and budgets dedicated to the invitation of artists and ‘strangers’ to the museum to work with the collections, ethnographic museums have been embracing their roots and history in greater depth and penetrating critique. However, each of the constituents of these residencies (people, space, time and budget) are equally important and lead to different types of engagement depending on each collaboration. As mentioned by Doris Prlić, Kahlon’s residency involved many members of staff at the Weltmuseum Wien and showed the limits of this much engagement across sectors and areas of specialisation. Similarly, when discussing the Digital Residencies organised during *Leaky Archives*, Agustina Andreoletti conveyed that there were limitations to how she could help the residents due to her lack of specialisation in all the topics and collections that the residents were exploring. This led to thinking of how each participant in the *Leaky Archives* fellowship could be assigned a specialised museum referent to help them in their research and act as bridges with other staff members within RJM. Linking each participant with a museum referent could be a way to “leak the network” of

these large institutions to the ‘strangers’ who might need help in accessing these people.<sup>59</sup> These interactions between ‘strangers’ and ‘insiders’ are equally beneficial to the institution itself as, as mentioned by Claudia Augustat, it is only through the people that the practices of institutions can move towards decolonisation. As for space, time and budget, these factors are often the main causes of restriction. While Dalena had over a year to work on her project, Kahlon was in residence in Vienna for only two months. Artistically, this difference is not necessarily visible, but it shows that Kahlon’s time at the Weltmuseum Wien, while not constrained by any exhibition project at first, was only enough time for her to collate the information she needed to later propose the exhibition project *Staying with Trouble*. While the residency *was* the starting point to the exhibition, most of her creation time happened beyond her time as artist in residence: the museum was involved in the beginning and end of this artistic project more than in its creative process. Finally, when it comes to the space and time given to both artists, Kahlon was given a temporary space inside the museum for fifteen months – considered a long time in the museum world –, allowing for the visiting public to see her work and reflections on the collections. As for Kiri Dalena, she was given a long-lasting digital space on the *Leaky Archives* dedicated website<sup>60</sup>, with links to her own version of the database as well as her blog [snareforbirds.com](http://snareforbirds.com). As for the physical space, she exhibited some of her work within themed exhibitions which were part of the wider decolonial program of the RJM. Both residencies showed similarities in how institutions have given access to their photographic collections to artists. Yet it is important to stress that their engagement with these collections was different. While one took place at the museum for over two months, the other lasted over a year and was, for its major part, digital. What is left from both residencies is the works that were created by both Kahlon and Dalena, works that live on outside of the institution that prompted the work to be created in the first place.

Since Kahlon’s residency in Vienna, the Weltmuseum Wien has dedicated more of its time to artists coming to work with collections inside the museum, including for the exhibition *George Nuku. Oceans. Collections. Reflections*. which I will discuss in the following chapters of this thesis. Artist George Nuku started building his exhibition for four months, in collaboration with both museum staff and external volunteers from March 2022, and with a run time of seven months from June 2022 to January 2023. As for the RJM, the work realised by Kiri Dalena during her residency gave way to two rounds of Digital Fellowships (from September to October 2022 and from April to June 2023) with a total of

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<sup>59</sup> Personal interview with Agustina Andreoletti at RJM in Cologne, 22 November 2022.

<sup>60</sup> <https://www.rjm-leakyarchive.de/EN/main.html#Online%20Access%20Tours>, last accessed on 21/09/2025.

eleven fellows whose work is still visible thanks to an open-source platform that highlights the different stages of each fellow's research.<sup>61</sup> In both cases, the Weltmuseum Wien and the RJM have incorporated artists residencies and fellowships as inherent to their programming, showing their desire to recognize their institutions as conflict zones, whether in physical or digital spaces. In an interesting way, by inviting artists in residence, museums of ethnography are embracing the present time by working with people as subjects rather than mere objects. In most cases, whether at the request of the institution or that of the artist, they are using the exhibition as a tool of restitution and translation for the collaboration carried out during the residencies. Finally, these artistic residencies allow for museums – admittedly in limited ways – to support artistic research to be carried inside museum institutions while at the same time engage in turning upside down the colonial profit by allowing artists to receive both critical and financial acclaim for their productions.

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<sup>61</sup> <https://drops.rjm-leakyarchive.de/>, last accessed on 21/09/2025.

## Chapter 3 - Archival Alteration: A Means to Narration and Retelling

### I) Introduction

In the introduction to this thesis and in Chapter One, I have presented colonial archives as objects of and from the past that can enable to bring the past to the present, act as memory triggers as well as bear the potential for memorialisation. In the second chapter of this thesis, I have presented how collaborations with artists have become part and parcel of the practices of museums of ethnography. More precisely, this second chapter has shown that beyond inviting artists to work with object collections, museums have been invested in working with their archival collections involving artists in the process. Through the study of the ways artists work with colonial archives, alter and include them in new archival artworks, this chapter will look at the materiality of archives and conceptualise alteration as characteristic of archival art for the retelling of (hi)stories which were captured in colonial and ethnographic contexts, and kept in museum archives.

Since the 1990s, the digitisation of museum collections has given them new dimensions. A large part of the work done in museums with collections relies on these databases, as the first interface with which anyone, whether internal or external to the museum, is confronted (von Oswald 2024:XI). According to anthropologist Tiziana Nicoletta Beltrame, the digital counterparts to collections which gather images of each artifact and all of its data and historical records known and kept by the museum lie in the “digital avatar of the object” (2015:114). When artists work with museums, the database is often offered as the first means to access collections, to get a sense of what is available, and to make selections ahead of visits or residencies, beyond the physical organisation of collections (McCracken & Hogan Stacey 2023:40). Indeed, depending on the conditions of invitation of artists within institutions, and the practicalities of their collaborations – such as the travel restrictions that occurred during the pandemic for example –, databases and the collections’ avatars become facilitators. Not only are databases allowing for broader and quicker searching within museum holdings, they also facilitate visualisation and identification. Through enabling looking without touching, moving or lighting artefacts, they enact the conservation principles of museum preservation. However, Beltrame reminds us that this apparent easy access to collections through the digital is nonetheless controlled by the museum classifications assigned to each avatar, and in line with the “longstanding museological practice of de- and

re-contextualizing objects” (2015:124). Thus, the encounter with museum collections, and in the case of this thesis with archival material is often a digital encounter with the archive’s avatar. As examples, while Kiri Dalena first worked for a long time with the digital avatar of the RJM’s photographic collection before being able to encounter the material copies, Brook Andrew *only* worked with the digital copies of films from the mqB-JC for his piece *Horizon II* (2020). The role of the digital in the artists’ encounters with archives is essential because archival art is inherently a digital artistic practice as I will explain now.

When he first defined an archival impulse, Hal Foster (2004) associated archival art with Nicolas Bourriaud’s (2007) ‘art of postproduction’. Bourriaud’s use of this phrase was based on his observation of “an ever increasing number of artworks [that] have been created on the basis of preexisting works; [which] more and more artists interpret, reproduce, re-exhibit, or use works made by others or available cultural products” (2007:13). He identified this moment in art as having started in the early nineties, in an “age of digital information” which Foster argued followed industrial production and mass consumption (2004:4). Concomitantly, this period saw the shift from analogue to digital media, which was particularly visible in art through the practice of photography (Callahan 2022:115-119). Geoffrey Batchen spoke of “post-photography” to characterize a practice that is “photographic in character but nonphotographic in medium” (1994:50). Batchen questioned the tenability of the photographic category if the digital was to completely take over, as he considered most of its signifiers of truth to reside in photographs’ materiality (1994). The digital has since become intrinsic to the practice of photography, and it is not a defining factor in the qualification of what is art or not anymore. However, and as I have argued so far, I agree with Batchen that archives are bound by their materiality. I also believe that the digitisation of archives, and their reuse by artists thanks to digital means, create new materialities that do not erase the archival materiality but rather expand this materiality beyond the ‘original’ archive.

In *Relational Aesthetics* (2022:77), Nicolas Bourriaud explains that “*Post VCR art* renders forms nomadic and fluid, encouraging the analogous reconstruction of aesthetic objects of the past-“refills” of historical forms”. While Bourriaud speaks specifically of video work, his argument works for archival art too: central to the making of archival art is the fluidity of forms which enables the archival material to be transferred into something new, while keeping parts of its historical aesthetic markers. This ties in with the principle of reproduction, famously conceptualised by Walter Benjamin in *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* (1955). In this text, Benjamin explores the reproducible nature of

the artwork through mechanical reproduction. Different methods for the reproduction of artworks or, in our case, of archival material, have been in use since the Middle Ages ranging from engravings and etchings which later extended to lithographs, photographs and digital reproductions. In this chapter I will explore several of these techniques of reproduction, especially drawing, lithography, photography and digital techniques. Beyond the reproduction of art for artistic practices, reproduction has become the most effective tool that museums use for the communication and advertising of their institutions and collections. While the specific use of digital tools for the institutions' outreach and influence is outside the scope of this thesis<sup>62</sup>, it is interesting to note how essential it has become for institutions which capitalise on their material collections. Similarly for artists who make archival art, reproduction is essential as it enables them to incorporate archives in their artworks without interfering with the principle of conservation. Allan Sekula argues that "although the very notion of photographic reproduction would seem to suggest that very little is lost in translation, it is clear that photographic meaning depends largely on context" (1999:184). Indeed, the transfer of the archive from its original materiality into that of the contemporary work of archival art through a digital photographic technique ensures the translation of most of the original's visual markers. However, as explained by Sekula, the archive's meaning changes through its photographic reproduction because its context of encounter has changed, and is integrated into an artwork. Through a change of context, it is this very change in meaning that artists are creating in order to offer archival retellings. Because "manipulation is of the essence of photography" (Burgin 1999:41), the alteration of archives through their reproduction and transfer in the creation of archival artworks hints at a technical filiation between mechanical reproduction, photography and archival art. Thanks to the manipulations of archives in both digital and analogue forms, archival art offers new possibilities for the archive. As put by John Berger when talking about the reproduction of paintings by the camera, this action "destroys the uniqueness of its image. As a result its meaning changes. Or, more exactly, its meaning multiplies and fragments into many meanings" (2008:19). On the one hand, it is this fragmentation of the archive which enables it to live on through its altered and alternative versions. On the other hand, while the archive needs to bear some of the original markers once reproduced, the power of archival art lies in what is different, what has been altered and how.

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<sup>62</sup> To learn more about the role of social media in museums, see Drotner & Schröder 2013; Geis 2025.

In this chapter, I will explore some of the technical and practical ways through which artists alter archives in order to transform them into archival artworks. To do so, I will look at the different modes and processes that are used to understand how these works stand as new originals, embedding both the old material and their new status as contemporary artwork. While I argue that this practice of alteration can be used broadly as a method to study archival artworks in order to uncover the stories of the archive and the artistic practices that enable the ‘transfer’ of the archive, I will focus specifically on the works of Brook Andrew and George Nuku. Throughout their careers, both Andrew and Nuku have worked extensively with European museums, and more specifically with museums that hold ethnographic collections. Their work is part of a long-standing practice of institutional critique by artists who are invited by museums to work with their collections “towards self-reflective and evidencing a progressive sensibility” of the institution (Marstine 2017:10). Indeed, Sara Callahan has shown that the practices of institutional critique and archive art are akin, although she argues that archive art, unlike institutional critique, allows “the faith in the veracity of documents [to be] both stressed and deliberately challenged by works that merge fact with fiction, metafiction, parafiction and epistemological uncertainty” (2022:200). Through the close study of artworks, I will evaluate some of the ways in which archives are transformed into archival artworks and create new realities for the archive. In this chapter, I will thus analyse some of Brook Andrew’s and George Nuku’s works created in and in collaboration with European museums as case studies in my research of archival practice. First, I will look at Andrew’s works *Horizon I* (2015), *Horizon II* (2020) and *SMASH IT* (2018), which are three video works created from different archival sources and collections and exhibited in different settings and institutions in and outside Europe. I will then look at the work that George Nuku has been doing with 18<sup>th</sup>-and 19<sup>th</sup>-century exploratory voyage prints in exhibitions in Rochefort (France) and Vienna (Austria). Before looking at the ways Nuku altered voyage illustrations, I will delve into the practice of exploration drawing and its printed formats. Doing so will allow me to reflect on the recording practice of illustration in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and draw parallels with the contemporary practice of archive alteration in the making of archival art. While different in practice and form, the parallel study of Nuku’s and Andrew’s works will enable me to show how, regardless of the form of the final artwork and of the archive used, alteration principles can be defined and used as methods for the understanding of archival art practice.

## II) Brook Andrew: archival visual noise

Brook Andrew is an interdisciplinary Australian artist, curator and writer of Wiradjuri and Ngunnawal descent on his mother's side, and of Celtic descent on his father's side. Since the beginning of his artistic career, Andrew has been working with his own archives alongside that of institutions. His award-winning work *Sexy & Dangerous* (1996) (Fig. 43) marked the beginning of Andrew's commitment with the archive as both "his medium and subject matter" (Ryan 2017:29). The year he created this work, Andrew encountered one of Kerry & Co.'s photographs depicting a young Aboriginal man in the form of a postcard at the Mitchell Library in Sydney (Fig. 44).<sup>63</sup> After digitising the picture, Andrew used photoshop to render the image in colour, enhance the contrasts and add body markings with a spray-paint-like digital tool. Titled after a famous Chinese film which Andrew inscribed digitally on the man's torso in the manner of a tattoo with the Chinese lettering of the words 'sexy' and 'dangerous', Andrew altered the form, the visual and therefore the essence of the original postcard and photograph he encountered in the library archive. While this work has been extensively discussed (Andrew 2008; Marsh 2010; Rawlings 2010; Garden 2011; Jorgensen & McLean 2017; Ryan & Andrew 2017; Barthe 2022; Ryan 2024; Debrosse forthcoming) and is not the focus of this thesis, it is key to understanding Andrew's practice as it lays the foundations to many of his later works that will be at the core of the discussion in this chapter. Indeed, *Sexy & Dangerous* uses the photograph of an 'Aboriginal chief' captured at the beginning of the twentieth century by one of Kerry & Co.'s photographers to document 'Aboriginal Life' as a means to advertise Australia's colony to the world. From a mere 13.7 x 8.8 cm postcard, this man without a name today only visible to the archive visitors and owners of this postcard, becomes a 'sexy' and 'dangerous' man fit for an advertising campaign today on a 145.9 x 96 cm glossy panel. This transformation of meaning, medium and size of the archive that Andrew infused with playfulness allowed for historical and social critique of the original image to transpire and for the original image to be inherently altered. The image's creation story is not erased but rather integrated into a new reading which takes prevalence in placing the archive in a newly defined time and space relationship, making use of the colonial to undo its legacy.

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<sup>63</sup> To learn more about Kerry & Co. postcards, see Peduzzi, Nicole, 2011. "Travelling Miniatures: Kerry & Co.'s Postcards of the Pacific (1893-1917)". PhD diss., University of East Anglia.

This use of the photographic archive as a colonial tool has been central to Andrew's practice with works like *Gun-metal Grey* (2007) (Fig. 45), *The Island* (2008) (Fig. 46), *52 Portraits* (2013) (Fig. 47), *WITNESS* (2014) (Fig. 48), *Possessed* (2015) (Fig. 49), or *Memory (Triptyque)* (2016) (Fig. 50), where the photographs were reworked into new materials, collaged and enlarged. They were also used in many of his exhibitions and installations such as *Vox: Beyond Tasmania* and *Anatomy of a Body Record* (2013), *A Solid Memory of the Forgotten Plains of our Trash and Obsessions* (2014), *Sanctuary: Tombs of the outcasts* (2015) (Fig. 51), *Room A; Mirror* (2017) (Fig. 52), *The Right to Offend is Sacred* (2017) (Fig. 53), and in *Ahy-kon-uh-klas-tik* (2017) (Fig. 54), to only name a few. Amongst his own works where archives were transformed in archival artworks, photographs were used as materially untransformed archival objects which Andrew calls POWERFUL OBJECTS that "carry physical and psychic traces of cultural meaning and action, requiring careful protocol to assist our comprehension of their complexity" (Andrew 2020:250). For Andrew, these POWERFUL OBJECTS which he also refers to in Wiradjuri (his matrilineal kinship group language) as 'ngawal murrungamirra' (powerful things) are not limited in category, form, classification or practice. Rather what makes them so is that "they have the ability to shift dominant agendas and Western timelines" (Andrew 2021:151). Thus, objects of Indigenous cultures and colonial archives alike can be considered as POWERFUL OBJECTS and are used by Andrew in his practice as such. Though all the above-mentioned works testify to the diversity of Andrew's productions, there are two elements that are yet to be precisely mentioned: Andrew's video creations and his neon works. In order to analyse how Andrew manages to alter archives in his artistic practice, I want to focus on his works *Horizon II* (2020) and *SMASH IT* (2018) – two video works that display both institutional and personal archival footage – which I encountered for the first time at the musée du quai Branly-Jacques Chirac (mqB-JC) in 2020 in Paris during the *À toi appartient le regard (...) et la liaison infinie entre les choses* exhibition, and at the Museum of World Cultures in Liverpool during the 2023 Liverpool Biennale *uMoya: The Sacred Return of Lost Things*. While *SMASH IT* preceded *Horizon II*, I wish to discuss these works in the order I personally encountered them as this has informed my analysis. *Horizon II* is a second version of the work *Horizon I* which Andrew created in 2015 for his exhibition *De Anima* at the RMIT Design Hub in Melbourne. In discussing these works, this thesis not only aims to showcase the diversity of Andrew's practice but also the diversity in the approach taken by artists working with colonial archives. Archival collections are eclectic and so are the artists' engagements with them. Focussing on *Horizon II* and

*SMASH IT* is a way to highlight the role of the video both as an object kept in the archive and an artistic means to transform the archival material.

### 1. *Horizon*: archival allure

In the summer of 2020, between lockdowns caused by the Covid-19 Pandemic, the mqB-JC's first large exhibition of contemporary photography *À toi appartient le regard (...) et la liaison infini entre les choses* opened its doors on 30 June. Curated by mqB-JC senior curator for photography Christine Barthe, the exhibition presented twenty-six contemporary artists originating from eighteen non-European countries who work with photography and film across different media. Organised around five themes, the exhibition was a success despite the Covid-19 pandemic and created a shift at the mqB-JC towards a significantly younger demographics of visitors.<sup>64</sup> Presented in the third part of the exhibition titled *Les images se pensent entre elles* (The images bounce off one another), Andrew's work *Horizon II* (Fig. 55) was exhibited alongside the works of artists Katia Kamelli, Din Q Lê, Dayanita Singh, Rosângelo Rennó, Mariana Castillo Deball, and Ho Rui An.

In preparation for the exhibition, curator Christine Barthe looked at Andrew's portfolio and was interested in his work *Horizon I* (Fig. 56) for its use of neon light and archival footage, and for its questioning of the horizon line as "a principle of Western landscape painting" and later of photography. For Andrew, the horizon line "symbolise[s] hierarchies of class, society, culture and the idea of an 'opposite', pitting Western man as superior to this new land, taming it with a new spirit" (Andrew in RMIT Design Hub 2014:[2]). The transportation of the work to Paris was an issue due to the fragility of the neon, so the idea of creating a new version of *Horizon* came rapidly. This was an opportunity for Andrew to finally work with the film collection from the mqB-JC after working with the photographic collection during his residency at the museum in 2015. Though Andrew was able to watch some films while at the museum for a couple of days, the sheer number of films in the collection, added to the Covid-19 pandemic and the closing of borders made it impossible for him to watch the rest of the films in Paris. This resulted in the creation of an online viewing system of the film archives by the head of the audiovisual collections at the mqB-JC, Élodie Saget, so that Andrew was able to browse the whole collection while in Australia.<sup>65</sup> In this

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<sup>64</sup> Personal interview with Christine Barthe, 10 June 2024.

<sup>65</sup> Personal interview with Christine Barthe, 10 June 2024.

collection, Andrew chose films from five ensembles: “Indiens du Mexique 1 – Indios de México I. Indios Huastecos del estado de San Luis Potosí. Stresser-Péan” 1937-38 from the cinémathèque Claude et Guy Stresser-Péan; “Mission ethnographique, chapitre 1, Rajasthan” 1993 from the Fonds Geneviève Dournon; “Traversée du Sahara, Algérie, Niger” 1951; “Guinée, masques du pays Kono et cérémonies” 1951-52; “Côte d’Ivoire, région de Tabou” 1970, all three from the Fonds Bohumil Holas. Alongside these were also films from Andrew’s personal collection.

Where *Horizon I* was an eight-channel video displaying eight videos from Andrew’s personal collection dating from 1931 to 1973 (Fig. 57), *Horizon II* was a five-channel video installation with a mix of films from the mqB-JC collection dated from 1937 to 1993 and some of the ones used in *Horizon I*, except for a pornographic film. The latter could not be used in the mqB-JC version of the work due to the difficulty of both adding content warning signs for such a large work as well as enclosing the work in a space that underaged visitors were not allowed to enter.<sup>66</sup> Specific to *Horizon II* was also a new neon made in Paris which had a more organic shape than the one in *Horizon I* which was almost straight – like a horizon line uninterrupted by neither landscape nor people. Established in the Renaissance, the convention of perspective included the horizon line as a point of focus, or rather a vanishing point in the landscape in order for *any* type of landscape to be represented through a specific Western viewpoint (Berger 2008:16).<sup>67</sup> This convention made the horizon essential in the creation of a landscape that would be deemed ‘nature-like’. In reproducing this quasi-straight line in *Horizon I*, Andrew plays with this binary by materialising it in the space thanks to the neon. On the contrary, the neon in *Horizon II* was full of ‘accidents’ and based on the horizon line of a photograph in Andrew’s collection. This misshaped horizon line did the opposite to the straight horizon line and advocated for a reading of the landscape – and in the case of *Horizon* a reading of the videos – which breaks away from the European-centred lens. It shows how history and territory can be represented through different means and how we consume it (Andrew in Barthe 2020:112). For Andrew, it can be seen as a river or a serpent and enhances this ‘allure’ and ‘desire’ created by the bright and colourful aspects of the neon (musée du quai Branly-Jacques Chirac, 2020).

The power of the neon lights to draw people in like fireflies in the night, confronted the visitor with rarely seen footage from both Andrew’s and the museum’s collections. Not

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<sup>66</sup> Personal interview with Christine Barthe, 10 June 2024.

<sup>67</sup> For example, Australian Aboriginal paintings are not organised around a horizon line or perspective, but rather on an Aboriginal understanding and relation to the landscape which is organised along geographical markers.

only is this a way to bring together films with various topics, it also questions the documentation and categorization processes in order to ‘break apart this idea of the primitive’ (musée du quai Branly-Jacques Chirac, 2020). Indeed, the five films chosen by Andrew in the collections represented a diversity of landscapes (a forest in the Ivory Coast, Kono people territory in Guinea, the Sahara desert, the musical soundscape of Rajasthan and the state of San Luis Potosi in Mexico) which, while diverse, were all linked by the practice of anthropological documentation that led them to be part of the mqB-JC collection. The label of *Horizon II* (Fig. 58) in the exhibition only referred to the work as *Horizon* and did not mention the first version of the work. However, it detailed which of the mqB-JC films were used in the creation of the work, identifying both the archival unit they were part of as well as the title of the films and their dates. But while their identification in the label allowed for the visitor to know which of the films were used, it was impossible to know which one was used on which video channel, and which were the films that came from Andrew’s personal collection.<sup>68</sup> In this way, a blur was created between the sacrosanct museum collection and that of the artist, putting them on an equal footing. Furthermore, not specifying which video was shown on which channel was a way to blur the period as well as the location in which each film was shot. Similarly to how Andrew disrupted the videos with the insertion of the neon that literally created a visual disturbance, their anthropological scope was also disturbed by this inscription in a ‘dreamlike’ and ‘hypnotic’ space created by the neon (musée du quai Branly-Jacques Chirac, 2020). Indeed, the videos did not stand anymore as individual films from an ethnographic collection, but rather became part of one of Andrew’s works. In this way, their original identification, while partially present in the label of the work, was supplemented by the installation as a whole: together, they were *Horizon II* by Brook Andrew, a mqB-JC commission piece for the exhibition *À toi appartient le regard et (...) la liaison infinie entre les choses*. However, while the new artwork took over the unique identification of each element that made it a whole, the composing elements “retain traces of their original contexts even as they are reinscribed into a complex overlay of traits and effects” (Buskirk 2005:123). While the re-use into a new work for most media would require a process of material reproduction, the film archive is somewhat different. Indeed, as a moving image, the film can be continuously redisplayed – within the limitation of the film’s condition – through projection. However, it is the moving image in the film that is continuously reproduced and transferred from film to VHS, DVD or digital file, rather than its materiality. While

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<sup>68</sup> In RMIT Design Hub, Melbourne, the room plan clearly identified which film was projected on which channel.

institutions are working towards the conservation of the films, and that is partly achieved through a digitisation of the content of the film, what is captured *on* the film, the image, somewhat prevails over its container (Fossati 2011; Antoniazzi 2019). Indeed, with the digitising of films, their receptacle might disappear, yet their content can exist beyond their own materiality thanks to their digital transfer.

Working from digital versions of the film which, in the case of *Horizon I* and *Horizon II* were projected onto the wall as large channel videos from video projectors rather than as small 8 or 16mm films, altered the bodily encounter that the public has with the videos, from a camera to a cinema experience. This distortion of the image in size altered its original creation features and therefore distanced it from its original time and space record. Finding the perfect display conditions for an artwork is key for Andrew in order for the work to convey the right message to the audience, which is why he re-exhibits works in various contexts and locations in order to be able to find what is right for the work (Barthe 2020:109). With both *Horizon I* and *Horizon II*, the display choices (assigning the video creations to each channels, the placing of the neon, choosing the device used for the projection, deciding on the label content and placement) alongside the video composition (selecting videos from both Andrew's and the mqB-JC's collections, deciding on their collage and editing) worked together in reframing and retelling the story told in each film when encountered on their own in both Andrew's and the institution's archive. In each version of *Horizon*, Andrew tore apart the myth of the European-centred binary understanding of the landscape, opening up landscape and territory to other non-Western understandings and readings, thanks to the rupture of the image with the disrupted horizon line, but also thanks to the alteration of the films themselves which partly freed the films from their ethnographic categorisation.

## 2 . *SMASH IT*: digital glue

This process of editing, transformation and assemblage, which in turn disturbs, reframes, retells and questions the visual archive, through the creation of a new video work, an archival artwork, was also used in Andrew's 28-minute video artwork called *SMASH IT* (2018). Supported through residencies at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington DC and at the Künstlerhaus Bethanien in Berlin, *SMASH IT* (Fig. 59) was exhibited at the Künstlerhaus Bethanien from 12 April to 6 May 2018 in an exhibition titled *Stretching the Guidelines of Glue*. The description of the exhibition on the Künstlerhaus Bethanien's website explained that "the term 'glue' in the title of the exhibition alluded metaphorically to the coherence of

diverse sites of colonialism internationally, and their related meanings and connections to memorial sites in Berlin, Germany and greater Europe”.<sup>69</sup> This idea of the glue is useful in thinking about what constitutes *SMASH IT* and how it was collaged together into a video.

There were several types of elements that came together to form the video *SMASH IT*.<sup>70</sup> First was the use of the 1955 Australian film *Jedda* by Charles Chauvel. Second was a series of filmed interviews conducted by Andrew for the exhibition *The Boomerang Effect: The Aboriginal Arts of Australia* at the musée d’ethnographie in Geneva (MEG) in 2017, which is known as *Interviews III*.<sup>71</sup> These interviews featured contemporary First Nations leaders Marcia Langton, Lyndon Ormond-Parker, Maxine Briggs and Wesley Enoch. Third were videos that showed the toppling down or defacing of statues and public monuments as well as rioting scenes throughout the world. Fourth were films showing various types of landscape destruction. Five were still images which come from Brook Andrew’s personal postcard collection which are part of the Brook Andrew Archive (BAA), which is currently being digitised and uploaded on the [archive.brookandrew.com](http://archive.brookandrew.com) dedicated website. The ‘glue’ that makes this digital assemblage coherent is a general discourse about the relationships of people to their land and territory and how impacted it was by colonisation. It also discusses how “Western ideas stereotype First Nations people” and how these preconceptions need demystifying (Andrew in Monroy and Stracke 2018). Andrew put in place several visual and sound strategies in order to “demystify prejudice and the legacy of western authorship and archetypes” visualised in *SMASH IT* (Andrew in Monroy and Stracke 2018). Through these strategies and this ‘digital glue’, which assembled and collaged together a range of elements, Andrew brought together a coherent message, conveying an alternative and postcolonial sticky story.

The first of these strategies was the rewriting of the script of *Jedda* (1955), not only the first Australian film in colour but, most importantly, the first film to cast Aboriginal Australian actors to play Aboriginal characters. It tells the story of a young Aboriginal girl named Jedda (Rosalie Kunoth-Monks) who is raised by a white woman and wants to learn about her own culture. Eventually, Jedda gets curious about an Aboriginal man named Marbuck (Robert Tudawali) who goes on to abduct her. After taking her back to his Country while being tracked by Joe – the head stockman and narrator of the story played by Paul

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<sup>69</sup> <https://www.bethanien.de/en/exhibitions/brook-andrew/>, last accessed on 26/09/2025.

<sup>70</sup> This list may not be comprehensive as it was not provided by the artist. I drafted it myself after watching the video work.

<sup>71</sup> The complete interviews can be accessed here <https://www.brookandrew.com/interviews>, last accessed on 28/09/2025.

Clarke in blackface (Miller 2007) – they die together after Marbuck jumps off a cliff, taking Jedda with him in his fall. Known in the United Kingdom as *Jedda the Uncivilised*, the film is rooted in “dominant Australian colonial history and narrative”<sup>72</sup> as exemplified by Andrew’s words, despite its casting of First Nations actors in lead roles. Andrew wanted to ‘de-stabilise’ this version and perspective by “re-creating a fantasy and science fiction script without the original sound track”, yet by using “the existing visual film” and adding the new script with a subtitling of his version of *Jedda* called *The Pledge*.<sup>73</sup> In this futuristic script, Andrew stayed close to the original narration with only minor text alterations, yet changed the names of the characters: Jedda became The Pledge, Marbuck became The Plotter, Jedda’s White mother is The Conspirator and her White father is The Machinator. Some of the other characters took names such as The Capital, The Front, The Ideology, The Confederacy, The Soldier, Sleepy, Snow White, or Witch Doctor. These names bring to the surface the colonial story that was in disguise in the original *Jedda*. This added meaning to the film is paralleled with another type of subtitling that coexist in *SMASH IT* through *Interviews III*.

First realised for the 2017 MEG exhibition *L’Effet Boomerang*, *Interviews III* was conducted and recorded in English with French subtitling of the video throughout, which was kept in *SMASH IT*. In this way, both texts of *The Pledge* and *Interviews III* coexist in *SMASH IT*. Indeed, in the manner of a ‘desktop documentary’ (Monroy and Stracke 2018), *SMASH IT* collaged several videos onto one another, creating direct dialogue between each other. At times, three videos were displayed at the same time with inserts of still pictures. Even the linearity of *Jedda*’s original narration was broken when two videos of different moments in the film were playing concomitantly over *Interviews III*. When it came to the visual disruption, intermittent bright geometric shapes (yellow, red, blue and green circles, squares, triangles and rectangles) appeared superimposed with the interviewees’ faces in *Interviews III* (Fig. 60). These geometric shapes were also layered throughout *SMASH IT*, over some of the faces of the Indigenous people that could be seen in the photographs and postcards embedded into the digital collage and used as backgrounds for these images. Including people whose faces were hidden seemed to reinforce the stereotyped primitivist image of Indigenous people as ‘being all the same’ and the denial of the diversity of people’s identities, cultures and languages.

A final essential element of *SMASH IT* is the soundtrack. While *Jedda*’s original soundtrack was erased to be replaced by the written version of *The Pledge*, the sound of

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<sup>72</sup> Andrew’s description of the film in the prequel to his rewriting of *Jedda*, *The Pledge*.

<sup>73</sup> Andrew’s prequel of the *The Pledge* in *SMASH IT*.

*Interviews III* was kept, so that both French (through subtitling) and English (through sound) levels of understandings were present in the video work. Through *Interviews III*'s soundscape, the discussion on Indigenous cultural protocols took prevalence over all other elements as *Interviews III* was the only element that was present through three signifiers: sound (original voices), image (original image) and text (French subtitling). *Jedda* only had visual and textual signifiers and no sound, when some of the other footage only had the visual and sound signifiers without the textual element. The rest of *SMASH IT*'s soundscape was completed with marching instrumental chants that were evocative of a military march to the sound of snare drums, but also with dissonant sounds that added tension to the image projected and created a certain uneasiness.

The last and most important soundscape of *SMASH IT* was techno music. For the last ten minutes of the twenty-eight-minute video, the 'loud' collage disappeared to make room for a bright red background on which *Jedda* was displayed, alongside the script of *The Pledge* through subtitles. Starting with an image of Jedda playing the piano, the techno music resounded as if Jedda was playing this music herself. In the next shot "whilst playing the piano at a hypnotic pace and rigor" (Andrew in Monroy and Stracke 2018), Jedda was staring at a shield with chevrons motifs similar to Andrew's iconic black and white motif inspired by Wiradjuri dendroglyphs. For Andrew this newly found 'obsession' with the shield complemented with the fast-paced music created an 'astounding energy' that is "at times very humorous" (Monroy and Stracke 2018). The use of techno music and its intense and repetitive rhythm created a trance-like environment for both the image and the viewers. The intensity of the sound amplified what was shown in the image, the forbidden and complex love story between Jedda and Marbuck who Andrew argues are seen as "sexy and beautiful", a moment rarely depicted in films casting First Nation people (Monroy and Stracke 2018). Finally, the trance created by the music is also echoed by the final pursuit of Jedda by Marbuck (Fig. 61) on top of a cliff reaching into a climax echoed in Andrew's text *The Pledge*:

“THE PLOTTER: Yes I love you. We should stay strong. The Capital make them chasing Prophecy tales. They jealous us free thinking, they trapped...

We must follow The Prophecy no matter if it's to our death.

Yes, we may die together!

THE PLEDGE: That's crazy talk!

THE PLOTTER: We must make union... and this all be gone!

Our union... is death together!

It our Freedom!

THE PLEDGE: Not like this!

... not like this!

THE SOLDIER: Plotter!

THE SOLDIER: Pledge... Pledge! Let her go Plotter.

She's no good for you... your Prophecy is wrong!

THE PLOTTER: We will unite!

THE PLOTTER: We are The Prophecy!

We are Freedom!"<sup>74</sup>

After these last words, Marbuck jumped off the cliff, taking Jedda with him in his fall. The climax was reached, the techno music stopped, we hear a shout echoing the fall that was followed by a clapping ovation, breaking the dramatic aspect of this end by bringing comedy in again. After the final scene, the screen turned black before the word **NGAAY** appeared in bold red letters. Ngaay is a Wiradjuri word meaning 'to see' which invites "viewers to experience these images anew and to reimagine a different legacy".<sup>75</sup>

In his preface to the *À toi appartient le regard et (...) la liaison infinie entre les choses* exhibition catalogue, French essayist and critic Jérôme Bastianelli (2020:9) talks of a current period of "visual brouhaha" which is a good representation of what *SMASH IT* is achieving as a noisy artwork, both literally and through its complex digital collage. Despite its negative connotation, I find the idea of 'noise' useful to think of *SMASH IT* as something that is loud and persistent, something that is disturbing when experienced, yet something that you remember because of the uneasy feeling it might have created in yourself. The word noise is sometimes used by people disliking techno music for its lack of melody and its intense rhythmic and repetitive characteristics which are precisely the reasons why techno listeners love it. In choosing this alternative music genre, Andrew played off this love-hate relationship that people have with 'noise'. What is more, Andrew was making literal and metaphorical noise with this artwork. The noise of the film not only interrogated and drew museum visitors in, it also created noise in the rather silent museum environment, thus materialising in sound the impact of the work.

Another phrase used by visual artists and curators Gabriela Monroy and Caspar Stracke (2018) that is useful to describe *SMASH IT*, is that of "historical 'Iconoclashes'". Indeed, in bringing together various types of archives, space-times, genres – whether musical

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<sup>74</sup> Extract from Andrew's script of *The Pledge*.

<sup>75</sup> Label of *SMASH IT* exhibited at the World Culture Museum in Liverpool during the 2023 Liverpool Biennial *uMoya: The Sacred Return of Lost Things*.

or filmic – and histories, Andrew challenged every single archival material used, as well as the institutional archives from which they originate. Beyond this digital collage/assemblage of various media, the ‘clash’ of material was directly embedded in the chosen material. Indeed, titled *SMASH IT*, the artwork was composed of numerous videos showing the destruction of public monuments by citizens and iconoclastic acts of destruction like with the blowing up of Bamiyan Buddha by the Taliban (Flood 2002). Arguably, Andrew’s use of the imperative form in the title was both an echo of one type of image used in the video collage and a direct address to the visitors, asking them to ‘smash’ their own preconceptions. Together, these elements questioned the visitors’ own knowledge and positionality.

### 3. Brook Andrew’s alterations

Reflecting on both exhibitions of *Horizon II* and *SMASH IT* in the context in which I personally encountered them – the *À toi appartient le regard (...) et la liaison infinie entre les chose* exhibition at the mqB-JC in Paris and the World Culture Museum in Liverpool during the 2023 Liverpool Biennial *uMoya: The Sacred Return of Lost Things* –, numerous similarities are to be noted. The first one is that both works were displayed in ethnographic museums yet exhibited as part of contemporary art events: an exhibition and a Biennial. *Horizon II* was exhibited as part of a temporary exhibition of contemporary art built with a neutral and minimalist museography that is closer to the stereotypical image of contemporary art spaces than of ethnographic museums. On the contrary, *SMASH IT* was displayed in the permanent galleries of an ethnographic museum. While engaging in timely discussions around the restitution of artefacts, the museography of the World Culture Museum in Liverpool seemed stuck in time with old and badly lit vitrines. The visual dichotomy between the ‘dusty’ museum and Andrew’s bold and loud video work somewhat emphasised *SMASH IT*’s message. While in Paris the neon light shining through Din Q Lê’s photographic installation *Crossing the Farther Shore* (2014) was the hypnotic element of Andrew’s installation that drew people in (Fig. 62), it was the loud techno music which was ‘hypnotic’ and led me to actually find Andrew’s work at the World Culture Museum in Liverpool. Installed in a receding corner of the ethnographic galleries, the sound was both a lure to watch *SMASH IT* and a disturbance to the expected quietness of the museum galleries – echoing exactly what was achieved in the video: an impossibility to look away despite the disturbing words and

images that were comprised in this assemblage.<sup>76</sup> Though the encounter of the neon light in a contemporary art exhibition is far from being as surprising as the encounter of techno music in an ethnographic museum, *Horizon II* and *SMASH IT* presented archival material that had been altered in both form and content through collage and insertions that create frictions (Tsing 2004; Karp et al. 2006) that are not dissimilar to guerrilla tactics. Guerrilla tactics in museums refer to “where the artist, lacking an invitation, interjects a counter-discourse into institutional narratives” (Marstine 2017:7). While Andrew’s work inside museums always takes place after he is invited by the institution, some of his methods, especially the sound in *SMASH IT*, did disturb the museum’s environment in ways that are similar to guerrilla tactics that shake institutions from within. With *Horizon* and *SMASH IT*, Andrew played with a layering of visual elements to bring the images he worked with into a new light and added a range of textual meanings to disrupt these images and spell out his counter narrative. This play with text and image, essential elements of archival records, is also central in the work made by George Nuku, though his work differs in the sense that the play with image is carried out through erasure rather than textual overload.

### III) George Nuku: infusing exploration prints with Māori

In 2015, a collaborative project was initiated between the Musée Hèbre de Saint Clément in Rochefort (France) and Māori artist George Nuku. At its core was the relationship between Nuku and museum director Claude Stéphani, as well as with the museum’s collections of both illustrations and artefacts, made or brought back by Pierre-Adolphe Lesson (1805-1888). Lesson was local to the city of Rochefort and took part in several circumnavigation voyages alongside his brother René Primevère (1794-1849) and French naval officer Jules Sébastien César Dumont d’Urville (1790-1842). These elements were joined in an exhibition to tell the stories of encounter in the first part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century between Dumont d’Urville and his crew members and the people of Aotearoa, as seen by George Nuku 200 years later.

Originally due to open in November 2020, the exhibition *George Nuku. Voyage Autour du monde, L’aventure māori de Dumont d’Urville* finally took place at the musée Hèbre from 19 May to 28 August 2021. The exhibition displayed over twenty pictures from the various voyages of Dumont d’Urville to Aotearoa New Zealand, both in their original versions and

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<sup>76</sup> This ‘disturbing’ aspect of the work was mentioned to the visitors through a trigger warning panel installed next to the work that read: “PLEASE BE AWARE The artwork, *Smash It*, shown in this space includes occasional imagery and language which some visitors may find offensive”.

reworked by Nuku, and Māori artefacts which were accompanied by a series of sculptures and pictures made by Nuku. The exhibition was split into two rooms, with one large room presenting Nuku's creations alongside the Māori *taonga*<sup>77</sup> and another, presented as a *cabinet d'art graphique*<sup>78</sup>, displaying the original drawings and lithographs made by officer Alphonse Pellion (1796-1868), artists Denis-Sébastien Leroy (?-1832), Louis-Auguste de Sainson (1800-1874), Louis Le Breton (1818-1866), Jules-Louis Lejeune (1804-after 1851) and Antoine Chazal (1793-1854), and botanist Pierre-Adolphe Lesson between 1825 and 1840. Thanks to the display of illustrations published in the voyages accounts, this exhibition told the stories of Māori people as seen during the voyages of *L'Uranie* and *La Physicienne* between 1817-1820 under the command of Louis de Freycinet; the voyage of *La Coquille* between 1822-1825 under the command of Louis-Isidore Duperrey; the voyage of *L'Astrolabe* between 1826-1829; and finally the voyages of *L'Astrolabe* and *La Zélée* between 1837-1840, all three under the command of Jules Dumont d'Urville. The exhibition was more than a mere historical retelling. Nuku paralleled these circumnavigations with his own personal voyage from Aotearoa New Zealand to France, where he lives today, and brought them into a contemporary light.

The exhibition was mostly visual with little space dedicated to text: only four wall texts, three of which were written by Nuku, acted as a narration of the exhibition in no particular order. The texts highlighted Nuku's creative and thinking process for this exhibition: addressing his relationship to these voyages' prints; the respect he has for the artistry of these voyages' artists; his curatorial choices in the display of the artworks, and the significance of the art of tattooing which is a running theme throughout the exhibition. These elements of the works will be elaborated upon below through the study of the exhibition and artworks.

Due to the organisation of the exhibition which was open plan with no route to follow, visitors' encounters with the historic illustrations could take place before or after seeing Nuku's versions of these illustrations, building on a mutual response between Nuku's work and the 'originals' rather than on a chronological display of 'the old' followed by 'the new'. The prints stood as historical and iconographic references to Nuku's creations rather than as central elements to the exhibition. While these prints exist as records of the people and

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<sup>77</sup> *Taonga* in Māori language are often translated as 'ancestral treasure'. The term conveys more than the words artefacts or objects and shares "a Māori perspective on art" (Mead 1997:182). To learn more about *taonga* see also Tapsell 1997; Tapsell 2000.

<sup>78</sup> A *Cabinet d'art graphique* defines both a collection of works on paper (drawings, prints) as well as the space in a museum where this collection is displayed.

customs encountered by the voyages' artists in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, they also testify to a period's style, and albeit life-like and capturing emotions and expressions, it is important to keep in mind that they contain a degree of interpretation and are not mere photographic reproductions of Māori people and life at the time. Thanks to the display of the original prints in a room separate from, yet adjacent to Nuku's creations, the exhibition fostered a dialogue between Nuku's works and the voyages illustrations thus encouraging both types of works (historical prints and contemporary creations) to enrich each other. Through curatorial juxtapositions and creative alterations, the exhibition *George Nuku. Voyage Autour du monde, L'aventure māori de Dumont d'Urville* testified to the long lasting living cultures of Māori people. Alongside visual and formal reworkings of voyages illustrations, Nuku added carved sculptures in plexiglass and polystyrene central to his practice, presented with Māori *taonga* from the musée Hébre, the musée des Beaux-Arts de Chartres and Nuku's personal collection. Throughout the exhibition, he explored the idea of the *mise en abyme* by "creating an atmosphere with portraits inside portraits, frames inside frames and worlds inside worlds".<sup>79</sup> By playing with visual, art historical and museum codes, while always referencing the Māori world and conceptions, Nuku told a contemporary story of Māori people thanks to the reworking of archival materials. By studying closely the voyages prints together with their reworked versions by Nuku, I will present further methods and strategies to alter colonial archives in light of postcolonial and Indigenous perspectives.

## 1. Alteration, a component of exploration voyage prints and drawings

At the beginning of exploratory voyages, the collection of visual data from the various encounters with the native people of the visited islands could be realised by anybody on board the ship (naturalists, botanists, physicians, clerks, etc.). In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, professional artists were specifically hired for the task (Hemming 2005:80). According to art historian Roger Collins (1991:2),

"the fund of scientific expertise carried out around the world within these ships [...] represents in itself one change of approach; the status given to both official and unofficial artists [...] is indicative of another, and at the same time a reflection of the place given to drawing in the naval training schools".

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<sup>79</sup> George Nuku's words on one of the wall texts in the exhibition *George Nuku. Voyage Autour du monde, L'aventure māori de Dumont d'Urville* in Rochefort, France. My translation from French.

The dedication of funds and time to the training of artists for exploration voyages is intrinsically linked to the French quest for knowledge developed and encouraged in the 19<sup>th</sup> century by national scientific institutions such as the Muséum national d'Histoire Naturelle in Paris which was also involved in the publication of the voyages' accounts (Hemming 2000; 2005). Today, this legacy is visible through the sheer number of illustrations that were created during this period and that are still kept in archives, museum collections, libraries, and also thanks to their dissemination through various editions and publications of the voyages' accounts.

In the exhibition in Rochefort, a total of seventeen voyage illustrations were displayed in the *cabinet d'art graphique*: fourteen came from the musée des Beaux-Arts de Chartres, two from the Musée Hèbre in Rochefort and one from the media library in Rochefort. While based in Rochefort, the exhibition relied on collections held in different institutions in order to tell a story of the French voyages to Aotearoa. The musée Hèbre in Rochefort holds an important collection of Māori *taonga* brought back by the brothers Lesson, of which fourteen were exhibited in *George Nuku. Voyage Autour du monde, L'aventure māori de Dumont d'Urville*. Completing this material collection, the musée des Beaux-arts de Chartres holds a large collection of visual material from the exploration voyages. These illustrations are part of the Fonds Bouge, a collection created by French colonial administrator Louis-Joseph Bouge (1878-1960) which was gifted to the museum by his wife Emma Quille in 1970. By presenting both material and visual collections from the museums in Rochefort and Chartres together with Nuku's creations, curator Claude Stéphanie – who used to be curator at the museum in Chartres – and Nuku himself told a multi-perspective story of the French voyages of exploration to Aotearoa New Zealand and of the local maritime history in Rochefort, which used to be one of France's major ports and where many voyages departed from. Nuku and Stéphanie first met in 2006 and have been working together on a range of projects across the years. After “seven years of gestation” (Nuku in Ville de Rochefort 2021), this exhibition was their first large scale collaboration at the museum and the result of their joint passion for and interest in the Dumont d'Urville voyage illustrations.

Displayed in the *cabinet d'art graphique*, several types of prints and drawings were exhibited: two were drawings with ink and watercolour, four were drawings with pencil, four were engravings on copper with watercolour and seven were lithographs. This variety of techniques testifies to the preferred methods in use in 19<sup>th</sup>-century France for exploration drawings first, and later for publication, reproduction and dissemination. It also shows an evolution in practice, from a simple sketch for the recording of people and customs, to more

detailed coloured drawings and watercolours which would mostly be executed onboard ships (Hemming 2005:80). According to historian Chris Ballard, drawing, (although first used for the representation of anthropological types) comes close to people's humanity and enables a true portrayal of identities beyond racial stereotyping (2013:141), which is undoubtedly true of the drawings made by Lesson and De Sainson which will be studied in further detail below. Regarding the reproduction techniques used for publication, engraving was the preferred choice in France for printmaking until lithography became

“a scholarly medium in 1830 when ‘by Royal command, His Excellency [Baron Hyde de Neuville, Minister of the Navy] authorised the publisher of the *Voyage of the Astrolabe* to publish [de Sainson's] drawings by the lithographic process” (Collins 1991:4-5).

This change from metal to stone in printing methods over time is visible in the prints and drawings exhibited in Rochefort and which span over twenty years of French voyages to Aotearoa New Zealand. Looking closely at the dates on which the drawings were made onboard ships and comparing them with the dates of the published illustration plates is telling of this development. The exhibition displayed: one engraving from the voyage of *L'Uranie* and *La Physicienne* (1817-20) dated from 1826; three engravings from the voyage of *La Coquille* (1822-25) dated from 1825 and one drawing made by Pierre-Adolphe Lesson dated from 1824; seven lithographs from the voyage of *L'Astrolabe* (1826-29) dated from 1833 and two drawings made by Louis de Sainson dated from 1827; and three drawings made by Louis Le Breton from the voyages of *L'Astrolabe* and *La Zélée* (1837-40) dated from 1840.

The engraved plates of *L'Uranie* and *La Physicienne* took six years to be published as opposed to less than a year for the voyage of *La Coquille* whose first edition was published in the same year as the ship returned to France. After these first voyages and as mentioned before, lithography became the prominent reproduction technique in France in 1830 and saw the publication of the accounts of *L'Astrolabe* four years after the ship's return. The lithographic method was also chosen for the accounts of the later voyages of *L'Astrolabe* and *La Zélée*. In order to get to the published atlases, the original pictures went through several stages of transformation. From being drawn on site in New Zealand, or on board the various ships of the Dumont d'Urville voyages, before being reworked for publication, most of these pictures have had several lives of their own.

Exhibited in Rochefort, plate 107 (Fig. 63) of the *Voyage autour du monde ... Sur ... l'Uranie et la Physicienne*'s atlas is an engraving on copper with watercolour realised in 1826 by Pillet Aîné in Paris after a drawing of Alphonse Pellion made in 1819. The original

drawing was made in Sydney during a visit of Māori men<sup>80</sup> for trading purposes (Collins 1991:14). The style of these three-side portraits is undoubtedly neo-classical considering the framing which stops at the shoulders, and the three men's hair style (Lanoir 2001). The drawing of 'Etui-déni' (Fig. 64) still shows the pencil grid that allowed the realisation of the drawings according to European techniques based on perspectives and proportions. As suggested by these stylistic elements,

“European stylistic and thematic conventions constantly came between the artists and any unvarnished recording of the physical and psychological ‘realities’ of the Maori, and thus played a fundamental role in determining how the Maori was represented” (Bell 1981:2).

Besides the mentions of New Zealand in the text and the Māori-sounding names – which, according to Collins are not authentic (1991:14) — their *moko* (facial tattoo) seem to be the only visible characteristic of their identity. After the ship returned to France in 1820, Pellion's drawing was reworked in Paris by Denis-Sébastien Leroy in the preparation for the publication of the voyage's accounts. To the 'original', Pellion added three other Māori men who are mentioned as “tattoo studies” on the plate's caption which was printed in the voyage's atlas. The three portraits numbered 4, 5 and 6 on plate 107 were drawn from *mokomokai* (māori tattooed heads) purchased in Sydney and brought back to Paris. This numeric system is used for the reader of the atlas to get a visual picture of the written account they are reading. The text that refers to plate 107 reads as follows:

“During the *Uranie's* stay in Port-Jackson, several New Zealand chiefs visited; we observed them with interest; and M. Pellion drew with his usual accuracy the figures of some of them, which you will find engraved under n° 1, 2 and 3 of our plate 107. The drawings below these were made on dried heads, in New Zealand proper, and singularly well preserved in terms of form and the smallest details. We bought these curiosities in Port-Jackson, from where they were transported to Paris and deposited in the Museum of Natural History. The sketch of these last three heads should only be considered as a study of the singular and complicated tattoos made by the chiefs of these warlike peoples. You will no doubt notice that some of them have frizzy hair and others have straight hair.” (Desaulses de Freycinet 1829 :909, my translation from French).

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<sup>80</sup> At the bottom of the drawing can be read 'Naturels à la Nouvelle-Zélande au Port Jackson, d'après nature' which translates as 'Natives to New Zealand in Port Jackson, drawn from life'.

Pairing the visual with the textual, the reader of the voyage's accounts is virtually meeting some of the men which de Freycinet's crew — amongst which Jules Dumont d'Urville — encountered during their voyage to the Pacific. However, as explained in the unpacking of the creation of plate 107,

“what might seem straight up and down portraits [...] are manipulations too, in that they invariably conform to standard compositional formats and make use of conventional motifs and pictorial devices that inevitably carry with them associative values that do not necessarily have much to do with Maori culture and society.” (Bell 1981:2)

Beyond its primary illustrative role, plate 107 stands as a visual trace to these 19<sup>th</sup> century encounters, as a depiction of history through a visual record. As highlighted by cultural historian Leonard Bell, these images were constructed and reworked in order for the right message to be conveyed and for the public's interest to be grasped, “As long as it was not too alien – or alien enough to be disturbing” (Bell 1980:23).<sup>81</sup> The final printed and bound illustrations therefore had to fit in this in-between, to catch the reader's interest, yet not put him/her off from reading the accounts.

Following the traditions of scientific publications was key in the dissemination of these accounts too, which led to specific codes that went beyond the stylistic depictions, and were also about the presentation and layout of drawings in the page. In the publication of the French voyages referred to before, there seems to be a mix of full-size plates and plates that are made of groupings of several smaller drawings (as is the case in plate 107).<sup>82</sup> While collating several smaller drawings on one plaque appears to be an efficient way to use the material (wood, stone, metal and paper) in the printing process, it might testify to a desire of staying truer to the original drawings, preferring isolated but more ‘honest’ scenes and characters, as opposed to fully (re)constructed large narrative scenes. This specific style also fits in with the tradition of natural sciences and herbariums which tend to present variations of specimens on a single page as can be seen in Fig. 65. It also stays truer to the sketches realised during the voyages which, when grouped together, could form an ensemble depicting a common topic. For example, Fig. 66 shows a grouping of five individual drawings depicting Māori people whose common denominator is their originating place, l'Anse de l'Astrolabe,

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<sup>81</sup> Bronwen Douglas and Chris Ballard have written on how European representations, in text and illustrations, have been alienating Indigenous people and bodies through a constant othering. See Douglas 1999 and Douglas & Ballard 2008.

<sup>82</sup> Except for rare occasions, British accounts seem to prefer full size plates, making this specific style of collating drawings a French tradition rather than a European one.

located near Motuareronui Island in the Tasman Bay in the North of the South Island. For these groupings which can contain artefacts, people, natural specimens or even isolated body parts, it is the caption which allows for the common denominator to be made visible to the reader. This organisation seems to reinforce both a topical and scientific aesthetic for these exploration accounts, assuming the codes of a publication that would be more for a scientific readership rather than for large scale dissemination.<sup>83</sup> This type of plate is undoubtedly based on entomological series in a zoology Atlas that are indicative of the racial theories at the time which classified people based on their skin colour and physical appearance in a scale that ranged from white people at the top and black people at the bottom (Stéfani 2001:34). When reading the text attached to Plate 42 (Fig. 66) of the *Voyage de la corvette l’Astrolabe: Exécuté par ordre du Roi pendant les années 1826-1827-1828-1829*, the physicality of the peoples encountered throughout the voyages takes prevalence in the description:

“One of the pirogues carried ten naturals and the other nine; half of these people appeared to be of a higher rank, judging from their tattoos, their beautiful shapes and the distinguished expression on their faces; the others, without tattoos, with common and insignificant features, slaves no doubt or belonging to the lower class, would have been readily taken for men of another race, so different did they seem from the chiefs at first sight.” (Dumont d’Urville 1830-34 t.2:25-26, my translation from French)

This difference between what Europeans saw as a lower rank person as opposed to a person of high rank could also be one of the reasons why not all people were named in the caption of Plate 42 in the Atlas. It reads: “New Zealand. (Astrolabe cove.) 1. 2. 3. 4. Natives. 5. Théadai.” (my translation from French). Indeed the three men at the top of the illustrations and the woman in the right bottom corner are all referred to as ‘natives’, while the man in the bottom left corner was given the name of Théadai in the Atlas — whether it was his real name or one given by the French. Four out of the five people in the page are wearing *moko*, except for the top left character. While the caption seems to indicate that all five people were drawn during the stay of the *Astrolabe* in the Tasman Bay, it seems that the reason for them having been portrayed lies in their bearing of *moko*. Indeed, *moko* was — and still is — an essential part of Māori society and was certainly observed with attention by Europeans (Ollivier 1997:44). While the text refers to an encounter between French and Māori people on the water, the contextualisation is left to the text and the illustration only conveys the various ‘types’ of people aboard the pirogues, rather than expand on the specific peoples depicted on

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<sup>83</sup> While the written accounts of the voyages were printed quite widely, the atlases that came with them were very costly to print and therefore, destined for a scientific and wealthy audience.

plate 42. The naming of Théadai could be seen as the mark of a special relationship between him and the crew and/or the draughtsmen and an extra marker of rank, as he would have introduced himself to the crew by his name as the representative of his people. Looking at Plate 42, although the central figure seems to prevail in seniority, Théadai, based on the recording of his name as well as his nearly complete *moko*, would have certainly been one of the highest ranked men of his clan.

However, the context was not removed from all of the prints. When looking at Plate 48 (Fig. 67) of the voyage of the *Astrolabe*, a full-size illustration shows a *haka* being performed aboard the *Astrolabe*. It is not just an illustration showing a few people in action, but a fully constructed image on the *Astrolabe* ship, two crew members, probably Dumont d'Urville himself in the top right corner and fourteen Māori people, two of them standing on each side of the performance. What looks like a cloak made of dog hair (*kahu kuri*) is lying on the foreground next to the boat's access to the hold.<sup>84</sup> While such visual detailing reveals how striking this experience must have been for the crew, this scene is represented in a few simplistic lines in the text:

“At the same moment, our two canoes were returning from land, and the decision I took was undoubtedly the safest.

There remained on board about fifteen natives, including five or six women, who had let their pirogues go, intending to spend the night with us. They were very worried at first, and were tormented by the fear that we might want to take them away. I hastened to reassure them by explaining the reason why I was forced to leave the anchorage so abruptly: they then regained their former confidence, gave us performances of their dances, and cheerfully spent the night on board.” (Dumont d'Urville 1830-34 t.2:105-106, my translation from French).

The last part of the last sentence is the only echo of the *haka* performed by the Māori on board in the account written by Dumont d'Urville, which feels rather anecdotal. But choosing such detailed illustration proves that it was a key moment of the crew's time in Aotearoa, at least for De Sainson – the official artist of the voyage – who drew the scene and described it as follows in his personal accounts of the voyage of the *Astrolabe*:

“Little by little their bodies are thrown back, their knees strike together, the muscles of their necks swell, and the head is shaken by movements which look like convulsions; their eyes turn up, so that, with horrible effect, their pupils are absolutely hidden under

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<sup>84</sup> To learn more about the different types of Māori cloaks, see Decottignies-Renard 2020.

their eyelids, while at the same time they twist their hands with outspread fingers very rapidly before their faces. Now is the time when this strange melody takes on a character that no words can describe, but which fills the whole body with involuntary tremors. One has to have heard it to form an idea of this incredible crescendo, in which each one of the actors seemed to us to be possessed by an evil spirit; and yet what sublime and terrible effects are produced by this savage music!” (De Sainson cited in Collins 1991:27).

The level of detail in this written description leaves us to wonder whether De Sainson ever made a sketch of this scene or only wrote these lines in his personal logbook. While not visible in the published accounts of the voyages of the *Astrolabe*, the interchangeability between the image and the text leads us to think that he was truly captivated by the event, so much so that De Sainson might only have written these lines to capture and remember the details of this instant in order to create this image later. Or was there a quick sketch of the two characters at the front, who are in the spotlight on the print thanks to the shading, in order to capture part of their movement? It is interesting to think of Roland Barthes’ idea of the text as “parasitic message” to the image (1977:25): while the text has historically often been made to prevail over images, when images become central in the narration, they ‘no longer illustrate the words; it is the words which are parasitic on the image’ (Barthes 1977:22). While there was an undeniable emphasis on the written words in exploratory accounts, it is interesting to think of how the illustrations have supplanted and outlasted the voyages’ texts, apparent in the way that Nuku has used these images, devoid of any text.

After De Sainson returned to France, he took part in the publication of the *Voyage de la corvette l’Astrolabe* and was specifically involved in the choice of illustrations (Collins 1997:77). His involvement could explain why certain illustrations were chosen over others, especially when the image’s impact and the textual depictions do not quite align. Looking closely at the links between images and texts in Plate 48 allows us here to see their interrelationship. While an image may depict a specific moment of these voyages of exploration, its visual rendering was conditioned by the memories the artist had of this instant (in this case De Sainson) and by the format in which this image had to be made and reproduced in order to be disseminated.

Throughout this series of examples, it became evident that any illustration that was published for the various voyages’ accounts to which Dumont d’Urville took part were all reworkings of sketches, recreation of scenes based on texts, or even true creations for the purpose of illustrating the ‘voyages’. Indeed, these illustrations that we now take as historical

evidence “were in many cases originally conceived above all as documents”. But it is important to keep in mind that “their successive adaptations and metamorphoses reveal the fragility of their documentary message” (Collins 1991:5). While “as ‘fictions’ they often embody ‘truths’”, Bell argues that the images “are more useful as a key to preconceptions and prejudices of the European society” than they are about Māori people (Bell and Johnston 1981: [1]). However, Nuku emphasises that De Sainson’s images did convey veracity, as “they still manage to capture not only the physical life of the people but they manage to capture the character of the people, and all the nuance that goes with it. [...] they capture a people that is not intimidated by the Western world” (Nuku in Ville de Rochefort 2021).

In the exhibition in Rochefort, these prints and drawings were presented as historical records as well as artworks in their own rights. While the lithographs’ labels enhanced their role as illustrations of the voyages’ accounts, the drawings were presented as stand-alone works by artists Pierre-Adolphe Lesson, Louis de Sainson and Louis Le Breton. This variety in forms exemplifies the multiplicity of techniques used in the creation of atlases but no two images presented in the *cabinet d’art graphique* derived from one another. Instead, the *cabinet d’art graphique* highlighted the history of the city of Rochefort by means of these “rare and precious documents” which served as source material for George Nuku’s creations.<sup>85</sup> The lives of these drawings are interspersed with various levels of interpretation, modification, and distortion which all lead to alterations of the historical ‘truths’. As put by historian Greg Denning,

“histories are fictions – something made of the past – but fictions whose forms are metonymies of the present. Histories are metaphors of the past: they translate sets of events into sets of symbols. But histories are also metonymies of the present: the present has existence in and through their expression. The present – social reality, the structures of our living – has being through re-presentations of the past in coded public forms. We read or hear histories in this double way. We know in them both a present and a past” (1991:349-50).

Thus, by definition, these histories were already fictitious from the moment of their recording by D’Urville’s crew. Yet because these records are dated from the time of the event, we tend to consider them as closer to past reality. The layers of histories that are embedded in these prints and drawings only continue when reworked by Nuku. Through his work, Nuku absorbs the recorded histories in these illustrations, and infuses them with his own historical

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<sup>85</sup> The wall text in the *cabinet d’art graphique* referred to the prints and drawings from the voyages of Dumont d’Urville to New Zealand as “a series of rare and precious documents”.

knowledge of Māori people. In turn, the illustrations in their original versions and in Nuku's versions both convey histories with elements of truths and fictions which are left to the viewers to understand from their own standpoint and knowledge.

## 2. George Nuku's alteration process

The exhibition *George Nuku. Voyage Autour du monde, L'aventure māori de Dumont d'Urville* was Nuku's first show of this scale which engaged with voyages' prints and drawings, though he had previously worked with this material close to thirty years before in Aotearoa New Zealand in 1993 at Strange Cargo Gallery. In that exhibition titled *Seeds sown in Rangiatea* (Fig. 68), Nuku's typical formula of associating sculptures with the visual material was already in place. He played with illustrations of several of the exploration voyages, including some of the illustrations from Cook's voyages to Aotearoa as well as to other places in the Pacific: the illustrations chosen depicted people from Hawai'i, the Cook Islands or the Marquesas for example. In the 1990s, the tools for digital alteration were far from being as sophisticated as the tools available to us today yet, Nuku edited the original voyage prints to print them on banners alongside texts. Keeping the formula of textual and visual that is present throughout the voyages' accounts, Nuku edited out the publications' texts to add his own, in order to convey a message about Pasifika identity while sticking to the tradition of the text serving as caption to the image. With this exhibition, Nuku played with the codes of exploration publications, and redefined the terms used in these publications by giving the definitions of these words in the various languages spoken across Polynesia. To reinforce this message, a text printed in the exhibition read:

“Before we were called Savage Islands  
Before we were called Friendly Islands  
Before we were called Christmas Islands  
Before we were called Easter Islands  
Before we were called Sandwich Islands  
Before we were called Cook Islands  
Before we were called Chatham Islands  
Before we were called Marquesas Islands  
Before we were called New Zealand  
WE ARE TANGATA MAAORI”

With this stance, Nuku called for a unified Pasifika identity over identities of differences created by Europeans who were bent on scientific studies and classification, an echo to Epeli Hau' Ofa's famous words published in the same year as Nuku's exhibition:

“Oceania is us. We are the sea, we are the ocean, we must wake up to this ancient truth and together use it to overturn all hegemonic views that aim ultimately to confine us again, physically and psychologically, in the tiny spaces which we have resisted accepting as our sole appointed place, and from which we have recently liberated ourselves. We must not allow anyone to belittle us again, and take away our freedom.” (1993:16).

With his reworking of prints and drawings in 1993, Nuku addressed these power relations that were at stake during the encounters between Pacific people and Europeans. With his show in Rochefort in 2021, the focus is turned to Aotearoa New Zealand and Māori people only, to further study the specific encounter of French people with Māori between 1824 and 1840.

- a. Digital
  - i. Cropping, re-sizing, de/re-grouping

Fast forward to 2020, Nuku's place in the global art scene has grown immensely through numerous exhibitions in both museums and art galleries. In 2010 he moved to France where he still lives today, and his personal relationship with the country has only developed since. While he participated in many exhibitions across Europe, especially in the United Kingdom<sup>86</sup> (Fig. 69), and conducted several exhibitions in French museums based on his project titled *Bottled Ocean*<sup>87</sup> — in Rouen (Fig. 70) and La Rochelle (Fig. 71) for example —, it was the first time he had worked with both *taonga* and visual material from museums' collections.

Due to the regulations surrounding the conservation of prints and drawings, it was impossible for Nuku to work directly on the 'originals' as museums have the responsibility to safeguard the materiality of their collections. The first step in preparing for this exhibition was to digitise all the prints that Nuku wanted to work with. This task was entrusted to Studio

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<sup>86</sup> To only cite a few, Nuku participated in the exhibition *Pasifika Styles* (2006-2008) at the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology in Cambridge, UK; *Power & Taboo* (2008) at the British Museum in London, UK; *Skin* (2010) at the Wellcome Collection in London, UK; *Mana Maori* (2010-2011) at the Volkenkunde Museum in Leiden, Netherlands.

<sup>87</sup> *Bottled Ocean* is an exhibition which evolves with time and spaces, through adaptations to the host institution. Centred around the use of plastic as a sacred material, *Bottled Ocean* merges the codes of Māori art and culture with the use of contemporary materials such as polystyrene, plexiglass or plastic bottles to address the climate emergency. To read more on *Bottled Ocean*, see Patole-Edoumba 2016; Nyssen 2020; Jacobs 2022; Clark et al. 2025.

Ludo, a French company based near Poitiers specialised in photographs and digital printing. The prints were digitised and turned into large resolution files of each of these illustrations so that Nuku was able to print and rework them in order to create new media.

As expressed previously through the study of voyage prints and drawings, the interest of draughtsmen and crew members for *moko* was evident. During the voyage of the *Astrolabe* (1826-29), De Sainson showed so much interest in the art of tattooing that he drew stylistic variations in *moko* and chose these illustrations to be added to plates 57 (Fig. 72) and 70 (Fig. 73) of the Atlas. While the portraits of Rangui and Nataï (respectively plate 71 (Fig. 75) and plate 63 (Fig. 76)), both depicted with remarkably detailed *moko*, are featured on full-size plates (Fig. 77), the depictions of *moko* on plates 57 and 70 are collated with other drawings of Māori people (Fig. 74). The tattooed leg on plate 57 is that of Pako, a chief from the Reinga Cape, himself depicted in the bottom left corner of the plate under number 3. While this page shows illustrations of four people including two chiefs, De Sainson preferred to curate the plate around the *moko peha* (thighs and buttocks tattoo) taking centre stage because of its position and size (twice as big as the people).<sup>88</sup> On plate 70, five portraits show four Māori people alongside the *moko kauae* (lips and chin tattoo for women) of two of the women on the page. While inserting these *moko* illustrations in the Atlas was a way to depict the people's social ranks, it undoubtedly shows De Sainson's care in reproducing them with great precision.

In his own reworking of it (Fig. 74), Nuku took these three *moko* elements of plates 57 and 70 and grouped them together against a white background, showcasing both *moko kauae* above the *moko peha*. With this pairing, Nuku highlights De Sainson's interest for the art of *moko* and, above all, the importance of *moko* for Māori people to this day. The text in the exhibition ties these illustrations to the 1980s and the ongoing 'revival' of Māori women wearing the *moko kauae*. Significantly enlarged, Nuku's version of plates 57 and 70 is shying away from the visual codes of the atlas as a scientific publication: the numbering and captions of illustrations have been removed, there is no more plate number and finally, all mentions of artist's, lithographer's and editor's names have been erased. Reworked and cleaned from all of the elements adjacent to the illustrations, this wall-size artwork now addresses contemporary Māori tattooing practices and is one of Nuku's artworks. One could argue that this is one of the plates of George Nuku's own voyage's atlas.

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<sup>88</sup> The same display can also be found on plate 76 of the Atlas when De Sainson chose to create a plate with at its center a tattooed leg from Tonga and four portraits of a woman and three men from Tonga around it.

## ii. Colouring

While the ‘original’ atlases all carry a single colourway throughout the edition — either black and white or with added watercolour — Nuku’s life-size atlas does not. In his reworking of the prints and drawings, some were kept in black and white, the ‘original’ prints and drawings with colour were kept with colour; plates 38, 48 and 49 which were black and white prints in the original Atlas were digitally coloured by Nuku. Both plates 38 (Fig. 78) and 49 (Fig. 79) show scenes of navigation, whether at sea or embarking. Enlarged to fully occupy the wall space, both prints have been stripped from all the written elements that tie them to published works. Similar to the prints of *moko* addressed before, the reworking of these voyages prints and drawings transformed these illustrations authored by draughtsmen, lithographers, engravers and editors into George Nuku’s artworks.

Beyond the change in scale, Nuku’s versions of plates 38 and 49 (Fig. 80 & 81) have been mirrored and coloured in blue. While the image’s new scale allowed for the visitor to be immersed in the image, it also brought the size of the characters and boats closer to life-size. Going from black and white to blue made the image simply convey, through colour, the topics of seafaring and navigation — both Māori and European — that are intrinsic to the illustration and exploration storytelling. This new colourway also altered for the print’s temporality. Indeed, while black and white tends to be associated with old times — especially with regards to photographs —, adding colours to images makes them feel more real and relatable. As I have argued elsewhere, “transferring the pictures into a world of colour shifted their status of images of and from the past to a present reality” (Debrosse 2026:29), where the past is “an important and pervasive dimension of the present and future”, known as an “ever-present now” (Hakiwai 1996:53). A large sculpted and adorned plexiglass *waka* (canoe) was hanging in front of both prints, allowing for the visitor to “understand this dynamic sense of movement of a *waka* at sea, or of a *waka* pushed in the water by the people”, thus reinforcing the maritime theme of the prints.<sup>89</sup> Here, the change in scale and colouring of the prints allowed for the visitor to ‘enter’ the picture and experience these illustrations in an almost bodily manner.

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<sup>89</sup> Personal communication with Nuku, 23 June 2022.

### iii. Photographic transformation

The third type of digital alterations of the print brought them into yet another realm. As he did with the blue illustrations, Nuku enlarged plates 45 (Fig. 82), 46 (Fig. 83) and 52 (Fig. 84) of the voyage of the *Astrolabe*. This time, these black and white prints were neither cropped nor recoloured, but turned into negatives. The encounter between French and Māori is core to the narrative told within these three illustrations. But suddenly, with this visual treatment, what was easily identifiable, like an officer's attire, becomes almost unreadable, dissolving each of the characters' identities.

At the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century as photography was evolving, it was common to photograph drawings or prints in order to experiment with the technology and find ways cheaper than lithography to reproduce and disseminate illustrations. The musée du quai Branly-Jacques Chirac in Paris holds a few photographic negatives of the *Astrolabe* Atlas plates: one of them is a negative of plate 49 (Fig. 85) discussed before. Ironically, the mqB-JC negative looks as if it could be one of Nuku's creations, except for the presence (on the negative) and the removal (on Nuku's version) of the textual elements which are part of the print. With this negative transformation of the print, there is a direct nod that is made to photography, alluding to the level of details captured in De Sainson's drawings. Nuku goes even further and says that De Sainson "was the camera to catch the real life" (Ville de Rochefort 2021), acknowledging his detailed artistry alongside a form of veracity captured in his illustrations.

With this transformation into negative (Fig. 86), the voyages' imagery echoes photographic negatives and is also transported into another realm. The original pictures which depicted scenes in the daylight suddenly seem to be seen through a night vision device where the characters are turned into spectre-like figure. This time, the treatment not only alters temporalities but transports us in a different reality where characters look surreal, more-than-human. Finally, switching the prints into negatives can directly refer to the reproductive techniques like engraving and lithography. For the illustrations to be printed in the voyages' accounts, metal plaques or slabs of stones have to be sculpted, hollowed out so that a negative image of the illustration can then be printed with ink on paper. This intricacy and constant dialogue between media is part and parcel of Nuku's practice, so much so that while most of the drawings and prints were reworked digitally to take on the shape of other prints, a drawing made by Louis Le Breton during the voyages of *l'Astrolabe* and *la Zélée* (1837-40) was transformed into a plexiglass sculpture.

## b. Painting and sculpting

While I have so far focussed on the digital work that is carried out on the new prints and drawings of George Nuku's atlas, it is important to know that most of Nuku's works are sculptures made of contemporary materials such as plastic, polystyrene or plexiglass. Nuku decided to work with plastic as today's equivalent to the wood that his ancestors would have used to carve, which brings "the art forms his ancestors had been making for centuries [...] into the present" (Jacobs 2009:117).

"A chief was expected to be brave, a good warrior, wise in council, excellent in keeping the food storehouses full, able at oratory, good at looking after people [...] and good at art. [...] He was expected to be a skilled carpenter, canoe builder, carver and painter as part of being the complete chief" (Mead 1986:190-191).

The ties between social rank and craftsmanship are evident and place Nuku's artistry into a Māori tradition of creative practice. Nuku's work with plastic is also tied to the transparent, solid and glossy qualities of plastics and plexiglass which resemble the qualities of the *pounamu*, a green Māori stone that is considered a cultural treasure, thus giving the same sacredness to the plastics (Nyssen 2020:5-7). Finally, while Nuku's work in plastic perpetuates the Māori carving tradition, it is also an action against the use of single use plastics to raise awareness about our world plastic pollution (Jacobs 2022).

## i. Sculpting and framing prints and drawings

In the series of drawings exhibited in the *cabinet d'art graphique*, one specifically caught Nuku's attention and led him to transform it into a 'sculpted drawing'. *N Zel femme, portrait d'une femme de haut rang portant un moko, Otago* made by Louis Le Breton in April 1840 (Fig. 87) is a pencil drawing of an older Māori woman wearing a *moko*, a necklace made of shark teeth and a cloak. While not chosen to illustrate the accounts of the voyages of *L'Astrolabe* and *La Zélée*, it nevertheless is a remarkable drawing for capturing the essence of this woman and her rare *moko kanohi* (full face *moko*) which is unusually spread out to her cheeks and forehead and testifies to her rank.

In his representation (Fig. 88), Nuku depicted her in her prime wearing a shark tooth necklace. And rather than transferring the drawing into another print, he carved her image onto a slab of plexiglass which was also sculpted all around on the edge to create a frame. Her eyes are painted in red and reference the European red wax that can be found on *hei tiki*

figures dating from the European encounters.<sup>90</sup> The same red eyes can also be found in the sculpted frame. Lit up with a led light system, her face glows on the slab. This display allows us to visualise this ‘sculpted drawing’ – a drawing made on a flat surface yet that exist in 3D through the object on which it has been drawn – as a new sculpted medium ready to be inked and pressed on paper for printing, to create a form of plastic engraving. With the sculpted imbedded frame, it also stands as a ready-to-hang artwork which was itself framed in the space by an architectural sculpture also made of plexiglass.

The art of framing, which is so inherent to European culture and specifically museums and galleries, became one with the ‘sculpted drawing’ of Louis Le Breton’s illustration of a Māori woman. This intertwining of *Toi whaikairo*, the Māori sculptural tradition, with the art of European frame sculpting was not restricted to this example but carried out throughout the exhibition.

Two walls of the exhibition (Fig. 89) were painted in a dark red colour and a series of seventeen prints from Nuku’s voyages atlas were displayed on the wall in a *salon* style framed in gold-coloured frames made of spray-painted and carved polystyrene. Each one of these frames was uniquely sculpted with variations of Māori traditional carving based on vegetal stylisations. While they were visually imposing in size and directly referenced metal and wood sculpture, they were extremely light objects. Nuku speaks of this ambivalence by stating that “this project is both heavy and light, as the plexiglass appears light, but it’s very heavy, and as the polystyrene can appear heavy, but in fact is very light” (Nuku in Ville de Rochefort 2021). Thanks to this visual ‘heaviness’ added to the frames, prints were truly evocative of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century museum and brought these illustrations from the realm of scientific publications to the art realm, where artists would display their works in museums such as the musée du Louvre. The musée Hébre itself has a *salon* style display on a dark red wall for its classical paintings, thus allowing for the visitor to directly see the reference *in situ*. Beyond this display, Nuku’s working of frames thanks to their Māori style sculpting, also emphasized how they were not only practical elements but truly part and parcel of the artwork.

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<sup>90</sup> For example, the eyes of the *hei tiki* from the musée du quai Branly-Jacques Chirac registered as 72.84.225 are made of red wax.

## ii. Painting *kōwhaiwhai* motifs

Finally, a last element that was brought by Nuku onto these voyages' illustrations, are the *kōwhaiwhai* motifs painted in the backgrounds of Nuku's own voyage atlas. Similar to the creation of Nuku's plate showing three *moko*, a series of prints and drawings from the various voyages that Dumont d'Urville took part in were digitised, cropped, enlarged and edited to create this *salon* style installation (Fig. 89). However, in this series of prints, the background was adorned with the most iconic of Māori patterned motifs: *kōwhaiwhai*.

The tradition of *kōwhaiwhai* is “a major art-form of the Classic and Post-Contact periods” (Neich 2001:16) and is most likely one of the oldest forms of adornment that can be found on some of the painted paddles collected by the first voyages of exploration in the 18<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>91</sup> For Roger Neich, “kōwhaiwhai was the most highly developed type of Maori painting” which can be akin to a form of writing when considering linguistics: the act of “painting and adornment of a surface by pattern or colour was ‘tuhī’” but since modern times has also been understood as ‘to draw’ or ‘to write’ (2001:16-17). Numerous variations – some could argue endless – of *kōwhaiwhai* motifs are possible as both their names and designs “designate forms from the natural world” (Neich 1990:173), both vegetal and animal. The use of *kōwhaiwhai* designs, based on the *koru* motif (which represents an unfurling fern), has expanded alongside the building of Māori meeting houses (*whare whakairo*) as they were painted on house rafters and were understood as a visual signification of *whakapapa* (genealogy) (Neich 1996:53). As for the birth of paint, it is linked to the origins of the Māori world: Rangi and Papa<sup>92</sup>

“had been joined so long that parts of their bodies had grown together. When Tane<sup>93</sup> separated Rangi and Papa, their parts were severed and their blood was spilt. It was the mixing of the two bloods from Rangi and Papa that produced red ochre or kokowai. Because this paint was created from the bloods of the first parents, it was a very powerful agent for creating new forms. This paint not only provided physical protection but also spiritual protection. Therefore, red ochre used on carvings gave them total protection. This spiritual significance of red paint carried through to the use of red paint in figurative painting” (Cliff Whiting 1992 In Neich 2001:VII).

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<sup>91</sup> To learn more on this type of paddles, see Gibbs, Lythberg & Salmond 2018.

<sup>92</sup> Rangi and Papa are the primal couple of the Māori world. Rangi represents the earth and Papa the Sky.

<sup>93</sup> Tane is one of Rangi and Papa's children, the god of forests and birds.

Ultimately, Hirini Moko Mead argues that “*kōwhaiwhai* is a fascinating field of activity for artists with creative talent” (2003:262), which Nuku makes full use of in this whole exhibition.

Originally, *kōwhaiwhai* motifs were painted in red, white and black colours. In Rochefort, Nuku chose a blue paint which was reminiscent of the Royal blue colour as a visual code for the French monarchy. Placed against a white empty background, both Māori people, artefacts and houses could be found in this wall gallery. Were they to have stayed against a white background, their aesthetics would have stayed in the realm of 19<sup>th</sup> century voyage illustrations. But with the addition of the blue *kōwhaiwhai* painted motifs, the transition from scientific publication to artwork — which was introduced with the addition of the sculpted frames — is carried through. This background of *kōwhaiwhai* patterns gave both a visual and contextual background to these portraits, life scenes and artefacts, by inserting them back into a Māori context with historical continuity, building on this in-between of the encounter by visually merging European-coded illustrations of Māori people with Māori visual codes. Furthermore, as an inherent depiction of genealogy that can be found in Māori *moko* (Thomas 1995:93), the *kōwhaiwhai* motifs added by Nuku to the voyage illustrations tie them directly to his personal ancestry, allowing him to tell a history of Māori people as well as his personal life story as a Māori man who has worked and travelled in Aotearoa New Zealand as well as in Europe.

### 3. Māori encounter through alteration

At the core of Nuku’s artistic practice is the (re)creation of old *taonga* into contemporary ones. Most of his interventions have taken place in museums of ethnography around Europe where he works with museum collections. With this new exhibition in Rochefort, he carried on his usual work but involved prints which, while not made by Māori people, were the result of ‘social interactions’ (Ballard 2013:139) and encounter which through observation and translation into drawing, captured the essence of Māori people. In this light, it is interesting to consider Nicholas Thomas’ words on Nuku’s reproductions and transformations:

“The *patu* now in European museums are historic forms; they are old, but they are emphatically not dead. Rather, for Māori and for those aware of Māori communities’ interests and efforts to animate historic *taonga*, they are full of *mana*, or spiritual power – they are living and vital forms. Nuku’s reproduction and transformation of the form into an expression of light and life stands as a continuation of that dynamic,

generative history. Its importance is also a vindication of Māori agency, which is not past, not historic, not vanishing, but has reached into the twenty-first century and into the Northern Hemisphere” (Thomas 2022:10-11).

While they were made by Europeans and not Māori people, considering the voyages’ prints and drawings as ‘historic forms which are old but emphatically not dead’ is helpful, as they can be seen as dynamic materials that have the capacity to continuously ‘generate history’. After Nuku’s reworking, this historical potential is expanded into new temporal and geographical dimensions with bridges built between past, present and future, as well as between France and Aotearoa.

The intricacy of the Māori world, the world of encounters and the French world are constant in the exhibition and, more generally, in Nuku’s work because they are all part of his history and identity. They are visible as well in the numerous parallels that Nuku draws between himself and the Māori people in the pictures, but also with people like De Sainson. Indeed, the relationship between Nuku and Studio Ludo was key in the practical realisation of this work. In the same way “De Sainson had developed relationships with the lithographers, [Nuku found himself] in a similar situation with the infographics people from Studio Ludo” (Nuku in Ville de Rochefort 2021). In creating this exhibition, he felt he was replaying these past events:

“These representations are images of my family [...], in one respect, I literally am walking out of the lithograph. I’m coming out of the picture and I’m in a repeat performance in some ways, here in Rochefort. However the difference is that the context has changed, because this is all history. So the place where this context continues is in the museum because the original function of Rochefort doesn’t exist anymore” (Nuku in Ville de Rochefort 2021).

By bringing his true self and his *pūmanawa* (creative talent) to museums, *taonga* and historical collections, Nuku is merging timelines, visuals and experiences to tell a multiplicity of (hi)stories of past, present and future encounters.

#### IV) Conclusion

Through the study of Nuku’s and Andrew’s works, this chapter has allowed me to look into the various tools and practices used by artists when working with archival material to make archival artworks. The broad scope of techniques and mediums spanned from the 18<sup>th</sup> and the

21<sup>st</sup> centuries. In the case of Brook Andrew, the archives he worked with had already been digitised, which facilitated their transfer and incorporation into video media. However, it is their bringing together into digital collages using a ‘digital glue’ that made them into a new whole and somewhat erased their ‘original’ identification elements that define each of these films or images within institutional collections. As for George Nuku, *he* was the instigator of the digitisation of the voyages’ prints. This transformation of the prints into high resolution digital files was key for all the different alteration processes he employed. As argued by Benjamin, “technical reproduction can put the copy of the original into situations which would be out of reach for the original itself” (1955:214). By changing the materiality (whether analogue or digital) of the archival material used, there was equally an alteration of the object and the different categories that govern it. For example, when Andrew created his work *Horizon II* for the mqB-JC, the ethnographic films from the museum collections became part of *Horizon II*, but this new artwork did not supplement the original identification of these films. Rather it encapsulated both layers of the archival material and the contemporary creation as a way to expand the archive’s materiality, which is evocative of Beltrame’s idea of the avatar (2015). By including these materials into their creations, the artists played with the temporalities which are tied to archives and infused them with new ones so that the works evoke both colonial and postcolonial times. Through these processes akin to Bourriaud’s (2007) idea of fluidity of form, the archive exists in its digital and analogue form, original and altered multiplicities across time and space. Their multiplicities are also expressed in the field to which they belong: from stored archival material, they have become archival artworks which exist beyond the museum of ethnography, in the contemporary art world through exhibitions, galleries and the art market. Thanks to digital alteration, archival art enables the conservation principle of museums to be respected, and mostly allows for a retelling of histories through reproduction techniques. In this way, it can be argued that the very principle of alteration that is at the centre of archival art can be studied and understood as a direct evolution of the mechanical processes of reproduction and photography. Following a process of layering where text and image work together for a ‘restorying’ (Saggar 2025:81) of the past, the archives enter newly defined time-spaces where, when performed in the museum through display and exhibitions, they can be experienced collectively and in new contexts.

# Chapter 4 - Adaptation: A Critical Method for the Display of Archival Artworks

## I) Introduction

Rooted in conceptual art practice, the invitation to artists by museums for their intervention in their space and with their collections is used as a tool for the critique of the institution, but also, as a “narrative tool”, an “ally to sustain education”, or brought in as a “disruptive element that sparks discussion, imagination and triggers self-reflection” (Rossi-Linnemann & de Martini 2020:13). While this practice of artistic invitation and intervention has spread to a range of museums, it seems that the first artistic intervention in a museum with ethnographic collections took place at the British Museum – then Museum of Mankind – in 1985 with the exhibition *Lost Magic Kingdoms* (Museum of Mankind & Paolozzi 1985). Following three years spent researching the museum’s collections, British artist Eduardo Paolozzi (1924-2005) curated this exhibition to reveal the influence of the British Museum’s ethnographic collections on ‘Western artists’ and his own work (McLeod 1985:15). According to researcher Anaïs Clara, the British Museum’s invitation of Paolozzi to curate this exhibition reveals the strong interest at the time in the ‘primitivist’ turn in modern art as shown with the exhibition “*Primitivism*” in *20<sup>th</sup> Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern* which took place at the MoMA in New York between September 1984 and January 1985 (2024:44).

While this exhibition reveals how collections are understood, reorganised and a source of inspiration for artists, the work of African American and Caribbean artist Fred Wilson is often cited as the first record of an institutional critique realised by an artist in a museum. In 1990, Wilson created the exhibition *The Other Museum* at White Columns, a non-profit art gallery, in New York where he ‘simulated’ his first ethnographic institution by grouping photographs and artefacts in a similar display style as ethnographic museums (Nesbitt 1990:171). In 1992, Wilson was invited by The Contemporary in Baltimore (USA) to work with the collections of the Maryland Historical Society where he created his landmark exhibition *Mining the Museum* (Wilson & Halle 1993). In *Mining the Museum*, Wilson ‘mined’ the historical collections of the Maryland Historical Society as a direct way to challenge the colonial and racist bias of museums, thanks to object juxtapositions, label and display subversions.

This coming of artists “between the object and the museum” is characteristic of “intervention projects” (Carroll La 2011:219) which considerably grew at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Although this thesis has a strong focus on ethnographic museums, albeit not only, artistic interventions also took place in other types of museums like the Victoria and Albert Museum and the Natural History Museum, two of London’s largest museums. Indeed in 2000, the V&A exhibited Hew Locke’s gigantic cardboard sculpture *Hemmed in Two* (2000) in its entrance hall. The cargo-like sculpture which had an “architecturally intrusive appeal” (Kim 2008:4) addressed the colonial legacies of the institution, partly embedded through the collections it holds. This efficient “museological module” (Kim 2008:6) of artistic interventions inside museums, which art historian Seong Eun Kim argues enables for “the ambiguities of their [artists’] otherness” (2008:6) to be revealed, was also used at the Natural History Museum. Bergit Arends, who was curator for contemporary art (2005-2013) at the Natural History Museum is said to have been inspired by the “advances made in ethnographic museums in working with artists” (2020:214) to create a series of artistic residencies at the museum in collaboration with Gasworks London. These three residencies which hosted Shanghai-based artist Hu Yun (2010), Indigenous Australian artist Daniel Boyd (2011) and Bangalore-based artist Sunoj D (2012) were followed by displays in the galleries of the Natural History Museum. Such interventions reveal the potential of natural history museums and collections to “provide the material, impetus or catalyst for artists to develop work on these topics” (Wade 2022:103), whereby the museum is not only a recipient but a true agent of artistic interventions.

As for museums of ethnography, the collaborations they instigated with communities in the 1980s-1990s led to artistic commissions, interventions and full museum takeovers from the 1990s onwards. The Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology in Cambridge displayed contemporary creations such as Powwow costumes for the exhibition *Living Traditions* (1994) (Herle & Phillipson 1994) and linocuts from Torres Strait Islander artists for the exhibition *Torres Strait Islanders: An Exhibition Marking the Centenary of the 1898 Anthropological Expedition* (1998), (Herle & Philp 1998) amongst many other artistic collaborations. Between 2002-2003, New-Zealand based artists Christine Hellyar and Maureen Lander intervened in the galleries of the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford with their project *Mrs Cook’s Kete*. In order to reveal the legacies of Captain’s Cook voyage to the Pacific and the lacunae of its representation in museum collections, the two artists decided, between fact and fiction, “to imagine as if a Maori basket ‘kete’ were newly found in south London where James Cook’s wife Elizabeth Cook had lived after his death” (Kim 2007:7). A

few years later, Maori artist Maureen Lander took part in the exhibition *Pasifika Styles* (2006-2008) curated by artist Rosanna Raymond and scholar and historian Amiria Salmond which gathered over twenty Pasifika artists from across the United Kingdom and the Pacific Islands at the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology in Cambridge (Raymond & Salmond 2008). This exhibition marked the history of artistic interventions in museums of ethnography for its scale and the key role played by artists of Pacific descent who had “a forum to express frustrations and raise questions about museum practices of collection, classification, and containment” (Herle 2008:169). They did so through interventions on historical displays as well as on contemporary displays exhibited across the galleries.

In many of the above-mentioned artistic interventions in museums, artists have worked with collections of artefacts and natural specimens in order to bring in critique and reflection on the colonial period and its practices as reflected through institutions. In this chapter, the artists studied use new ways to exhibit archival colonial collections in museums, not because they would not be displayed otherwise, but rather to exhibit them in light of their own recontextualizations and bring new meaning to them. While in the previous chapter I have looked at the means through which artists alter the materiality of archives in the making of archival artworks, the focus of this chapter will be on how artists adapt their artworks and exhibitions to different museum environments in order to tell a story that reflects local geographies and histories. According to anthropologist Sharon Macdonald, “exhibitions tend to be presented [...] as unequivocal statements rather than as the outcome of particular processes and contexts” (1998:1). Through the examination of two cases studies — George Nuku’s travelling museums of the exploration voyages to Aotearoa New Zealand and Brook Andrew’s *Vox/Anatomy of a Body Record: Beyond Tasmania* —, I will examine and unpack some of the processes through which artists’ artworks and exhibitions are adapted to museum environments by artists and how each of these re-exhibitions informs the next one.

These re-exhibitions are concerned with two major aspects: the change of institution and the change of location. Each institution has its own modes of display (visible in the museography, use of vocabulary, content creation, education programme) which work together with the display environment (architecture, geography) to form the public image and message conveyed by the institution. These, Macdonald argues, are all part of the ‘politics of display’ in museums (1998:3). In the case of the exhibition of an artwork, whether it is for a permanent or temporary display, the politics of display together with the environment impact the public viewing experience of an exhibition. Indeed, there are cases when institutions reframe their politics of display in an attempt to compensate for the legacy of their geographic

and architectural environment or, conversely, make use of the politics of display to address the environment, creating a space for dialogues and resonances to take place. For example, the musée d'ethnographie de Genève (MEG) in Switzerland released a 2020-2024 strategic plan with the mission to “question accepted ideas, cultural practices and representations in the aim of facilitating decolonisation and looking towards the future”.<sup>94</sup> In order to do so, the MEG recognised that it needed to go beyond a simple critique of history and instead engage in rethinking its practices and discourses to work towards a decolonisation of the institution. While these changes are first happening at a level which is internal to the institution, they will eventually be reflected in the politics of display of the museum, as can be seen now at Tate Britain. Recently, a wall text was added within the entrance space of the gallery, titled “Tate and the Legacies of Slavery”, using text in this instance to address the environment of Tate and its legacies, revealing here a change in discourse. With such practices, and specifically with the inclusion of a text like at Tate Britain, museums pluralise the narratives exhibited to the audience, in order for them to be engaged in a critical conversation with the museum, rather than through imposed narratives.

When artists are involved in the exhibition of their own work, the institution's politics of display are not the sole decisive power anymore. Instead, the artists' own lexicon creates frictions with the environment and the need for the installation or exhibition to be adapted to this specific location, therefore challenging it and often creating site-specific art. Established in the 1960s, the concept of site-specific art “re-conceptualized the artistic process with artists no longer working in isolation but within an ongoing dialogue on issues of concern to the public” (Heerman 2013:244), giving rise to installations and exhibitions that are “often conceptually engaging and provocatively challenging, asking much from their audience” (Bouttiaux 2013:50). However, when an artwork or exhibition is defined as site-specific, it somewhat focuses on “establishing an inextricable, indivisible relationship between the work and its site, and [demands] the physical presence of the viewer for the work's completion” (Kwon 2002:12). A site-specific work or exhibition seems to be solely about the institution and its environment in relation to its viewers, rather than a reflection on the “multiple narratives of place, self and history” (Williams 2015:88). Thus, following this logic, the site requires a form of responsiveness which was called as “site-responsive” by writer and curator Gillian McIver (2004). In this thesis, the idea of a work being site-responsive is more useful in this thesis than the concept of site-specific art, as it comprises an understanding of, and

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<sup>94</sup> <https://www.meg.ch/en/about-us/strategic-plan-2020-2024>, last accessed on 26/09/2025.

reaction to all aspects of the place in which it is situated. While McIver uses this term to refer to sites as non-places, being outside of institutions, I would like to use her idea of responsiveness, but in the museum and gallery context, therefore arguing for a ‘museum-responsive’ or ‘institution-responsive’ artwork or exhibition. While thinking of the location of the work through the scope of the museum or the institution in which it is presented could appear to erase the larger local and national environment in which the institution is located, my view is that the geographical environment of the institution is inherently tied to it, making the institution inseparable from its environment. In this light, I will be able to address how both Andrew’s and Nuku’s works are rooted in museum-responsive practices, revealing the histories and legacies of specific institutions and their environments (geographical and historical) through adaptation of their artworks and exhibitions.

Following the practice of the artist-curator (Putnam 2009:132), both Andrew’s and Nuku’s practices use curation and the technologies of display of the museum, but with their personal take on them, to refer to collecting practices, historical recording, classical framing and Indigenous perspectives. Through the use of their respective artistic lexicon, they constantly re-adapt their work to the different locations, allowing for the museum-specific exhibitions and installations to be museum-responsive and in dialogue with the environment. Thanks to archival art, “the meaning of [archives] is constructed and reconstructed as the frameworks for interpretation and interpreting subjects change (Hooper-Greenhill 2000:75), revealing that the institution, together with the diversity of actors (institutional, artistic, community and public) involved in making and seeing the artworks have an impact on its content and meaning creation. After looking at how artists alter the materiality of colonial archives through digital practices, I will now look at how the adaptation of the artworks and their exhibition to the environment of museums plays an equally significant part in the artistic creation and conceptualisation of archives with regards to museum institutions. Finally, I will look at the impact that these adaptations to the museum environment by artists have on the public and their experience of the work.

## II) George Nuku’s travelling museum: Māori adaptations in European institutions

After his exhibition in Rochefort in 2021, Nuku was invited to create an exhibition at the Weltmuseum Wien in Vienna curated by Reinhard Blumauer, the curator for Oceania and Australia at the Weltmuseum Wien. Titled *George Nuku. Oceans. Collections. Reflections.*,

the exhibition was open from 23 June 2022 to 31 January 2023. Both in terms of museography and with the works on display, the exhibition in Vienna was a direct segue from the exhibition in Rochefort. Only composed of two rooms in Rochefort – one being dedicated to the *cabinet d'art graphique* –, the exhibition in Vienna consisted of a succession of six (Fig. 90) rooms within the museum, complemented by a monumental installation in the hall of the Weltmuseum Wien as well as an occurrence of his exhibition series *Bottled Ocean* in the Theseus temple in Vienna's Volksgarten. For the purpose of this thesis, I will solely be focussing on the exhibition comprised in the succession of the six rooms within the museum.

In Vienna, each of the rooms had a different colour and theme: Blue – *Te Moananui* (the Big Blue); Red – *Hunters and Collectors*; Green – *Te Aonehehe* (The Natural World); Gold – *Intrepid Voyagers*; Black – *Te Rarohenga* (the Underworld); White – *Te Ao Marama* (the World of Light). From one room to the other, the visitor was taken on a journey of encounter between Aotearoa New Zealand and Austria aboard ships and between realms, alongside Māori and Austrian people. While the exhibition in Rochefort was focused on the voyages in which Dumont d'Urville took part, the Viennese exhibition used Austria's historical context as backdrop in order to tell both a Viennese encounter with Māori people as well as a broader story of encounter between Europeans and Māori spanning the 18<sup>th</sup> to the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.

In the first room, the journey started at sea in *Te Moananui* (the Big Blue)<sup>95</sup> onboard a *waka* (canoe), or rather three that “represent the past, present, and future: one comprised of customary materials, one from a fusion of old and new, and one made entirely from the ever-present plastic” (Blumauer et al. 2022:28). The exhibition *George Nuku. Oceans. Collections. Reflections.* played with codes which one might find at odds with one another, but which are central to Nuku's practice. His carving practice is rooted in Māori tradition in technique and design but realised in contemporary materials such as plexiglass and polystyrene as explained in the previous chapter. To make this merging of materials and techniques visible, Nuku builds around museum collections in ways that allow him to complete collection artefacts that have missing elements. Unlike conservators he does not try to make his changes invisible, but rather emphasizes them by making his own version of them.<sup>96</sup> To contextualise a canoe prow

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<sup>95</sup> Te-Moana-nui-a-Kiwa is the Māori name of the Pacific Ocean. See Te Punga Somerville 2017 to know more about the conceptualisation of the term.

<sup>96</sup> In 2012, Nuku worked alongside the National Museums Scotland in Edinburgh to restore a *waka taua* (Māori war canoe) from the museum collections. Jointly with the conservators and curators, Nuku decided to make these repairs visible through the creation of missing pieces out of plexiglass instead of wood. This practice of repair or completion of incomplete museum pieces is part and parcel of Nuku's practice, and testifies to his relationships with institutions (Stable, 2012).

(*tauihu*) and stern (*taurapa*), two paddles (*hoe*) and a maker (*tata*) from the collections of the Weltmuseum Wien, Nuku created a plexiglass rendition of a *waka* at sea with men (Fig. 91), which allowed the artist to present the collections in context of use, but also echoed the lithograph presented in the background, showing a similar scene of Māori men at sea in a *waka*. This encounter, an in-between and merging of worlds, people, spaces, practices, is one of the main aspects of George Nuku's work.

Moving towards the second room, *Hunters and Collectors* (Fig. 92), brought back to life the display that was predominant in Rochefort. With dark red walls, wooden floors and large-adorned windows, the visitor left the blue room to enter “a nineteenth-century study room” which “pays homage to the voyages of the Novara expedition, its crew, and the powers behind this extraordinary feat of global exploration in the name of science” (Blumauer et al. 2022:40). This display showed a series of prints depicting people and natural specimens from Aotearoa New Zealand adorned with Nuku's *kōwhaiwhai* (as explained in Chapter Three), as well as prints depicting the expedition itself, the ship and the men onboard. These illustrations were framed in gold-sculpted-polystyrene frames, a practice that was present throughout all six rooms of the exhibition.

The next room, *Te Aonehehe* – the Natural World (Fig. 93) was visually represented by the colour green covering the walls of this large room as well as echoed in the choice of illustrations representing mountains and forests. The colour was continued to an altar at the centre back of the room and a series of sculpted animals and plants which brought the natural history specimens to life.

Moving away from the imagery of Aotearoa New Zealand, the next room, *Intrepid Voyagers* (Fig. 94), was covered in ivory and gold colours. The visitors were then brought back to Austria alongside two Māori men, Wiremu Toetoe Tumohe and Hemara Te Rerehau Paraone, who went on a journey to Vienna in 1858-9. While the green room bore all the codes of the Māori world through images of the landscape, presence of animal species, and Māori carvings and motifs, including the *whare whaikairo* (the Māori meeting house)<sup>97</sup>, this ivory and gold room brought together the codes of the Austro-Hungarian empire. The room was adorned with portraits of Emperor Franz Joseph I and his wife, Empress Sissi, several coats of arms engraved in plexiglass plaques and a gold-painted polystyrene eagle, the emblem of the Austro-Hungarian empire. As in the other rooms, Nuku used pictures of people from various collections (in Vienna, London, Auckland and Wellington) that he framed in polystyrene and

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<sup>97</sup> The role of the *whare whaikairo* in this specific room and for the exhibition will be discussed later on in this chapter of the thesis.

placed in a sculpted environment he created. But while the context was Austrian with various references to history and the Empire, the story was still a Māori story. With chiefly Māori figures presented alongside the emperors and Wimeru Toetoe Tumohe and Hemara Te Rerehau Paraone, the room focussed on their ‘reverse exploration’ of Europe which led them to bringing back to Aotearoa New Zealand the printing press they were gifted by the emperors, allowing them to later start the first newspaper in Reo Māori.<sup>98</sup>

Entering the penultimate room of the exhibition *Te Rarohenga* – the Underworld (Fig. 95) was a drastic change and a visual ‘shock’ compared to the previous rooms so vivid in colours. The walls and floor were covered in black paint and carpet. While the previous rooms were visually cohesive in their shared colourful walls adorned with framed illustrations and sculpted polystyrene motifs with inclusions of plexiglass sculptures, in *Te Rarohenga*, the portraits on the walls were not made from painted prints anymore, but engraved in backlit plexiglass pictures and plexiglass sculptures. Thanks to a play with the lighting and the material, visitors could see and experience the works of Nuku’s Underworld before moving to the final room, *Te Ao Marama* – the World of Light (Fig. 96).

While the previous room was bathed in darkness, the final room embraced the light with white walls, white frames and white sculptures, and transparent sculptures made from plastic and plexiglass as well as images in black and white hues. Bringing back the display codes of the previous rooms with the large-framed prints on the walls, “this room [was] essentially a summation of all the themes, ideas, and expressions shown in this exhibition” (Blumauer et al. 2022:78). More than a sum of the Viennese exhibition, *George Nuku. Oceans. Collections. Reflections.* can be seen as a new expanded and adapted occurrence of *George Nuku. Voyage Autour du monde, L’aventure māori de Dumont d’Urville* which had taken place a year before in France, as I will go on to explore.

## 1. Re-exhibiting, telling new (hi)stories through adaptation

“No work of art is immune to the circumstances of its presentation. Nor is it an uncommon experience to find some new quality or detail in a work of art that one has seen many times. Part of the power of works of art that bring one back time and again is that surprise in the midst of the familiar. But the degree to which the surrounding

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<sup>98</sup> While this is an important aspect of the exhibition and the ties between Aotearoa and Austria, I will not expand further on the journey of Toetoe Tumohe and Hemara Te Rerehau between Aotearoa and Austria in this thesis but have done so elsewhere (Debrosse 2026). For further information: Cameron 1958; Fletcher 1984; Morrell 2002.

environment frames this work establishes a form of contingency that can have a profound impact on how the work is understood. Nor is it just the object and the surrounding space that are in play, because the other actor is the viewer, mobile and experiencing the work as a series of unfolding encounters. The body is thus present, not as sculptural representation, but rather in the person of the spectator whose movement through space is framed and marked by abstract form” (Buskirk 2005:21).

In her book *The Contingent Object of Contemporary Art* (2005), art historian Martha Buskirk addresses the variations that stem from the re-exhibition of an artwork, or rather the re-experience of an artwork. There are two key elements to this experience, the environment in which the work is shown, and by whom this work is seen and experienced. I personally visited the exhibition and can thus reflect on my own experience. The broader reflection on public experience will not be addressed here<sup>99</sup>, focussing instead on the environment of exhibition of the work.

a. *Te Moananui* – the Big Blue

In the exhibition *George Nuku. Oceans. Collections. Reflections.* in Vienna, nine of the wall art that were already presented in Rochefort were displayed: two of the pieces, which are reinterpretations of plate 38 (Fig. 97) and 49 from (Fig. 98) the Atlas of the voyage of the *Astrolabe*, were displayed in the first room *Te Moananui* – the Big Blue, and seven, which are reinterpretations of plates 42, 45, 46, 47, 53, 54, 55, 57, 63, 70 and 71 from the Atlas of the voyage of the *Astrolabe*, were displayed in the last room *Te Ao Marama* – the World of Light (Fig. 96). In Rochefort these works were presented in the same room, telling the story of the voyages of Dumont d’Urville in Aotearoa New Zealand. In Vienna, the display was devoid of the narrative around the French naval officer in order to narrate another story of encounters between Māori and Austrian people. In the six rooms in Vienna, the exhibition used narration and codifications from both European and Māori worlds to embark the visitor on the journey of Nuku’s ‘Reflections’ about ‘Oceans’ and ‘Collections’ as places and traces of encounter.

Before considering the variations in the use of these works in the storytelling of this exhibition, it is important to look at both host institutions. The musée Hèbre de Saint Clément in Rochefort is a municipal museum run by the town of Rochefort where both art historical

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<sup>99</sup> Despite an attempt at collecting data from the exhibition’s visitors, it was unsuccessful. See note 19.

and anthropological collections are held and displayed. The Weltmuseum Wien in Vienna is the largest museum of anthropology in Austria, an institution of national importance solely holding anthropological and archaeological collections. The status of both institutions, their buildings and exhibition space available, and their budgets have large implications on what projects museums are able to realise. It is fair to say that the musée Hèbre does not have the same resources as the Weltmuseum Wien yet George Nuku talked of his exhibition in Rochefort as “one of the greatest achievements of [his] life” (Nuku in Ville de Rochefort 2021) because of how detailed the exhibition was. Due to their differences in size and reach, both exhibitions fulfilled different purposes: the telling of transnational (hi)stories rooted in the local history of Rochefort versus the telling of (hi)stories evoking transnational encounters rooted in both Austrian and Māori worlds. There were however similarities between the two exhibitions with the re-exhibition of artworks between Rochefort and Vienna.

Both in Rochefort and Vienna, plates 38 and 49 of the Atlas of the voyage of the *Astrolabe* were enlarged, coloured in a blue hue and framed in a copper-coloured, sculpted and polystyrene frame. In Rochefort (Fig. 80 & 81), the two prints covered the full height of one of the exhibition’s walls with a frame that was more similar to architectural sculpted elements as it delineated all ends of the walls: rather than defining a space on the wall for the artwork, the whole wall was the artwork. In Vienna (Fig. 97 & 98), while they were enlarged compared to the original size of the prints in the voyage’s Atlas, illustrations were framed in a European tradition that echoed the display of paintings on museum walls. Both print displays addressed navigation themes which were reinforced by the nearby presence of a plexiglass *waka* sculpted by Nuku in Rochefort, a wooden model *waka* from the Weltmuseum collection (Inv. No. 7.876) and a hybrid plexiglass and wooden *waka* in Vienna (Fig. 91). In Rochefort the label read as follow:

“This work is a representation of the *waka* depicted in the blue lithographs exhibited behind it. The transparent plexiglass allows the spirit of the moments depicted to be conveyed. The work is suspended to give the impression of floating through time and space.

By celebrating the union of past and present, it aims to place the visitor inside the painting itself.”<sup>100</sup>

The prints were purposefully displayed larger than life in order for the visitor to experience them as part of the museum’s environment that they were moving through. This direct bodily

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<sup>100</sup> Label in the exhibition *George Nuku. Voyage Autour du monde, L’aventure māori de Dumont d’Urville*. My translation from French.

engagement of the visitor with the work was certainly different in Vienna. There, both *waka* were displayed on plinths and the prints were placed in the middle of the wall, resembling a traditional museum display where most elements were at eye height. This display enhanced the relationship between object (on the plinth) and image (on the wall) over that of the bodily encounter of the viewer with the works. While it allowed for Nuku to play with the codes of museum display, strategies had to be found in order to preserve the objects from the collection based on the museum's conservation rules.

Indeed, museum collections were directly displayed on tables without glass cases, so distance between the wanting-to-touch public and the objects was created with installations made of bubble wrap, plastic sheets and plastic bottles under the tables. While different displays created different visit experiences, the prints acted both as contextual background for the sculptures as well as historical references in Rochefort and Vienna. In both locations, the displays addressed the voyages and migrations of Māori populations from Hawaiki to Aotearoa New Zealand on these canoes. It is worth mentioning that the word *waka* is also used to define the broader type of Māori social grouping which got its name from these very canoes (Te Awēkotuku 1996:30): “When we introduce ourselves, we name the waka on which our relatives travelled from Hawaiki to Aotearoa so they know our whakapapa [genealogy] and they know who we are” (Nuku, interview, 2006, as cited in Jacobs, 2022, p. 219). Embedded within both illustrations and objects are the histories and numerous generations of Māori people, enhanced by the presence of both prints and sculptures in constant dialogue. While this telling of the Māori voyaging history was seen in Rochefort through the eye of French artist Louis-Auguste de Sainson, in Vienna it was incorporated in the larger story of Pacific voyaging, with illustrations by two Austrian landscape painters, depicting respectively Papua New Guinea and Easter Island. This use of paintings realised by Austrian artists Hugo Darnaut and Ludwig Hans Fischer circa 1885 definitely pulled the exhibition away from what was done in Rochefort to really inscribe it in the Viennese context.

“I purposely bring, from past things and change it and enhance it, and add completely new things to it, to make the new idea. I mean they're all site-specific projects: the sites are specific, the countries are specific, the languages are specific, the behaviours are specific, the process of both in front and behind the scenes are completely different from country to country, and even from city to city. So you have to take all of that into account. The

conversation is happening on a big scale here, but it's still between me and the place where I am.”<sup>101</sup>

Building from each project, Nuku recycles ideas to create new works, practices and meanings in new places, each time creating a site-specific show that is very obviously *his* work, yet always reinventing what he previously did. This practice of replicating yet moving forward was central to the last room of the Viennese show.

#### b. *Te Ao Marama* – the World of Light

*Te Ao Marama* – the World of Light displayed a series of ten wall art pieces (Fig. 96), nine of which were exhibited in Rochefort: two were photos of the now-disappeared Pacific collections from the museum in Caen which was bombed during WWII; seven were works made by Nuku using eleven plates from the Atlas of the voyage of the *Astrolabe*. The last work of this series is a photograph of Nuku that was purposefully created for the show in Vienna titled *The Native Manipulating His Own Ignorance* (2022) which I will be coming back to later.

Similar to the treatment of the two blue prints in the first room, the illustrations in the last room were presented on a large scale in Rochefort, occupying the full height of the walls, with an architectural-polystyrene frame around, except for the portraits of Natai (Fig. 76) and Rangui (Fig. 75) and the *Collage of Moko* (Fig. 74), which were full-size wall prints without any sculptural adorning. Finally, the second *Collage of Moko* is a grouping of several portraits made by de Sainson that were hung as standalone pieces in Rochefort, framed in gold polystyrene and adorned with blue *kōwhaiwhai* motifs. In Vienna, these elements created during the voyages of Dumont d’Urville told a narrative which is not focused on the voyages anymore, but rather on Māori mythology, specifically on the realm of light. Bathed in these all-white elements, *Te Ao Marama* used the historical illustrations in order to tell a Māori narrative thanks to the classic museum codes of display (white walls adorned with framed visual artworks). Playing with this idea of the ‘white cube’, all the frames, sculptures and architectural elements sculpted in Polystyrene were painted in white, coating the material in its original colour, enhancing it rather than transforming it.

“Serious and light at the same time, taking the audience forward from the deeper, inner, contemplative aspects of the other rooms and encouraging an outwardly reaction

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<sup>101</sup> Personal interview with George Nuku, June 2022, Weltmuseum Wien, Vienna.

to move towards a form of resolution of self, others, and the world at large” (Blumauer et al 2022:78),

*Te Ao Marama* was the last of Nuku’s ‘reflections’ in this exhibition, gathering and disseminating early voyages prints as icons of the Māori world which carry their histories, embedded in the visual rather than in the textual captions that were attached to their original publication and which Nuku removed digitally. Taken on an exploration of Nuku’s creations, the audience was transported in an in-between world of European and Māori codifications, a world of encounter. Indeed, during European and Pacific encounters “in the midst of massacre and revenge, there was a meeting of meanings, of bodies and minds, whereby pre-existing understandings, preconceptions from both sides of the encounter, were engaged, brought into confrontation and dialogue, mutual influence and ultimately mutual transformation” (Jolly & Tcherkézoff 2009:1). This in-between of Oceanic encounters can be perceived through Nuku’s projects that merge both European and Māori worlds where Nuku is the master puppeteer of this world which becomes a representation of “the world of light in the context of enlightenment”.<sup>102</sup> In turn, Nuku’s practice can be said to be governed by a lexicon of forms and visuals that he reuses and re-adapts across projects, to convey the different space and time of encounter.

In *The Native Manipulating His Own Ignorance* (2022) (Fig. 99), George Nuku was shown sitting on a chair, with threads going to his body parts, turning him into a puppet. In this photograph he was surrounded by *taonga* from the Weltmuseum Wien collections. Above this framed photograph was a polystyrene stylised version of Nuku wearing his *moko*, feathers in his hair and earrings, holding the wood and string mechanism of the puppeteer that controls his human self in the photograph. Nuku plays with his own image and personification in the space, negotiating with the various worlds he lives in and embracing each one of them to showcase it in his exhibitions. By impersonating both the Native and the Ignorant (a representation of the coloniser), Nuku plays with the notion of the *pae*, “a transitional zone of demarcation and negotiation” (Jahnke 1999:193), as well as with his origins as a man of Māori and Scottish and German descent.

This ambivalence was also represented in the exhibition’s second room, *Hunters and Collectors* where Nuku staged himself as *The Native Observing the Colonizer Observing the Native* (2022) (Fig. 100). At first, this work could appear to be the coloured version of the

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<sup>102</sup> Nuku in an Instagram video shot for the exhibition *George Nuku: Oceans. Collections. Reflections*. [https://www.instagram.com/reel/CoC53etIzan/?utm\\_source=ig\\_web\\_copy\\_link&igsh=MzRIODBiNWF1ZA==](https://www.instagram.com/reel/CoC53etIzan/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igsh=MzRIODBiNWF1ZA==), last accessed on 26/09/2025.

photograph exhibited in *Te Ao Marama*, though the threads that made Nuku a puppet were not present in this version. The ambivalence of the title leads us to wonder whether Nuku is impersonating both the ‘Native’ and the ‘Colonizer’ or whether the visitor of the exhibition is this ‘Colonizer Observing the Native’.

While none of the works exhibited in *Hunters and Collectors* was exhibited in Rochefort, it was the display style which was carried through and adapted to the new material and location (Fig. 101). A central part of the exhibition in Rochefort was a dark red wall covered with a curated layout of reworked voyage prints framed in gold and adorned with painted *kōwhaiwhai* motifs (Fig. 89), echoing the *salon* style type of display. This idea was taken to Vienna but amplified from a single wall in Rochefort to a whole room (Fig. 92) evoking a nineteenth-century classic drawing room, “investigating and recognizing the works of Ferdinand von Hochstetter, the naturalist and geologist who accompanied the voyage” (Blumauer et al. 2022:40) of the Novara expedition. The room aimed to “elevate the voyage art presented to the status of classical art”<sup>103</sup>, acknowledging both the work conducted during this voyage as well as the people represented in the art. The naval theme of the room was complemented with a sculpted and painted polystyrene portrait of Ferdinand Maximilian Habsburg, Emperor Franz Joseph’s brother and officer of the Novara expedition. Over this bust was a large polystyrene sculpture representing the European voyages of explorations as well as the winds and currents that both Māori navigators and European sailors travelled through. This ensemble of prints, sculptures and colours, collaged together to create this specific museography that merges the classical institution with Nuku’s artistry, has become one of Nuku’s new exhibitory codes after its replication in both Rochefort and Vienna that he also carried to a later exhibition *Bottled Sea 2124* (2024), at the musée du Masque de Fer et du Fort Royal in Cannes, France (Fig. 102). When speaking about his exhibitions, Nuku argues that he is making ethnographic shows. While being a contemporary artist, he works with the visual and scenographic codes that are expected of ethnographic museums, especially the merging of vitrines and collections and now the *salon* style displays.<sup>104</sup> Merging his style with that of the museum is one of the ways in which Nuku really embraces his relationships with institutions by using their language in order to tell his own story.

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<sup>103</sup> Nuku in an Instagram video shot for the exhibition *George Nuku: Oceans. Collections. Reflections*. [https://www.instagram.com/reel/Cnmyv6lKfYZ/?utm\\_source=ig\\_web\\_copy\\_link&igsh=MzRIODBiNWFIZA==](https://www.instagram.com/reel/Cnmyv6lKfYZ/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igsh=MzRIODBiNWFIZA==), last accessed on 26/09/2025.

<sup>104</sup> Personal interview with George Nuku, 23 June 2022, Weltmuseum Wien, Vienna.

Going back to Martha Buskirk's idea of the environment as a framework for the understanding of the work exhibited, it is interesting to consider Nuku's following statement in light of this specific display:

“I have brought a museum into the museum. I'm at that stage in my career, that's what I'm doing. I'm building travelling museums now, and each travelling museum has the advantage of mobility, like the ancestors on the *waka*, they have the advantage of mobility”.<sup>105</sup>

While Nuku's travelling museums are not new in his practice as his *Bottled Ocean* project exemplifies, the exhibitions in Rochefort and Vienna have really confirmed that Nuku creates modular museographies that can, not only be adapted to locations both in terms of geography and spatial occupation, but also keep the layers of their previous versions. Nuku's series *Bottled Ocean* is his best known and most used modular exhibition concept, being re-created over and over again throughout the world from various plastics and plastic bottles.<sup>106</sup> At the same time as *Bottled Ocean*, Nuku has been creating for close to twenty years “new museum environments in which the visitor [is] surrounded by the past and present — or better, where visitors [are] confronted by the past and the future at the same time” (Thomas 2022:13). In these numerous interventions, Nuku infiltrated museums by populating the vitrines with his creations coming into dialogue with the museums' collections. In most of these collaborations with institutions, Nuku's works were present in the space but only sporadically. However, several of his exhibitions to date, including one in 2011 at the Museum aan den Stroom in Antwerp (Belgium) and *George Nuku. Oceans. Collections. Reflections.*, to only mention a couple, have taken over the museum by using all elements of the exhibition spaces in a way that merges two traditions of museums: the Māori museum and the European museum.

## 2. Merging/bringing Aotearoa New Zealand into the European museum

While art history tends to consider the birth of the museum as a concept that originated in the European Renaissance with the creation of elite cabinets of curiosities (Bennett 1988; 1995; 2006), it is argued that the concept of museum was born much earlier in Ptolemaic Egypt, with the *Museion* of Alexandria (Lee 1997; Genoways & Andrei 2008), dismantling the euro-

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<sup>105</sup> Personal interview with George Nuku, 23 June 2022, Weltmuseum Wien, Vienna.

<sup>106</sup> *Bottled Ocean* was first exhibited in Taiwan in 2014 and has had fifteen occurrences ever since. Despite the importance of this project in Nuku's practice, this thesis will not look into it for the questions it addresses around plastic consumption and climate change would take us too far away from the scope of this thesis. For more information on *Bottled Ocean*: Nyssen 2020, Jacobs, 2022.

centric creation myth. Indeed, the idea of “a building or area used for exhibiting interesting objects connected with literature, art, science, history, or nature”<sup>107</sup> is not exclusive to Euro North-American conceptions but is rooted in Indigenous traditions too. Extensive research has been carried out specifically on Indigenous museums in the Pacific, trying to understand whether such a concept can be applied at all, knowing that “museumizing is heavily implicated in the construction of postcolonial national identity in the region” (Stanley 2007:7).<sup>108</sup> I want to look at how certain museum practices may have counterparts in Indigenous community life, not to deny the colonial root of ethnographic museums, but to recognise how certain modes of exhibition are inherently Indigenous.

According to scholar, writer and Māori leader Sir Sidney Moko Mead, the basic functions of the museum are “storing objects of value, exhibiting them to persons other than their producers and of being a structure that is itself valued because of how it is used and what is in it” (1983:98). In this sense, he argues that “the museum in Maori society is the carved meeting-house, the *whare whakairo*” for “it is the focus of group pride, the centre of community gatherings, the place where the dead are bade farewell and the place where visiting groups sleep” (Mead 1983:98).

*Whare whakairo* (Fig. 103) are a mid-nineteenth-century development of earlier types of housing built in Aotearoa New Zealand starting as early as the fifteenth century. According to anthropologist Roger Neich, they were “elaborated, both as a function building and as a symbol of group identity” (2001:73). Through time it “became the main vehicle for Maori visual arts” (Neich 2002:15) and has remained so to this day. Symbolically, the *whare whakairo* is “identified with the body of the chief and his ancestors” with the ridge-pole acting as the backbone of the ancestor, “equated with the genealogy of the tribal ancestors listed in a single unbroken descent line” (Neich 1996:105). Nuku plays with the various codes of the Māori meeting house in his museums’ takeover in order to redefine “a museum gallery as part of a Māori environment – a space of meeting, even confrontation, a space inhabited by ancestral treasures” (Thomas 2022:11). In doing so, Nuku makes the museum a space of encounter where mutual influence generates dialogue and transformations.

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<sup>107</sup> *Living Webster Encyclopedia Dictionary* (1973) cited in Mead 1983.

<sup>108</sup> For further literature on Indigenous museums: Eoe & Swadling 1991; Lonetree 2012; Pieris 2016.

In his 1983 text for ICOM's journal *Museum International*, Mead describes the *whare whakairo* as follows:

“Inside it will be found woodcarvings of several types, large and small.

Representatives of the illustrious ancestors line the walls. There are wall patterns in latticework and paintings on the ceilings and walls. [...]

In most modern meeting-houses will be found a collection of photographs of deceased relations. When there is a death the photographs of deceased close relatives are exhibited around the coffin and, on the death of a very important personage, cloaks, greenstone artefacts and prized traditional weapons are put on show for the duration of the mourning ceremonies [...].

Painted identifications of the ancestors on the wall indicate that the Maori housebuilders of the late nineteenth century were already moving towards the idea of a museum. In some houses the photographs are all labelled and properly identified. Feather cloaks hang in some houses, while in others books are stored.” (1983:98).

When entering the third room of the exhibition in Vienna, *Te Aonehehe* – The Natural World, the visitor was leaving behind all the imagery of the European exploration voyages that were presented in *Hunters and Collectors* to enter ‘the natural world’ of Aotearoa New Zealand. The walls were covered in a green colour enhanced by copper-coloured ‘polystyrenecarvings’<sup>109</sup> running alongside the plinths, doors and cornices of the room, both highlighting the original structure yet transforming it. In the centre of the room, a plexiglass architectural structure composed of a frontispiece with a *tekoteko* (pediment figure) from the Weltmuseum Wien collections (Inv. No. 3.804) formed an architectural sculpture (Fig. 104). In the continuity, a ridge-pole stylised as a polystyrene spine painted in white and with red *kōwhaiwhai* motifs elements were citing the ancestral genealogy system as well as the “transfer of tribal prestige from war canoes to meeting houses” which became the “new symbol of identity” through time (Neich 2001:73). From the ancestor’s spine the ribs carved out of plexiglass descended, themselves leading to glass cases containing both plexiglass images of ancestors and *taonga* from Nuku’s and the Weltmuseum Wien’s collections. At the back of this display stood an all-green altar made of plastic, plexiglass and plastic bottles showcasing an ensemble of *punamu* (greenstone) *taonga*. Covering all the walls of the *whare-whakairo*-transformed room were framed pictures originating from the Weltmuseum Wien, the Naturhistorisches Museum Vienna and several Austrian voyages’ atlases. Similar to

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<sup>109</sup> In the same manner as we talk of woodcarvings, I have chosen to talk of ‘polystyrenecarvings’ to address Nuku’s practice of making traditional Māori woodcarvings in polystyrene, one of his preferred materials.

Mead's description of the *whare whakairo* (1983), they formed a collection of images of deceased relations adorned with orange latticework, itself a symbol of genealogy. Each of these portraits (Fig. 93) was accompanied by its own number on the wall referring to a written caption with the name of each person depicted, allowing for their names to resonate when read in the space and echoing the Māori tradition of *korero* which consists in reciting names and genealogies. The images, the *kōwhaiwhai* and the names of the people represented, can be said to have acted as a "technology for recording genealogical relations" (Empson 2007: 121). Alongside these portraits, pictures of landscapes in Aotearoa New Zealand brought the natural world in, and acted as windows to the exterior of the *whare whakairo*. Neich argues that "the display of framed photographic and painted portraits" in the *whare whakairo* is "an extension of the concept of the meeting house as a representation of the genealogy of the hapu" (clan) (2001:105). These intricacies of the Māori design elements within the Austrian Imperial palace attest to how Nuku "fuse[d] both worlds – both art and traditions of décor – into one conversion" (Nuku and Blumauer 2022:101), as way of creating something that could be described as *Gesamtkunstwerk*, 'total artwork'. Rooted in 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century European aesthetics and the arts and craft movement, the *Gesamtkunstwerk* was characterised by the use of a multitude of materials and techniques to create a coherent whole. Looking at Nuku's practice in general, and at his creation of *George Nuku. Oceans. Collections. Reflections*. more specifically, this idea of 'total artwork' is a useful concept to understand how both museum and Māori living space were adapted in Vienna to not only become compatible but rather akin to one another, allowing for a space in between to exist. By making use of a variety of materials, practices and techniques, *Te Aonehehe* (The Natural World) brought the Weltmuseum Wien into an Indigenous Māori context, that of the *whare whakairo*, allowing for both types of spaces to coexist, visualising the encounter between Austrian and Māori people and being a mode of 'self-portraiture' for Nuku whose Germanic mother lineage "persists and endures within [his] psyche" (Nuku 2011:68) alongside his Pacific identity.

While I have so far explained why we can consider that Nuku has brought the *whare whakairo* into the Weltmuseum Wien both visually and materially, there is a final aspect of these meeting houses that I have yet to mention, their ritual and societal functions.

### 3. Making, encounters, creating: a path to transmission

Following from his description of the *whare whakairo* to create an analogy with the concept of museum, Mead explained how Euro-North-American institutions differ from these meeting houses.

“The essential point about a Maori meeting-house is that display is not its primary function. In the majority of cases the carved house is not open on a daily basis to tourists and casual visitors. It is a structure used by the community at various times for meetings, church services, mourning ceremonies, unveiling of burial monuments and so on. At such times the building is opened to the ‘public’ that has been drawn to each occasion. A group of people might be present in the house for a meeting that lasts only one day. This group meets in an artistic context and anyone who is bored with the talk can look at the artwork instead. Another group may sleep the night, while others may stay for several days and nights. What is important is that the people who sleep in the meeting-house are able to contemplate the art works for a much longer period of time and in a much more relaxed manner than the crowds who visit any museum in the West” (1983: 98-99).

Mead states that contrary to museum institutions, the *whare whakairo* were not originally built to be visited by tourists and casual visitors that would only admire their aesthetic qualities, even if they still became tourist sites later on. They were first and foremost built to act as community and education spaces, where their artistic aspect is rather an environment in which the life of the community happens, and that serves a larger educational purpose.<sup>110</sup> While museum exhibitions are created to be seen and visited – both for educational purposes as well as places that display art and beauty –, Nuku’s projects are indeed community and educational projects, in this sense echoing the original function of the *whare whakairo* as well as that of the museum. Before *Bottled Ocean*

“I [Nuku] had completed a huge permanent work together with members of my *whanau* [‘family’] and *hapu* [‘sub-tribe’] for our *iwi* [‘tribe’], located on our *marae* complex in my own village of Omahu. It was six weeks of intensive work among people who were all genealogically related to me.” (Nuku and Blumauer 2022:96-97)

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<sup>110</sup> A large part of learning a craft relies on observation. In this way, the *whare whakairo* acts as a place where sculpting, painting and weaving are all present and can be closely observed by the people learning the craft.

All the instances of *Bottled Ocean* to this day have “involved massive collaboration, with local communities, schools, and artists helping out” therefore enabling

“local artists and community groups to develop relationships with the institutions during my tenure and after my departure. Further projects in Taiwan, the Netherlands, Switzerland, and now here in Austria have been possible, with the elements of public assistance, participation, and engagement, in part because of the proven track record of the past projects”. (Nuku and Blumauer 2022:97)

This creative process has become key in the realisation of Nuku’s exhibitions, and testifies to the relationships between him and the host institution.

“The relationship stems from my life experience within the Māori world, in particular the *marae*. By this I mean the dynamic between hosts and visitors. This is a highly codified system, with huge attention paid to both protocols and etiquette. I am hosted by the institution, and in this they are bound to do their utmost to provide for and take care of my needs. I, in turn, as the invited guest, am bound to respect their position by giving my utmost effort in the performance of my duty (in fact, I will always go beyond). [...] In some ways, you could say that I too am a ‘museum’ or an ‘institution’, the difference being my mobility. I say this: ‘*Kia ora*, esteemed institution, I am the institution of George Nuku, it is great to meet you – let us work together”. (Nuku and Blumauer 2022:103).

Nuku positions himself as an equal to the museum institution and draws parallels between his creative practice and the operational system of the museum. He also inscribes his projects in the Māori

“concepts of *manaakitanga* – that is, hosting people as a way to nurture relationships; *whanaungatanga* – the idea of kinship, coming together in acknowledgement of our relationship with each other; and *kaitiakitanga* – the duty of care inherent in stewardship (of people, land, the environment)” (Nuku 2024:59).

By following this framework, Nuku ensures that both himself and the museum will work towards fulfilling each other’s responsibilities in the host/guest relationship. While ‘the visible part of the iceberg’ in the museum is the host building and the permanent and temporary exhibitions inside it, the people working inside the museum are mostly invisible to the visiting public, a sort of faceless identity. Similarly, what is visible of Nuku’s work is the exhibition, very visibly *his* through both stylistic replication and the title using his name as a stamp of authentication. In the same way as the *whare whakairo* is first and foremost a place

for community life, both institutions – the Weltmuseum Wien and the institution of George Nuku – are community spaces too.

The Weltmuseum Wien is composed of a director, curators, conservators, registrars, public services, various teams of security, cleaning, invigilating, welcome hosts, researchers and much more, who all together allow for the Weltmuseum Wien to exist beyond the architecture of the Hofburg palace. The Weltmuseum Wien's team as a functioning organism is one of the key elements necessary for one of Nuku's projects. But as mentioned previously, a third element is key to this realisation: a community of volunteers that Nuku calls his 'slaves of love' (Nuku & Blumauer 2022:97).

In Vienna, this community consisted of over two hundred people who came from Vienna, Austria and beyond.<sup>111</sup> On 15<sup>th</sup> June 2022, I joined the team of volunteers coordinated by Felix Abrudan, Nuku's assistant for the project. What I experienced for nine days was only a snippet of the previous three months of co-creation. Two rooms adjacent to *Te Moana Nui* were transformed into the exhibition's official workshop, while work was carried out throughout all spaces of the exhibition. During the nine days I spent at the Weltmuseum Wien until the opening of the exhibition, I spent a large part of my time stapling and gluing blue and green bottles for *Te Moana Nui* and *Te Aonehehe*. In the same way as Nuku is a master carver and other people in the Māori community are weavers, once a volunteer is good at a task, it tends to become their dedicated task. Nuku first told me what he wanted with these bottle installations before I tried to convey this to the other people joining me over the days to complete the work altogether. Thanks to this collaborative and repetitive task, I met several people who all played a part in the coming together of the exhibition, beyond their creative labour.

While the bottle installation was ongoing in *Te Moana Nui*, I realised that a woman was talking about one of the works displayed on the wall to her children who had joined her in volunteering. Looking at Nuku's version of De Sainson's plate 47 from the Atlas of the voyage of the Astrolabe, she was telling them stories about Māori creation myths. Later on, when talking to her, she told me she was a Māori artist living in Vienna who had come a few times during the few months of the creation of the exhibition. That time round, she came with her children to keep them busy during the holidays. At that moment, the environment evidently became a community space and pretext for the transmission of her knowledge,

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<sup>111</sup> A making of of the exhibition showing the collaborative process can be accessed here <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WFgwSB1-2Xo>, last accessed on 29/09/2025.

aided by the visual presence of these works, which essentially is at the core of what Nuku tries to achieve with his work:

“it’s a gift to audiences, gifting them this treasure, and saying what do you think? How do you feel? Ideally, my greatest desire is in the young audiences, they’re my greatest desire, I make no bones about it.”<sup>112</sup>

*George Nuku. Oceans. Collections. Reflections* acted in a similar way to “history books brought to life and transformed through the creative process to provide meaning and significance” (Hakiwai 1996:54). He used all the elements he had at his disposal, voyage illustrations, artefacts and contemporary creations to tell his own personal story together with that of Māori people, from their migration to Aotearoa New Zealand to today. This transmission also happened by ways that went beyond the materiality of the exhibition and the exhibition-making.

In preparation for the exhibition opening on 22 June 2022, Kane Harnett-Mutu a Māori man based in Copenhagen, joined the exhibition’s team and was entrusted with teaching *haka* to the staff of the Weltmuseum Wien and the team of volunteers. “The form of ritual being used to open a modern art exhibition is virtually the same as that used for a new building on a marae” (Mead 2003:264), hence all elements of this ritual opening were needed for the opening of *George Nuku. Oceans. Collections. Reflections*. After learning the *haka* as a group, other elements to the ceremony needed to be arranged. Once more, the collective gluing and stapling of bottles witnessed key discussions in the realisation of the exhibition. On this day, I was carrying out my usual task with two other young women who live in Vienna, Anna and Liz<sup>113</sup> and Kane, our *haka* instructor. The usual conversations of getting to know one another led us to talk about Anna who was an opera singer. In that instant, Kane’s excitement was palpable and told her she *had* to perform the *Karanga*<sup>114</sup> for the exhibition opening. He proceeded to teach the words and melody of the *Karanga* to Anna, whose powerful voice resonated within the walls of *Te Moana Nui*. We were all moved by this impromptu performance. In teaching Anna to be the *kaikaranga* (caller), Kane was ensuring that all elements of the *pōwhiri* (welcome) were performed. The minutes that followed led to further organisation of the opening with Liz, of Tongan and Austrian descent, offering to bring her *tapa* skirt and belt so that Anna could wear a traditional Pacific dress that would echo the importance of the opening ceremony that was to unfold. On the day of the opening, Liz’s

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<sup>112</sup> Personal interview with George Nuku, 23 June 2022, Weltmuseum Wien, Vienna.

<sup>113</sup> Some names have been changed in order to respect requests of anonymisation.

<sup>114</sup> The *Karanga* is a woman’s call performed in ceremonial context before entering the *marae*.

mother brought her traditional dress and together, they dressed Anna. In preparation for the ceremony, I was given the role of instructing the minister of his reciprocal duty when Nuku was to challenge him during the ceremony “to test the intentions of the visiting delegation” following the tradition of the *wero* (challenge) ritual (Jacobs 2009:123). These sets of ritual encounters organised during the ceremony existed in light of the host/guest relationship in order to “effect the fullness of Manaaki [give hospitality], during and after visitation to the marae [ceremonial place]” (Duncan & Rewi 2018:122), whereby the host was not the Weltmuseum Wien anymore, but George Nuku, Kane Harnett and the volunteers.

On the evening of the exhibition opening, after a final group rehearsal with both Kane and George, we were all ready to start the ceremony. Soon after, the exhibition’s *hapu* walked outside the doors of the Weltmuseum Wien, walking across the Volksgarten to reach the Theseus temple where *Bottled Ocean 2122* was on display (Fig. 105). The first opening was performed there, with both song and challenge of the *karanga* and the *haka*. After walking back to the Weltmuseum Wien, Anna sang another *karanga* before we all entered the rooms of the exhibition forming a procession. It is only after we walked across all the rooms of the exhibition and performed a final *haka* that the exhibition was open for the invited public to visit. These opening ceremonies have been a central aspect of Nuku’s exhibitions since he started working with museums in Europe in 2006, inverting the host and guest relationship.

Considering once more what defines a *whare whakairo*, the communal life that happened during the exhibition testifies to the transposition of the Māori meeting house to Nuku’s Viennese exhibition, as materiality, aesthetics and functions were carried through. The Weltmuseum Wien acted as *pae*, “a demarcation between the known and the unknown; between the familiar and the unfamiliar” (Jahnke 1996:194), allowing the volunteers to encounter and experience arts, (hi)stories, and people regardless of their knowledge and experiences. According to Nuku’s assistant Felix Abrudan, “the exhibition spaces still whisper with the echoes of our efforts, if you listen carefully” (2022:108), embedding *within* the space, the communal effort of creation. Referring to the *whare whakairo*, Mead argues that “the art in the house is not there only for contemplation but to feel, to change the behaviour of the beholders and to frame the space in which the activities of the people occur. Such an artistic environment encourages respectful behaviour from all who enter the house” (Mead 1986:202). Essentially, following Mead’s statement, while the exhibition certainly had an impact on visitors, its imprint on the volunteers was much greater, whether they spent a few hours, a day, or three months creating alongside George Nuku, due to their personal involvement for longer periods of time with the art. The exhibition was created for the public,

for the artist's stories to be told. But as the meeting house closes its doors to the public for community life to happen, it is arguable that the communal life of the Weltmuseum Wien's *whare whakairo* mostly took place before the exhibition opened its doors to the public, when it was still in the making. I have argued elsewhere (Debrosse 2026) that not only can George Nuku's travelling museums be thought of as *whare whakairo* – thought of as museums by Mead (1983) – but that his collaborative practice can be paralleled with the social organisation of the *waka*. As both a symbol of Māori genealogy and Māori seafaring, the *waka* metaphor is helpful to think of Nuku's and the volunteers' interdependency for the making of the exhibition. Going back to Buskirk's quote at the beginning of this chapter, she speaks of the impact of the surrounding environment in the experience of the art and the viewer's body (2005:21). In taking part in the making of Nuku's travelling museums, by embarking on his *waka*, people got to experience the art, again and again, seeing it every time in a new light, enriched by the past experiences in making, seeing, and being surrounded by the Māori environment that Nuku created by merging museum, *whare whakairo* and *kaupapa Māori* (Māori approach).

So far, I have considered how George Nuku was able to adapt the concept of the travelling museum that he built in Rochefort to the environment of Vienna and Austria's history, especially in relation to Aotearoa New Zealand. I have also shown how this adaptation was not solely relying on the European museum but building on Māori concepts and understandings of the museum too. I will now look at how another artist, Brook Andrew, used archival material together with museums and galleries across Europe to spread his critique of human remains collecting by adapting his archival sculpture *Vox/Anatomy of a Body Record: Beyond Tasmania* (2013) to their environments.

### III) Brook Andrew: voicing colonial collecting and archival recording

The exhibition *YOYI! Care, Repair, Heal* was open at the Gropius Bau in Berlin from September 2022 to January 2023. It was co-curated by artists Brook Andrew, Kader Attia and Giscard Bouchotte as well as curators Natasha Ginwala, Bárbara Rodríguez Muñoz and Stephanie Rosenthal and showcased 25 invited artists and collectives. Created as a “coming

together in celebration and mourning”, the exhibition aimed to “critically challenge, re-invent, expand, perpetuate and disavow notions of care, repair and healing”.<sup>115</sup>

*YOYI* is a word from the Tiwi Islands in Northern Australia which is “the call to place”, here used as a communal and collective call to the exhibition as a place, to explore the themes of care, repair, and healing.<sup>116</sup> In the suite of rooms, the eighth exhibition space presented the work of Brook Andrew. The large palatial room of the former decorative arts museum building showcased two of Andrew’s works. One of his latest works at the time, a three-channel video installation of his play *GABAN* (2022) and one of his recurring works since its first presentation in Paris in 2013 for Galerie Natalie Obadia, *Anatomy of a Body Record: Beyond Tasmania* (2013). In this exhibition, their adjunct presentation transformed the works into one installation titled *GABAN | Anatomy of a Body Record: Beyond Tasmania*. One part of this installation has been re-exhibited through different versions since 2013. It is the changes of this installation over time and its adaptations to the different exhibition settings that will be studied now.

### 1. *Vox: Beyond Tasmania | Anatomy of a Body Record: Beyond Tasmania*

Before being exhibited in Berlin, Andrew’s installation existed in different forms. There exist two versions of this work, one that was created for the exhibition *52 Portraits. Vox: Beyond Tasmania* at Tolarno Galleries in Melbourne from June to July 2013, titled *Vox: Beyond Tasmania* (Fig. 106) and accompanied by the *52 Portraits* series. Both works were respectively acquired by the National Gallery of Victoria in Melbourne, in 2014 and 2017. The second version of this work is titled *Anatomy of a Body Record: Beyond Tasmania* (Fig. 107) and was first exhibited in France by Galerie Natalie Obadia in Paris from November to December 2013 alongside the series *52 Portraits* in the exhibition *Anatomie de la mémoire du corps: Au-delà de la Tasmanie*. Both these installations consist of a glass case built with a wooden frame and wooden legs which are reminiscent of Victorian display cases. While the case of *Vox: Beyond Tasmania* is in the shape of a cube with short legs and two glass plates – one in the middle of the case and one at the bottom – allowing to display objects on both levels, the case for *Anatomy of a Body Record: Beyond Tasmania* is rectangular and built on

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<sup>115</sup> <https://www.berlinerfestspiele.de/en/gropius-bau/programm/2022/ausstellungen/yoyi-care-repair-heal>, last accessed on 26/09/2025.

<sup>116</sup> Brook Andrew interviewed by Magnus Elias Rosengarted in the podcast episode *YOYI! Voices: Brook Andrew*, <https://mediathek.berlinerfestspiele.de/en/gropius-bau/2022/yoyi-voices-brook-andrew>, last accessed on 29/09/2025.

high legs, placing the display at eye level for the visitor, and with a single-story display. In each of these cases, the side of the vitrine is pierced with a circular hole that connects the case to a large wooden gramophone horn. As for what these vitrines contain, in both versions and in each of their re-exhibitions, a human skeleton was displayed in the case alongside a series of books, magazines, photographs, artefacts and storage boxes which are mostly part of Andrew's personal archive. Depending on the exhibition in which these installations were shown, the carefully assembled artefacts within it were adjusted by Andrew in order to create a site-specific collage of Powerful Objects that can be adapted and attuned to the historical specificities of each place and location.

Both installations are materialisations of Andrew's encounter with University of Melbourne's first Professor of Anatomy Richard Berry's 1909 book *Dioptrographic Tracings in Four Normae of Fifty-Two Tasmanian Crania*. This publication which encapsulated Berry's phrenologist studies reminded Andrew of when he saw the skull of an Australian Aboriginal person originating from New South Wales in the storage of the Royal Albert Memorial Museum in Exeter, UK when he was there for a residency in 1996. To bring these traumatic and violent experiences into the reality of each viewer of his installations, Andrew placed a human skeleton inside the vitrine, with a gramophone horn in front of the vitrine where the skull was placed. National Gallery of Victoria curator Judith Ryan argues that the gramophone horn acts as an amplifier and "gives voice to these fifty-two stolen crania of the violated and deceased" (2017:25) drawn in 1909 by Richard Berry. Although exhibiting human remains in museums was common in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, the practice has been questioned in light of decolonial discussions, the advent of The Human Tissue Act<sup>117</sup> and new legal frameworks so that museums have been largely working towards the removal of human remains from their display in consultation with members of the originating communities.<sup>118</sup> While encountering human remains still happens in museums, it is rarer to see them in contemporary art settings. Beyond the general practice of human collecting, Andrew referred specifically to the "pan-international practice of collecting Aboriginal skulls as trophies of a 'primitive' and 'dying

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<sup>117</sup> The Human Tissue Act (2004) is a legislation for England, Wales and Northern Island that was established in order to "regulate activities concerning the removal, storage, use and disposal of human tissue", which is "defined as material that has come from a human body and consists of, or includes, human cells". <https://www.hta.gov.uk/guidance-professionals/codes-practice-standards-and-legislation/legislation>, last accessed on 17/04/2026.

<sup>118</sup> See the current guidelines on the exhibition of human remains inside museums in the *ICOM Code of Ethics for Museums* which can be found here: <https://icom.museum/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/ICOM-code-En-web.pdf>, last consulted on 16/09/2025; and in the Museums Association *Code of Ethics* which can be found here: <https://media.museumsassociation.org/app/uploads/2025/08/14133715/HS546-MA-Code-of-Ethics.pdf>, last accessed on 17/04/2026. To learn more on human remains inside museums, see Bodenstein et al. 2022; Biers & Stringer Clay 2023; Debrosse 2023a, pp. 77-79.

race” (Ryan 2017:24). What he did was to display a skeleton that was gifted to him by a friend whose brother-in-law studied medicine at the University of Melbourne in the mid-twentieth century.<sup>119</sup> However, the specific information regarding the skeleton is kept from visitors, thus leaving them to make their own interpretations and critique, and preventing them to truly reflect on the ethics and politics of display of human remains if they are not already familiar with them. In fact, in 2013, the title of the work *Anatomy of a Body Record: Beyond Tasmania* together with the skeleton’s display led people to think that the remains on display were those of an Aboriginal Tasmanian (Barthe 2020:109). This ‘trick’ of the installation was reinforced by the encounter of the viewer with the skull devoid of a glass surface when looking straight into the gramophone horn: there, the hollowed-out glass panel made the viewer feel how disturbing this encounter with human remains is, as was experienced by Andrew in 1996. Indeed, as put by Steph Berns, “glass display cases distance and dislocate objects from their pre-museum contexts” (2016:153), thus transforming what they contain into museum objects and making them undergo an act of ‘museumification’ (Ames 1992:23). While glass cases are now made to be as close as possible to being invisible so that they don’t obstruct the viewer’s experience with its content, Brook Andrew purposefully chose a wooden case reminiscent of a “bygone age of display” (Berns 2016:155) in order to directly reference the collecting and displaying practices from the Renaissance to the Victorian period. In turn, Andrew played with both codes of art and artifacts displayed in vitrines “as precious and distant to the touch, to the smell, to the bodies living on the other side of the glass” (Carroll La 2011:229). However, the hollowed-out panel conflicted with the codes of the museum display which present remains as scientific and ethnographic specimens. In doing so, the installation acted not only as discursive tool about the display of human remains and Andrew’s experience of the skull in Exeter, but as a recreation of Andrew’s encounter with it in the storage. Art historian Rex Butler argues that if it were only for the vitrine, Andrew’s work could be mistaken for “an exhibit of anthropology” (2020 np). According to him, it is the gramophone horn that transforms the case into an artwork thanks to its ability to metaphorically ‘amplify’ the work’s original message:

“It takes what happens inside the vitrine out into the world, making its secret public. It has the implication of transforming what would be inexplicable, contradictory and even forbidden [the display of human remains] within the vitrine into a form of

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<sup>119</sup> Brook Andrew, email to author, 10 January 2022.

publicly accessible discourse. It would be as though it amplifies the vitrine in the sense of making it clearer, less ambiguous, straightening it out” (Butler 2020 np).

Butler also adds another layer, by stating that in turn, the gramophone horn can act as a hearing aid so that the work can also be impacted by the visitors that see it and speak around it (2020 np). It is worth mentioning that the gramophone horn also referenced a 1903 photograph of Tasmanian elder Fanny Cochrane Smith, who was using a gramophone for the recording of songs on wax cylinders in the Flinders Island (Ryan 2024:36). Taking into consideration the different roles and meanings of the gramophone in the installation, we can argue that the work is not only discursive but truly dialogic.

As mentioned earlier, *Vox/Anatomy of a Body Record: Beyond Tasmania*<sup>120</sup> are installations which are built around an assemblage of Powerful Objects. This term, which includes the human skeleton, was coined by Andrew in order to refer to “objects or artworks in the museums that [...] have the power to speak outside of and transcend Western museological labels and systems” (Andrew 2021:128). Instead of the traditional mode of information dissemination in the museum by means of museum texts, Andrew relies on the archive paraphernalia that he places in the purpose-built vitrine to act as transmitters. Some of the elements exhibited in *Anatomy of a Body Record: Beyond Tasmania* (Fig. 107) include books such as *The Native Races of the Empire* by Sir Godfrey Lagden (1924), a French translation of *The Golden Bough* by James George Frazer (1922) and *Britain in the Pacific Islands* by W. P. Morrell (1960). The common denominator of these publications is that they are all related to colonial history. While as books they are textual elements, they were presented in the case for the power embedded in their object form, rather than *because* they are textual elements that can convey written information to the viewer. Yet, the words embedded in them do convey stories that Andrew purposefully chose to highlight by means of their exhibition. Interestingly, in *Anatomy of a Body Record: Beyond Tasmania*, books are the most represented type of artefact exhibited. They were displayed in a variety of ways: closed, giving visibility to the title and author; open showing text; open showing illustrations, especially black and white photographs; piled up, as elevation for the skull to be visible through the gramophone horn; or on either edge of the book where elements of the skeleton, photographs or other small objects rest.

In *Vox: Beyond Tasmania* (Fig 106), although a human skeleton was also exhibited, the composition of objects was centred around the display of a photocopy of Richard Berry’s

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<sup>120</sup> For general reference to both versions of the installation, I will use the title *Vox/Anatomy of a record: Beyond Tasmania*, to preclude the repetition of both similar titles.

book *Dioptographic Tracings of fifty-Two Tasmanian Crania* (1909), and an assemblage of archival boxes and mixed media: books, printed papers, film bobbins, glass plates or negatives, a stone axe, a shield and a pair of grinding stones. In this specific display, the story was more closely tied to Australia through the figure of Berry, the shield, axe and grinding stones, while in *Anatomy of a Body Record: Beyond Tasmania* the story told was that of a broader European and colonial practice. Yet, in both installations, the role played by museums in this collecting process was highlighted through the wooden glass case and assemblage of mixed media. Due to the different contexts, both the story and its telling in *Vox/Anatomy of a Body Record: Beyond Tasmania* had to be adapted to the local history and presumed knowledge and understanding of the visitors. Their modular aspect has therefore been key in their re-exhibition, whether in France, Australia, Spain or Germany.

The installations *Vox/Anatomy of a Body Record: Beyond Tasmania* were never exhibited as stand-alone pieces, but alongside the series *52 Portraits* (Fig. 47). Derived from Andrew's series *Gun-metal Grey* (Fig. 45) realised in 2007, *52 Portraits* is a series of fifty-two photographic portraits printed on a foil and cotton material, that depict

“unknown people from across the globe who have endured colonial duress, subjugation and judgement [that] mirror and humanise the fifty-two Tasmanian skulls [drawn by Berry] by rendering them visible, as flesh and blood, and serve to universalise the experiences of colonialism” (Ryan 2017:25).

The original photographs used in *52 Portraits* were found in archives by Andrew while visiting the Royal Anthropological Institute in London, the Pitt Rivers Museum at Oxford University and the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology at Cambridge University (Butler 2020). Brought together in *52 Portraits*, they represent the practice of ethnographic photography and more specifically of the racial photography of ‘types’. Commenting on such practice, Elizabeth Edwards explains that

“photographically, the ‘type’ is expressed in a way which isolates, suppressing context and thus individuality. The specimen is in scientific isolation, physically, and metaphorically, the plain background accentuates physical characteristics and denies context. The meaning and ‘reality’ of the subject can be given only by those who interpret the visual evidence” (1990:241).

In exhibiting *52 Portraits* with *Vox/Anatomy of a Body Record: Beyond Tasmania*, Andrew ties the stories of the people in the photographs with the narratives created in the vitrines. The display of these portraits on the wall by Andrew also allows for these often-unidentified faces to be seen, recognised and remembered. The restricted access to these images, both in private

and public collections, is often one of the reasons why people are not identified. Through this process of transforming material and size – from small photographs to large-printed foil canvas – anthropologist Marcia Langton argues that Andrew “restitute[s] the people represented ... [by] giving them hyper-real life in his own work” (Langton 2008:38). Recently, *Vox: Beyond Tasmania* was displayed in the exhibition *65,000 Years: A Short History of Australian Art* (30 May – 22 November 2025) at the Potter Museum of Art in Melbourne. After a conversation between Andrew and the National Gallery of Victoria who owns the work, the decision was made to scan the human skeleton and create a 3D-clear acrylic print of the work in order to replace the original bones in the case (Fig. 108). Andrew speaks of this change in *Vox: Beyond Tasmania* as “an act of reciprocity and repatriation”<sup>121</sup> which echoes and addresses the ongoing discussions regarding the ethics of displaying human remains in museums.

## 2. *Really Useful Knowledge – Splinters of Monuments: A Solid Memory of the Forgotten Plains of our Trash and Obsessions*

After their first respective exhibitions in France and Australia, *Vox/Anatomy of a Body Record: Tasmania* was exhibited in Madrid at the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía (2014-2015) for the exhibition *Really Useful Knowledge*, in 2017 and 2018 in two exhibitions at the National Gallery of Victoria in Melbourne, first in Andrew’s solo exhibition *The Right to Offend is Sacred* and later in *Colony: Australia 1770-1861/Frontier Wars*, in Berlin at the Gropius Bau for the exhibition *YOYI! Care, Repair, Heal* (2022-2023) and in Melbourne again for the exhibition *65,000 Years: A Short History of Australia Art* at the Potter Museum of Art in 2025.

In Madrid, *52 Portraits* and *Anatomy of a Body Record: Beyond Tasmania* were exhibited alongside classical Spanish paintings from the Reina Sofía collections, objects from Andrew’s own archive, and collections and archives from the Museo de America and the Museo Nacional de Antropología both located in Madrid. It was displayed in a suite of two rooms covered by Andrew in black and white diamond and zigzag motifs which are Wiradjuri motifs that Andrew inherited from his mother’s side, “notably the geometric incisions on warrior’s shields of resistance and on dendroglyphs (carved trees) cut down from Country” (Ryan 2017:15-16). The display *Splinters of Monuments: A Solid Memory of the Forgotten*

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<sup>121</sup> Personal communication with Brook Andrew on 21 August 2025.

*Plains of our Trash and Obsessions* (2014) comprised the installations mentioned before, alongside an added table-like wooden glass case on high legs where paper archives (photographs, books, magazines) were assembled with small objects like a film box or a fan and various types of graphic works (both artworks and archives), including Spanish works created during the colonial period, which were framed and displayed on the black and white painted walls (Fig. 109). Bringing together “Spanish, Australian, and international institutional and community material regarding ‘dark’ or hidden stories” and time periods allowed for the creation of a “memorial of objects and artworks” (Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia 2014:194) to the colonisation of the Pacific, addressing the role of Spain in this endeavour. The title of the work *Splinters of Monuments* is evocative of what is left of colonisation: things that are sharp, painful and persistent, hard to get rid of. While they can be thought of as tiny pieces, these ‘splinters’ – here all of the archives and objects that were kept or retrieved from, or produced during the colonial period – are part of a bigger whole. Their lasting nature and presence allows for this ‘solid memory of the forgotten plains of our trash and obsessions’ to become more than traces of the past in the present, rather the past that is piercing through to the present.

In order to address these little-known stories of Spain in the Pacific, Andrew decided to rely on histories that are part of the local and national memory, like the Spanish Civil War or the colonial history of the Americas (Barthe 2020). For example, the series *52 Portraits* was juxtaposed with casta paintings (Fig. 110). Started in the 15<sup>th</sup> century with the conquest of the Americas, casta paintings were used to depict social castes based on racial classifications in a way that is similar to the racial ‘type’ of photography that was used in the making of *52 Portraits*. By creating a direct parallel between these histories more familiar to the Spanish audience and that of colonisation in Australia, Andrew tapped into people’s knowledge and affects, encouraging them to learn and experience comparatively with a history that is not generally well known. Taking things even further than with his first two exhibitions of *Vox/Anatomy of a Body Record: Beyond Tasmania*, in Madrid the installation was immersed in Australia’s history and legacy through the archives and thanks to the diamond pattern – a signature of Andrew’s work that “epitomises the importance in his practice of transforming ancient visual markings of identity and prestige into hard-edge modern forms that are graphic in their visibility” (Ryan 2017:16). This was present on every wall of the installation, creating a delineated space within the rest of the exhibition. By using the full exhibition including the walls, Andrew created a complete environment, which is similar to how Nuku took over the Weltmuseum Wien, so that the visitor was immersed and

experienced the work surrounded by visual codes, conceptual and historical cues that expanded the work's meaning and reach.

### 3. *Vox/Anatomy of a Body Record: Beyond Tasmania* and the *Boîte-en-Valise*

The re-exhibition of an artwork or an installation is based on the re-creation of something that has already existed as well as on its adaptation to the new space and context of exhibition.

With *Vox/Anatomy of a Body Record* there were already two existing versions of an installation that were created concomitantly to serve two different exhibition spaces: Tolarno Galleries and Galerie Nathalie Obadia which are two of the galleries which represent Andrew's artistic practice. Each work was made with structural elements – the vitrine and the gramophone horn – and interchangeable elements – all of the objects inside the vitrine. Together, these elements formed the works *Vox/Anatomy of a Body Record: Beyond Tasmania* which is comparable to an archive, a small museum or even a microcosm. Although most of the paraphernalia in *Vox/Anatomy of a Body Record: Beyond Tasmania* exist as a whole in the Brook Andrew Archive, it is their public presentation which binds them visually and publicly as an assemblage to be experienced as a whole. As briefly presented in the introduction to this thesis, archive work is one of the defining practices of the broad practice of archive art, and is here merging together with Andrew's archival art practice.

In 1935, French artist Marcel Duchamp created the concept of the *Boîte-en-Valise* (literally Box-in-Suitcase) which consists in a small box that contains sixty-nine miniature reproductions of the most famous and representative works of Duchamp (according to himself) made between 1910 and 1937 (Fig. 1). In 1941, the first *Boîte-en-Valise* of a series of three hundred and twelve was made. It was conceived for the dissemination of his art *as a whole* as he considered that “showing one painting in one place and another somewhere else is just like amputating one finger or a leg each time” (Duchamp in Bonk 1989:18-19). With the creation of the *Boîte-en-Valise*, Duchamp had control over the narrative told through his works thanks to a careful selection which became an ensemble, a chosen format which was both the container of the works and the work itself, and a limited production so that he could keep control over who could be granted access to this constructed narrative-in-a-box (Bonk 1989).

While *Vox/Anatomy of a Body Record: Beyond Tasmania* is not a work showcasing miniature versions of Andrew's other works, I believe there is an interesting parallel to draw with Duchamp's *Boîte-en-Valise* especially as Duchamp's work is considered as one of the

precursors of archive art (Schaffner 1995; Enwezor 2008; Callahan 2022). First and foremost, Andrew's choice of format for this work is also a box, the most common of museum boxes, the glass case. Like the box in the *Boîte-en-Valise*, the glass case in *Vox/Anatomy of a Body Record: Beyond Tasmania* acts as a container while being also an intrinsic part of the work itself. For Duchamp, the suitcase aspect of the box was an echo to something that is compact and can travel, which was the main reason for the making of the *Boîte-en-Valise*. But for Andrew, the choice of the glass case is a direct reference to the classical museum display style used by ethnographic and natural history museums. The glass case has become a symbol of these institutions as “the ‘inbetween’ that distinguishes the museum from other spaces in which social and sacred practices engage material objects” (von Zinnenburg Carroll 2017a:24). While for Berns the glass case “becomes a marker of time – separating the past from the present” (2016:65), Khadija von Zinnenburg Carroll argues that “in its inbetweenness, the vitrine exits the flow of time” (2017a:24). Arguably, the vitrine created for Andrew's installation acts as a time capsule, both marking time and at the same time escaping it, by navigating between past, present and future thanks to the content of the case and the reparative possibilities that the work offers.

Similar to Duchamp's selection of his works for the *Boîte-en-Valise*, Andrew carefully chose each of the displayed objects within his archives to tell both “Australian and international histories and stimulate new perspectives on power structures, armed conflicts, historical amnesia, stereotyping and complicity” (Ryan 2017:24). While Duchamp's selection was solely a selection of his own works, Andrew chose from his own archive, the Brook Andrew Archive (BAA), which is a “growing collection of documents, objects, ephemera and research collected by Brook Andrew which inform and are used in his installations”.<sup>122</sup> In choosing from books, prints, photographs and other objects which, while not made by him, are his, Andrew selects the pieces which are (according to him) the best ones for the story he is trying to tell. Like the *Boîte-en-Valise*, *Vox/Anatomy of a Body Record: Beyond Tasmania*'s message is not characterized by each individual element contained, but by its ensemble, which Andrew characterises as an ‘assembly of histories’ (Gardner 2017:91). In creating these archival assemblages, Andrew explores the possibilities of the archive as a means for archival recontextualization to go beyond institutional critique, and engages with a critique of the practices of anthropology.

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<sup>122</sup> [https://archive.brookandrew.com/baa\\_archive](https://archive.brookandrew.com/baa_archive), last accessed on 26/09/2025.

The last aspect of Duchamp's *Boîte-en-Valise* mentioned earlier is its production, the bringing together of the artwork's miniature reproduction with the box container, as well as its series reproduction for dissemination. In *Vox/Anatomy of a Body Record: Beyond Tasmania*, there exists the same dependency between the container and its contents. It is only by combining the glass case with the archives that Andrew disrupts the elements that define an archive, often thought of as "discrete . . . , stored, retrieved in specific places" (Batchen 2000:183). If the archive was presented without the case, this 'assembly of histories' and Powerful Objects would lack their context. It is only thanks to the vitrine that reframes the archive as "desirable, aesthetics [and] elevated objects" (von Zinnenburg Carroll 2017a:24), and the gramophone horn which is what makes it an artwork (Butler 2020), that the story told by Andrew can be complete. Paired with the skeleton, the gramophone horn and the 52 *Portraits* series, *Vox/Anatomy of a Body Record: Beyond Tasmania* turns into a travelling museum which, like the *Boîte-en-Valise* is carefully distributed to museums and art galleries – and adapted to each location by injecting new archival sources – so that markers of untold stories of colonisation and collecting are disseminated and talked about, at a scale which is only growing larger at each re-exhibition. Characterised as "installations of spectacle and substance" by curator Judith Ryan (2017:17), Andrew's installations act as temporary monuments to these forgotten histories.

#### 4. *GABAN | Anatomy of a Body Record: Beyond Tasmania*

In all its variations, *Vox/Anatomy of a Body Record: Beyond Tasmania* was always presented alongside 52 *Portraits* as well as other archival objects, objects, works and graphics in Madrid and Melbourne (2017). But while these last two presentations of the work came almost as a paroxysm with the installation taking over the gallery space, including the walls through large frescos, the exhibition of *GABAN | Anatomy of a Body Record: Beyond Tasmania* in Berlin at the *YOYI! Care, Repair, Heal* exhibition took a new turn.

Created between 1877 and 1881, the Martin-Gropius-Bau is a neo-Renaissance palace-like building first created to house the decorative arts museum. Later on, it also housed the Museum for Prehistory and Early History as well as the East Asian Art Collection. Today, the Gropius Bau is a gallery dedicated to temporary exhibitions of modern and contemporary art that are accompanied with a programme of live performances. On the day of the exhibition opening, one of Andrew's latest works was performed: his play *GABAN* (strange). Originally written for his PhD thesis (Andrew 2021) at Oxford University, *GABAN* is a "post-traumatic

play that summons a number of interlinked stories concerning the mess of the colonial fall-out”.<sup>123</sup> As *GABAN* was created to “imagine a world beyond the trauma of colonisation”, it should always be performed in places that are evocative of this trauma, like “museums, asylum centres, prisons, cultural centres, religious halls or Indigenous and other public spaces related to this trauma” in order to “activate aspects of the script” (Andrew 2021:17). For this reason, the Gropius Bau was an appropriate place for the play to be presented. It was performed in the gallery space during the opening on 15 September 2022 (Fig. 111), as well as on eight other occasions with the last performance being on 3 October 2022. Beyond these in-person representations, *GABAN* was shown throughout the exhibition’s running time, thanks to a 3-channel video titled *GABAN* (2022), running time 1h30.

At first glimpse, the room where *GABAN* and *Anatomy of a Body Record: Beyond Tasmania* were exhibited is a pretty simple, all-white room with obscured windows, with the wooden floors, cornices and ceiling ornaments revealing the building’s Bauhaus architecture. When entering the room, the first thing that the visitor encounters is the video installation (Fig. 112) *GABAN* while *Anatomy of a Body Record: Beyond Tasmania* is visible behind the three screens. For the first time, the installation is presented without the *52 Portrait* series with, in its place, the video installation *GABAN*.

The cast of *GABAN* is composed of thirteen characters: NARRATOR – gudhingan; TREE – guulany; PHOTO – bunda-nha; MASSACRE – balubunirra; GUILT – dhulu-ga-rra; MUSEUM – ngiilinya; WITNESS – nginyundha; JUDGE – ngayamaldhaani; CROWN – walanbangan; TIME – guwayu; EVIDENCE – mughanha; MEMORY – winha-nga-nha; PUBLIC. Together, they embody the elements which were instrumental in the construction of museum institutions. PHOTO, WITNESS, TREE, MEMORY and EVIDENCE are the captives of MASSACRE, MUSEUM, CROWN and TIME, of which GUILT, JUDGE, PUBLIC and NARRATOR are the instruments.

*GABAN* (2022) was filmed in Berlin at the Humboldt Forum, in order to capture through space the colonial legacy and anchor the characters into a place which already contains and embodies all of the characters that are part of *GABAN*. In personifying PHOTO, TREE, MEMORY and MUSEUM, Andrew voices the trauma created by the colonial museum institution<sup>124</sup>:

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<sup>123</sup> <https://www.brookandrew.com/new-gallery-1>, last accessed on 28/09/2025.

<sup>124</sup> TREE refers to the Australian Aboriginal trees from South-East Australia which are adorned with dendroglyphs. Named guulany, tarrang, marara, or dhulu, depending on their place of origin, these trees were cut and sent to museum institutions across the world including the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford, the MEG in Geneva and the Museum Der Kulturen in Basel (Switzerland). Alongside Brian Martin and Kimberley Moulton,

“TREE

I remember being on the ocean. That swaying feeling was strange... those rough endless moments of sickness. I had died a thousand times. I saw smoke swirling around me – it being sung within me. My body pulled apart in many sections, the way the brain thinks about what to have for breakfast, is it sugar or meth. [...]

It wasn't until I met PHOTO and we took a ferry together up the Thames, or was it the Seine? There was a great hall of light starting down through high windows and the smell of thousands of bodies rushing and glaring. A great exhibition with many other objects, just like us, thousands of us all lost and all cut to pieces. We came from all parts of the world, from ancient places. These memories, they are flooding back to me via MEMORY. In that moment of remembering, I slumped to the floor – to get closer to the creaking wooden boards of the ship, its sound was like my own bones and skin, creaking, never stop creaking. And the boards spoke to me, they asked me who my mother was. I said I am the marara and I wept. PHOTO... their arm around me, hugging my limbless splintered wooden body. It was then that I realised I was never going back, to the ngalan [light].” (Andrew 2021:45-46)

“MUSEUM (cont.)

I the MUSEUM will protect and keep TREE safe from PHOTO's lunacy. But do not despair I will care for PHOTO, even in this deranged state, otherwise PHOTO will perish without me, without my hoarding, without the enterprise of solid structures and inners and moments of protection in this very institute.

I implore the living to protect these rare specimens, I mean, I mean, these Powerful Objects of an indiscriminate period – locked away forever – protected forever. [...]

MUSEUM

I am the saviour of this calamity. I am the master of the house of collections.”  
(Andrew 2021:54-56)

Each of these dialogues evoke the collecting process in which MUSEUM and PHOTO took part and which TREE was a victim of. In their dialogue TREE evokes MEMORY, which is set by Andrew as “the accumulated memory of those who have forgotten who they are or were taken away from who they were” (2021:22). As for TREE, their character “is based on the millions of Indigenous cultural objects that were stolen and collected during colonial periods and now exist in museums” (Andrew 2021:19). Thanks to the voicing of TREE's experience, Andrew gave life to the holdings of museums and revealed the possessive and over-protective nature of MUSEUM and PHOTO in wanting to preserve everything in eternity.

While personified in the play, it is easy to transpose these characters into *Anatomy of a Body Record: Beyond Tasmania* which visitors can see in the background, between the screens of the video installation (Fig. 113). Like the previous displays of *Vox/Anatomy of a*

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amongst other people, Brook Andrew has been working on the memory that is tied to these trees kept in museum collections. In 2023, the exhibition *More than a Tarrang (Tree): Memory, Material & Cultural Agency* was held at the Bunjilaka Aboriginal Cultural Centre in Melbourne. In 2024-2025, a dhulu kept in the Museum Der Kulturen in Basel was returned to Australia. To learn more about Australian carved trees see: Andrew et al. 2020; Andrew 2021; Morton 2024; Martin & Neath 2025.

*Body Record: Beyond Tasmania*, the vitrine ending in a wooden gramophone horn is filled with an entangled assemblage of photographs, skeleton, small objects, books and other archival elements which can all be understood as TREE (Fig. 114). While in its previous displays the elements within the vitrine were completed by 52 *Portraits* on the wall, here there is a coming to life of the archival sculpture through the video installation as well as through the bodies of the cast members when the play was performed within the space of the Gropius Bau. The presence of both *Anatomy of a Body Record: Beyond Tasmania* and *GABAN* allowed for a direct visualisation of each other: the elements of the glass case came to life in the play, and the elements on which the play's character is based, are visible in the archival sculpture. Beyond their mutual echo, the public was invited to take part in this installation, not only through looking and listening, but also by questioning these power relations and their own role in them:

“PHOTO

MUSEUM, we're not your ornamental history... your obsession is gammin [pretend]... a few hundred years in the making. Round and round in circles. [...] The true meaning of us Powerful Objects is not here! Not in this dizzying labyrinth! Even a hysterical spinning snorting child would see no pain for they, just like this PUBLIC, are under your highly strung glamour – like your stupid PUBLIC.

(To PUBLIC) You, pretending not to know, these stories – this colonial hole, this mess.

TREE has confessed another memory... a thousand times in another boring meeting in this madhouse!?

(To MUSEUM) You, pretending we have no provenance, no MEMORY and no other life. Your lies hidden inside that pot of gold (pointing to MUSEUM's desk).

(To TREE) The way they gawk at you... at us. They are all conspirators. They sabotage! They fabricate mirror images of our true power.

(PHOTO screams hysterically at PUBLIC whilst pointing to MASSACRE) Look...

MASSACRE binds us with its stinging eyes – and PUBLIC devours us whole. Yes you – you want us, but you never really know us – who am I – tell me who I am !?”

(Andrew 2021:39-40).

PHOTO is presented as one of the tools exerted by MUSEUM, trapped by the institution and consumed by the public. Andrew does not question the role of photography in the colonial enterprise but rather puts it on an equal footing with artefacts like TREE, and reveals how photographs are instrumentalised both by museums and audiences alike to see a past that was traumatic for both populations and Powerful Objects alike.

If truly the public visiting the *YOYI! Care, Repair, Heal* exhibition is unaware of ‘these stories, this colonial hole, this mess’, *GABAN* spells it out for them, followed by a bodily confrontation with the archives and skeleton (Fig. 115), whose voices and message are amplified by the gramophone horn in *Anatomy of a Body Record: Beyond Tasmania*. In the

play, PUBLIC is confronted with EVIDENCE, “a human size anthropological study plaster head” whose “entire body skeleton is revealed” once its structure, “MUSEUM’s table is broken” (Andrew 2021: 21-22). The realities of both the video and the *Anatomy of a Body Record: Beyond Tasmania* are somewhat merging. One can wonder – is the vitrine in the gallery, MUSEUM’s table mentioned in *Gaban*? Is the whole in the side glass panel a sign of its breakage, revealing that it is indeed human remains?

By presenting *Anatomy of a Body Record: Beyond Tasmania* alongside *GABAN*, Andrew created a new realm where “the objects are speaking back, and the museum is a playground for the reinvention, reimagining and recontextualization of all space, objects and people that revolve around and through the museum” (Andrew 2021:127). In doing so, Andrew infused life into the museum, its archives and collections, as a means to truly invite the public to discuss its history and legacies, and questioning each and everyone’s relation to them.

#### IV) Conclusion

As seen in the study of the exhibition *George Nuku. Oceans. Collections. Reflections.* and of *Vox/Anatomy of a Body Record: Beyond Tasmania*, both Brook Andrew and George Nuku embrace the technologies of museum and gallery display as part of their artistic and curatorial lexicon for the telling and re-telling of (hi)stories by means of colonial archives. With the different versions of *Vox/Anatomy of a Body Record: Beyond Tasmania*, Andrew uses his personal collection, the Brook Andrew Archive, to create a critique of museum institutions – as opposed to one specific museum or gallery –, their role in colonisation and especially in the collecting and conserving of artefacts and people. While the work was originally created for and displayed in commercial galleries in Melbourne and Paris, it was adapted to a range of environments across exhibitions and institutions by tapping into local and national histories and adding museum collections to the display, in order to create familiarity for the visitors to grasp the true meaning of the work. Andrew also adapted the installation by presenting it with a range of his own artworks. In the exhibition *YOYI! Care, Repair, Heal*, his presentation of *Anatomy of a Body Record: Beyond Tasmania* alongside *GABAN* metaphorically gave life to the archival sculpture and all its archival and human components. This dual presentation reinforced Andrew’s message by making his argument twice, in different forms, each artwork thus enhancing the other’s presence.

As for George Nuku, he relied on several of his previous projects for the creation of his Viennese show. While he worked with voyage prints in Rochefort for the telling of the city's history as presented in the third chapter of this thesis, Nuku reused material that he contextualised differently in Vienna as a means to tell a story of Austrian, and more broadly European encounters in Aotearoa New Zealand with Māori people. However, while Nuku played with the typical display tropes of European museums with a *salon*-style display, golden frames and vitrines, he brought the Māori environment of *whare whakairo*, which have been akin to museums as argued by Māori scholar Hirini Moko Mead (1983), into the space. Beyond the visual adaptation of the story and the museum, Nuku also brought in Māori protocols and ways of making, relying on a large team of volunteers who, together with Nuku, became a host institution involved in a host/guest relationship, performing their social duties. Through this process, Nuku's exhibition in Vienna can be considered as a successful example of a participatory museum as defined by Nina Simon (2010). Collaborative, co-developed and co-created, the exhibition project showed the possibility for museums, through artistic interventions, to collaborate meaningfully on the development of projects, by involving both artists and the general public. As expressed in the interdependency of the host and guest relationship (interchangeably institution and artist), and the "radical trust in community members' abilities to perform complex tasks, collaborate with each other, and respect institutional rules and priorities" (Simon 2010: chapter 8, n.p.), the exhibition *George Nuku. Oceans. Collections. Reflections.* showed the success and impact of collaborative making for and by diverse communities (here the museum staff, the artist, the volunteers and the general public). Together with Nuku's critical engagement with the voyage's prints, the exhibition process as a model of participatory museum, showed the potential of archival art in fostering diverse and impactful engagements.

Both Andrew's and Nuku's works directly addressed the public, by confronting them with their knowledge and understanding of the colonial in the case of Andrew, and by involving them in a creative process in the case of Nuku. In so doing, they enhanced the essential aspect of experience for each artwork and installation to take on its full meaning. Here, I am not arguing that archival artworks lose pertinence if they are not adapted to their exhibition environment. I believe that thanks to adaptation, artists have enabled a different type of engagement and experience of their artworks by the public. When archival artworks exist together within an environment that artists have engaged with, adapted to in terms of museum-responsiveness, the public life and biographies of artworks can tap into people's

affects, and leave an experiential mark that can work towards a wider dissemination not only of the artwork, but of the archival material within it.

## Chapter 5 – Performing/Experiencing the Archive in the Buffer Zone

### I) Introduction

As explained in the introduction of this thesis, the encounter of works of archival art in exhibitions was essential to informing this research project. Another core aspect was the very experience of the archive through the archival artwork. Indeed, the identification of the work as a piece of archival art, either through aesthetic appreciation, knowledge or the reading of the label, changes the relation between the viewer and the work, as the viewer is suddenly not just encountering a piece of art, but a fragment from the past. While I previously discussed in chapter three how neon lights act as a lure to the viewer in Andrew's work, Jane Connarty speaks of how, similarly, the very act of viewing the archive in print or through film has a "spellbinding effect on the viewer" (2006:7). According to her, this effect resides in the "material and aesthetic qualities acting as a trigger to memory, evoking a sense of time and nostalgia, or conjuring fantasies of history" (Connarty 2006:7). These qualities of the archive allow it to "[function] as surrogate, or virtual sites of remembrance, or as metaphors for the processes of recalling the past", (Connarty 2006:7) and can be activated when experienced by the viewer. Though unique to each person, the encounter with archives is intrinsic to their existence. Indeed, they exist in the hope that they might be useful for the future, after being examined, classified and stored for future users. Similarly, and still thinking of archives and photographs as holding similar qualities — both materially speaking are made in paper and in their capacity to capture a moment in time — Olivier Lugon speaks of the "spectator of the future" as inherent to the creation of photographs: "In this logic, the figure of the spectator of the future for whom we claim to be working seems to constitute, more than the recipient of images, an imaginary entity operating in the present, embodying a gaze for immediate contemplation" (2001: 343). Thus, archives and photographs alike are bound by their necessity to be seen, touched, and experienced to work as memory devices. According to Achille Mbembe, without human interaction, archives have no meaning (2002:23). But this interaction with archives is conditioned either by the rules of access and opening hours of the archives, or by their display to the public in museums and galleries which have their own rules of access and opening hours. Albeit the digitisation of archives which has considerably

changed their access, the aura of the archive pertains to its embodied encounter. In *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, Walter Benjamin speaks to the work of art as being imbued with an aura due to its uniqueness and argues that, once reproduced, the aura of the original artwork “withers” (1955:215). Boris Groys argues that in our age of reproduction, “the aura is the relationship of the artwork to its location, its external context” (2002:97). He explains that “all objects placed in museums are originals [...] for one simple, topological reason – one must go to a museum in order to see them” (Groys 2002:100). By combining both Benjamin’s and Groys’ ideas and transposing them to the archival artwork, the aura therefore lies in the uniqueness of the object/artwork as well as in its tangible presence in a site-specific location, at a specific time, where it is encountered and experienced by a viewer. In *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression* (1995:10), Derrida speaks to how the very act of placing documents into archives “marks [an] institutional passage from the private to the public”, which is doubled through the action of institutional exhibition: the archive then goes from public-available to public-visible, thus opening up the realm of archival access. Jeffrey Wallen explains how the lure of the archive has recently changed paradigm, from the desire to “unearth” archives and their content to wanting to engage with it, especially at institutional level (2023:48). As developed throughout this thesis, it is evident today that institutions have made it a central part of their practice to open access to their collections through artistic residencies and temporary exhibitions. This has undeniably changed the “conditions of visibility” (Azoulay 2008:167) of not only photography but also of archives, making them a common medium to encounter in museums, galleries and in artworks. While archives are by definition more accessible today due to their new public-visibility, also enhanced through digitisation of archival collections, the difference in engagement also depends on their site of exhibition. Indeed, contemporary art has become a global phenomenon that attracts visitors which is in part due to contemporary art galleries and private art foundations, testifying to the “deepening relationships between contemporary art and the public”.<sup>125</sup> Yet, the reach of these artworks, and thus of archives, revolves around two criteria: the popularity of artists working with them, and that of institutions. Generally speaking, today’s most popular museums with the public are so-called universal or encyclopaedic museums<sup>126</sup> like the Louvre and the British Museum, closely followed by museums of Modern and Contemporary art, with the

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<sup>125</sup> <https://cimam.org/museum-watch/museum-watch-actions/the-success-of-contemporary-art-museums-and-its-consequences-changes-happened/>, last accessed on 25/08/2025.

<sup>126</sup> It is important however to keep in mind that the category of the universal museum was created in 2002 in the Declaration on the Importance and Value of Universal Museums which argued against restitutions. To learn more on the history and changing meaning of the term, see Bertin & Molinié-Andlauer 2025.

Tate Modern in London at the top of this list.<sup>127</sup> As for temporary exhibitions, private foundations like the Fondation Louis Vuitton has joined the list of institutions with the most visited exhibitions in Paris alongside the musée d'Orsay.<sup>128</sup> Amongst these mammoth museums and blockbuster exhibitions, visitor numbers for museum of world cultures and ethnography do not compare. Only the Museo de Antropología in Mexico City, ranking 10<sup>th</sup>, and the musée du quai Branly-Jacques Chirac in Paris, ranking 63<sup>rd</sup> – which is ironic seeing that it presents itself as an art museum rather than a museum of ethnography – appear in the list of the 100 most visited museums in the world in 2024.<sup>129</sup> Though visitor numbers alone cannot reveal the local impact of exhibitions on communities, they are evidence of the general touristic and consumeristic trends and interests in museums and galleries today. By definition, the impact of exhibitions of artworks in local museums or museums of ethnography seems to be lesser than in national institutions, universal museums and art galleries. However, the very reasons for the instigation of a project of archival art, or the exhibition of an archival artwork in this range of institutions differ.

Indeed, in chapter two, three and four of this thesis, I have shown a range of examples where museums of ethnography, or museums with ethnographic collections, have been the instigators of artistic residencies and exhibitions for the reworking and displaying of their archival – often photographic – collections. I have also shown in Chapter One how the reappraisal of archival material by artists is not always institutionally led, and can instead be initiated by artists themselves as a means to work against institutional rules of ownership, copyright and access. In chapter three and four, I have also looked at the (re)-exhibition of archival art across a range of art spaces, notably a temporary exhibition gallery, a national art gallery and a contemporary art biennale. In this final chapter, I will examine the specificities of an artistic residency taking place in a contemporary art space, programmed not for its archival art power, but for its potential to attract the public, thanks to a renown international artist.

Throughout this research project, I have been able to encounter archival artworks, and through them archives, thanks to their exhibition – though at times only digitally – and thanks to the exhibition documentation which acts as exhibition archives. With this final example of

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<sup>127</sup> <https://www.theartnewspaper.com/2025/04/01/the-worlds-most-visited-museums-2024->, last accessed on 26/08/2025.

<sup>128</sup> <https://www.paris.fr/pages/musees-monuments-expos-51-millions-de-visiteurs-a-paris-29090>, last consulted on 26/08/2025.

<sup>129</sup> <https://airtable.com/appq9gt6ytKxF3Psk/shrfXm7oWmKDyN8do/tblq4nVyFDcEuXK3J?viewControls=on>, last consulted on 26/08/2025.

archival art I will explore the experiential aspects of the archive and archival art as a means to materialise the past into ghosts and spectres that can be encountered by the public. Through the example of the artistic residency of the Centre for the Less Good Idea at the Fondation Cartier pour l'art contemporain in Paris in May 2024, I will delve into archival art as a medium for transmission to an audience, aided in this case by performance and framed by specific viewing conditions. Moreover, I will reflect on the situational encounter of the archive between artists and viewers through the idea that the exhibition space, together with the artwork, act as a buffer zone, allowing for the archive to be partially freed from its institutional yoke. Finally, I will consider whether all spaces of exhibitions can be described as buffer zones when it comes to the exhibition of archives, or whether this terminology can only be used in the case of what I will define as an institutional 'transfer'.

## II) The Centre for the Less Good Idea at the Fondation Cartier pour l'art contemporain in Paris: archives and the Pepper's Ghost

From 14<sup>th</sup> May to 20<sup>th</sup> May 2024, the Fondation Cartier pour l'art contemporain in Paris hosted the Centre for the Less Good Idea (CLGI) for a festival of experimentations through performance. The CLGI is an "interdisciplinary incubator space for the arts"<sup>130</sup> founded in 2016 by William Kentridge and Bronwyn Lace and based in Johannesburg. It was created "to provide spaces and initiatives for creativity", in reaction to "the failure of public institutions in Johannesburg" (Locke 2022:200). During two seasons of events per year, the CLGI explores all aspects of performing arts through dancing, singing, playing music, acting, writing, drawing, researching and experimenting. The Centre is involved in projects in and outside of South Africa, working with diverse institutions, including but not restricted to museums, galleries and theatres. Following a partnership which started in 2017 between researcher and anthropologist Anna Seiderer and visual artist Bronwyn Lace, the CLGI became a participant in the research project *Moving Pictures, Controversial Memories* (CINEMAF, 2020-2024), alongside the Université Paris 8, the CNC (French National Centre of Film and Moving Image), the Institut des Mondes Africains, the musée départemental Albert-Kahn (mdAK), the musée du quai Branly-Jacques Chirac, the university of Abomey-Calavi in Benin and the CEREFREA (Regional Francophone Centre of Advanced Research in Social Sciences, Bucharest). Starting in November 2021 at the musée du quai Branly –

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<sup>130</sup> Description of the centre on their website: <https://lessgoodidea.com/>, last accessed on 21/09/2025.

Jacques Chirac alongside the restitution of twenty-six objects from the museum's collection to the Republic of Benin, Bronwyn Lace (CLGI) and Anna Seiderer (Université Paris 8) co-initiated the series of seminars, workshops and performances *Arts, Archives & Performances* (AAP) (Lace & Seiderer 2025a; Lace & Seiderer 2025b). In August 2022, Lace and Seiderer organised a workshop together with Didier Houénou (University of Abomey-Calavi) as part of the AAP series, which took place at the CLGI in Johannesburg in August 2022 with participants from Benin, France, South Africa, Columbia, Belgium and Austria.<sup>131</sup> On this occasion, Julien Faure-Conorton (mdAK) presented the photographic and video archives from the mdAK before the participants engaged with them in multifarious ways. One special element of this encounter between participants and archives was the Pepper's Ghost (Fig. 116), an illusion technique created in the Victorian period which they used to play with the mdAK archives.

“The Pepper's Ghost was named after John Henry Pepper in 1862. It was used as an illusionary theatre technique in Gothic theatre to have ghosts appear and disappear on stage. So, very practically, it's a half-silvered mirror suspended at a 45° angle. And as you can see, when the lights are on in front, it acts as a mirror and reflects us here. But when we go to the back, and the light pushes through the mirror, there start to be possibilities of a different kind of realm. When we start to play with the archive, we ask questions of what it is to look at this archive collectively; to reframe our looking, to place ourselves inside of the image, to de-objectify the image, to rehumanise the archive and to ask whether this is even possible”.<sup>132</sup>

In Paris, the Pepper's Ghost was at the centre of most of the CLGI's performances. This speech (above) was given by Bronwyn Lace at the start or at the end of each of these live and public performances, as a way to present what the public was about to experience or had just experienced (Fig. 117). Bronwyn Lace gave her speech with Julien Faure-Conorton who is in charge of scientific research and championing of the mdAK's collections. During the different performances, Faure-Conorton was facilitating the translation of Bronwyn Lace's speech into French and introduced the public to the archives projected onto the Pepper's Ghost. During their joint presentation, Lace and Faure Conorton were moving in and out, in front of and behind the Pepper's Ghost, to show the audience how it worked with lights, and

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<sup>131</sup> Another occurrence of the Arts, Archives & Performances workshop took place in Porto Novo in 2023. The CLGI residency at the Fondation Cartier pour l'art contemporain in 2024 was also part of this series.

<sup>132</sup> Bronwyn Lace's speech during the event *Pepper's Ghost & the Mark | HOW – Showing the Making*, at the Fondation Cartier pour l'art contemporain, Paris, France, 15 May 2024. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dy9WcVjjiKg&t=690s>, last accessed on 30/09/2025.

also as a screen for the projection of the archives, thus revealing its ghostly tricks (Fig. 118 & 119). In this joint introduction, Julien Faure-Conorton was Bronwyn Lace's translator as well as the conveyor of the information that the mdAK holds on the archives from its collections. Most of the archives used in the performances at the Fondation Cartier in Paris were dated from 1930 and filmed in Benin. The films were shot by photographer and filmmaker Frédéric Gadmer (1878-1954) who was the operator during a mission in Dahomey, Benin (1 January – 14 May 1930) which was directed and initiated by Father Francis Aupiais (1877-1945) in order to have photographic and filmic material for his conferences to promote African cultures in Europe (Faure-Conorton & Thomas 2025: 13-20). These films were sponsored by French banker and philanthropist Albert Khan (1860-1940) as part of his collecting of images for his world-documenting project, *Les Archives de la Planète* (the Planet's Archives). Today, these images shot by Gadmer and kept in the mdAK archives consist of 1102 autochromes (a photographic process for the reproduction of colour photography on glass plates) and over 10 kilometres of film on 140 reels, most of which are showing ritual practices from Dahomey, Benin (Faure-Conorton & Thomas 2025:23).

On May 15 and May 17, these archives were used in two performances dedicated to showing *how* the CLGI had been working with archival material in collaboration with the institutions mentioned above since 2022. The shows were entitled *Pepper's Ghost & the Mark | HOW – Showing the Making* (15 May 2024) and *Pepper's Ghost: Silent films & Choral Responses | HOW – Showing the Making* (17 May 2024).

In the first performance *Pepper's Ghost & the Mark | HOW – Showing the Making* on May 15<sup>th</sup>, the show started with a projection of what seemed to be one film, but which was in reality made of four different films from the mdAK archives (Fig. 120), cut and edited into a nine-minute video. These images were first shot for and used in the film *Le Dahomey chrétien* for the Société des missions africaines in Lyon and for the film *Le Dahomey religieux*, an ethnographic film which today has disappeared (Seiderer 2024:206) and was used by Aupiais during his scientific and ecclesiastical conferences in France (Faure-Conorton & Thomas 2025:23). This new video projected at the Fondation Cartier pour l'art contemporain was made with images from an homage ceremony to royal ancestors at Justin Aho's place in Oungbégamé near Abomey, Dahomey<sup>133</sup>; a dance with Guèlèdè and Zangbéto masks on

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<sup>133</sup> Justin Aho was king Béhanzin's Nephew, king of Dahomey. AI13575, 16-18/02/1930, <https://collections.albert-kahn.hauts-de-seine.fr/document/oungbegame-environs-d-abomey-dahomey-ceremonies-d-hommages-aux-ancetres-royaux-chez-justin-aho/617aa7e0cf8b8968b338b262?q=aupiais&filtrerParDomaine%5B0%5D=Images%20anim%C3%A9es&pos=52&pgn=3>, last accessed on 21/09/2025.

Takon, Dahomey<sup>134</sup>; a procession to the Odoudoua temple in Daagbé, Dahomey<sup>135</sup>; Vodoun dances in Bohicon near Abomey, Dahomey<sup>136</sup>. Each of these performances were orchestrated by Gadmer and Aupiais for their recording in film, where people were aware of the camera, yet were asked by Father Aupiais ‘not to change their ceremonies’ (Aupiais cited in Seiderer 2024:206-207). According to Anna Seiderer, this attests to the “deliberate and implicit negotiations and reconfigurations, of all participants” for and with the camera (2024:207). The original films’ lengths vary from under one minute to over nineteen minutes.<sup>137</sup> During the residency, the films were edited in order to only show danced performances which, when brought together, showcased a diversity of dancing in Dahomey, but mostly a range of body movements to the sound of music and rhythm. Although this rhythm is visible through the dancing, it cannot be heard, as the filming techniques in 1930 were limited to image capture, omitting sound and therefore muting these moments. Father Aupiais originally wanted for the films shot in Dahomey to be accompanied by the sound of songs, prayers and instruments recorded on discs (Faure-Conorton 2025:38). However, the visual focus of *les Archives de la Planète*’s project prevented from the sound recording to take place, which was one of Aupiais’ deepest regrets about the mission (Henley 2025:51). At the Fondation Cartier, the public experienced these images – allegedly for the first time – *with* sound, in turn bringing Aupiais’ desire to life. For each performance, the public were sitting on stands with the Pepper’s Ghost placed in front of them. In this first performance of *Pepper’s Ghost & the Mark | HOW – Showing the Making*, participants in the workshop (from the different institutions and the CLGI) sat on the floor in a line, at the front on the left-hand side of the Pepper’s Ghost (Fig. 121). Their position and clapping mimicked the line of seated clappers in the video footage projected onto the silvered mirror. Altogether, in the room and in the film, the arrhythmic clapping of the people in line was slowly moving to a clapping that was synchronised with

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<sup>134</sup> AI13522, 30/01/1930, <https://collections.albert-kahn.hauts-de-seine.fr/document/dahomey-takon-danse-des-masques-guelede-et-des-zangbeto/617aa7e0cf8b8968b338b0b5?q=aupiais&filtrerParDomaine%5B0%5D=Images%20anim%C3%A9s&pos=31&pgn=2>, last accessed on 21/09/2025.

<sup>135</sup> AI13520, 30/01/1930, <https://collections.albert-kahn.hauts-de-seine.fr/document/daagbe-dahomey-procession-au-temple-de-odoudoua/617aa7e0cf8b8968b338b0b4?q=aupiais&pos=30&pgn=1>, last accessed on 21/09/2025.

<sup>136</sup> AI13542, 24/02/1930, <https://collections.albert-kahn.hauts-de-seine.fr/document/bohicon-environs-d-abomey-dahomey-danses-vodoun/617aa7e0cf8b8968b338b0c0?q=aupiais&filtrerParDomaine%5B0%5D=Images%20anim%C3%A9s&pos=39&pgn=2>, last accessed on 21/09/2025.

<sup>137</sup> It is important to note that in preparation for the exhibition *Pour une reconnaissance africaine : Dahomey 1930* which took place at the mdAK in 1996-1997, the films which were originally kept on 15 reels were divided on over a hundred clips. Following a high-definition digitisation of the original reels in 2020, the films were revealed in their full quality, original framing and montage (Faure-Conorton 2025: 35-37).

that in the image. On the other side of the clappers, a drum was played, with a rhythm adapting to the movement of the people in the film. As light shown through the Ghost and singing started, four people were revealed behind the silvered mirror, giving a new dimension to the archive. On top of the added sound, the image was given colour, with the layering of the singers' and dancers' bodies at the back of the screen that were superimposed onto the archive. As the film was unravelling and the dancing rhythm changed, the drum player was adjusting his play into faster or slower rhythms.

On top of the music and body layers, behind and surrounding the archive was a final layer created *on* the archive by *the mark* (Fig. 122). The mark was made digitally by Marcus Neustetter through a graphic tablet whose canvas' basis was the video archive. Gradually, the movement of the performers behind the Ghost – or *in* the Ghost – merged with the archive by means of the mark, described by Anna Seiderer as 'chrono-graphies' (2025b:167), which created shapes that echoed the dancing masks in the film and encapsulated the dancers into one shape. It is only after this first performance that Julien Faure-Conorton disclosed the information on the mdAK archives. The point was not to keep the archive's information from the public, but to create special viewing conditions where the public's experience of these archives was not tainted by anything other than the performance itself, and their knowledge and experience. In the second part of this session, the group of performers embraced the *how* aspect of collaborative *making*, not only by showing the audience the process of making a performance like the one the public had just experienced, but also by telling. Indeed, Bronwyn Lace explained how their performance with the archive aimed at "unmuting silent footage, through the simplest mechanism of percussion but also through the mechanism of the mark, so looking at what it is to draw".<sup>138</sup> Then, Lace and William Kentridge were both directing, through their voices, the actions that each of the performers was to take next in order to work towards a complete performance. This second part allowed the public to understand how, through workshops, residencies, and practice in general, interventions on archives are constructed, and how none of these performances are fixed.

For the second performance *Pepper's Ghost: Silent Films & Choral Responses | HOW – Showing the Making* on May 17<sup>th</sup>, the show, in contrast with the first performance, started with Lace and Faure-Conorton's speech on what the Pepper's Ghost is, then followed by an introduction of the archival material. This presentation of the material was also a way to

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<sup>138</sup> Bronwyn Lace's speech during the event *Pepper's Ghost & the Mark | HOW – Showing the Making*, at the Fondation Cartier pour l'art contemporain, Paris, France, 15 May 2024. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dy9WcVjjiKg&t=690s>, last accessed on 30/09/2025.

introduce the research project in which the CLGI had been involved, as mentioned above, and to place it into the context of their residency at the Fondation Cartier. While in the first performance the emphasis was put on the public's first experience of the archive, this second time the performers were seeing the images for the first time too, with a first silent viewing – in the way that the archive was originally made – with the public before the performance started.<sup>139</sup> Though general context was given about the archives (that they were filmed by Gadmer and Aupiais in Dahomey in 1930), the individual archives were not presented in detail – provenance information was given but without descriptive details – therefore allowing space for interpretation. The first film was a thirty-six second film shot in Porto-Novo, Benin, showing three young girls and young women slowly spinning around.<sup>140</sup> After the first viewing of this archive, the singers started to talk and sing, creating a sound for the film, that was mimicking the endless turning movements of the girls, like a ritornello. A melody was instigated, with repeated notes and rhythm, complemented by Neo Muyanga playing the keys. After this first attempt and musical suggestions by the singers, Neo Muyanga explained that “when we make an intervention at home as composers, as music makers, we are trying to imagine where the character is”.<sup>141</sup> On the second round of improvisation, there was a clear attempt at mapping the environment through sound. The sounds and melodies came as signifiers for the place where this film was shot. Literally, the choir was giving sound to 1930 Porto-Novo. Adding to the music, visual artists Marcus Neustetter and Nthabiseng Malaka brought yellow, red and blue fabrics that they placed on the floor on top of the turning girls in the video which, thanks to the Pepper's Ghost were reflected in the mirror (Fig. 123). These pieces of cloth inserted colours to the dresses of the girls and therefore to the black and white film. Neo Muyanga asked the singers to reflect this colour onto the sound environment they were creating. Finally, after several rounds of the music, Neustetter and Malaka brought a long and large piece of craft paper, hiding the colourful clothes, bringing back the photo into a black and white realm, but with a crumpled paper. Though this paper aimed at removing the colourful traces of the clothes, its crumpled state stood as an indelible trace onto the archive, a visual and tangible proof of the sound and visual environment which had been created at the Fondation Cartier for this specific film from the mdAK collection.

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<sup>139</sup> For the purpose of the workshop, the CLGI performers were not shown these films prior to the event.

<sup>140</sup> AI13458, <https://collections.albert-kahn.hauts-de-seine.fr/document/porto-novo-dahomey-fillettes-et-jeunes-femmes-mina/617aa7e0cf8b8968b338b093?q=dahomey%20fillettes&pos=17&pgn=1>, last accessed on 21/09/2025.

<sup>141</sup> Neo Muyanga's speech during the event *Pepper's Ghost: Silent Films & Choral Responses | HOW – Showing the Making*, at the Fondation Cartier pour l'art contemporain, Paris, France, 17 May 2024. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gZJagIXVXY&t=1710s>, last accessed on 30/09/2025.

At a later date during the week, this attempt became a performance in itself. Titled *Loop*, it became an eight-minute-long performance which reused several of the elements proposed during the session on ‘showing the making’. These public exercises using film archives continued, with another film from the mdAK collection as well as a private family film shot in Congo during the time of Belgium Congo, employed in similar ways. These attempts led the performers to play with various aspects of sound making, creating different soundtracks for each video based on the various instructions they were receiving. With the second mdAK film experiment, a weaver and moulder video made in Porto-Novo in 1930<sup>142</sup> was parachuted into a new temporality. With prompted suggestions from the public, the performers created a new environment for the film: the weaving movement was newly transformed through public interpretation as a pasta making movement, shot in a future time in 2250, when all that is left to eat is pasta.

Through both days of *Pepper’s Ghosts | HOW – Showing the Making*, the public was not only spectator of the creative process of the CLGI, but also spectators of, and at times participants in, the work with the mdAK archives. Both performances exemplified the essence of the CLGI which takes its name from the Setswana proverb “E a re ngaka kgolo go retelwa, go alafe ngakana”: If the good doctor can’t cure you, find the less good doctor. The following speech was given by William Kentridge during the opening night of the CLGI’s residency at the Fondation Cartier pour l’art contemporain on 14 May 2024. It introduces the concept of ‘the less good idea’ which is central to the work of the CLGI and to their multimodal performative responses to the mdAK archives:

“When a good idea of grand certainties fails, then we need to look for something new, more local, less sure of itself, open for what the moment suggests. [...] It starts with an idea, a good idea, a very good idea in fact, and one starts with confidence with this idea, which is clearly a good idea. But then, as the work proceeds, the cracks appear, a gap between this first idea and the realisation. [...] But in the end, every certainty is authoritarian, with an army to defend it. Or otherwise, one can find the cracks in the edifice, to follow the strange promptings of a rehearsal that’s gone wrong, or a gesture we’ve seen in between rehearsal. We can follow the misheard word, the mistranslation, the gaps in understanding that we jump over. Because each such leap gives us a jolt of energy. And this, is the terrain of the less good idea. We make a statement, but as we

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<sup>142</sup> AI13464, <https://collections.albert-kahn.hauts-de-seine.fr/document/porto-novo-dahomey-tisserand-et-modeleur/617aa7e0cf8b8968b338b095?q=porto-novo%20tisserand&pos=15&pgn=0>, last accessed on 21/09/2025.

say it, there's another thought that comes forward, a parallel unspoken thought. We are always fighting the contradiction, the ambiguity. We jump from one stepping stone to another, between the stones there is a river of other thoughts flowing, and we do the best that we can, trying to capture the thoughts that eludes us. [...] The centre is a place for translation, of mistranslation, showing the virtues to jump over the gap.”<sup>143</sup>

By exploring live and with an audience the different possibilities of engagement with an archive, the ‘less good idea’ was fully explored. The concept of the less good idea gives space to experimentation and re-experimentation, working towards an “alternative solution” (Locke 2022:201) to expand from the first idea. In this specific case of the CLGI’s residency at the Fondation Cartier, I would argue that the first idea, as opposed to the less good idea, is encapsulated in the archives. With their performance with the archives, the CLGI reveals the archival cracks through play and the Pepper’s Ghost, itself a device with the ability to highlight and reveal what is hidden in plain sight, or visible only to some people.

### III) Viewing conditions: contemporary séance

Cherished by William Kentridge, the technique of the Pepper’s Ghost was first used by the CLGI in 2019 for its seventh season of performances. Built from a table, a mirror, a projector and lights, the structure allowed for ‘discoveries and experimentation’ with the different realms of performance enabled by this illusionary technique.<sup>144</sup> As explained in *True History of the Ghost*,

“Modern researches in Spiritualism have led to one practical result — the discovery of a ghost [Pepper’s Ghost]. Not of an ordinary old-fashioned ghost, appearing in the midnight hour to people with a weak digestion, haunting graveyards and old country mansions, and inspiring romance-writers into the mischief of three-volume novels; but of a well-behaved, steady, regular and respectable ghost, going through a prescribed round of duties, punctual to the minute — a Patent Ghost, in fact” (Anon. In Pepper 2012:22-3).

In this simple and contemporary form with the inclusion of the video projector, the CLGI’s Pepper’s Ghost when experienced in person, created an event similar to 19<sup>th</sup> century lantern shows where an audience gathered for an illusionary spectacle. Before the Pepper’s Ghost

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<sup>143</sup> “A Defense of the Less Good Idea”, Speech given by William Kentridge during the Collapsed Concert on 14 May 2024. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GA6mNUF7SU&t=829s>, last accessed on 30/09/2025.

<sup>144</sup> <https://lessgoodidea.com/thinking-in-peppers-ghost>, last accessed on 26/08/2025.

was patented, John Henry Pepper performed public ‘magic lantern’ shows three times a day at the Polytechnic Institute in London in the mid 1800s. On physics and chemistry these shows were meant for education purposes (Carlson 2014:38). Similarly, lantern slides were part and parcel of 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> academic lectures and public talks, and “part of the general exchange and flow of anthropological data” (Edwards 2001:45) through the showing of fieldwork photographs. More broadly, the lantern, in its capacity to project, is a “technology, medium, spectacle, (social) influencer, and archival source” (Lenk & Majsova 2022:10) which enabled storytelling across time, through the meeting of the public and images. Similarly after returning from Benin in 1930 until his death in 1945, Father Aupiais organised conferences and photographic and film viewings to disseminate the footage captured as part of the mission in Dahomey (Thomas 2025). By using the Pepper’s Ghost in their performance, the CLGI was not only tapping into the theatrical history of ghosts’ and spectres’ presence on stage, but also into the educational and storytelling nature of lantern shows and conferences used across the globe. Anna Seiderer argues that the very use of the Pepper’s Ghost by the CLGI in the artistic and decolonial context of South-Africa, “literally and figuratively shifts the discursive frameworks within which these images were conceived” when they are seen through the Ghost thanks to the possibilities to literally “enter the image and intervene in the narration that once accompanied it, multiplying its meanings and perspectives” (2025a:141). In Paris, thanks to the use of John Henry Pepper and Henry Dircks’ Ghost together with digital technology and performance, the CLGI was able to control and play with the ghosts of the archive. As explained by American teatrologist Marvin Carlson, “the traditional symbolic representation of the repetition, this unavoidable return”, – in this case the return of the mdAK archive on screen to be viewed by many –, “is the figure of the ghost” (2014:27). With this logic, it is the archival film which is the returning ghost inside of the Pepper’s Ghost. The choice of the Pepper’s Ghost as the medium of encounter of the archival ghost is in line with William Kentridge’s practice to play with the “histories of representations” thanks to “the conventions and gadgets, equipment and devices that construct our visualisation and experience of the world” (Garb 2016:66). There, the ghosts were both the device and the film and permitted to bring back to life the people, places and life scenes captured in these films in Benin in 1930. Through this technological process, there is a bridging of temporalities that took place, bringing the past into the present. Furthermore, the weaving together of these temporalities into new ones was accentuated by the elements added to the archive and the Pepper’s Ghost. Indeed, the experience offered by the CLGI was not reduced to the experience of the archive through the Ghost’s device. Instead, it was

supplemented by play, music, dance, acting, costumes, drawing, accentuating the creation of new temporalities by the making of what Ariella Aisha Azoulay calls “potential histories” through the reading of “records of destruction as proof of persistence and right to survive” (2019:187). In this way, not only were the mdAK archives (originally captured to document a world thought to be on the verge of collapse) standing as a proof of history, but also and most certainly acting as ‘memory catalysts’ (Lace & Seiderer 2025a:144) to enable the telling of new stories, helping with the survivance (Vizenor 2008) of these images. In the words of Saidiya Hartman, such performances, akin to her work of critical fabulation where she uses literary fiction as a means to tell the unrecorded lives of enslaved people, both “tell[s] an impossible story and [...] amplify[ies] the impossibility of its telling” through “rearranging the basic elements of the story [and] by representing the sequence of events in divergent stories and from contested points of view” (2008:11). Presented and made visible to an audience through the projection in the Pepper’s Ghost, the performance and the Fondation Cartier event more broadly, the mdAK archives were given “new spaces of meaning” (Allain Bonilla 2017:168, my translation from French). Indeed, Marie-Laure Allain Bonilla argues that the very act of making private images public transforms them into ‘memory aids’ (*prothèses de mémoire*) for people whose history is incomplete (2017:169). Here, and though they are technically public images (both accessible in person and digitally), the mdAK archives were restored and restoried (Saggar 2025:81) thanks to their public re-sounding (Basu, Geismar & Vokes 2025) and re-voicing. Indeed, the process of resounding not only allows for images to “resonate and elicit affective responses”; it also offers itself “as a kind of method of inquiry, generative of new understandings of photographs and how they move and affect us, beyond what is immediately apparent to the eye” (Basu, Geismar & Vokes 2025:1). While working with the mdAK archives, the contribution of the CLGI did not lie in the telling of the lives of Albert Khan, Francis Aupiais or Frédéric Gadmer. Instead, it opened up a realm of encounter of various people, where a discussion could take place.

#### IV) Re-voice, re-sound to restore/restory

During the performance *Throne | Thrown | The Interview* (Fig. 124)<sup>145</sup>, the photograph of a family is shown through the Ghost. Conceptualiser and performer Thulani Chauke used a cabasa (a hand shaker) as a microphone to interview the family members in the photo (Fig.

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<sup>145</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xJALtfR9Opc&t=1s>, last accessed on 30/09/2025.

125). Alternating between both French and English, the questions he asked were: “is this your family?”; “What’s your name?”, “Ça va monsieur?”. Although a few times, Chauke gave answers in place of the people in the photograph, they were mostly sounded through the percussion of the shaker. In this dialogue, Chauke was essential as the interpreter who could convey into words (in English or French), the absent voices of the people in the photo, which the public could only hear through the shaker. He also provided the audience with names.

As the family interview took place, draughtsman Marcus Neustetter intervened with his digital drawing on the mdAK photograph, by drawing black lines across it, thus hiding and revealing certain parts through scribbling and circling round (Fig. 126). As the performance carried on and the photograph disappeared more and more behind Neustetter’s drawing, Chauke suddenly panicked: “What’s happening? I cannot see your father’s face. It seems like they have disappeared!”. He repeatedly said the names given to the man and the woman in the Photo (Peter and Joyce), desperately looking for them after they disappeared. While the only person left visible in the photo was the young boy, Chauke repeated his name alongside “je m’appelle” (my name is), saying out loud that the pronunciation of his own name “will bring them back”. For fleeting seconds, the photo reappeared underneath the black digital scribbling, giving Chauke hope for their presence before the image eventually disappeared, leaving him to ask “what happened?”. In the mdAK archives, the photograph is recorded under inventory number A63656, known to be taken on 8 March 1930 in Abomey by Frédéric Gadmer, and thought to be representing Cyrille Agbo and his family (wife and two children).<sup>146</sup> At the Fondation Cartier, it was the portrait of a family with whom Chauke seemed to be familiar, engaging with them through conversation and addressing people in the photograph by their names. This performance around the family photograph puts to the fore the role of photographs as social and relational objects in the telling of history, and also highlights the importance of “oral articulation, the naming of names” in order to not only remember but also ‘break the silence’ of the archive (Edwards 2005:39). Indeed, Edwards argues that performance is inherent in the telling of the history contained within photographs, embodied through orality, sounds and gestures whether these photographs belong to the community or are kept in archives (2005:30). According to anthropologist David Zeitlyn, the

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<sup>146</sup> <https://collections.albert-kahn.hauts-de-seine.fr/document/abomey-dahomey-actuel-benin-afrique-portrait-de-famille-cyrille-agbo/617a7a44cf8b8968b3382958?q=famille&filtrerParDomaine%5B0%5D=Images%20fixes&filtrerParMission%5B0%5D=1930%20-%20Dahomey%20-%20RP%20Francis%20Aupiais%20et%20Fr%20C3%A9d%20C3%A9ric%20Gadmer%20-%20289%20janvier-14%20mai%29&pos=43&pgn=2>, last accessed on 21/09/2025.

importance of being able to name people in photographs is tied to the concept of “resurrectionist history” which “brings ‘the dead to life’ by restoring knowledge of their names” (2012:465), developed by French historian Jules Michelet in 1863. What is more, it is through this very performance of the photograph that “a grounded empowerment, repossession, renewal and contestation” (Edwards 2005:28) takes place, going beyond the losses of the photographs and instead highlighting what we know or, in this instance, what could be or could have been known. When researching this same photograph, priest, religious heritage conservator and researcher Carly Dègbèlo was unable to confirm that it was indeed Cyrille Agbo portrayed, or to find the names of his wife and two kids present alongside him on the photo. He states that the “time constraints and the limited availability of local authorities were major obstacles” in accessing the necessary records (2025). Through the performance *Throne | Thrown | The Interview* at the Fondation Cartier, the CLGI does not attempt to tell the past as it was but rather engages, thanks to a retelling that is akin to “critical fabulation” (Hartman 2008:11), through “corporethics” with the archive which Christopher Pinney understands as “the sensory embrace of images, the bodily engagement that most people [...] have with artworks” (2001:158), and which Edwards has argued is intrinsic to the experience of photography (2005).

## V) Haunting, revealing the cracks

Each of the performances of the CLGI with the archives at the Fondation Cartier pour l’art contemporain testified to an ability of bringing back the past into the present as a form of ‘haunting’ as explained by sociologist Avery Gordon in *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (2008). According to Gordon,

“What’s distinctive about haunting is that it is an animated state in which a repressed or unresolved social violence is making itself known, sometimes very directly, sometimes more obliquely. [...] Haunting raises specters, and it alters the experience of being in time, the way we separate the past, the present, and the future. [...] Haunting and the appearance of specters or ghosts is one way [...] we are notified that what’s been concealed is very much alive and present, interfering precisely with those always incomplete forms of containment and repression ceaselessly directed toward us.” (2007:XVI)

Following this theory the CLGI gave space for this haunting of the archive and its spectres to take place in Paris, at the Fondation Cartier, as well as in all the places where the collaboration between the CLGI and various museum institution have taken place since 2022. Gordon carries on explaining her concept by saying that haunting is something that appears in “turmoil and trouble, that moment when things are not in their assigned places, when the cracks show up without any sign of leaving, when disturbed feelings cannot be put away, when something else, something different from before, seems like it must be done” (2007:XVI).

Going back to Kentridge’s ‘less good idea’ concept, the work of the CLGI is focussed on making visible the cracks between the first idea and the less good idea which echoes Gordon’s concept where haunting appears when the cracks between the past and the present are visible. The revealing of these cracks and of the spectres, is possible thanks to the various modes of intervention of the CLGI in the mdAK archives through an array of processes both digital and embodied, which are reinfusing the photographs and films with words, sounds, body movements and colours, not attempting to replicate the past yet not fully cutting ties with it either. These repeated interventions on the mdAK archives created a permanence in the alteration of these archives which are not only tainted by the ghost of the archive but also the ghost of each workshop and performance. Carlson talked about this ghost of theatre and performance in *The Haunted Stage: The Theatre as Memory Machine* (2003). He argues that due to the nature of theatre which consists in “the retelling of stories already told, the reenactment of events already enacted, the reexperience of emotions already experienced”, these repetitions all testify to the role of theatre “as a site of memory” (Carlson 2003:3), ‘ghosting’ as he calls it. Ghosting is not just about the making of a play or a performance, but also about its reception. Indeed, Carlson argues that ghosting is also characterised by the ways in which the public re-encounters something that they have encountered before, “although now in a somewhat different context” (2003:7). In the case of both performances of *HOW | Showing the making*, this re-experience was almost immediate thanks to the multiple viewings and performances of the same archive both during the same event and across the week of residency in Paris. However, it is important to note that each person’s knowledge of the CLGI’s work and/or of the mdAK archives would have had an impact on their archival re-encounter in the ghosting of performance. As put by Mark Sealy, “each time we see an image, it cannot be as it was before because we as viewers have changed in time” (2022:136). This changing in time is also affected by the place of experience. Both Carlson in his theory of ghosting and Gordon in her theory of haunting argue that ghosting and haunting take place in

a different context to the original one, “when things are not in their assigned places” (Gordon 2007:XVI). Indeed, although the CLGI’s residency was done in partnership with the mdAK and the mqB-JC, showing archives from both institutions, it took place at the Fondation Cartier pour l’art contemporain.

Created in 1984 at Jouy-en-Josas outside Paris before moving to boulevard Raspail in Paris in 1994, the Fondation Cartier is an institution dedicated to contemporary art practice and which, unlike the mdAK and the mqB-JC, did not inherit collections tied to the colonial endeavour. So what difference does it make for the archives to be seen at the Fondation Cartier rather than in the institutions that own them? When discussing the exhibition of photographs, specifically family photo-albums, Sophie Hackett says that “there is no question that bringing a photograph into an art institution changes the viewing context for that work. But what if the opposite is also true: the photograph changes the institution?” (2016:252). It is this very question which I will respond to now.

## VI) Freeing archives from the archive?

Undeniably, photographs have the power to change institutions through their capacity to “haunt the now” similarly to how they act “on the body like an overbearing historical weight that moves in culture under the cloak of denial and disavowal, unable to be touched but nevertheless intensely felt” (Sealy 2022:51). Yet, it is interesting to think that despite my focus and analysis of the work done by the CLGI at the Fondation Cartier pour l’art contemporain with archives – and I should specify that not all workshops and performance included archives –, their very use was not central to the advertising of the event to the public. Instead, the focus was put on the performative aspect of this residency through a range of shows and workshops with a desire to present the institution as actively engaging with performance as one of the characteristic art forms within contemporary art practice. The week-long residency was not organised by the exhibition teams. It was curated by the team of and as part of the Nomadic Nights, a programme which “[has] invite[d] artists from the contemporary scene to flood the Fondation Cartier’s exhibition spaces and garden”<sup>147</sup> since 1994. The performative aspect was also emphasised in the description of each performance which was accompanied by printed handouts. For the performance of *Pepper’s Ghost & the*

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<sup>147</sup> This description can be found on the website of the Fondation Cartier pour l’art contemporain: <https://web.archive.org/web/20240718080434/https://www.fondationcartier.com/en/nomadic-nights?lang=en>, last accessed on 21/09/2025.

*Mark* | *HOW – Showing the Making* on 15 May 2024, the handout introduced the *Pepper’s Ghost* briefly before focussing on the role of artists Marcus Neustetter, Pélagie Gbaguidi and Vusi Mdoyi in the workshop, talking about their respective practices, between drawing and dancing and pointing out the role of the audience in their artistic research process. No mention was made of the process of working with archives. For the performance of *Pepper’s Ghost: Silent films & Choral Responses* | *HOW – Showing the Making* on 17 May 2024, the handout did mention that the different performers would collaborate on the sounding of archival images, and work with silent films from the 1930s originating from the mdAK archival collections. However, whether mentioned or not, it is evident that in the communication of the event, the archive acted more as a pretext to the performance rather than as the central reason for the event to take place. Yet, as explained at the beginning of this chapter, the CLGI has been involved in the project CINEMAF with many partners, including the mdAK.<sup>148</sup> This shows that different sets of goals were at stake with the invitation of the CLGI. Indeed, for the Fondation Cartier it was not only a way to programme performances but also to invite William Kentridge, the founder of the CLGI and one of the artists in the collections of the Fondation Cartier. Internationally renowned, Kentridge’s career excellence was recently confirmed with a retrospective of his life’s work at the Royal Academy of Arts in London in 2022. His chamber opera *Waiting for the Sibyl* has also been touring Europe since its creation in 2019 and was shown in Paris in February 2023. Shortly after the CLGI residency in Paris, a few performances were held at the Fondation Luma in Arles, in the South of France around the new performance *The Great Yes, The Great No* which was workshopped live, at the Fondation Cartier. Thinking in terms of the communication around the event and the motivations for its programming, it is interesting to reflect on the differences between what the Fondation Cartier hoped for it to achieve and what was at work during the performances for the CLGI and its partners. Indeed, the residency enabled the CLGI to ‘show the making’ of their performance to an audience, which was a way to reveal to them how performances are made and adapt to places, people and materials. The residency enacted the concept of the ‘less good idea’ and explored it endlessly. This residency also enabled the reunion of different partners from the CINEMAF project (2021-23), including the Université Paris 8 – Vincennes, the mqB-JC and the mdAK, in order to continue the research started in 2021. It is interesting to note that this re-encounter took place at the Fondation Cartier, outside of the remits of each partner institution, in what could be regarded as a ‘neutral space’. However, this residency

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<sup>148</sup> To know more about the research project: <https://albert-kahn.hauts-de-seine.fr/les-collections/actualites-des-collections/la-recherche-au-musee>, last accessed on 21/09/2025.

took place after the end of the CINEMAF project, when the funding had likely run out. The financial power of private institutions<sup>149</sup> like the Fondation Cartier is unparalleled compared to the funding of national institutions, or the local financial support of the département des Hauts-de-Seine which supports regional institutions like the mdAK. Arguably, the invitation of the CLGI by the Fondation Cartier enabled this partnership to carry on, even though this might not have been the original reason for its programming. I would like to think of the role played by the Fondation Cartier in the display of colonial archives outside of their institutional walls. Is this temporary institutional escape one way to free the archive? I will now, consider whether we can argue that archives are ‘freed’ from their institutional yoke, in ownership, access and copyright, once they enter a buffer zone and undergo an ‘institutional transfer’.

## VII) The buffer zone: a new museum zone?

Buffer zones are clearly delineated area(s) outside a World Heritage property and adjacent to its boundaries which contribute to the protection, conservation, management, integrity, authenticity and sustainability of the Outstanding Universal Value of the property. Although buffer zones are not regarded as part of the inscribed property, their boundaries and relevant management approaches should be evaluated, approved and formally recorded at the time they are proposed by a State Party. Where buffer zones are defined, they should be seen as an integral component of the State Party’s commitment to the protection, conservation and management of the World Heritage property. The functions of the buffer zone should reflect the different types and levels of protection, conservation and management needed to protect the attributes that sustain the Outstanding Universal Value of the World Heritage property.<sup>150</sup>

Buffer zones are mostly used in three types of contexts: for climate purposes with the creation of buffer zones for the preservation of marine ecosystems, in war conflict, and by UNESCO as a means to preserve World Heritage sites. I have chosen to use the definition of the buffer zone given by UNESCO as the correlation of practices are greater between heritage sites and museums than with war conflict or biosphere preservation. The UNESCO definition identifies

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<sup>149</sup> In *L’ambition des musées privés au XXIème siècle: le cas de The Broad et de la Collection Pinault* (2019/2020), Morgan Labar uses two examples to explain the role of private institutions today in defining the contemporary art scene and thus altering the dynamic of both acquisition and exhibition of artworks.

<sup>150</sup> <https://whc.unesco.org/en/glossary/199>, last accessed on 21/09/2025.

a series of essential principles for buffer zones: they exist for the protection, conservation, management, integrity, authenticity and sustainability of the site; they are not part of the site but they are legally tied to the site; once defined, buffer zones are part and parcel of the State's preservation of the site. In short, the buffer zone exists as a close, yet separate, entity from the site, acting to protect, conserve and manage it. It also acts as a mitigator for the site. If we are to transpose this idea to the archive, and more precisely to the mdAK archives performed by the CLGI at the Fondation Cartier, I propose to think of the Fondation Cartier as a buffer zone for the experience of colonial archives.

In the past thirty years, the relations created between museums and communities have been extensively studied and conceptualised through a range of 'museum zones' (contact zone, engagement zone, insertion zone) which all attempted to find ways to represent how museum institutions collaborate with external parties, as explained earlier in the second chapter of this thesis. By bringing in the buffer zone in this final discussion, I wish to evaluate how the colonial archive is shown outside of its institution, and what this 'institutional transfer' means, what it generates, and whether we can consider it as one way to free the archive.

Earlier, I quoted Sophie Hackett on whether institution and photograph can mutually change each other. I have so far explained how archives are altered in permanence through the very act of archival art, even if the materiality of the archive is unchanged. I have also argued that archives undergo adaptations through their temporary (re)-exhibitions by artists in a range of museum and galleries, thus creating new forms of engagement for the public and inherently changing the original archive as a result. In the case of the CLGI residency at the Fondation Cartier – the same can be said to be true for any exhibition of archival art outside of the institutional hold of the archives –, there was an extension of the archives' perimeter of access. Not only was the archive accessible at the mdAK, or on display in its exhibition space, or on its online digital catalogue, it became available to an audience which mostly did not come to see, learn from, or experience the archive. Instead, they came for William Kentridge, for the Centre for the Less Good Idea, for Bronwyn Lace, for the Fondation Cartier, to experience performance and learn the secrets of these performances, to see how the CLGI is in constant search for the less good idea. For each of the *Showing the Making* performances, the mdAK archives used were introduced to the audience. But when it came to presenting 'final' performances which had been workshopped previously during the week – like *Loop / En Boucle* and *Throne/Thrown | The Interview* mentioned before –, the archives just became part of the performance and their institutional ownership disappeared. So, in this instance, the

encounter by the public was with the archives, but *through* the performance rather than directly. Arguably then, for the audience who encountered this archive, it underwent an institutional transfer. Albeit invisible to them, and with the fact that they were not familiar with the mdAK archives, they experienced the archive as ‘belonging’ to the CLGI and/or the Fondation Cartier. It is in this instance that I want to argue that the Fondation Cartier, as a physical space in which the audience encountered the archive, came to be an extension to the mdAK, a delineated space, a buffer zone, in which the life of the archives is altered, adapted, transformed and disseminated. Elizabeth Edwards discusses the capacity for keeping photographs alive if and when they are allowed “the space to operate on other registers” (2003:92). Experiencing the colonial archive in a space dedicated to contemporary art as well as through contemporary practice changes the ‘usual’ registers in which the archive can be encountered. The buffer zone opens up these registers by allowing the archive to leave its institutional walls. In this capacity, it acts as a mitigator for a different audience to interact with the archive: an audience interested in contemporary art and performance, the Fondation Cartier audience as opposed to an audience which visits a specialist museum dedicated to a man, his foundation, gardens and photographic and archival collection, the musée départemental Albert Khan.<sup>151</sup> Thanks to the buffer zone, the archive is also experienced in a new capacity: it is seen on a large screen (the Pepper’s Ghost), experienced not only with sound, but with a range of interdisciplinary inputs (drawing, dance, play), thus extending what the archive is made of. According to Mark Sealy, and I believe this to be true of archives as well, “photographs refuse to be contained. In our entangled, increasingly digital, cultural world, photographs are infinitely reproduceable ghosts that haunt those who have tried to hold them captive or erase their presence through epistemic control” (Sealy 2022:2). Through this performative display, the mdAK archive is escaping – being freed from – its original institutional containment and becomes something new, a visual element as part of a larger work which the audience will remember inextricably linked with the broader environment: the performance (theatre, play, dance, music, drawing) and the performers (the Centre for the Less Good Idea), the technique (the Pepper’s Ghost) and the Fondation Cartier pour l’art contemporain.

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<sup>151</sup> I am not arguing that one of these audiences prevails over the other in society or in the museum world, but rather that they are by definition drastically different.

## VIII) Conclusion

While I have used the example of the CLGI working with the mdAK archives during their residency at the Fondation Cartier in Paris, this idea of the buffer zone and institutional transfer can be applied to many works of archival art, including several of the examples discussed in this thesis. It allows for new and different encounters between colonial archives and audience – ‘new’ meaning in settings different from how one would traditionally encounter an archive. But beyond the institutional setting in which this encounter takes place, the audience gets to experience the archive thanks to archival art. According to Didi Cheeka, “archival practice has become an act of public memorial, a memorial work saying “this happened at one moment in time”. What we want to do is to take it out of the past and bring it into the present. Memory is not something that is past, it is something that connects us, something that also enables you to go into the future.” (Cheeka et al. 2021:169).

Thus, the encounter with the archive, by means of the artist’s work of archival art enables the audience to experience memory and history in the present, through the present’s lenses. Whether this archive is identified by the viewer through written or spoken means – a label, a guide or anyone around who knows about the work –, the visuality of the archive and its aesthetic are part and parcel of the conveying of the work as a piece of archival art to the viewer. In turn, the encounter with archival artworks triggers memory work, a kind of haunting from the past, to envision a present in which archives can take on new meanings.

In this final chapter, I have focused on the work of the Centre for the Less Good Idea with the archives from the musée départemental Albert Khan during their residency in Paris, at the Fondation Cartier pour l’art contemporain in May 2024. Through the analysis of several of the performances, I have reflected on the range of encounters and experiences of the archive that are tied to its viewing conditions. Contrary to the rest of the examples in this thesis, it is the only one where I have been able to experience, first hand, the making of each piece of archival art performance through the *Showing the Making* sessions. By looking into the modes of display of the archive through the Pepper’s Ghost, I have been able to think of the ghosts and spectres of the archives moving through time with the archive itself. I have also used theatre literature to emphasise the reviewing of the archives through concepts of ghosting and haunting. Finally, I have thought of the special conditions of encounter between the audience that attended the CLGI residency in Paris and the mdAK archives. To do so, I

have used the concept of buffer zone as a means to conceptualise the metaphorical institutional transfer of the archives, by extending the remits of the archives to the space of the Fondation Cartier on Boulevard Raspail in Paris. Thanks to the concept of the buffer zone, I have formulated a temporary space for the archive to exist outside of its institutional yoke, whether this zone happens to be an exhibition space, an institution, or a work of archival art, all in their own way allowing for the archive to be freed, even partially from its original site.

## Conclusion

### I) Disseminating archives today

On 27 March 2025, the Trump administration published Executive Order 14253 which aims at “Restoring Truth and Sanity to American History”. As part of it, President Trump ordered that the Secretary of the Interior shall

“take action, as appropriate and consistent with applicable law, to ensure that all public monuments, memorials, statues, markers, or similar properties within the Department’s jurisdiction do not contain descriptions, depictions, or other content that inappropriately disparage Americans past or living (including persons living in colonial times), and instead focus on the greatness of the achievements and progress of the American people or, with respect to natural features, the beauty, abundance, and grandeur of the American landscape”.<sup>152</sup>

What we should understand from this order is that the Trump administration wishes to reduce, if not completely remove, the mentions and references (written and visual) to slavery in their museums, National Parks and monuments in order for the visitors to focus on a so-called positive history of America as opposed to one that the current administration has deemed “a false reconstruction of American history” that includes “improper partisan ideology”.<sup>153</sup>

On 15 September 2025, journalists Jake Spring and Hannah Natanson revealed, in an article in *The Washington Post*, that following EO 14253, the Trump administration “ha[d] ordered the removal of signs and exhibits related to slavery at multiple national parks, according to four people familiar with the matter, including a historic photograph of a formerly enslaved man showing scars on his back”. The photo concerned with the removal depicts a self-emancipated man known as Peter (formerly wrongly identified as “Gordon”).<sup>154</sup> This photograph, taken by William D. McPherson and Mr. Olliver in Louisiana in March 1863, shows the scourged back of Peter after he escaped from the cotton plantation of Captain

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<sup>152</sup> Proclamation No. 14253, 90 Fed. Reg. 14563 (March 27, 2025), <https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2025/04/03/2025-05838/restoring-truth-and-sanity-to-american-history>, last accessed on 22/09/2025.

<sup>153</sup> Proclamation No. 14253, 90 Fed. Reg. 14563 (March 27, 2025), <https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2025/04/03/2025-05838/restoring-truth-and-sanity-to-american-history>, last accessed on 22/09/2025.

<sup>154</sup> Many copies of this photograph exist, but the National Portrait Gallery of the Smithsonian Institution holds an Albumen silver print registered as NPG.2002.89.

John Lyons on Louisiana's Atchafalaya River. At the time, the photograph was widely disseminated by abolitionists and was even published in *Harper's Weekly* on 4 July 1863 as a symbol of slavery's cruelty and inhumanity. Today this symbolism stands, and the photograph has become synonymous with the Civil War period and the horrors of slavery. It has been used across galleries, exhibitions and monuments worldwide as a testimony to slavery in the United States of America.

In 1995, Carrie Mae Weems included this photo of Peter in her series *From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried* (Fig. 127) discussed in the first chapter of this thesis. Coloured in red and framed in a black circle like the rest of the series' images, the following words were added onto the image: "Black and tanned your whipped wind of change howled low blowing itself-ha-smack into the middle of Ellington's Orchestra Billie Heard it too & cried strange fruit tears". There, Weems refers to the history of jazz by mentioning pianist Duke Ellington and Billie Holiday's version of the poem-turned-song *Strange Fruit* (1939). By merging the photograph of Peter with these musical references, Weems denounces slavery visually and sonically by tapping into people's knowledge of this musical repertoire. While Holiday's song *Strange Fruit* directly refers to the lynchings of African Americans, her mention of Duke Ellington refers to the broader history of jazz as a genre created by African American men and women. Thanks to her works, and I argue that the same is true for all works of archival art, Weems enabled the images used in *From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried* to be disseminated in the realm of contemporary art in their transformed versions. While many of the photographic archives used by Weems in this artwork are already known images used nationally and internationally to reflect on the history of slavery in the USA (in books and institutions), most of the other archives used by the artists discussed in this thesis are far from well-known to a non-specialised audience. Thus, when seeing an archival artwork like the one just mentioned, the public is encountering at once the archive *and* the artwork. Arguably, visitors first see the artist's work, then the archive – identified as such through written or spoken words – and are finally able to see it as an archival artwork. By defining these three steps in the identification of archival artworks by audiences, I suggest that the viewer is not experiencing a work of archival art in the same way as they would any artwork, for it already contains another original which needs finding and understanding for the full meaning of the new archival artwork to transpire. This implies that for the visitor to experience the work, it needs to be visible, displayed and accessible in the first instance. While the accessibility of archives and collections has considerably grown in the digital era, thanks to their digitisation, the digital enables access when we know what to look for but fails to provide the same

experience of chance encounter given by in-person visits to and research in institutional archives, storages, libraries or even museums and galleries. Going back to EO 14253, the removal of images from display such as that of Peter's is taking away the chance of encounter of this image and its history by the public. In a regime where the control of history, memory and information is of the essence, the removal of images and archives, which are not only traces of the past but also bear the potential to reframe history in the present, is the first step to the erasing of history.

## II) Archival art method

This reflection on ongoing events in the USA under the Trump administration is relevant to this thesis for it reveals the importance of artists in disseminating colonial archives through their archival art practice. Not wanting to take away the fact that these are artworks in their own right which should be valued as such, the first step in the making of archival artworks is the identification and selection of archival material by the artist. While this thesis' focus has been mostly on the archives kept in museums, part of the archival material used by Brook Andrew in his practice was collected throughout his career and eventually became the Brook Andrew Archive. In each of the case studies discussed, the first step to artists making their archival artworks was always research: first, to find the archival material, whether by searching in databases, looking through museum stores or rummaging through flea markets; second, to research and learn the history tied to each of these archives. Neither of these moments was necessarily undertaken by the artist alone; it was often supported by museum staff. This testifies to the inherently collaborative aspect of contemporary art making, especially of the practice of the "artist-as-researcher" (Wesseling 2011). Art historian Janneke Wesseling argues that

"the artist-as-researcher distinguishes himself from other artists by taking it upon himself to make statements about the production of his work and about his thought processes. The artist-researcher allows others to be participants in this process, enters into a discussion with them and opens himself up to critique. This is by no means self-explanatory; it actually represents a radical shift in the conception of 'artistry'" (2011:3-4).

Wesseling emphasizes the collaborative aspect of research conducted by artists, whereby others, are participants in the process. Indeed, looking back at the work of Rajkamal Kahlon,

Kiri Dalena and George Nuku's in both Rochefort and Vienna, their encounter with the archival material at the centre of their creations was guided by museum staff and curators. However, the time allocated together with the availability of staff for each artist to familiarise themselves with the museum archives was crucial not only in researching and understanding the archives, but in being able to process them and their harmful content and classifications. In this process, the digital was essential to facilitate the access to archives, especially as several of the works were realised or initiated during the Covid-19 Pandemic. The online database was key even for the in-person residencies like that of Rajkamal Kahlon. In her case, the time-constraint of her residency, itself registered by budget limits, meant that, considering the size of the collection, the digital database was the only tool that could provide research results in these conditions, despite the classification bias that is intrinsic to the database's system. These very classifications which govern museum databases were part of Kiri Dalena's 'undoings' during her digital residency at the RJM, where she gave new classifications to the photographs, allowing for the resilience of the Filipino people to be made visible in the database.

However, the digital is not only a means of access to archive and museum collections, it is also the very process which enables most works of archival art to be realised. While some of Brook Andrew's and Rajkamal Kahlon's works studied in this thesis were directly created with, from and on archives, digital editing, scanning and photographing is what has enabled archival artwork to enter the museum. Indeed, the digital circumvents some issues of conservation. One of the founding principles of the museum and of the archive, is to conserve and preserve their collections through time so that museums are governed by protocols that ensure the safekeeping of these collections for the future. While there is a range of fragile materialities that are kept in museums, papers, film and photographs (which consist of most of the archive's materials) are some of the most sensitive forms. In turn, when artists are not only using museum archives as sites for research as well as central elements in the practical making, the digital is paramount to the realisation of archival artwork. Indeed, central to the practice of archival art, and more specifically when Indigenous, diasporic or Global South artists are working with colonial archives, is the creation of an alternative reading of the archive, not removed from its colonial framework but rather critically engaging with it. To do so, artists work digitally with the archival material, both by using existing digital copies provided by the museum or by creating digital copies themselves which enable the archive to be transformed and altered while still preserving the integrity of the archive's materiality. Although alteration is generally used to talk of the change in something's materiality, I have

chosen to use it to encapsulate the inherently altering aspect of archival art with regards to archives. Whether artists create archival artworks by using the digital copies in the digital realm, like Brook Andrew's filmic works *Horizon II* and *SMASH IT* which exist as digital assemblages, or whether artists like George Nuku, Kiri Dalena, Sasha Huber and Carrie Mae Weems give new materialities (in print, wood or photograph) to the archive by using the digital to print a transformed archive, I argue that the very existence of the original archive is inherently altered, albeit materially integral. Indeed, once included into the archival artwork, the archive's original identification is supplemented by the artist's *authority* whereby the viewer sees the archival material as authored by the artist. In turn, archival artworks, combining the archive with the artist's lexicon archival artworks create new originals. Following this principle, viewers encounter at once the archive and the archival artwork, where the new original and the original, though not bound materially, exist concomitantly. The other essential aspect to archival art is its display, created as a result of a research process, followed by a creative process that enables the alteration of the archive.

While the digital is one of the key elements that allowed for archival art to enter the museum, the other essential aspect has been the new openness of museums to communities and artists from the 1980s onwards as presented in the introduction and the second chapter of this thesis. Following the different practices of the 'artist-as' which, for the most part emerged in the 1960s and the rise of conceptual art, together with the later invitation of artists into museums (specifically museums of ethnography), Hal Foster talked of the 'artist as ethnographer' (1995; 1996). He thought of this new model at the time when curators in 'non-art museums', informed by the global turn in art, could invite artists to reflect on their own cultures as a means to provide museums with institutional critique while also reflecting on culture. Though reflecting the growth of this practice at a specific point in time, American artist and writer Renée Green (1997) argues that Hal Foster's discussion is based on a fictional artist which is outside of the realities of artists working with institutions. Furthermore, she points out that Foster's theory denies the possibilities for "slippages of power positions [to] occur" (Green 1997:240) when artists are invited and or commissioned by institutions. Indeed, as presented in chapter four of this thesis and echoing a form of slippage between artist and institution, artists such as Andrew and Nuku, together with their archival artworks, have been engaging in a museum-responsive practice which does not only come as an institutional critique but rather addresses the broader geographical and historical context in which the museum institution is located. In this adaptative practice, they truly embrace their roles as artist-curators (Wesseling 2011; Jeffery 2015) whereby they create and

curate a display which is as embedded as the work is in the retelling of history through the archival medium. By using museum collections, archives, and the politics of display of the museum, while rooting their narrative in local or national history and knowledge, artists are using the power of archives together with their sites and conditions of encounter to trigger “the production of memory in the present” (van Alphen 2023b:94). Thanks to this curatorial adaptation of the archive to the exhibition environment (both the museum and the geography), artists are not constrained by what was recorded in the archive for the retelling of histories. Instead, they expand what is in the archive and create “a multitude of individual recontextualizations” (Stocking 1985:5). However, contrary to what George Stocking argues, these recontextualizations are not “given to them by the museum as an institution within a particular historical sociocultural setting” (Stocking 1985:5), but suggested by the artists who are themselves using the museum, its codes and its broader environment to display the altered archive in its new form: the archival artwork. Moreover, and this is especially true when considering the work of Brook Andrew and George Nuku, they used the museum as a place for critique as well as incorporated the museum tropes into their artistic lexicon and built their practices around them. In doing so, they create frictions with the institution and facilitate the retelling and restorying of the archive to be contextually embedded. This context is that of the European museum while in the case of George Nuku’s practice, the context is Aotearoa New Zealand and encapsulates the encounter of Europeans and Māori people not only visually but also in the experience of the visit. As for Andrew, he lures the audience into his critique of the archive by using visual (neon lights) and sound (techno music) strategies which at first may not seem to belong in the museum. In so doing, he tricks people’s minds in playing with their museum expectations – by displaying a human skeleton, using a vitrine, and titling his work in reference to Tasmania, he leads people to think that he is displaying the remains of an Indigenous person. What this reveals is that not only archival artworks are tools for the museum to showcase their revisited colonial collections and reveal their positions as institutions invested in decolonial practices, it is also an opportunity to offer different types of engagements with collections and art making.

According to museologist and art historian Claire Robins,

“the turn towards commissioning artists’ services has significant connections with wider shifts in thinking about how knowledge and understanding can be achieved through the visual and other sense modalities. Attention is given to the ways in which integrating contemporary art and re-investing in emotion, affect and curiosity has

motivated a number of collaborations between museum professionals and artists” (2013:12).

Robins argues that the different modalities of encounter created by artists have become essential in generating emotional responses in museums. With archival artworks, artists not only enable a broader accessibility and visibility of the archive which in itself facilitates its role as a memory device to be performed thanks to “the power of display as a method of communication” (Hooper-Greenhill 2000:151). I consider that by their alterations and adaptations, artists support the dissemination of the archive beyond its original frames of references. In turn, because the archive is experienced anew, visually and contextually, it is partially freed from its original signifiers. When first created, colonial archives enacted a form of capture in sound, image and text, of people, geographies and political situations. After this initial step of recording, archives were stored in boxes and institutions for future access, and while most are accessible to the public, their safekeeping in time has mostly prevented their public display. Thus, once archival material has become part and parcel of an archival artwork, the archive is freed from its archival containment and endowed with the qualities of art, as opposed to the containment of the archive where it is kept and stored away in the hope that someone, someday, might need it. Archival art is made to be seen and experienced through public display.

I believe that a further ‘freeing’ of the archive is possible when it leaves its institutional remit. In the case of the Centre for the Less Good Idea’s residence at the Fondation Cartier pour l’art contemporain in Paris, the CLGI and their partners, worked with the archives from the musée départemental Albert Khan. During this week of events and performances with the archives at the Fondation Cartier, I argue that the archives were presented in a ‘buffer zone’, a mitigation place which enabled the preserving of the archive through its recontextualisation and dissemination. Indeed, while the very transformation of archives into archival artworks enacts a form of liberation from the archive’s containment, the display of colonial archives in a different type of institution enables for the archive to be encountered outside of its institutional frame, thus operating a form of institutional transfer, where the institution can be both the place of exhibition and the artist themselves who have, through their work, taken partial ownership of the archive.

Finally, where this thesis has aimed to present archival art as a method used by diasporic, Indigenous and Global South artists in a context where museum institutions are engaging in decolonial practices, I would like to draw a parallel with the idea of the museum as method as defined by Nicholas Thomas (2010). In the museum as method, a method that

reminds us of the importance of understanding what happens behind the scenes of the museums walls, Thomas identifies three core elements that are characteristic of it: the discovery (“finding things that were not lost, identifying things that were known to others, or disclosing what was hidden or repressed”) (2010:7), the caption (“the business of description and the discursive contextualization of any museum piece”), the juxtaposition (“arises because objects are seldom exhibited on their own”) (2010:8). The first aspect of this method, the discovery, can be regarded as akin to the moment when artists research the archive, when they have to familiarise themselves with the archive, its classifications and histories. The elements of captioning and juxtaposing can be compared to the processes of alteration and transformation of the archive into an archival artwork, as well as with its broader contextualisation through adaptation to both museum and geographical environments. For Thomas, the museum as method is what allows curators to work “in ways that challenge many everyday or scholarly understandings of what things are and what they represent” (2010:8). However, while Thomas’ museum as method is helpful in framing archival art as a method, there are two elements that are specific to the practice of archival art. While I have argued before that artists often take on the role of curators and use curation as an essential element in their artistic practice, the work of museum curators – although some might also be practising artists – is not guided by artistic or personal choices, but rather by research and museum protocols with a view to presenting a display that is following museum rules and is factually informed and interpreted, removed from creative or personal storytelling. Artistic creative practice, though at times informed by history, real life events or archives, is always a creative and/or personal reaction and reflection. Archival art acts similarly as a method as it follows some principles that can be paralleled with that of museum (research, interpretation and display). While artistic retellings and restoryings of archives can be used by institutions in the service of decolonial programmes, they are first and foremost a means for artists to tell personal stories – theirs and that of the people in the archives – through creative practice in order to expand who can give meaning to archives and collections in and beyond the institution.

Informed by the archival turn in art, this thesis has focused on the specificities of artists working with colonial archives in European exhibition spaces. It has revealed that this practice was born out of the general archive art practice, together with the rise of the digital realm as well as the openness of museums to communities and artists working with their collections. Archival art, especially when pertaining to colonial archives, offers itself as a way for Indigenous, diasporic and Global South artists to take control over and revisit the

narratives of colonisation captured in archival records thus creating opportunities for repair and redress in and outside of museums. While this research has acknowledged the role of the embodied experience of colonial archives and archival art reframing colonial archives, further studies based on the reception of archival art by audiences, in museums as well as in art galleries (private and public), would enable understanding how the processes of alteration and adaptation, as explored through the works of George Nuku and Brook Andrew, inform and impact the visitors' engagement with and experience of the archive as well as that of the artwork itself.

*Thursday 25 September 2025*

This morning, when I arrived at the Sainsbury Research Unit, a copy of the newly released edited volume *Respecting Africa and Beyond: Reflections on Culture, Art and Heritage in Honour of John Mack* (King 2025) was awaiting me on my desk. As I was slowly flicking through the book, a familiar image suddenly drew my attention. It was a black and white photograph with three people sitting at the front and five at the back: they are curators from the former Wellcome Historical Medical Museum and are posing with artefacts from Africa and Oceania as well as human skulls. Beyond the uneasiness that the photograph can create with these staring gazes and their hands holding tight onto what seems to be their prized possessions, something felt out of place. I quickly realised that I knew this image, except each time I had encountered it until this morning, it was not as the 1915 photograph, but as part of contemporary artist Grace Ndiritu's work *The Twin Tapestries: Repair (1915) & Restitution (1973)* (2022). While I knew that Ndiritu's work was a piece of archival art based on two photographs, the visual signs of her tapestries reproducing this picture (and another photograph taken at the Ethnological Museum in Berlin) belonged visually to *her* work in my mind, until I was confronted with 'the original' photograph reproduced in a book this morning. While in archival art archives are always the source, the point of departure of the artists' work, as a museum goer, the newly made archival artwork is likely to be the point of departure for the viewer's understanding of the archival material.

Today, when I encountered this photograph, I saw it through Ndiritu's re-reading of it, as a large-scale tapestry prompting the question: how can we repair the harmful histories of possessions tied to the colonial? Because I first experienced her tapestry in the galleries of the Gropius Bau in Berlin in 2022, my relationship to this photographic archive is now bound to Ndiritu's work. However, in many cases, the viewer will only ever be exposed to the archival artworks, never the archive, thus exemplifying the role of display and embodied experience.

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Archival Present: Contemporary Artists at  
Work With Colonial Archives in  
European Exhibition Spaces  
Volume II

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Thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy  
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15 May 2026

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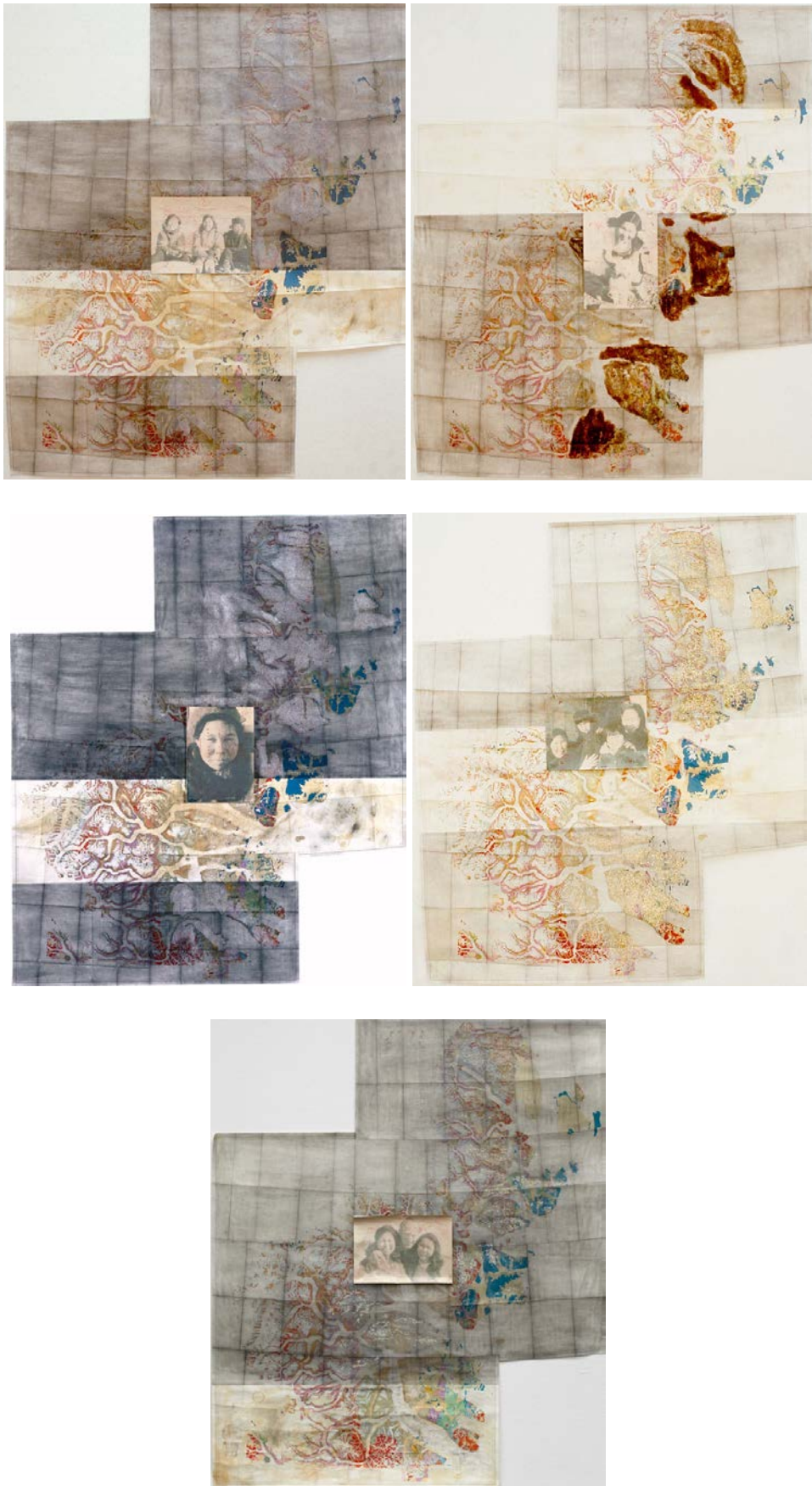


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Figure 10. Hulleah J. Tsinhnahjinnie, 2003, *Portraits Against Amnesia*. © Hulleah J. Tsinhnahjinnie  
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Figure 13. Yuki Kihara, 2022 – ongoing, *Paradise Camp* as displayed in the New Zealand Pavilion at the 59<sup>th</sup> Venice Biennale, 23 April – 27 November 2022 © Photo: Anna Souter / Hyperallergic <https://hyperallergic.com/744908/celebrating-samoas-third-gender-through-radical-camp/>



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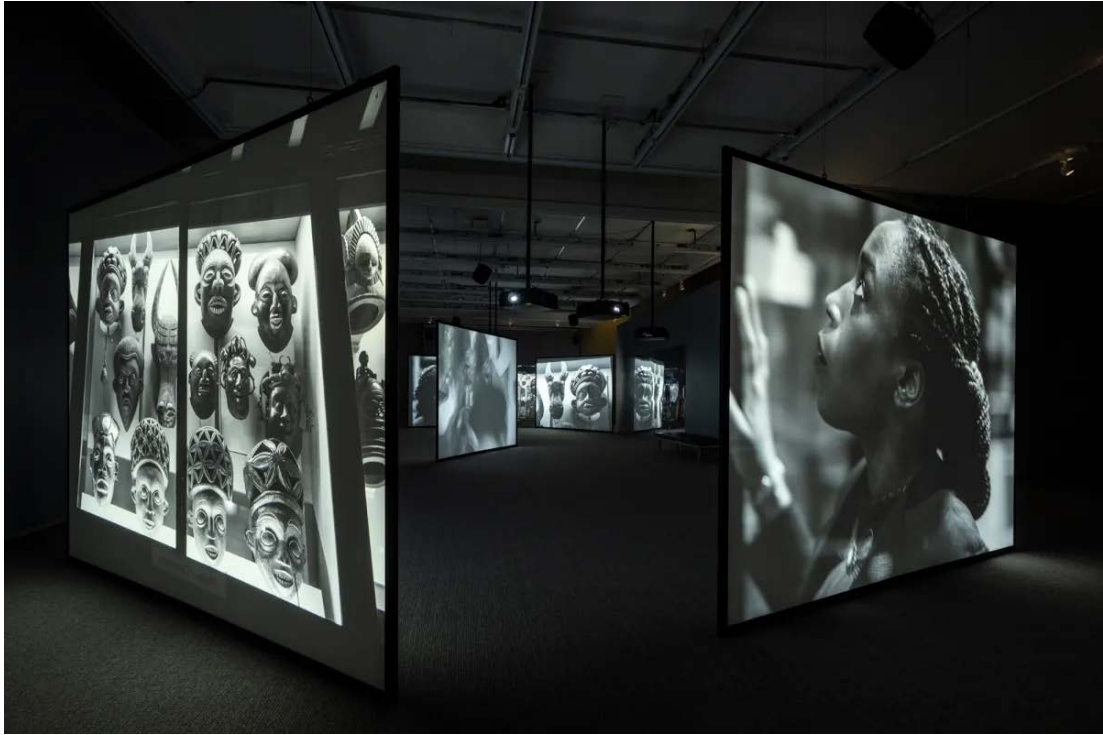


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Figure 19. Photography Centre, Victoria & Albert Museum, South Kensington, London. © Victoria & Albert Museum, London [https://www.vam.ac.uk/blog/news/our-new-photography-centre-is-now-open?srsltid=AfmBOopla2ftZf\\_-XNyp1pJB4Xnbb6jzDI18m3FHFck9O2VsGz0owI5A](https://www.vam.ac.uk/blog/news/our-new-photography-centre-is-now-open?srsltid=AfmBOopla2ftZf_-XNyp1pJB4Xnbb6jzDI18m3FHFck9O2VsGz0owI5A)

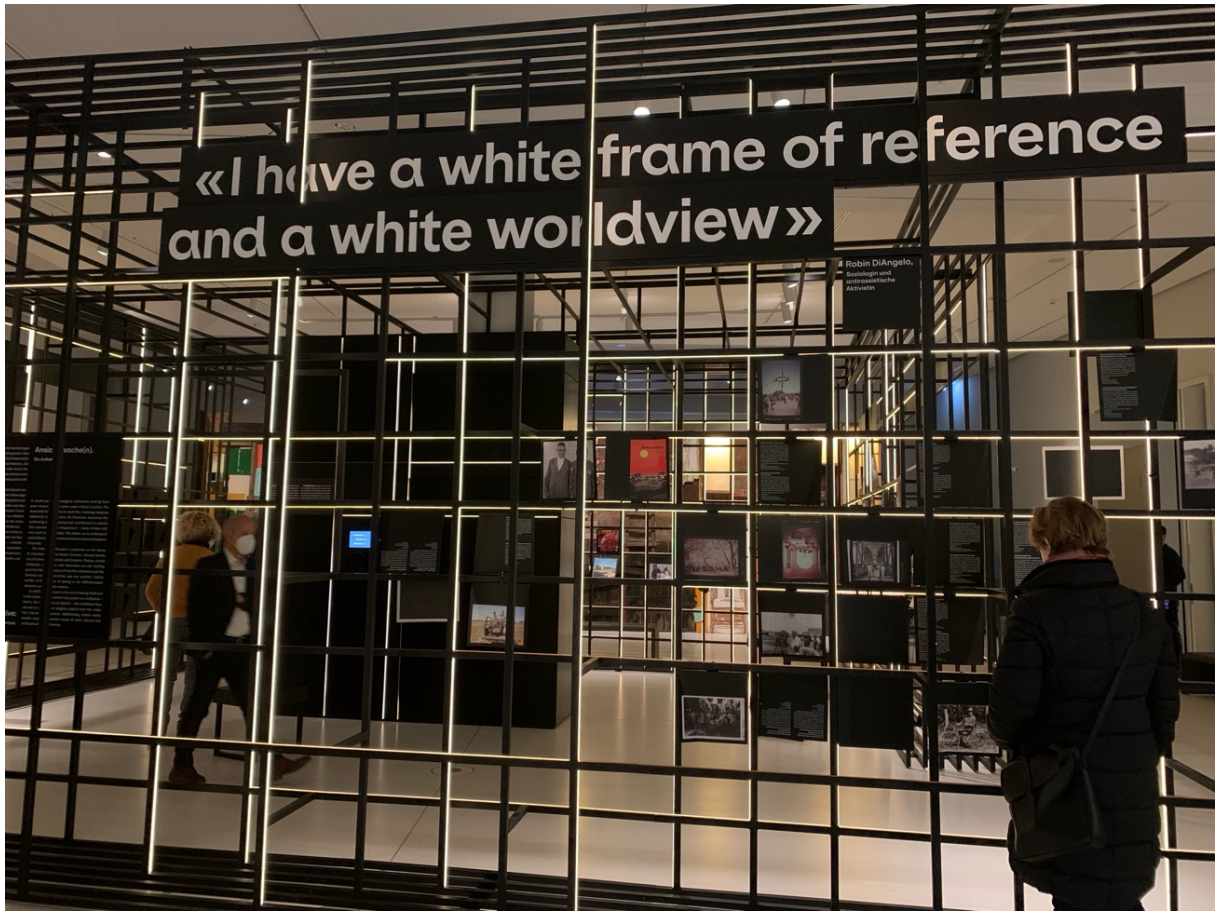


Figure 20. *Matter(s) of Perspective*, 2021 – ongoing, Humboldt Forum, Berlin. © Photo: Clémentine Debrosse



Figure 21. Kelani Abass, 2016, *Casing History I*. © Kelani Abass  
<https://www.headlands.org/artist/kelani-abass/>

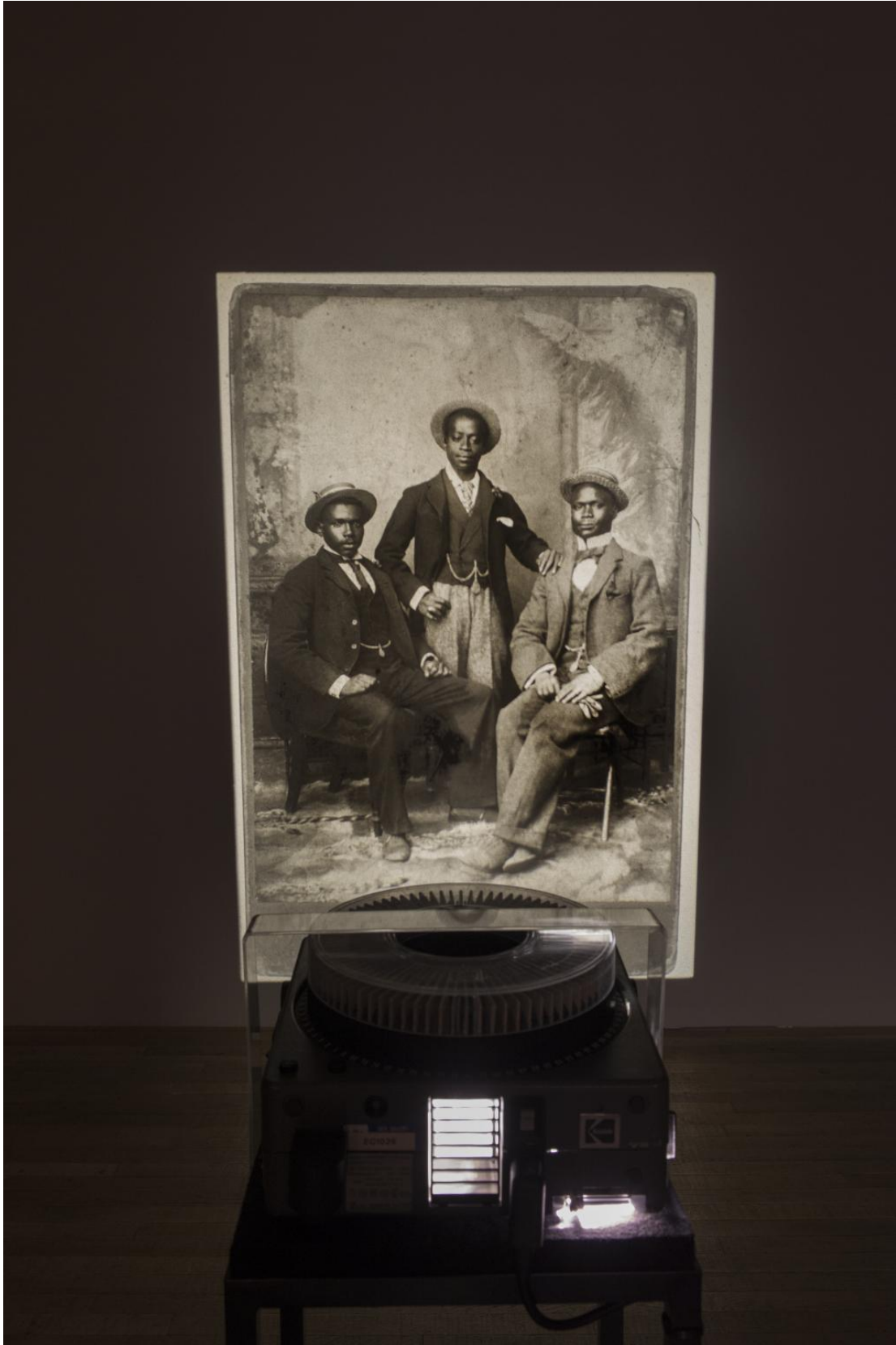


Figure 22. Santu Mofokeng, 1997, *The Black Photo Album / Look at Me*, Tate Modern, London. © Santu Mofokeng, courtesy Maker, Johannesburg <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/mofokeng-the-black-photo-album-look-at-me-t13173>



Figure 23. Ndid Dike, 2019, *A History of a City in a Box* in the exhibition *A World in Common: Contemporary African Photography* at the Tate Modern in London, 6 July 2023 – 14 January 2024. © Photo: Lucy Green <https://nataal.com/a-world-in-common>



Figure 24. Malala Andrialavidrazana, 2015 – ongoing, series *Figures*, *Figures 1867, Principal Countries of the World*. © Malala Andrialavidrazana <https://www.andrialavidrazana.com/figures>

## Chapter 1



Figure 25. Carrie Mae Weems, 1995-6 *From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried*, exhibited at the Barbican Centre in London in the exhibition *Carrie Mae Weems: Reflections for Now*, 22 June – 3 September 2023. © Carrie Mae Weems <https://www.carriemaeweems.net/fromhereisaw>



Figure 26. Carrie Mae Weems, 1991-2, *Sea Island Series*, exhibited at the Jepson Center & Telfair Museums in Savannah, Georgia, USA in the exhibition *Carrie Mae Weems: Sea Islands Series, 1991-1992*, 26 January – 6 May 2018. © Carrie Mae Weems <https://www.carriemaeweems.net/seaislands>

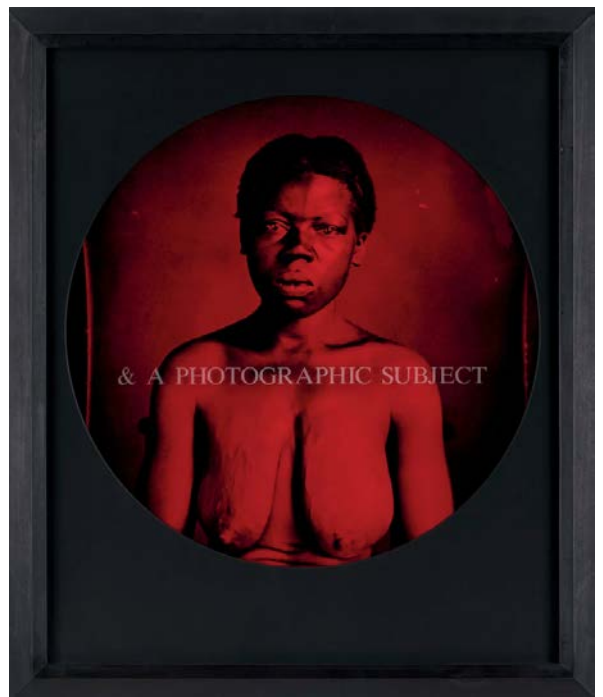
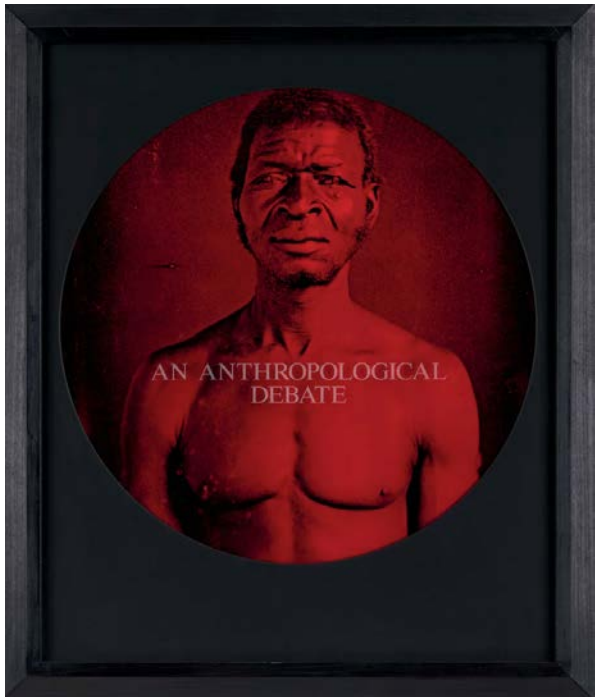
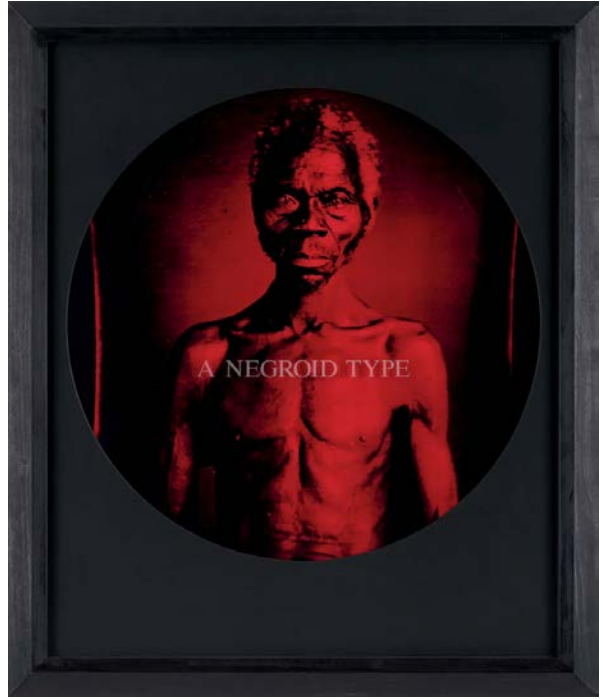
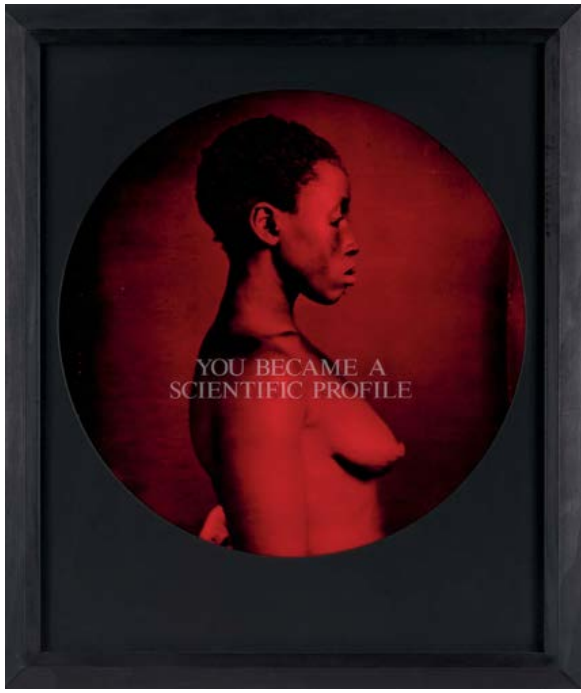


Fig. 27. Carrie Mae Weems, 1995-6, *From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried*. These four portraits depict Delia, Renty, Jack and Drana from left to right. © Carrie Mae Weems <https://www.carriemaeweems.net/fromhereisaw>



Figure 28. Sasha Huber, 2008, *Rentyhorn – The Intervention*. Here Sasha Huber is standing at the top of Agassizhorn in Switzerland with a sign to rename it as Rentyhorn. © Photo: Siro Micheroli <https://www.sashahuber.com/?cat=5>



Figure 29. Sasha Huber, 2021-23, *Tailoring Freedom*, as shown in the exhibition *You Name It* at the Turku Art Museum (9 June – 27 August 2023). © Photo: Vasa Aaltonen <https://www.sashahuber.com/index.php?cat=10093&lang=fi&mstr=4>

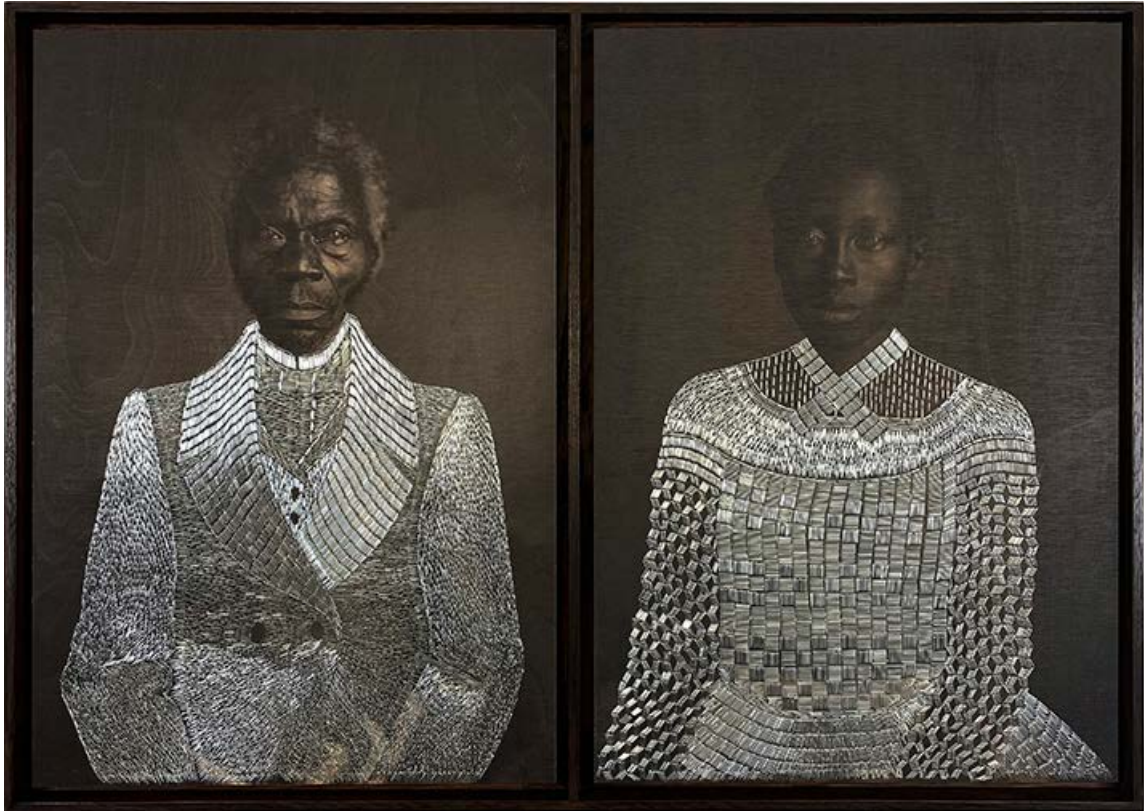


Fig. 30. Sasha Huber, 2021, *Tailoring Freedom – Renty and Delia*. Original images courtesy the Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Harvard University. © Sasha Huber <https://www.sashahuber.com/index.php?cat=10093&lang=fi&mstr=4>

## Chapter 2



Figure 31. Workspace of Rajkamal Kahlon during her residency at the Weltmuseum Wien, Vienna. © KMH-Museumsverband <https://www.weltmuseumwien.at/en/exhibitions/stayingwithtrouble/>



Figure 32. Rajkamal Kahlon's *Die Völker der Erde* presented at the Weltmuseum Wien in Vienna during her exhibition *Staying with Trouble*, 25 October 2017 – 8 January 2019. © KMH-Museumsverband

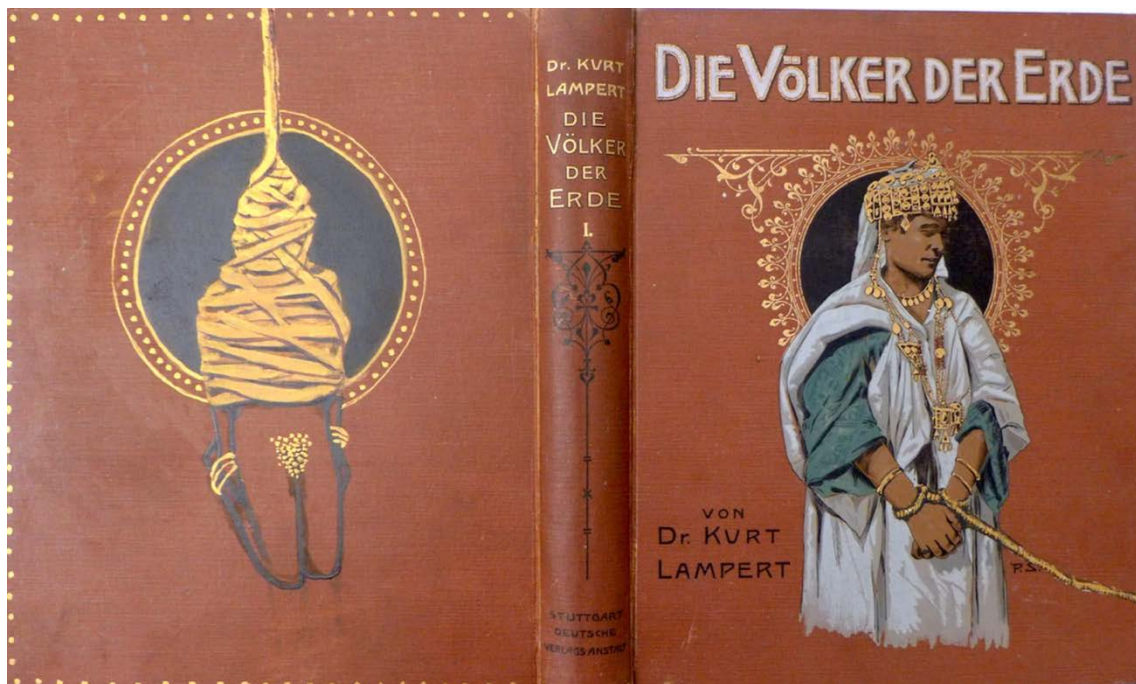


Figure 33. Kahlon's reworking of the cover of the copy of *Die Völker der Erde* by Kurt Lampert that she found in an antique bookshop in Vienna. © Rajkamal Kahlon  
<https://contemporaryand.com/fr/magazines/constructive-disruptions/>

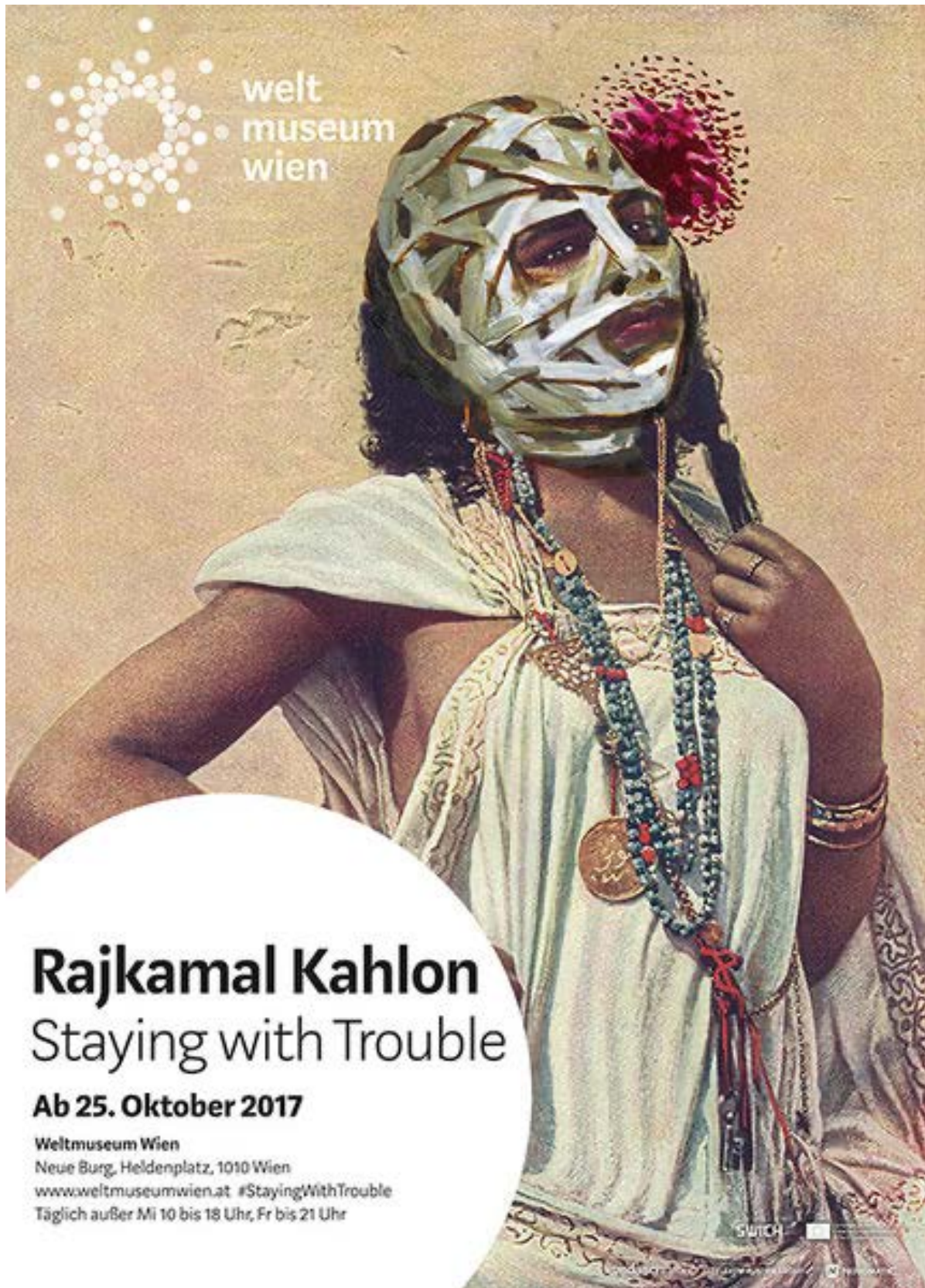


Figure 34. Poster for Rajkamal Kahlon's exhibition *Staying with Trouble* at the Weltmuseum Wien, Vienna, 25 October 2017 – 8 January 2019.  KMH-Museumsverband <https://www.weltmuseumwien.at/en/exhibitions/stayingwithtrouble/>



Figure 35. Rajkamal Kahlon's exhibition *Staying with Trouble* at the Weltmuseum Wien, Vienna, 25 October 2017 – 8 January 2019. © KMH-Museumsverband <https://www.swich-project.eu/nocache/documentation/detail/article/staying-with-trouble-rajkamal-kahlon-1/index.html>



Figure 36. Rajkamal Kahlon, three of the portraits from the *Do You Know Our Names?* Series, as exhibited at the Weltmuseum Wien in Vienna. © Rajkamal Kahlon <https://contemporaryand.com/magazines/constructive-disruptions/>



Figure 37. Display of the five portraits constituting the *Dear Sir, I Regret to Inform you...* series realised by Rajkamal Kahlon during her residency at the Weltmuseum Wien and presented in the *Staying with Trouble* exhibition, Weltmuseum Wien, Vienna 25 October 2017 – 8 January 2019. © KMH-Museumsverband

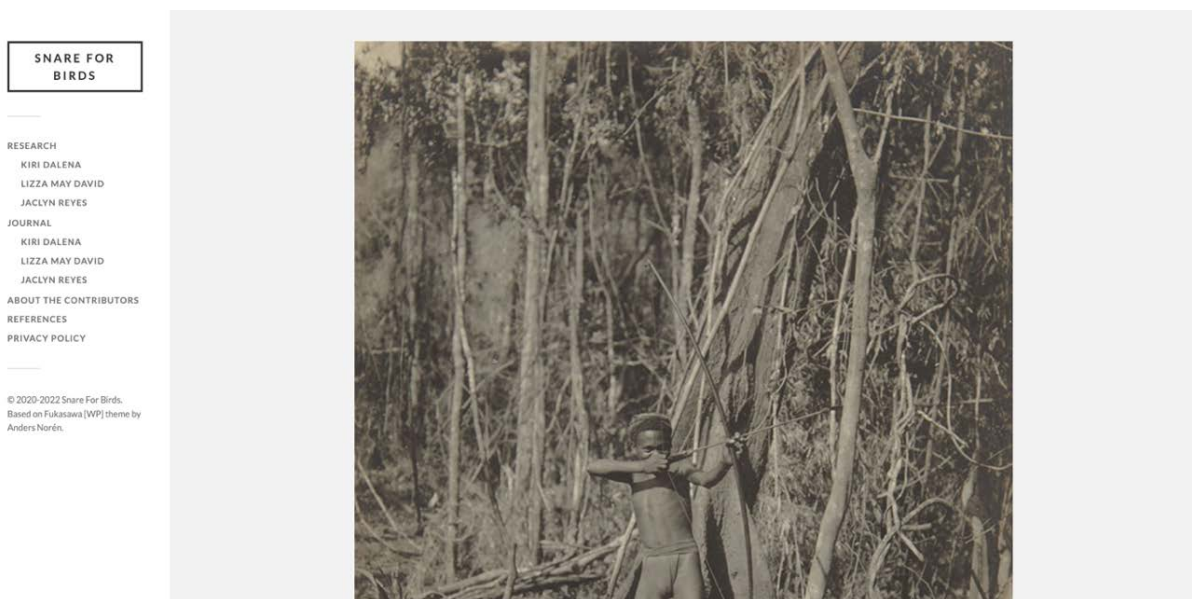


Figure 38. Screen capture of the home page of the Snare for Birds website, accessed on 17/09/24. © Snare for Birds <https://www.snareforbirds.com/>

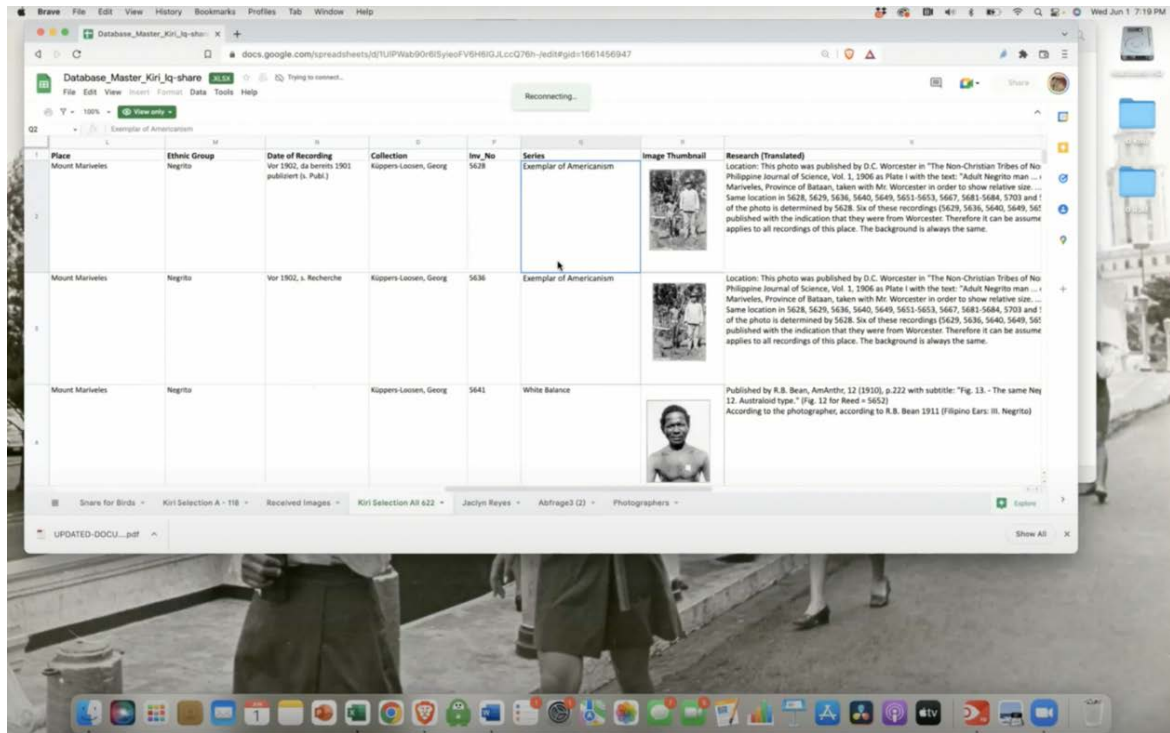


Figure 39. Capture of the database during Kiri Dalena's RJM Online Access Tour. © Kiri Dalena & RJM <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YbcEoooBK6I&t=1s>



Figure 40. Kiri Dalena, *Tagalog Women* exhibited in the exhibition *Snare for Birds: Rereading the Colonial Archive* at Ateano Art Gallery in Quezon City, 16 September 2023 – 17 February 2024. © Scott Garceau, The Philippine Star <https://philstarlife.com/geeky/673723-snaring-foreign-gaze?page=3>



Figure 41. Kiri Dalena, 2022, *Tagalog Women (Black)* series, 2022. © Kiri Dalena  
<https://contemporaryand.com/fr/exhibition/digital-fellowships/>

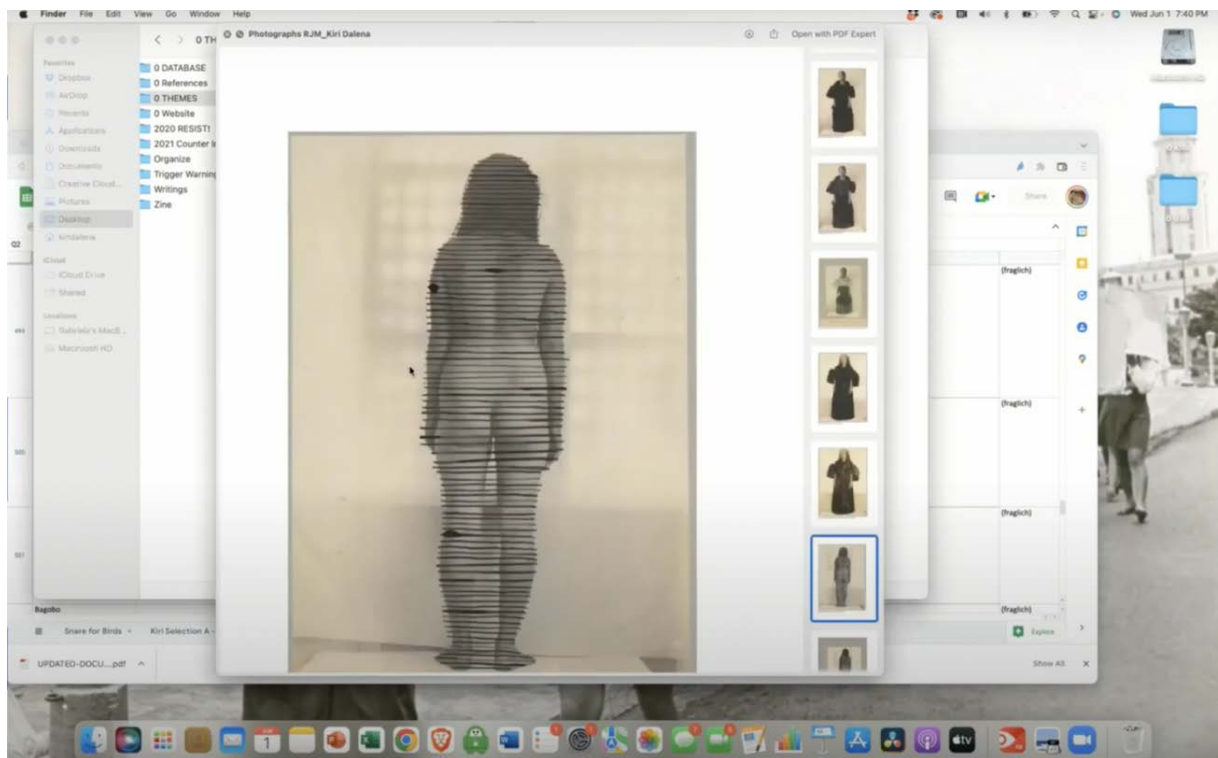


Figure 42. Kiri Dalena showing her work *Strike Through* during her 'Online Access Tour' as part of her digital residence at RJM and the *Leaky Archives* project © Kiri Dalena  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YbcEoooBK6I&t=1s>

## Chapter 3



Figure 43. Brook Andrew, 1996, *Sexy & Dangerous*, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne. © Brook Andrew <https://www.ngv.vic.gov.au/explore/collection/work/77516/>

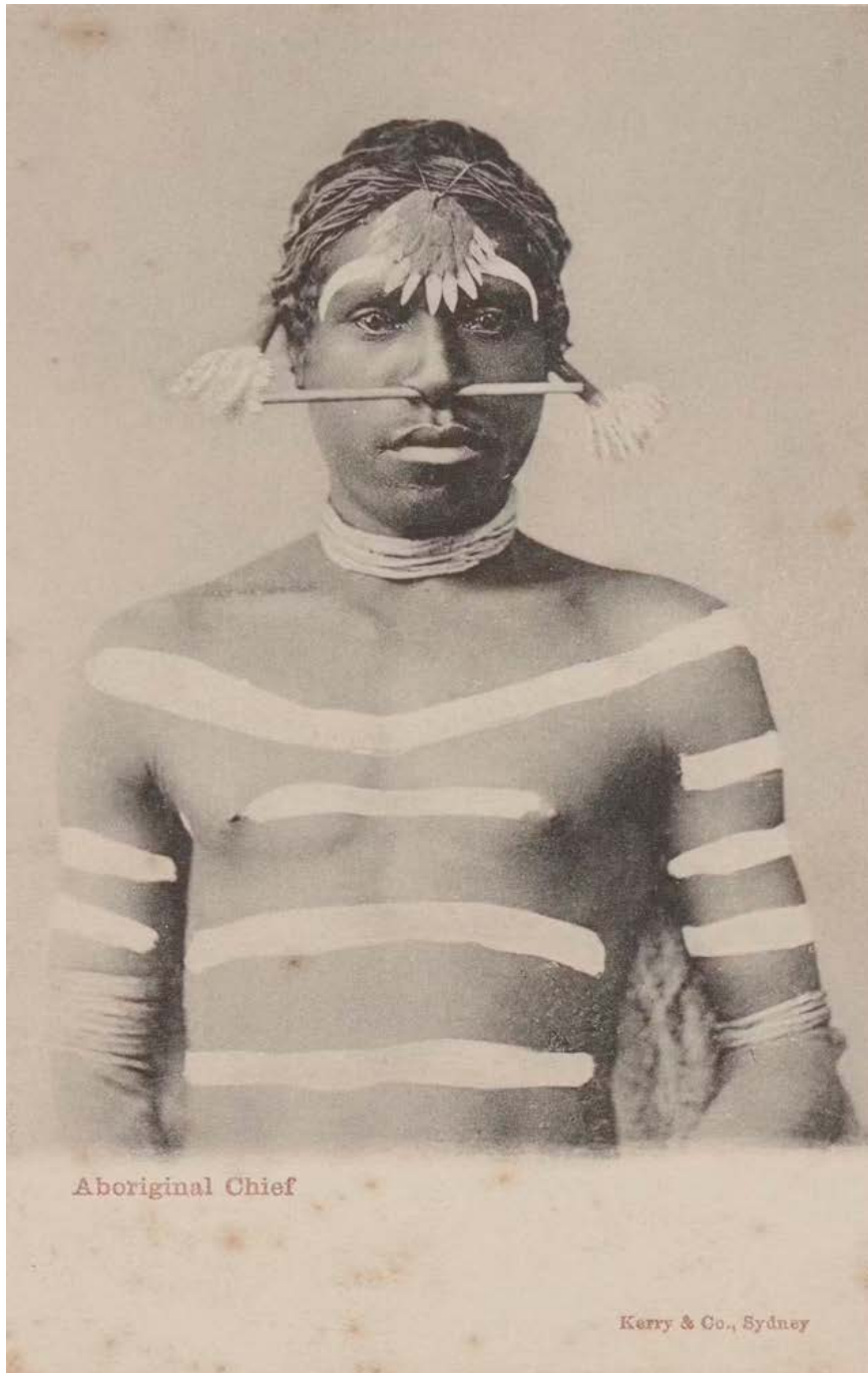


Figure 44. Kerry & Co, Aboriginal chief, 1901-1907, postcard.  
<https://www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/collection/works/518.2014/>



Figure 45. Brook Andrew, 2007, *Gun-metal Grey*, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne.  
© Brook Andrew <https://www.ngv.vic.gov.au/explore/collection/work/100305/>



Figure 46. Brook Andrew, 2008, *The Island IV*, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne.  
© Brook Andrew <https://www.ngv.vic.gov.au/explore/collection/work/124129/>



Figure 47. Brook Andrew, 2013, *52 Portraits*. © Brook Andrew  
<https://brookandrew.wordpress.com/2013/06/17/52-portraits-opens-at-tolarno-galleries/>



Figure 48. Brook Andrew, 2014, *WITNESS*, Lyon Housemuseum, Australia. © Brook Andrew  
<https://www.brookandrew.com/witness>



Figure 49. Brook Andrew, 2015, *Possessed*. © Brook Andrew  
<https://www.brookandrew.com/possessed>



Figure 50. Brook Andrew 2016, *Memory (Triptyque)*. © Brook Andrew  
<https://www.brookandrew.com/the-forest/wz0kivxybsldgntehishau5bqlsw7g>



Figure 51. Exhibition *Sanctuary: Tombs of the Outcasts*, 2015, Ian Potter Museum of Art, University of Melbourne. © Brook Andrew <https://www.brookandrew.com/sanctuary-tombs-of-the-outcasts>



Figure 52. Exhibition *L'Effet Boomerang*, 2017, installation by Brook Andrew *Room A; Mirror*, musée d'ethnographie de Genève. © Brook Andrew <https://www.brookandrew.com/room-a-mirror>



Figure 53. Exhibition *The Right to Offend is Sacred*, National Gallery of Victoria, 2017, Melbourne.  
 © Brook Andrew <https://www.brookandrew.com/the-right-to-offend-is-sacred/>



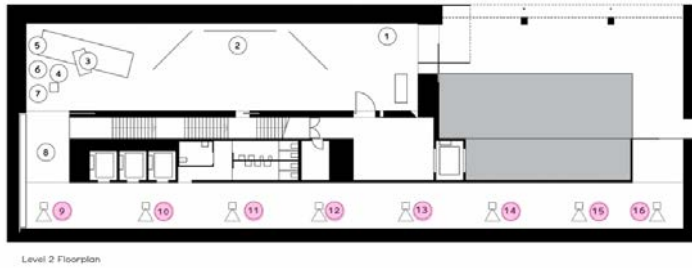
Figure 54. Exhibition *AHY-KON-UH-KLAS-TIK*, Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven, 2017.  
 © Brook Andrew <https://www.brookandrew.com/ahy-kon-uh-klas-tik>



Figure 55. *Horizon II*, 2020, *À toi appartient le regard et (...) la liaison infinie entre les choses*, musée du quai Branly-Jacques Chirac, Paris. © Brook Andrew <https://www.brookandrew.com/horizon-line-ii>



Figure 56. *Horizon I*, 2015, *De Anima* exhibition, RMIT Design Hub, Melbourne. © Brook Andrew <https://www.brookandrew.com/horizon-i>



#### Horizon I

- 9 Ministry of Home Security Training Film - Technical Training of Rescue Parties, Produced by Cinit Films, UK, c.1920. Armand and Michaela Denis On Safari (Part 2), c.1960
- 10 Apollo 11 - the first men on the moon, A Walten Film, 1969
- 11 American Family, home video, sound footage, Lithia Park Ashland, Oregon, c.1970
- 12 Unknown film clip, Columbia Pictures, 1973. Armand and Michaela Denis On Safari (Part 1), c.1960
- 13 Bullfighting, Spain, c.1970
- 14 Love by Appointment, standard 8mm, black and white, silent, c.1960
- 15 My Japan, War Finance Division, Compo films, Chicago, USA, 1945
- 16 The Blonde Captive, Capital Pictures, USA, 1931

Figure 57. Floorplan of the exhibition *De Anima* at RMIT Design Hub in Melbourne in 2015. In pink numbered from 9 to 16 are the eight video channels forming *Horizon I* with, on the right, the text describing which video from Andrew's collection is projected on each channel. <https://designhub.rmit.edu.au/docs/deanima-insert--web.pdf> (PDF downloaded on 05/07/2024 but the link was broken on 28/09/2025)

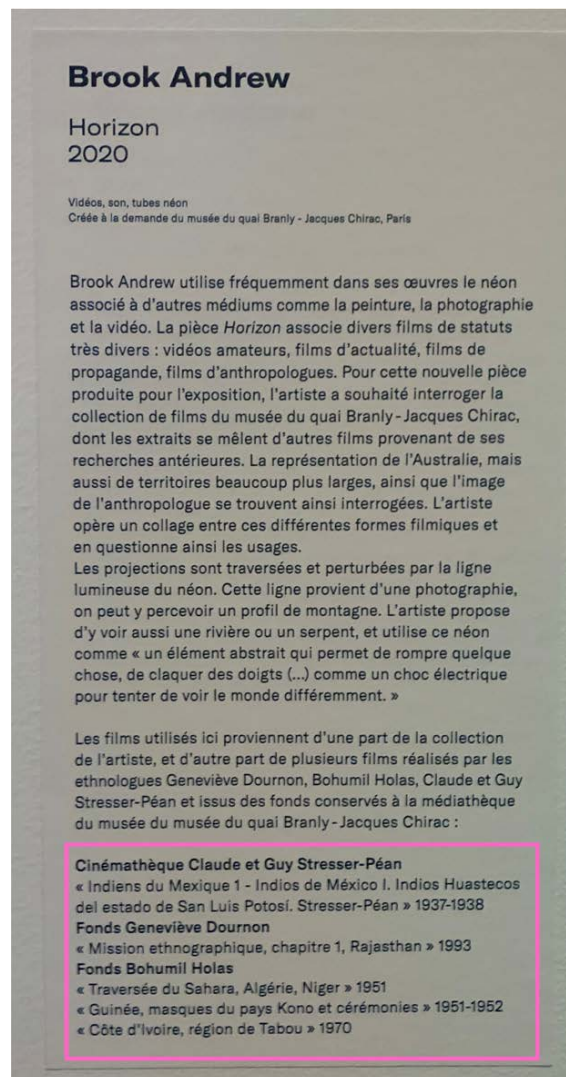


Figure 58. Label of the work *Horizon II* in the exhibition *À toi appartient le regard et (...) la liaison infinie entre les choses*, musée du quai Branly – Jacques Chirac, Paris, 2020. Framed in pink is the section of the label which gives the details of films from the collection that were used in *Horizon II* (my framing). © Photo: Clémentine Debrosse

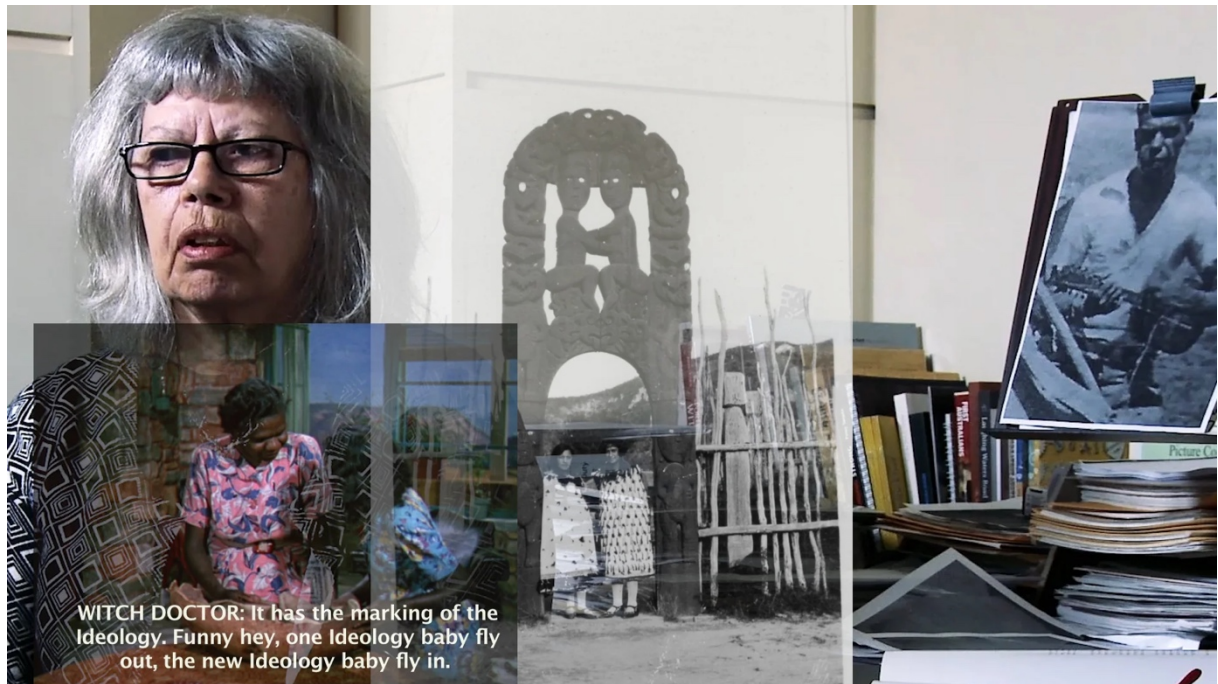


Figure 59. Brook Andrew, still from *SMASH IT*, 2018, 28 minutes. © Brook Andrew  
<https://www.brookandrew.com/smash-it>



Figure 60. Brook Andrew, still from *SMASH IT*, 2018, 28 minutes. © Brook Andrew  
<https://www.brookandrew.com/smash-it>

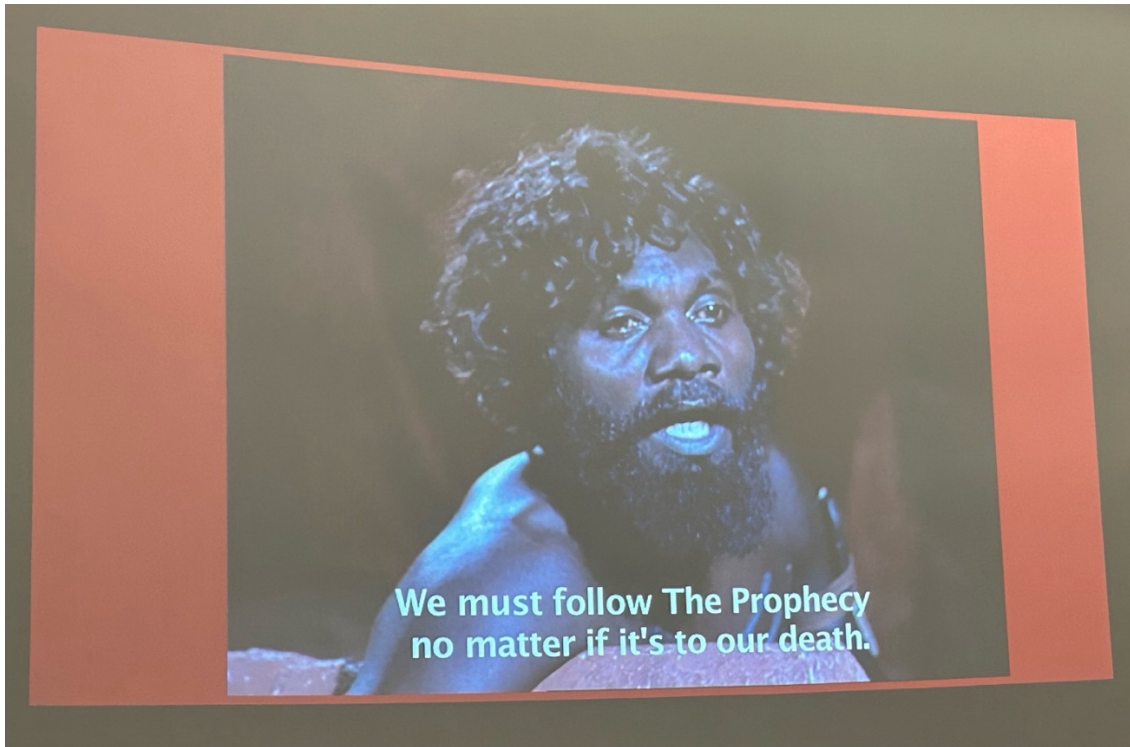


Figure 61. Brook Andrew, *SMASH IT*, 2018, 28 minutes, captured during the Liverpool Biennale projection, 2023. © Brook Andrew, Photo: Clémentine Debrosse



Figure 62. Din Q. Lê, *Crossing the Farther Shore*, during the *À toi appartient le regard* exhibition, 2021, musée du quai Branly – Jacques Chirac, Paris. © Photo: Clémentine Debrosse



Figure 63. Alphonse Peillon and Jacques Arago draughtsmen, Pillet Aîné engraver, plate 107, Atlas Historique, In Desaulces de Freycinet 1829-1839.



Figure 64. Alphonse Pellion, *Studies of Etui-Deni, Piro and Etu (sic)*, circa 1819, Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa, Wellington. <https://collections.tepapa.govt.nz/object/158152>

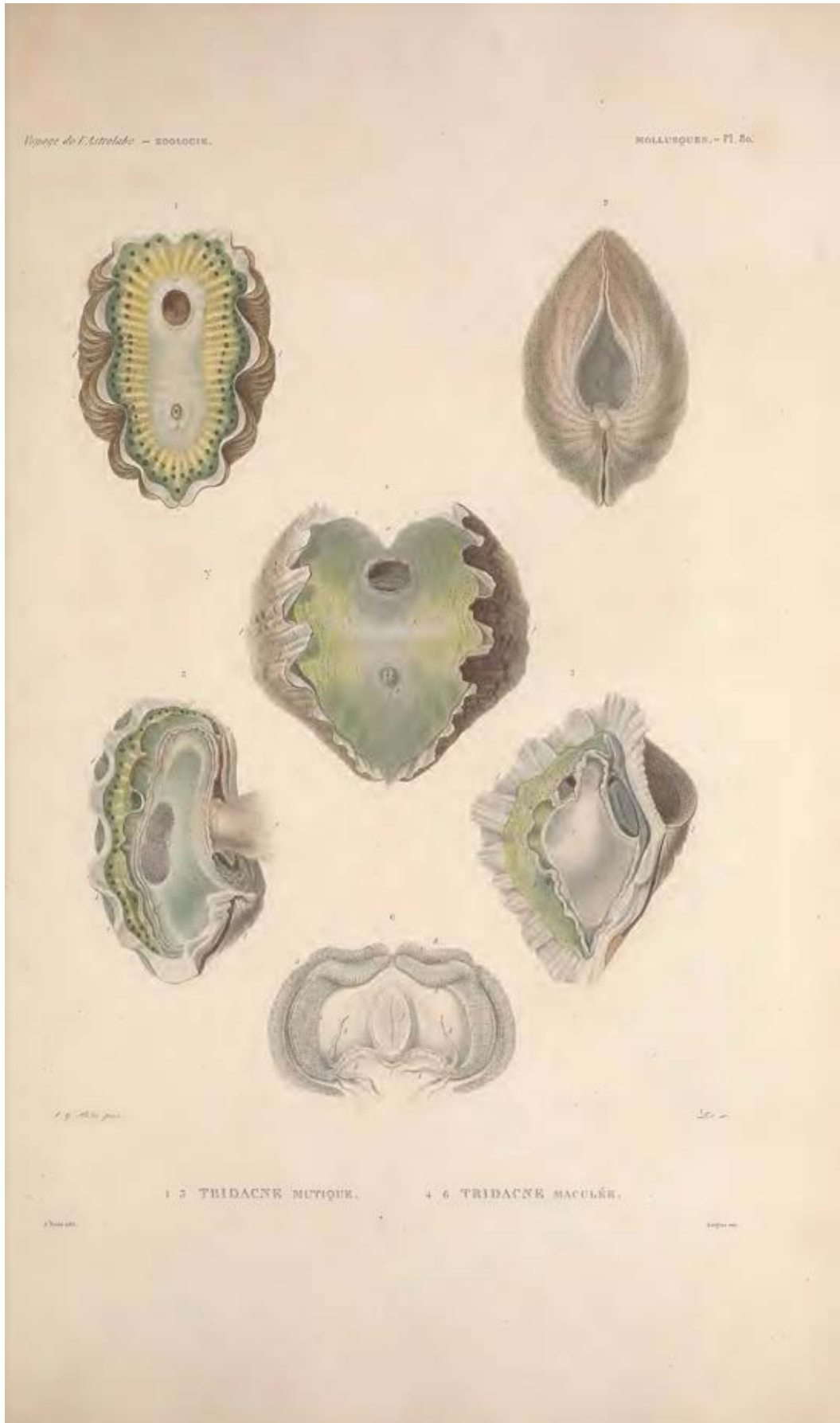
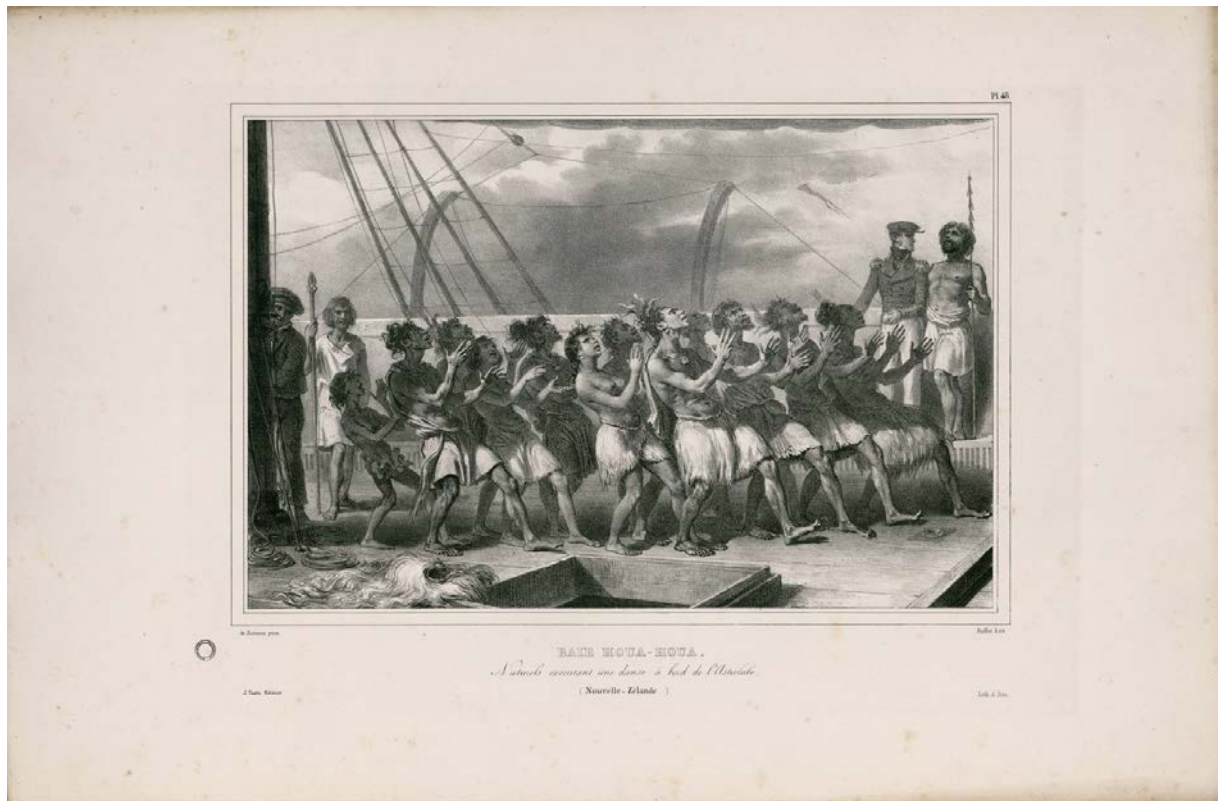


Figure 65. Langlois draughtsman, plate 80, Atlas de zoologie, In Dumont d'Urville 1830-34.



Source gallica.bnf.fr / Muséum d'Histoire Naturelle de Toulouse

Figure 66. De Sainson draughtsman, plate 42, Atlas historique, In Dumont d'Urville 1830-34.  
<https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k5356580q/f52.item.zoom>



Source gallica.bnf.fr / Muséum d'Histoire Naturelle de Toulouse

Figure 67. De Sainson draughtsman, plate 48, Atlas historique, In Dumont d'Urville 1830-34. <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k5356580q/f58.item>

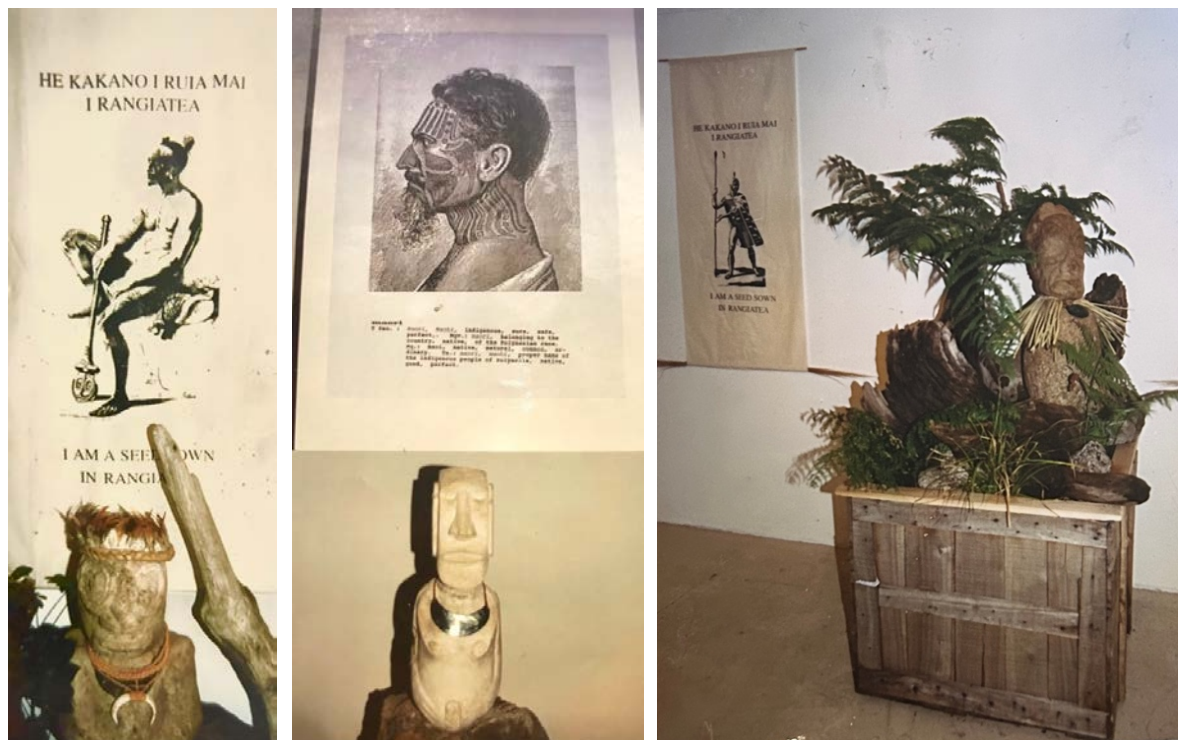


Figure 68. Exhibition *Seeds Sown in Rangiatea* by George Nuku at Strange Cargo Gallery in Auckland, Aotearoa New Zealand. Courtesy of George Nuku © George Nuku



Figure 69. George Nuku, *Outer Space Marae*, 2006, at the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology in Cambridge during the exhibition *Pasifika Styles*, May 2006 – February 2008. In Herle 2008.



Figure 70. Exhibition *Bottled Ocean 2115* by George Nuku at the Muséum in Rouen, France, 2015.  
<https://www.artist.co.nz/georgenuku>



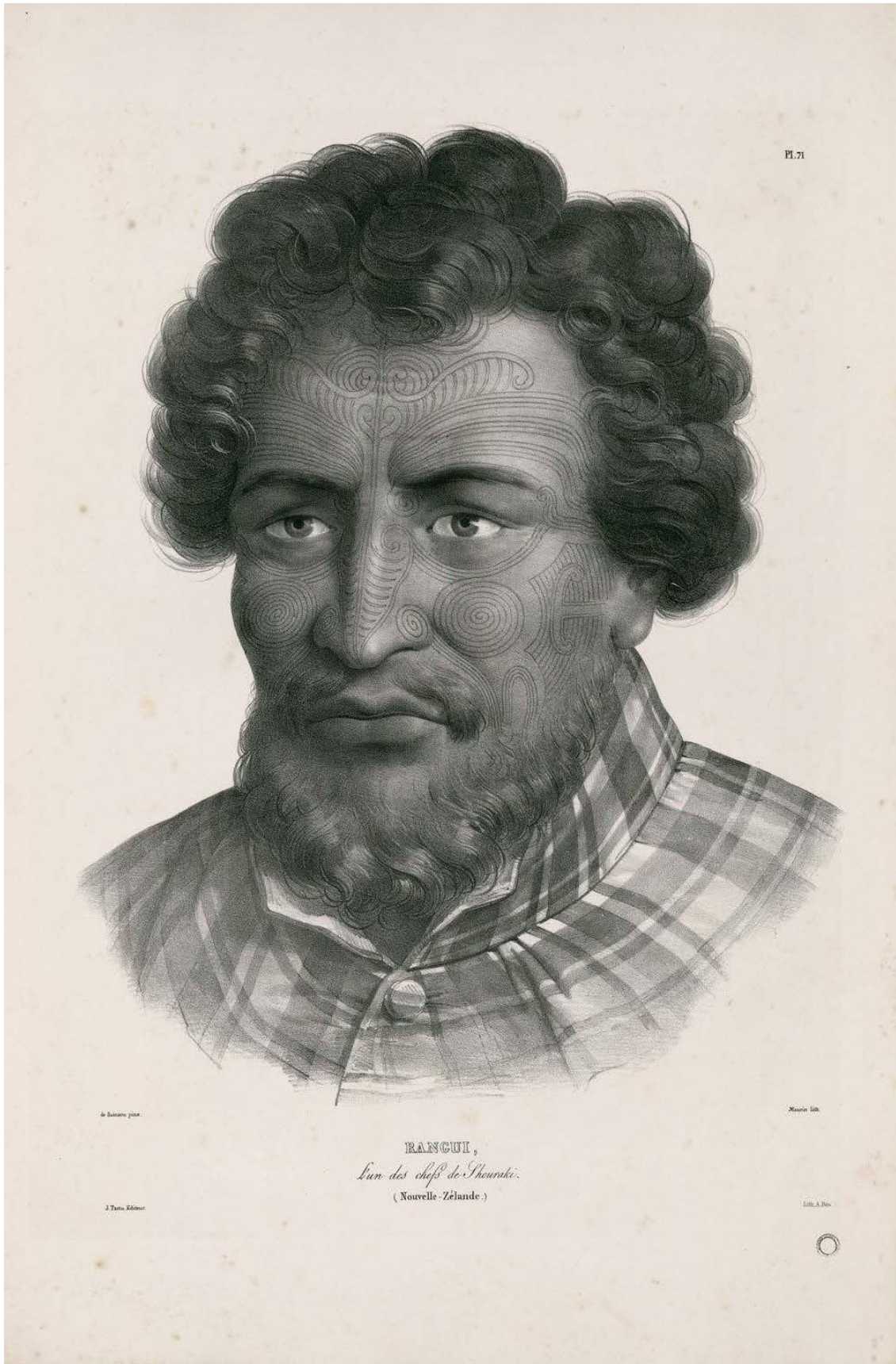


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Figure 73. De Sainson draughtsman, plate 70, Atlas historique, In Dumont d'Urville 1830-34.  
<https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k5356580q/f80.item#>



Figure 74. George Nuku, Collage of *moko* from Plates 57 and 70 from the atlas historique of the voyage of Dumont d'Urville in the exhibition *George Nuku. Voyage Autour du monde, L'aventure māori de Dumont d'Urville* at the musée Hèbre in Rochefort, France, 19 May – 28 August 2021 © Photo: Clémentine Debrosse



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Figure 75. De Sainson draughtsman, plate 71, Atlas historique, In Dumont d'Urville 1830-34.  
<https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k5356580q/f81.item#>



Voyage de l'Astrolabe.

Pl. 65

NATAI.  
*Un des Chefs de la baie d'Oran.*  
(Nouvelle Zélande.)

de Saisson peint.

l'Engr. Robert.

A. Moreau del.

del. A. Ben.

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Figure 76. De Sainson draughtsman, plate 63, Atlas historique, In Dumont d'Urville 1830-34.  
<https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k5356580q/f73.item>



Figure 77. George Nuku, After De Sainson, Plate 71 from the atlas historique, voyages of Dumont d'Urville in the exhibition *George Nuku. Voyage Autour du monde, L'aventure māori de Dumont d'Urville* at the musée Hèbre in Rochefort, France, 19 May – 28 August 2021 © Photo: Clémentine Debrosse

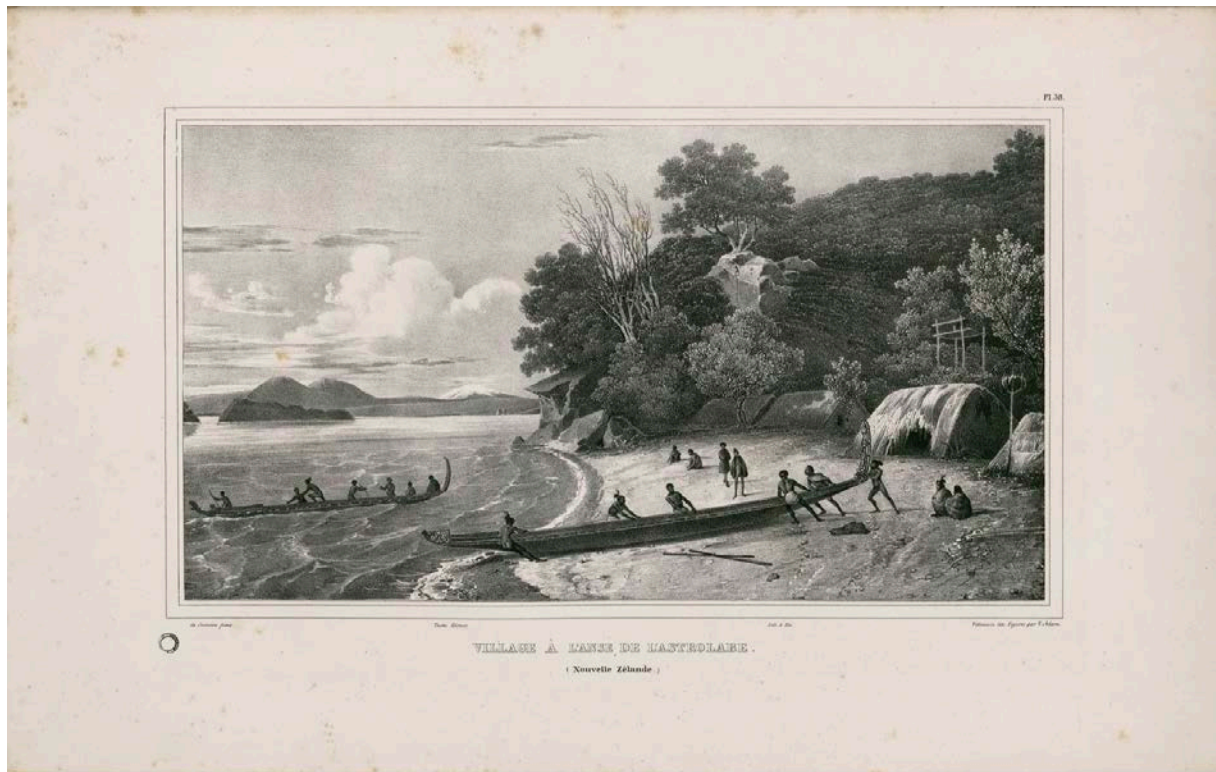


Figure 78. De Sainson draughtsman, plate 38, Atlas historique, In Dumont d'Urville 1830-34.  
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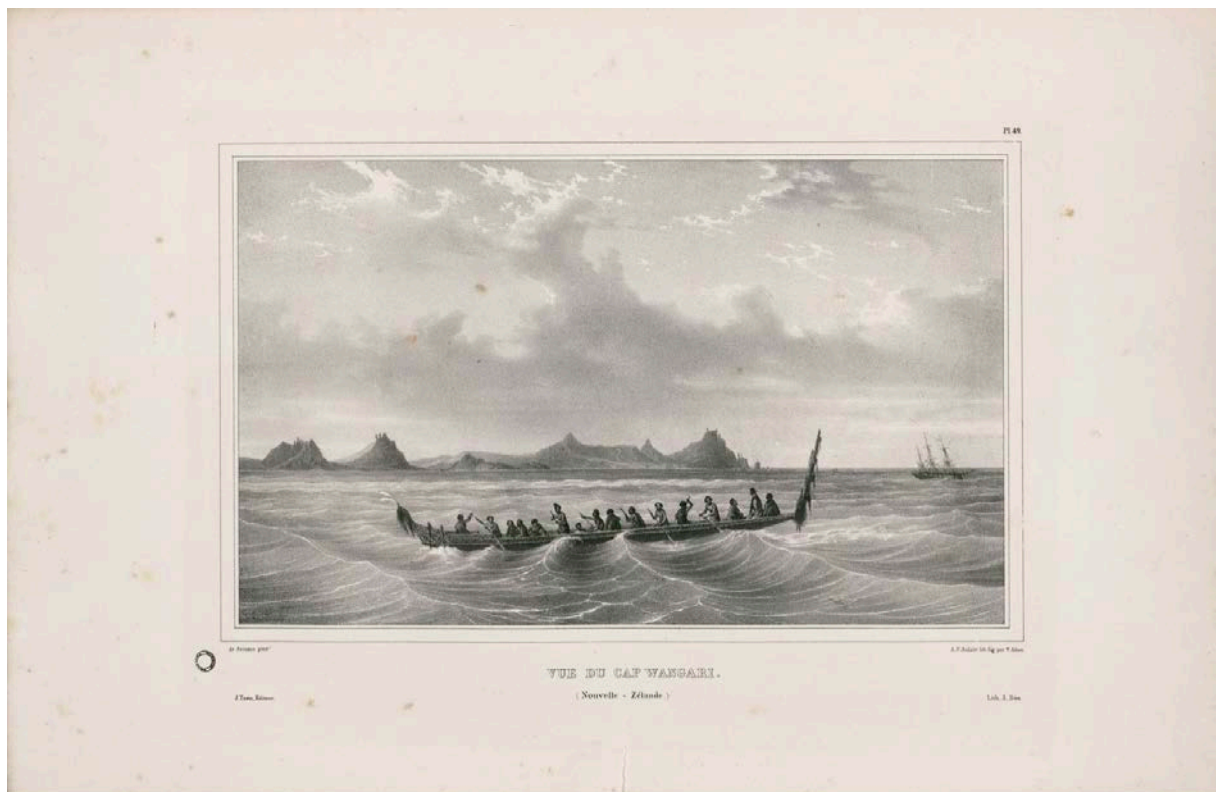


Figure 79. De Sainson draughtsman, plate 49, Atlas historique, In Dumont d'Urville 1830-34.  
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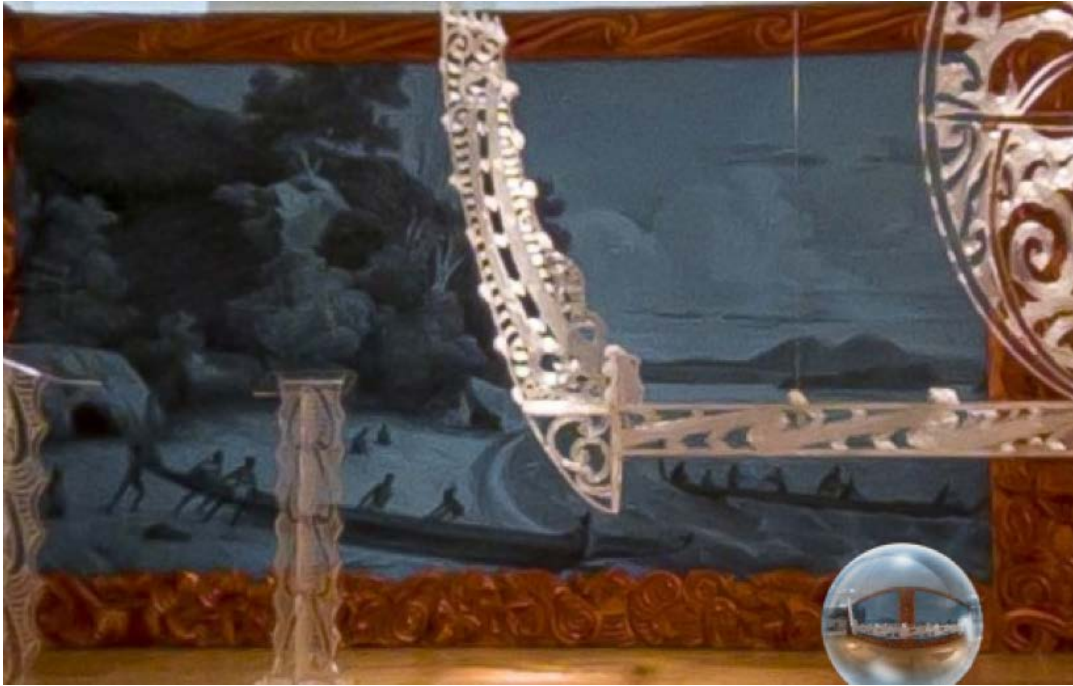


Figure 80. George Nuku, after De Sainson, Plate 38 from the Atlas historique, voyages of Dumont d'Urville in the exhibition *George Nuku. Voyage Autour du monde, L'aventure māori de Dumont d'Urville* at the musée Hèbre in Rochefort, France, 19 May – 28 August 2021, capture from the 3D visit of the exhibition <https://hebre.ville-rochefort.fr/actualites/voyage-autour-du-monde-laventure-maori-de-dumont-durville-par-george-nuku>



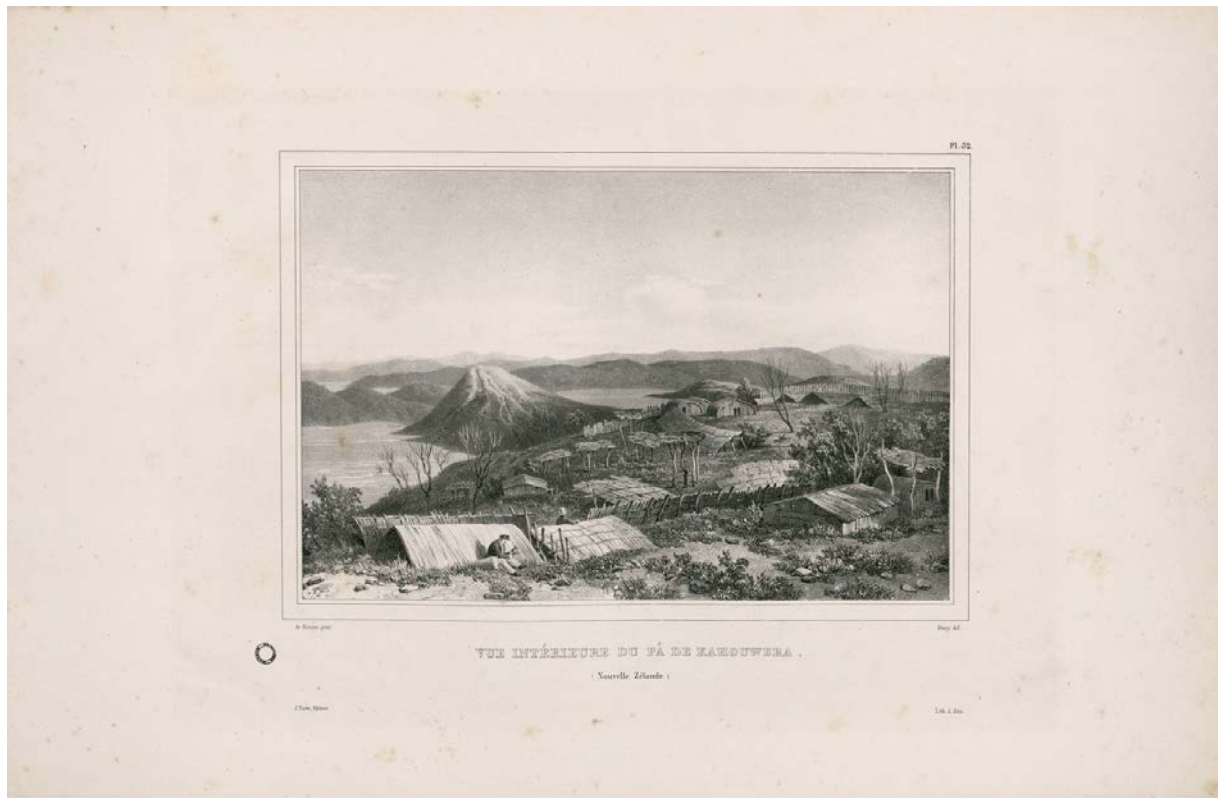
Figure 81. George Nuku, After De Sainson, Plate 49 from the Atlas historique, voyages of Dumont d'Urville in the exhibition *George Nuku. Voyage Autour du monde, L'aventure māori de Dumont d'Urville* at the musée Hèbre in Rochefort, France, 19 May – 28 August 2021. © Photo: Clémentine Debrosse



Figure 82. De Sainson draughtsman, plate 45, Atlas historique, In Dumont d'Urville 1830-34.  
<https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k5356580q/f55.item>



Figure 83. De Sainson draughtsman, plate 46, Atlas historique, In Dumont d'Urville 1830-34.  
<https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k5356580q/f56.item#>



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Figure 84. De Sainson draughtsman, plate 52, Atlas historique, In Dumont d'Urville 1830-34. <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k5356580q/f62.item>



Figure 85. Photographic negative, before 1938, made after plate 49 from the atlas historique, In Dumont d'Urville 1830-34. PF0042704, musée du quai Branly - Jacques Chirac, Paris.



Figure 86. George Nuku, After De Sainson, Plate 52, 46 and 45 from the Atlas historique, voyages of Dumont d'Urville in the exhibition *George Nuku. Voyage Autour du monde, L'aventure māori de Dumont d'Urville* at the musée Hèbre in Rochefort, France, 19 May – 28 August 2021. Captures from the 3D visit of the exhibition <https://hebre.ville-rochefort.fr/actualites/voyage-autour-du-monde-laventure-maori-de-dumont-durville-par-george-nuku>



Figure 87. Louis Le Breton, April 1840, *N Zel femme, portrait of a high rank woman wearing a moko, Otago (Ōtākou)*, Album Goupil, 2, 94, Fonds Bouge, Musée des Beaux Arts de Chartres. Exhibited in *George Nuku. Voyage Autour du monde, L'aventure māori de Dumont d'Urville* at the musée Hèbre in Rochefort, France, 19 May – 28 August 2021. © Photo: Clémentine Debrosse



Figure 88. George Nuku, after Le Breton, in the exhibition *George Nuku. Voyage Autour du monde, L'aventure māori de Dumont d'Urville* at the musée Hèbre in Rochefort, France, 19 May – 28 August 2021. © Photo: Clémentine Debrosse



Figure 89. George Nuku, *salon style display reusing a range of voyage prints* in the exhibition *George Nuku. Voyage Autour du monde, L'aventure māori de Dumont d'Urville* at the musée Hèbre in Rochefort, France, 19 May – 28 August 2021. © Photo: Clémentine Debrosse

Chapter 4

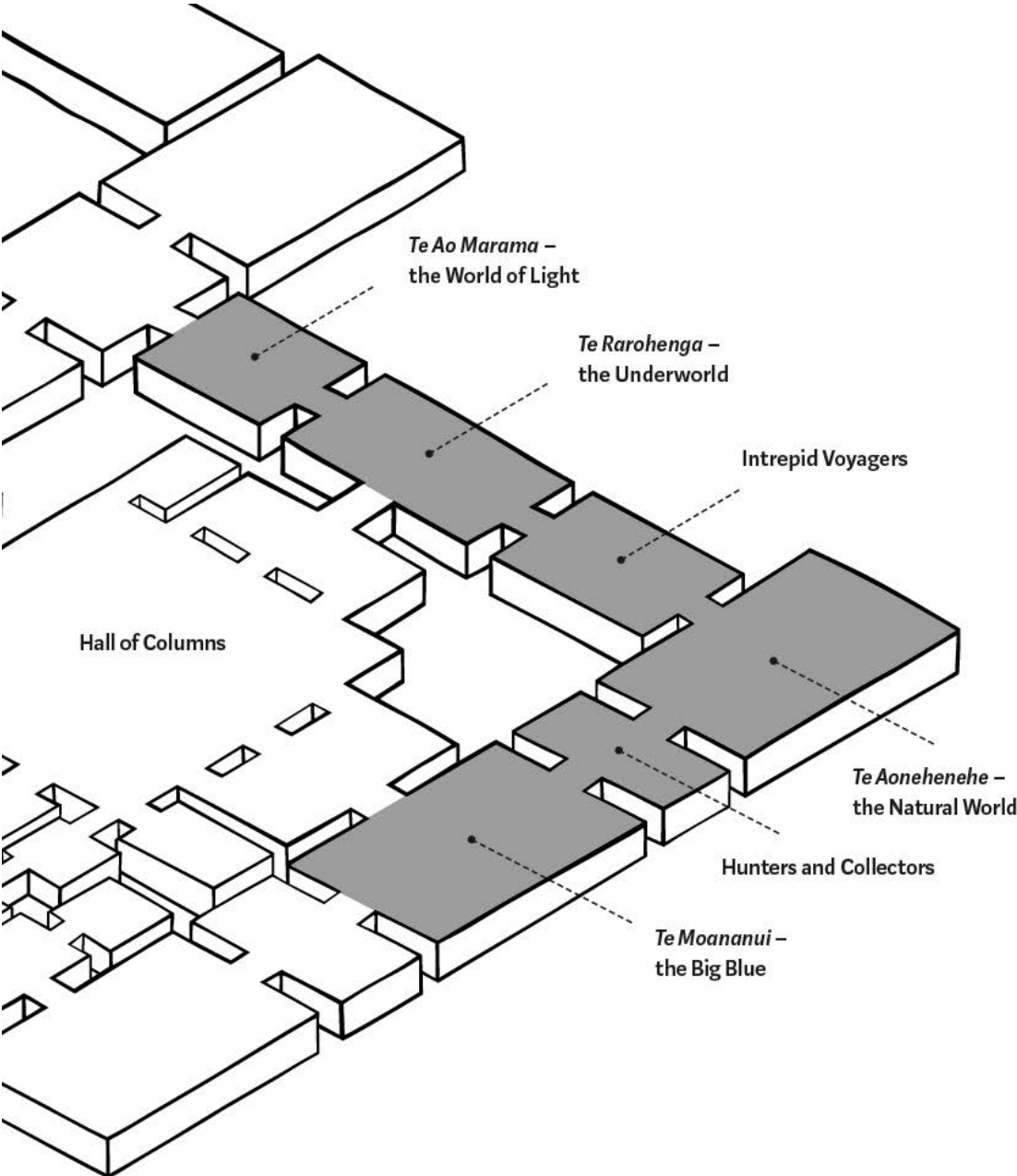


Figure 90. Map of the space dedicated to the exhibition *George Nuku. Oceans. Collections. Reflections.* at the Weltmuseum Wien in Vienna, 23 June 2022 – 31 January 2023. Booklet of the exhibition. © KMH -Museumsverband



Figure 91. Plexiglass sculpture by George Nuku adorned with a stern embellishment (*taurapa*) (Inv. No. 7.876), two paddles (*hoe*) (Inv. No. 3.806; Inv. No. 119.261), a bow embellishment (*tauihu*) (Inv. No. 42.587) and a maker (*tata*) (Inv. No. 42.598) from the Weltmuseum Wien collections in *Te Moananui* in the exhibition *George Nuku. Oceans. Collections. Reflections.* at the Weltmuseum Wien in Vienna, 23 June 2022 – 31 January 2023. © Photo: Clémentine Debrosse



Figure 92. Views of *Hunters and Collectors* in the exhibition *George Nuku. Oceans. Collections. Reflections.* at the Weltmuseum Wien in Vienna, 23 June 2022 – 31 January 2023. © Photo: Clémentine Debrosse



Figure 93. Views of *Te Aonehehe – the Natural World* in the exhibition *George Nuku. Oceans. Collections. Reflections.* at the Weltmuseum Wien in Vienna, 23 June 2022 – 31 January 2023. © Photo: Clémentine Debrosse



Figure 94. Views of *Intrepid Voyagers* in the exhibition *George Nuku. Oceans. Collections. Reflections.* at the Weltmuseum Wien in Vienna, 23 June 2022 – 31 January 2023. © Photo: Clémentine Debrosse



Figure 95. Views of *Te Rarohenga* – the Underworld in the exhibition *George Nuku. Oceans. Collections. Reflections.* at the Weltmuseum Wien in Vienna, 23 June 2022 – 31 January 2023. © Photo: Clémentine Debrosse



Figure 96. Views of *Te Ao Marama – the World of Light* in the exhibition *George Nuku. Oceans. Collections. Reflections.* at the Weltmuseum Wien in Vienna, 23 June 2022 – 31 January 2023. © Photo: Clémentine Debrosse



Figure 97. Views of *Te Moananui – the Big Blue* showing Nuku's reworking of plate 38 in the exhibition *George Nuku. Oceans. Collections. Reflections.* at the Weltmuseum Wien in Vienna, 23 June 2022 – 31 January 2023. © Photo: Clémentine Debrosse



Figure 98. Views of *Te Moananui – the Big Blue* showing Nuku's reworking of plate 49 in the exhibition *George Nuku. Oceans. Collections. Reflections.* at the Weltmuseum Wien in Vienna, 23 June 2022 – 31 January 2023. © Photo: Clémentine Debrosse



Figure 99. George Nuku, *The Native Manipulating His Own Ignorance*, 2022, in the exhibition *George Nuku. Oceans. Collections. Reflections.* at the Weltmuseum Wien in Vienna, 23 June 2022 – 31 January 2023. © Photo: Clémentine Debrosse



Figure 100. George Nuku, *The Native Observing the colonizer Observing the Native*, 2022, in the exhibition *George Nuku. Oceans. Collections. Reflections.* at the Weltmuseum Wien in Vienna, 23 June 2022 – 31 January 2023. © Photo: Clémentine Debrosse



Figure 101. *Salon style display in Hunters and Collectors* in the exhibition *George Nuku. Oceans. Collections. Reflections.* at the Weltmuseum Wien in Vienna, 23 June 2022 – 31 January 2023. © Photo: Clémentine Debrosse



Figure 102. George Nuku, *Bottled Sea 2124*, musée du masque de Fer et du Fort Royal in Cannes, France, May – November 2024. © George Nuku  
[https://www.instagram.com/p/C7MIZVHMym7/?img\\_index=1](https://www.instagram.com/p/C7MIZVHMym7/?img_index=1)



Figure 103. Leslie Adkinm 1936, *Ruakawa whare*, Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa.  
<https://collections.tepapa.govt.nz/object/127687?page=1&rtp=1&ros=1&asr=1&assoc=all&mb=c>



Figure 104. George Nuku presenting his *whare whakairo* in *Te Aonehehe*, in the exhibition *George Nuku. Oceans. Collections. Reflections.* at the Weltmuseum Wien in Vienna, 23 June 2022 – 31 January 2023. © Photo: Olga Dimoliati  
<https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=10229720427093710&set=pcb.10229720493975382>



Figure 105. George Nuku, Kane Harnett and the volunteers who helped make the exhibition during the opening ceremony of the exhibition *George Nuku. Oceans. Collections. Reflections.* on 22 June 2022.  
<https://www.facebook.com/photo?fbid=10159333669508375&set=pcb.10159333770813375>



Figure 106. Brook Andrew, *52 Portraits & Vox Beyond Tasmania*, Tolarno Galleries, Melbourne, 15 June – 20 July 2013. © Brook Andrew <https://www.brookandrew.com/vox-beyond-tasmania/57i4mfq6l7cmzgzk0cvtcegaovhuzeq>



Figure 107. Brook Andrew, *52 Portraits & Anatomy of a Body Record*, Galerie Nathalie Obadia, Paris, November - December 2013. © Brook Andrew, Photo: Belen Callejo <https://www.metalocus.es/en/news/reina-sofia-museum-presents-exhibition-really-useful-knowledge>

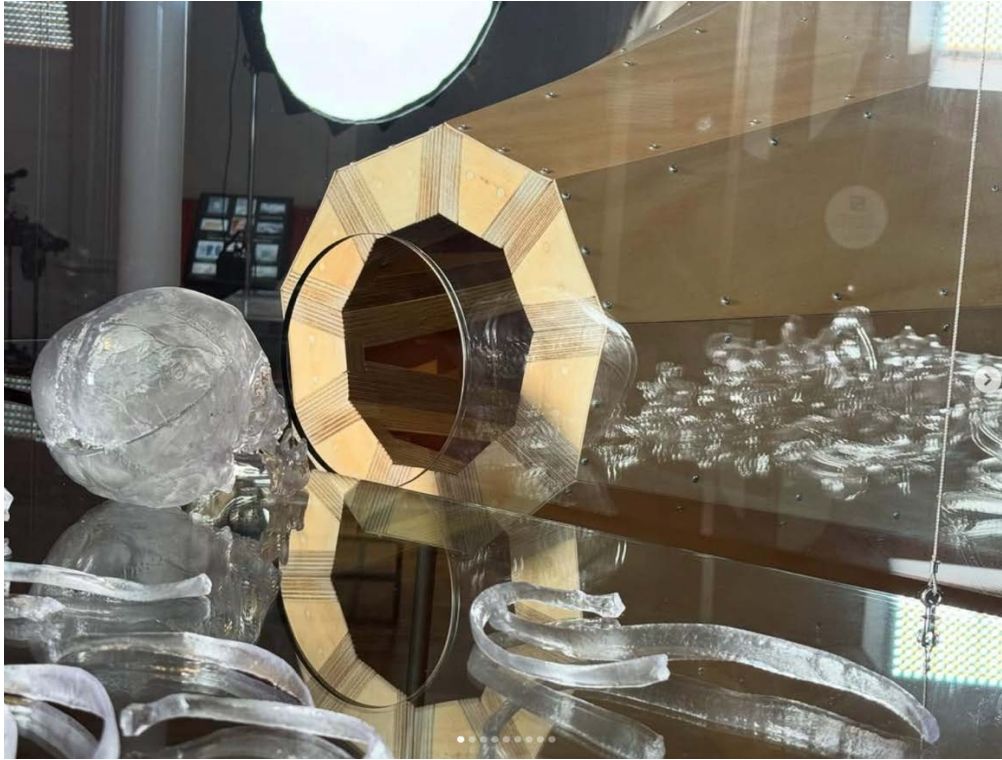


Figure 108. Brook Andrew, 2025, *Vox: Beyond Tasmania*, with a 3D-clear acrylic print of the human skeleton, displayed in the exhibition *65,000 Years: A Short History of Australia Art* at the Potter Museum of Art in Melbourne, 30 May – 22 November 2025. © Brook Andrew [https://www.instagram.com/p/DKhMldZz3sT/?img\\_index=1](https://www.instagram.com/p/DKhMldZz3sT/?img_index=1)



Figure 109. Brook Andrew, view of *A Solid Memory of the Forgotten Plains of Our Trash and Obsessions* in the exhibition *Really Useful Knowledge* at the Museo Reina Sofia in Madrid, 29 October 2014 – 9 February 2015. © Brook Andrew <https://www.brookandrew.com/a-solid-memory-of-the-forgotten-plains-of-our-trash-and-obsessions/hnlp1an3s5d04vrvjwysirum1enf0b>



Figure 110. Brook Andrew, view of *A Solid Memory of the Forgotten Plains of Our Trash and Obsessions* showing 52 Portraits (2013) exhibited alongside casta paintings, in the exhibition *Really Useful Knowledge* at the Museo Reina Sofia in Madrid, 29 October 2014 – 9 February 2015. © Brook Andrew <https://www.brookandrew.com/a-solid-memory-of-the-forgotten-plains-of-our-trash-and-obsessions/kju4yn5fuk7n6vrgqq8723mkkq667n>



Figure 111. Brook Andrew, *GABAN*, performed on 15 September 2022 during the opening of the exhibition *YOYI! Care, Repair, Heal* at the Gropius Bau in Berlin. © Brook Andrew, Photo: Laura Fiorio <https://www.brookandrew.com/new-gallery-1/sl2rlwg89u24bdigti8neah3h39ci5>



Figure 112. Brook Andrew, *GABAN*, 2022, view of the exhibition *YOYI! Care, Repair, Heal* at the Gropius Bau in Berlin, September 2022 – January 2023. © Brook Andrew, Photo: Laura Fiorio <https://www.brookandrew.com/new-gallery-1/gxg6ky85k9xf7gf9u99taly8ixttnj>



Figure 113. Brook Andrew, *GABAN* and *Anatomy of a Body Record: Beyond Tasmania*, view of the exhibition *YOYI! Care, Repair, Heal* at the Gropius Bau in Berlin, September 2022 – January 2023. © Brook Andrew, Photo: Laura Fiorio <https://www.brookandrew.com/new-gallery-1/qubdnq03jk9poyridvhzu4z2r1b813>



Figure 114. Brook Andrew, detail of *Anatomy of a Body Record: Beyond Tasmania*, in the exhibition *YOYI! Care, Repair, Heal* at the Gropius Bau in Berlin, September 2022 – January 2023. © Brook Andrew, Photo: Clémentine Debrosse



Figure 115. Brook Andrew, detail of *Anatomy of a Body Record: Beyond Tasmania*, in the exhibition *YOYI! Care, Repair, Heal* at the Gropius Bau in Berlin, September 2022 – January 2023. © Brook Andrew, Photo: Clémentine Debrosse

## Chapter 5

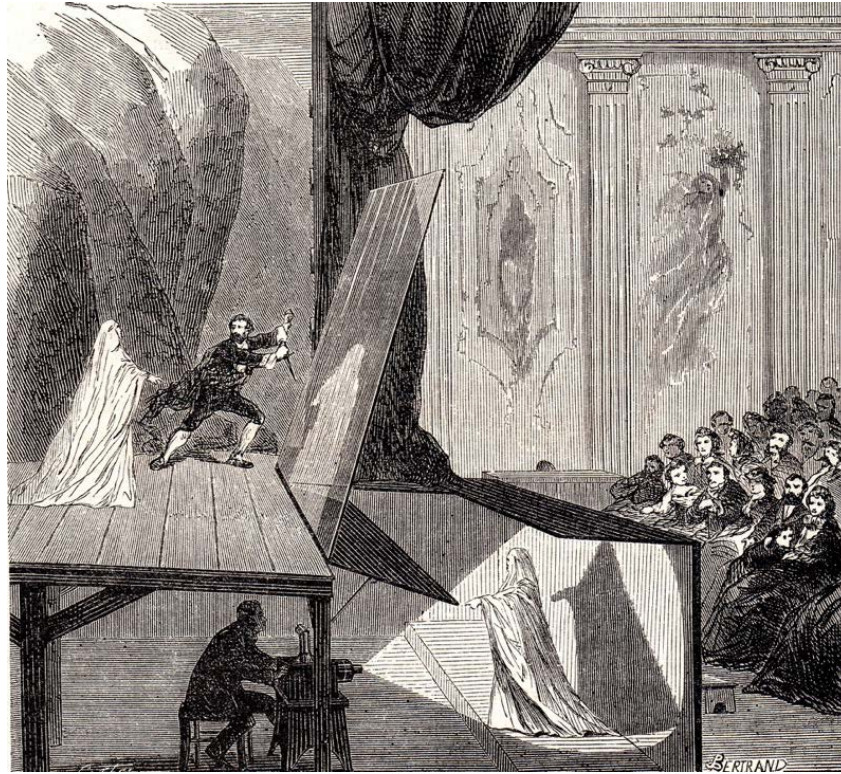


Figure 116. Bertrand, Stage setup for Pepper's Ghost. In *Le Monde Illustré* 21 January 1865, no. 406, p. 48. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pepper%27s\\_ghost#/media/File:Peppers\\_Ghost.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pepper%27s_ghost#/media/File:Peppers_Ghost.jpg)



Figure 117. Screen capture from the video recording of *Pepper's Ghost & The Mark | HOW – Showing the Making* at the Fondation Cartier pour l'art contemporain showing Bronwyn Lace and Julien Faure Conorton in front of the Pepper's Ghost, 15 May 2024. © The Centre for the Less Good Idea <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dy9WcVjjiKg&t=481s>



Figure 118. Screen capture from the video recording of *Pepper's Ghost & The Mark | HOW – Showing the Making* at the Fondation Cartier pour l'art contemporain showing Bronwyn Lace and Julien Faure Conorton at the back of the Pepper's Ghost, 15 May 2024. © The Centre for the Less Good Idea <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dy9WcVjjiKg&t=481s>

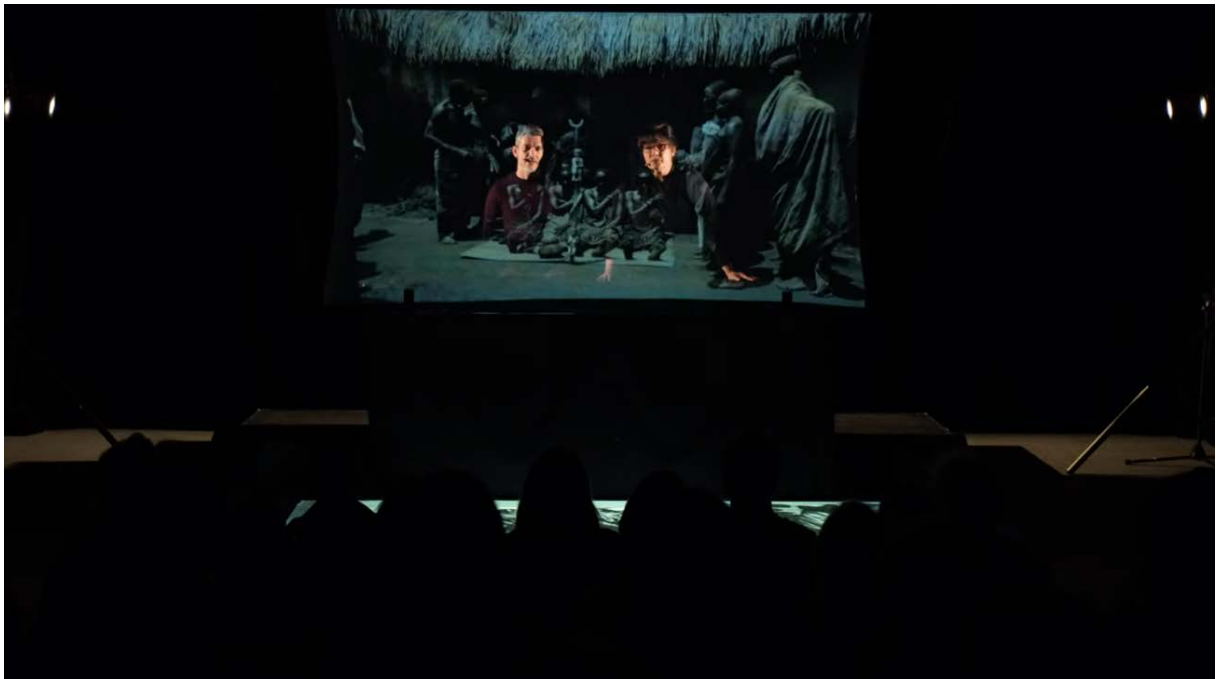


Figure 119. Screen capture from the video recording of *Pepper's Ghost & The Mark | HOW – Showing the Making* at the Fondation Cartier pour l'art contemporain showing Bronwyn Lace and Julien Faure Conorton 'in' the Pepper's Ghost on which an archive from the musée départemental Albert Khan is projected, 15 May 2024. © The Centre for the Less Good Idea <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dy9WcVjjiKg&t=481s>



Figure 120. Top left: Oungbégamé, Dahomey Cérémonies d'hommages aux ancêtres royaux chew Justin Aho. Top right: Dahomey / Takon Danse des masques Guèlèdè et des Zangbéto. Bottom left: Daagbé, Dahomey Procession au temple de Odoudoua. Bottom right: Bohicon, environs d'Abomey, Dahomey Danses vodoun. 1930, Mission RP Francis Aupiais and Frédéric Gadmer. © musée départemental Albert Khan (refer to the text for direct access to each film in the mdAK collection)



Figure 121. Screen capture from the video recording of *Pepper's Ghost & The Mark | HOW – Showing the Making* at the Fondation Cartier pour l'art contemporain, 15 May 2024. © The Centre for the Less Good Idea <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dy9WcVjjiKg&t=481s>

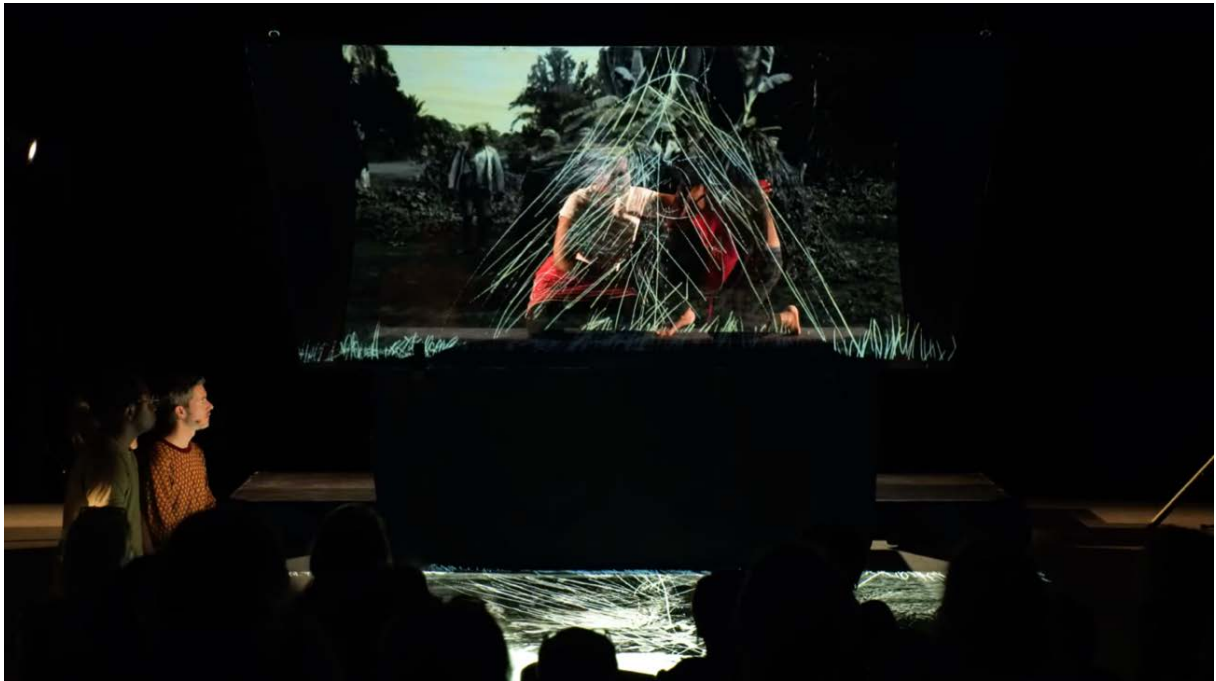


Figure 122. Screen capture from the video recording of *Pepper's Ghost & The Mark | HOW – Showing the Making* at the Fondation Cartier pour l'art contemporain, 15 May 2024. © The Centre for the Less Good Idea <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dy9WcVjjiKg&t=481s>



Figure 123. Screen capture from the video recording of *Pepper's Ghost: Silent Films & Choral Responses | HOW – Showing the Making* at the Fondation Cartier pour l'art contemporain, 17 May 2024. © The Centre for the Less Good Idea <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gZJaglXVXY&t=1710s>



Figure 124. Screen capture from the video recording of *Throne/Thrown | The Interview* at the Fondation Cartier pour l'art contemporain, 17 May 2024. © The Centre for the Less Good Idea <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xJALtfR9Opc&t=1s>



Figure 125. Abomey, Dahomey (today's Bénin), Afrique Portrait de famille (Cyrille Agbo ?), A63656, Frédéric Gadmer, 8 March 1930, autochrome, musée départemental Albert Khan, Boulogne-Billancourt. <https://collections.albert-kahn.hauts-de-seine.fr/document/abomey-dahomey-actuel-benin-afrique-portrait-de-famille-cyrille-agbo/617a7a44cf8b8968b3382958?q=A63656&pos=1&pgn=0>

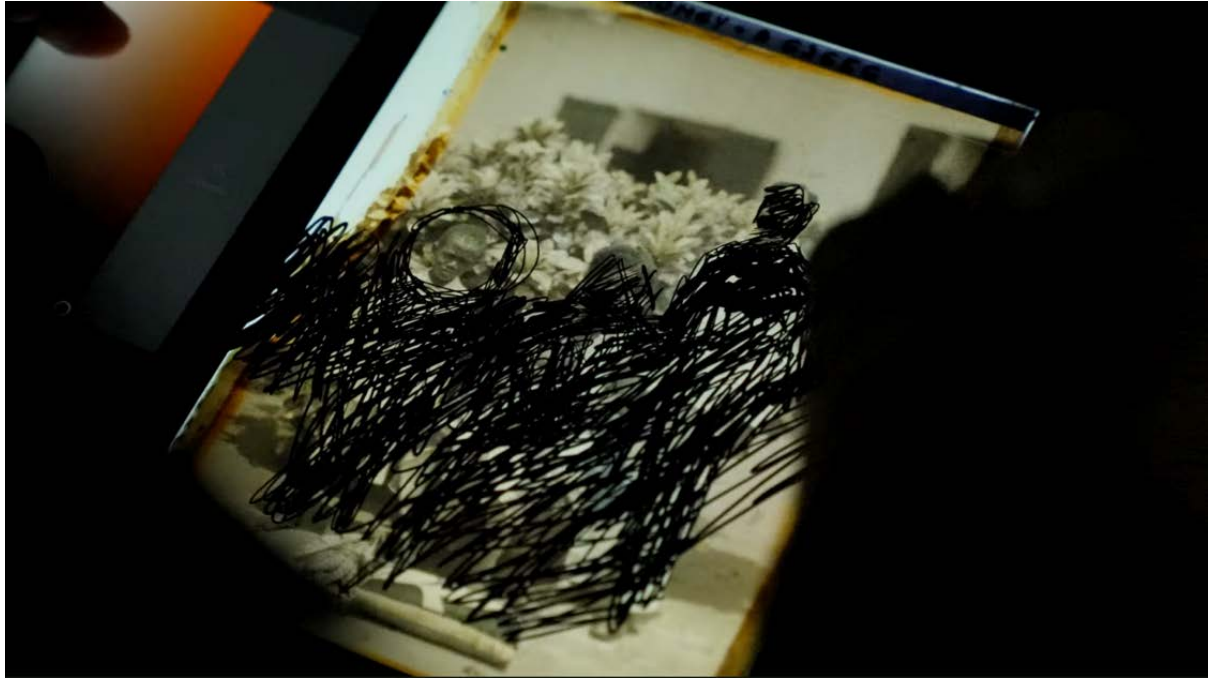


Figure 126. Screen capture from the video recording of *Throne/Thrown | The Interview* at the Fondation Cartier pour l'art contemporain, 17 May 2024, showing Marcus Neustetter live drawing on the image on his tablet while it is projected onto the Pepper's Ghost. © The Centre for the Less Good Idea <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xJALtfR9Opc&t=1s>

## Conclusion

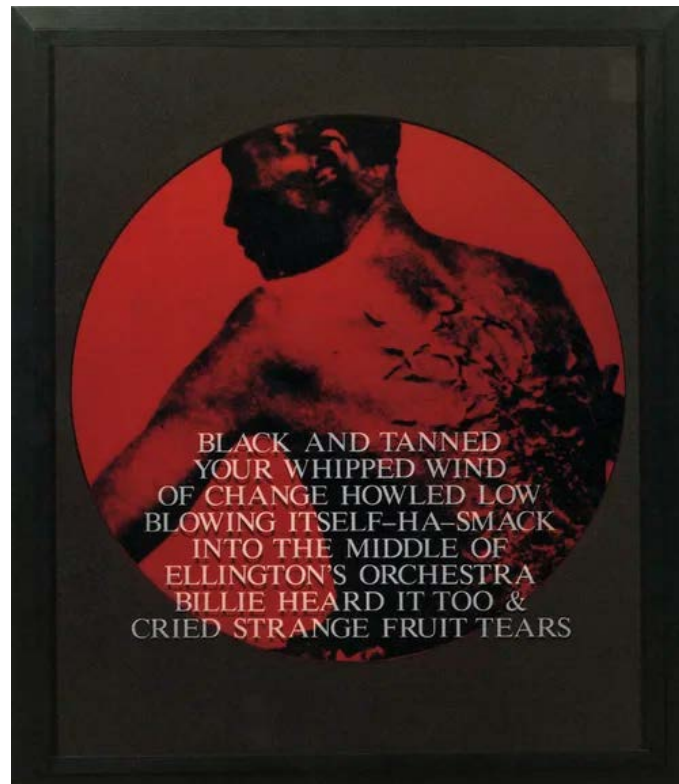


Figure 127. Carrie Mae Weems, *From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried*, 1995-1996. Photo of Peter. © Carrie Mae Weems <https://www.carriemaeweems.net/fromhereisaw>



Figure 128. *Some members of staff of the Wellcome Historical Medical Museum, c. 1915*, Wellcome Collection 14429i. <https://wellcomecollection.org/works/pdvwmvgj/items>



Figure 129. Grace Ndiritu, *The Twin Tapestries: Repair (1915)*, 2022, exhibited in the exhibition *YOYI! Care, Repair, Heal* at the Gropius Bau in Berlin, September 2022 – January 2023. © Photo: Clémentine Debrosse