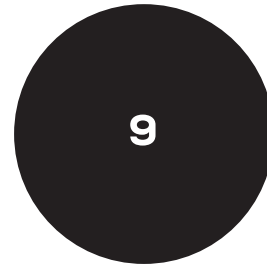




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## **View. Theories and Practices of Visual Culture.**

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*Ontological Laboratory in the Making: "After Year Zero" and the Resetting of Historical Imagination*

**authors:**

Annett Busch, Anselm Franke, Katarzyna Bojarska

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## **Ontological Laboratory in the Making: "After Year Zero" and the Resetting of Historical Imagination**

### **Annett Busch and Anselm Franke in conversation with Katarzyna Bojarska**

**Katarzyna Bojarska:** "After Year Zero" comes to Warsaw, Poland, and the art audience here, at an exceptional moment and is very much framed by the "return of the postwar." What I mean by this strange term is that in the last few months, the Polish public and cultural spheres have seen a reemergence of the postwar as a point of reference for literary and non-fiction publications, and for academic discussions and exhibitions in coming months. My impression is that the outcome of your research and your exhibition can serve to open this local discussion (with its local limitations, blind spots, and cul-de-sacs) onto a wider and more diversified perspective. This seems like a unique opportunity to me. I hope it will not be missed. The question is, however, what made you turn to the former colonies in your search for the after-math of World War II? How did that show come into being?

**Anselm Franke:** At the very beginning we did not know that this was going to be an exhibition. It started with a series of workshops, discussions. That opportunity emerged in the context of the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of independence, and the fact that at the time we both lived in Brussels. The Goethe Institute gave us an exceptional opportunity to bring people together for the sake of conversation and exchange. And it was only a year later that we decided to develop this project into an exhibition as well.

**KB:** I wonder: what was the context for these conversations? Were they held in an academic context, as artistic workshops?

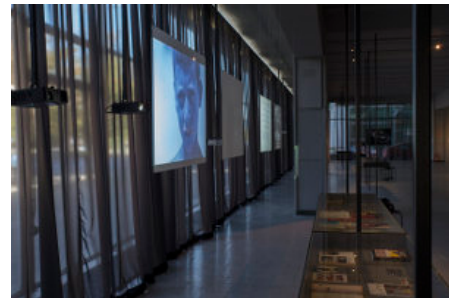
**AF:** We mostly conversed with filmmakers and a very specific kind of historian, i.e. people who deal with the past in a critical and unconventional way within historiographic discourse. We concentrated on the transition from anticolonial to independence to postcolonial, going against the grain of the traditional historical and political framing by drawing on cinematic thought and practice. This so-called research-based practice was at the core of this project of discussing political

geographies and topographies of memory using such contaminated frame as "collaboration." What was initially meant by that was the implied imperative of developing connections in the network environment as well as working across the enemy lines (both in the literal context of war and in the more metaphoric context of any power structure). Collaboration seemed interesting because it almost immediately forces anyone involved to rethink his/her position, and prevents anyone from being seduced by any idea of absolute purity or innocence.

**Annett Busch:** As you mentioned, Kasia, transgressing local and personal limitations was crucial for us, especially breaking with the condition of victimhood and departing from thinking in terms of the binaries that have long determined historical and political thinking. So: thinking together rather than thinking in oppositions, forming constellations rather than cause-effect logic. It allowed us to combine different, at times disparate, concepts and interlocutors; economy and music, historiography and film, etc. We encountered amazing instances of pre-independence activism, avant-garde political thinking, artistic forms hitherto absent from mainstream art histories. We wanted to take all the people, (including ourselves) caught up in certain modes of production outside and towards other forms of productivity. This time together proved immensely fruitful and stimulating, but also made us yearn for more.

**KB:** Why did an exhibition seem like the appropriate form to continue this project?

**AF:** The initial step was to make these various questions and local particularities relevant in a way where the politics of the universal could be played out. This is obviously a set of problems of representation of and in history: a concern with figures of collaboration. We tried not to enact any implicit, tacit, unspoken phantasms of direct access to these issues. Acting against that, from the outset we tried to expose our own position and implication(s). The first step was simply to ground all of that in Berlin, in a particular site, in this particular building, where one can clearly see how World War II has led to a reconfiguration of the politics of the universal, and that there are different frames at work pertaining to different historical memories and contemporary political interests. So this was, so to speak,



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the basic dramaturgical entry point to the exhibition. It might seem like just a moment in the exhibition, but it is a hitch to constellations that challenge each other, that are not commensurable. The iron curtain and the color curtain: they speak to different memories and historical frames. And one could say that the task of the future politics of the universal would be to see on what grounds it could be built. And that means that one needs to see how these memories interact: how they look at each other, how they speak to each other.

**KB:** Another given was Berlin, the capital of contemporary Germany – a site where you live and work – and, in it, the Haus der Kulturen der Welt, a very specific institution with a very telling past.

**AF:** There is this amazingly deliberate precariousness of Western elites, who in a strange way continue to tell a certain story without fully believing in it. In brief, a lot of this story could be contained in empty formulas of cultural dialogue, etc. And of course it is not easy to speak about the implicit or tacit architectures of power that are enacted. So the Haus der Kulturen der Welt ‘speaks’ from the place where the regime of racialization was introduced and developed to the point of industrialized genocide, and addresses the idea of rescuing the unity of Western civilization. That was the rhetoric that underwrote the founding of HKW, although one has to bear in mind that when it was established, it was not called HKW. This was in the 1950's, in a moment when – as we learned later– the CIA financed a new leftist anti-Stalinist humanism in places such as the HKW. Back then it was simply a congress hall and not a cultural institution, but also a place of encounter for science, technology, economics... At that time, NO German voice was allowed to speak in universal terms, except for the language of science, something seemingly historically detached. And with the exception of the “Family of Man” exhibition. So it makes perfect sense that the institution has become the Haus der Kulturen der Welt: this rhetoric followed that of the “family of man” quite smoothly. Ironically enough, your initial response to genocide is to accept everyone as a family member, you accept difference unconditionally, but then you end up with the most shallow, flat idea of multi-culturalism in the post-colonial situation.

**KB:** Your exhibition comes to Poland, not only in the midst of a reevaluation of the postwar, but also in the aftermath of the discussion of the revolutionary dimension of social change that took place during and after World War II. I wonder, what do

you make of this "move to the East" with your exhibition, how – if at all – does the context of its presentation influence its potential resonances, and have the two years since its premiere changed it in any way? This question also pertains to the other projects you have been engaged in in the meantime.

**AF:** I was coming to the final stage of turning all our ideas and references into an exhibition right after I finished working on an exhibition with Diedrich Diedrichsen on the emergence of information society, coined by the Californian dream and imaginary, which would be one of the resources of this phantom universality of capital. So to me, this was an important counter-context that allowed me to work through these two frameworks of references: not so much the iron/color curtain opposition, but California/Africa. How does the phantom universality of capital numb us and keep us from crafting the proper politics of the universal? And it does so, on a daily basis. It is very comfortable, because it seems that you do not have to do any work for it, but it is extremely dangerous, because it can transform into identitarian terror at any moment. And increasingly, we have seen that happening. This set of observations about what is to be done and what has already been missed, how much ground is lost ... all these questions followed the "After Year Zero" show in Germany. I guess that since then, both of us have been thinking about how to continue thinking in these terms and how to develop it into a publication that could reach more addressees. We have reconfigured some parts of the narrative: some things were developed, others are new. It is always good to rethink, to go back and chew on that same material once again. A major novelty for us, aside from placing it in the context of the here and now, is looking at this new frame of what it means to be implicated and how that is being played out. We tried to take as much as we could from both the workshops and the show and reframe it with a particular focus on self-implication in the post-dependence and post-independence context. We tried to focus on the focal points – Claire Davies called *Souffle* a "discursive museum," and we saw other journals in the same way. For us they provided a source of knowledge and a field where so many things met, clashed, and operated. They provided a kind of lens to look through and to realize that there is never a way to tell an adequate history without allowing heterogeneous voices in.



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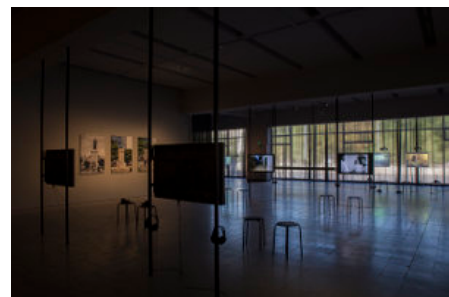
**AB:** The Berlin show came quite soon after the workshops but was also developed in close collaboration with the artists. It was reduced to five artists whose works were commissioned: it was all new to us, so until the opening night we actually did not know what it would look like and how it would work. Here, we worked with that experience, but also from a particular distance. Also, the spatial dimension is crucial: in Warsaw, the space (overground rather than underground) plays an important role. Not only did we know the works this time, but we were also able to put them into new constellations by adding other works and crucial archival materials.

**KB:** Did you commission any new works for Warsaw?

**AF:** No; we basically added two films, one of which is a gesture once again framing almost the entire story in a kind of epic of the colonial; a wonderful, humorous film that is very aptly titled *Memories of Overdevelopment* by Kidlat Tahimik, the story of the slave of Magellan, the first man who circumnavigated the globe. Also missing from the Berlin show but included here is a full film by Yervant Gianikian and Angela Ricci Lucchi, *Pays barbare*. It is a filmic narrative about Mussolini's attack on Ethiopia, and in a way it rewrites the story of the beginning of World War II, which, as we learn, actually began four years earlier.

**KB:** Almost a revolutionary gesture! Especially considering how attached we are to the idea of turning points, marking dates, celebrating anniversaries, and the fixed boundaries of what we tend to call historical events. It seems hard to imagine that we would be willing to open up this war frame and let others in, especially if the Other is Africa.

**AF:** Gianikian's and Ricci Lucchi's oeuvre is particularly unique in that it contains this leitmotiv, a dominant theme if you like, in their work, which they call "the rise of the Fascist man," and what they are determined to show in their films is the degree to which this type has been, not an exception, but a rule. This can be also found in *Pays barbare*, and it is particularly crucial in the context of the problematic implications of that piece – looking at archival material equals assuming the colonial gaze, even though it is estranged with different artistic devices. I do not remember who it was, possibly Rosa Luxemburg, who said that in



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order to understand the extent to which Europe as such (the idea and its realization) was implicated in the colonial lie. Once you entered this collective image-space with its set of choices of narratives, you are already complicit.

**KB:** Complicity is one of the key terms in Michael Rothberg's thinking about decolonization and the so-called postcolonial in his *Multidirectional Memory*. In a sense, there is no outside to this situation; the only ethical act is to acknowledge one's complicity in a self-conscious and critical way, to counter repression (or lies) both on an individual and a collective level.

**AB:** Precisely, in *Pays barbare*, because of the montage technique used, you as a spectator are constantly confronted with your own position: how you look (or actually that you look!). There is no way out. The film looks back at you, and lures you in. It is a highly reflective situation and it is hard not to look.

Coming back to the time between Berlin and Warsaw, I need to mention that I spent quite some time thinking about magazines, and whether there is a need to establish a new one. It was largely because this series of workshops created an intensity of discourse that one felt tempted to channel into something actual, topical, resonant, etc. I realized there was something at stake that I had not seen published in a serial way before now. And then of course the question, how could we continue producing and exchanging ideas in this way? On the other hand, during the research for the exhibition we encountered a lot of incredibly important texts, most of which were coming from all sorts of magazines published in Africa: it was *Souffle*, *Lotus*, and numerous others, some published for only a couple of years. I spent a lot of time in libraries going through that fascinating material. They tell and show their own version of history, and it is multidirectional, multidimensional, multimedia, etc. And most of all, it is extremely self-conscious, produced and distributed in the very specific context of a battle for independence, and out of one's condition as post-dependance subject. Another thing I realized was that there is a lot of research out there in the world on this very archive. So in the book, a lot of chapters concentrate on these heterogeneous sources.

**KB:** Did you reprint any of the articles from these journals?

**AB:** No, instead we asked certain critics and scholars to reread them. So, for example, we have Denis Ekpo reflecting on *Black Orpheus* ...

**AF:** We were looking to provide a topography of formative moments and media, of productive and resonant forms of collaboration.

**KB:** So we have already started discussing the book, but let me go back, and forgive me for probably being rather annoying, but: why an exhibition? What I am trying to get at is, what does this medium – mode of researching? mode of thinking? mode of knowledge production? – give you? What is that surplus that cannot – if I understand it correctly – be achieved by any other means?

**AB:** It is surely the space: putting ideas (their rendering in different media) into spatial constellations, and letting people in, with their mental and affective constellations (what they themselves bring to the show). I am not a professional art curator, my background is in film, so in a way, for me, this has always been a question: why an exhibition (and later, how an exhibition)? For me it was not an obvious decision to create an exhibition. But at some point the possibility of creating a space where things 'move' became very tempting, almost necessary. It is an environment where images, moving images, texts, and other objects speak to each other. It is a unique encounter and provides a framework for other possible encounters to take place. And, what is also important, the outcome of such encounters is never certain or secure. It is definitely different from writing a book, or having a films screening one after another in a dark cinema. In terms of temporal experience it is also something else: one can come in and leave and come back – both to the exhibition space and to the issues it addresses.

**AF:** There is something very particular about an exhibition as a medium that can be dialectically mobilized. And for this it is important to reference both the museum and art. Firstly, it is the question of objectification, of turning ideas into objects, but also documents (or witnesses) of certain history. In an exhibition one has to grapple with the thingness of history. In an exhibition things need to be present, so the question emerges: how does one make ideas and images present? And then the task is to actually rescue them from the exhibition, save them from reification, not so much by capital but by discourse itself.

**KB:** Why art and why in a museum?



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**AF:** You need a museum to mobilize this cognitive map, and the topography of history on which every exhibition is mapped as a kind of model world in itself. Aside from concrete works, art is fundamental here as a category, as a referent of something that is unstable. Art is allowed to break and fool around with signifying relations in ways that nothing else is. An exhibition like this would not function as a thematic exhibition outside the field of art, because only in the field of art are we allowed to completely reject the term of matrixial conditioning. In any other field we would be likely to succumb to certain regimes of knowledge. And this ability not to be liable is an occasion for taking a stance that is a fundamental rejection of the given. This, for me, is the great surplus – as you said – of the exhibition. But to reach this point requires hard work on the part of the person who makes the show. It does not happen automatically. Actually, you never achieve this, you can only approach; work in the direction of; move towards. Exhibition draws you into the space of thinking and challenges your mindset by mobilizing both your mental and your affective apparatus vis-à-vis works of art (and their clusters): aesthetic histories and political histories press close to each other.

**KB:** What I personally find very formative in the kind of exhibition you are talking about is that as a spectator you learn – and I mean in the broadest sense – in the most unexpected moments that you are exposed and deconstructed as a subject of thinking and feeling. What you come with is being radically altered by that experience, even if it takes a while for that experience to actually surface or become consciously absorbed. Especially in contexts where there is a certain resistance or even prejudice towards contemporary art, projects like this seem to make a lot of sense.

There is one more very important aspect – it seems to me – to an exhibition as a medium of knowledge production and knowledge transfer. Namely, that in contrast to all these individual, intimate situations such as reading a book or watching a film in a dark projection room, in an exhibition space, one is surrounded, not only by works of art and artifacts on display, but also by other people (who are mutually displayed, so to speak). One thereby sees oneself as implicated, not only in the issues addressed by the show, but also in a certain collective of the complicit, if



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you like.

**AB:** As a maker of an exhibition such as "After Year Zero," you participate in the creation of a social space where people come to assume different positions and enter into all sorts of relations with one another. It can be a space of belonging or of radical rejection; it will invite some and welcome them, and it will threaten or disgust others. We can only hope that some will be willing to rethink and alter their positions. This is what it is: we are here together faced with huge issues and traumas of universal history; let's face it and let's face each other (facing it). This, for me, is highly educational: the feeling of insecurity, and of not knowing what is being transformed.

**AF:** When it comes to exhibition making, you need to challenge yourself constantly, and question and doubt your own position, unless you want to end up with a kind of didacticism. An exhibition enacts a shift from saying to showing: the form of an image and the form of a thought need to communicate with each other, or fight with each other. If you want to rescue things from the destruction of history, you have to rearticulate the resourcefulness of the archive rather than insisting on the same forms of presentation and meaning. So, difference rather than repetition, or repetition with a difference.

**KB:** But in the case of your exhibition, but also many others, it is not only an archive of artistic production, but also of many other objects, documents and discursive elements that are introduced into the exhibition space. I wonder what you think about putting art in a broader context or, if you like, in conversation with other forms of "meaning production"?

**AF:** It is a tricky question, because of the options that are given to us as exhibition makers, and that I am trying to avoid by not traveling down the given path. In my opinion, if we want, on the one hand, to avoid ending up with the idea of pure art and its subsequent market fetishization, and on the other hand, we do not go for a kind of research-based practice that is beholden to other forms of discourse and thus is to be measured by say, social science, anthropology, etc. In my opinion, today, it is very important to think art and exhibition together, in the aftermath of institutional



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critique. Exhibition is – as Roger Buergel put it – an ontological laboratory, where the status of things is uncertain, and can be debated and negotiated. Bringing art together with other objects and forms of discourse opens up on the question of status: cognitive maps, ontological designations. Art opens up this space of negotiation, and other elements can be drawn into it. The undisciplinary (or undisciplined) status of an art exhibition, however, asks for an articulation of curatorial practices that are never transparent or self-evident; they are the politics of framing. There is obviously a reference to art, but also to certain forms of artfulness; the entire ethics of exhibition-making should be devoted to resensitization, to become sensitive anew. It is the ground on which you can imagine and oscillate between an empathic and analytic approach to the making of a collective: to what it is to be with an image, to be with others, to be with history, etc. It seems simple, but to me it is fundamental, and it can easily not happen at all.