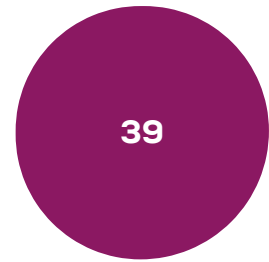




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## View. Theories and Practices of Visual Culture

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**abstract:**

In order to intervene in dominant historical narratives and overcome Eurocentric perspectives, artistic historicizations often draw on materials and documents from archives. Photographic media in particular have been instrumentalized for the project of European colonialism since their development, and have thus fixed colonial and Eurocentric perspectives firmly in the archives. With the question of the politics of showing and not showing historical photographs, the article discusses artistic methods of dealing with a violent and traumatic past and confronting the viewer with the violence of history and the persistent effects of the "imperial shutter" (Ariëlla Azoulay). An underlying question of the essay is how artistic forms of historicization can become productive as methodical unlearning and intervene in the perceptions and self-understandings of a (Western) audience.

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## Contesting the Colonial Archive, or Toward a Different Performativity of Images

"WHO ARE THE 'WE' at whom such shock-pictures are aimed?" Nnenna Onuoha's film *Baby Picture* from 2022 begins with this question by Susan Sontag. The Ghanaian-Nigerian artist, who has been living in Berlin since 2018, prefaces her investigation of filmic and photographic documents of the Nigerian civil war with it. The images used, taken more than fifty years ago, drastically illustrate the war and famine in Biafra, Nigeria, to "a far larger constituency – those only nominally concerned about some nasty war taking place in another country. The photographs are a means," as Sontag's quote ends, "of making 'real' (or 'more real') matters that the privileged and the merely safe might prefer to ignore."<sup>1</sup> The quote is taken from Sontag's *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2003), in which the author questions the efficacy of war photographs and documentaries of violent events. In her second book on photography, Sontag reflects on questions of empathy and detachment, witnessing, and the viewer's disinterest in what they see.<sup>2</sup> The Nigerian civil war is one of the numerous examples she uses to question the performative dimensions of journalistic photographs of war zones and other scenes of violence.

One of the central theses in Sontag's text is that "harrowing photographs" can haunt the viewer but cannot make them understand anything. According to her, without a caption or commentary, photographs say little or nothing. For Sontag, photographs are selective and only ever show a section of the world that requires an explanation to be able to categorize and understand what is seen. The legitimacy of showing cannot be clarified immanently. While viewing images of current war reports can still be understood as an obligation "because there was something to be done, right now, about what they depicted," other questions become relevant "when we are invited to

respond to a dossier of hitherto unknown pictures of horrors long past.”<sup>3</sup>

Referring to the New York exhibition *Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America* from 2000, which showed “photographs of black victims of lynching” from the period spanning 1890 to 1930, Sontag makes clear that “the presentation of these images [...] also turns us into spectators. What is the point of exhibiting these pictures?”<sup>4</sup> Why should we look at photographs of acts of violence and documentary materials of human suffering? How do artists comment on and historicize materials to achieve an appropriateness of showing? How can the necessity of remembering be reconciled with “visual justice,”<sup>5</sup> especially if we assume different viewer perspectives, horizons of experience, and involvement?

Particularly when dealing with violent representations or in relation to colonial and violent histories, an extremely sensitized and reflected negotiation of visualization on the one hand and the withdrawal of visibility on the other can be observed in artistic practices as a critical intervention in existing representations, patterns of perception, or blind spots. In their critical interrogation of the past, many artists combine the problematization of the reproduction of violent representations and the appropriateness of showing or not showing with the question of a different performativity of historical documents. The artistic historicizations of Nnenna Onuoha and Belinda Kazeem-Kamiński discussed in the following will be considered with regard to the aim of generating a different performativity of violent images. The artistic strategies of acquiring a different history from violent historical documents or making it accessible through them not only contribute to a different production of knowledge and an expansion of historical narratives. In the context of these works, a different performativity essentially means developing resistance to existing visual and epistemic forms of violence, interrupting continuities of “white sight”<sup>6</sup> in the

present and negotiating an appropriate approach to historical documents and narratives. In order to initiate processes of unlearning, Onuoha's *Baby Picture* offensively confronts viewers with historical film footage from the Nigerian civil war. On the other hand, Austrian artist Kazeem-Kamiński refrains almost completely from showing historical footage in her film *Unearthing. In Conversation* (2017), even though she examines its visual regimes. Despite such contrasting strategies of not / showing violent and harmful materials, both artists combine the necessity of telling other stories with the question of what observing them today means or can make visible. The constellation of narrated histories of violence and the continuity of epistemic violence is aimed directly at viewers and their respective positioning and experience in relation to the addressed continuity of colonial violence.<sup>7</sup>

The presumption of a different performativity of images seems particularly unexpected in Onuoha's *Baby Picture*, which shows graphic images of the famine in Biafra, a consequence of the Nigerian civil war, using found footage material. The artist does not shy away from directly showing the suffering and death caused by famine and war. Viewing these historical images in the exhibition space, we inevitably find ourselves in the position of the viewer, looking from a privileged position at a conflict from the past with thousands upon thousands of starving and dead.<sup>8</sup>

With the quote from Sontag's *Regarding the Pain of Others*, Onuoha also repeats the question of the addressee of these images, pointing it directly at present viewers. From the outset, they are asked about their relationship to the images shown and the epistemic violence inscribed in and resulting from them. For Sontag, however, there is no obligation to look at violent photographs, but "one should feel obliged to think about what it means to look at them, about the capacity actually to assimilate what they show."<sup>9</sup> Rejecting a perceived proximity in the

compassionate viewing of others, she urges us not to delude ourselves about “our real relations to power,” and to think about “how our privileges are located on the same maps as their suffering, and may – in ways we might prefer not to imagine – be linked to their suffering, as the wealth of some may imply the destitution of others.”<sup>10</sup>

This reflection is all the more prominent in *Baby Picture* because the documentary images used are likely to be familiar to most viewers in this or a similar form. Images like these have found many successors and have been circulating in the media ever since. The direct confrontation with these discriminatory and violent photographs and documentary materials in *Baby Picture* raises the question of what they tell us today, whose story they tell, and how they are seen. The film thus also problematizes whether other perspectives can gain recognition alongside a narrative that has entered the history books. How can a violent past be told at all?

The artistic use of violent documents and historical constellations is central to telling stories differently or recalling stories that are unfinished, unknown, or no longer remembered. Strategies of showing or not showing photographs or other documents with a historical index are an important element for artistic historicizations, in order to make visible the close entanglement of violence and the telling of history. For colonial archives and collections shaped by colonial history in particular, it can be stated that it is not only the documents themselves that are violent or represent violence, but that the archive as an institution that administers history determines the inclusion and exclusion of stories and produces gaps.<sup>11</sup>

One aim of artistic historicizing is therefore not only to tell uncompleted and unheard stories, but also to criticize the underlying conditions of a dominant historical narrative and to reveal the production of history.

## How to narrate a counter history?

In different books, the literary scholar Saidiya Hartman has written about the question of how history can be told based on archives pervaded by violence without reproducing the violence inscribed in them. In her methodological essay "Venus in Two Acts," she reflects on how to deal with "dilemmas<sup>12</sup> about representation, violence, and social death" against the backdrop of her own writing on the transatlantic slave trade – specifically on attempts to describe the life and fate of a girl based on the knowledge that can be found about her in the archives of slavery. Can one, Hartman asks, "recuperate lives entangled with and impossible to differentiate from the terrible utterances that condemned them to death"? Can one, she goes on to ask, tell the story of an enslaved girl, whom she names Venus, "without committing further violence in my own act of narration"<sup>13</sup>? According to Hartman, telling such a story is based on impossibility, because you must be "listening for the unsaid, translating misconstrued words, and refashioning disfigured lives – and intent on achieving an impossible goal: redressing the violence"<sup>14</sup> – even though you know that this cannot succeed.

The practice of her writing follows a method that Hartman herself calls *critical fabulation*, "in recognition of the violence that has made certain kinds of knowing, certain forms of telling, and certain ways of proceeding impossible."<sup>15</sup> As Hartman explains with reference to Aimé Césaire, critical fabulation is "an emphasis on poetics in creating knowledge that is suited to the measure of the world as opposed to the imperial or colonial knowledge formations." It is about challenging the "constitutive

limits of the archive" in order to "do more than recount the violence that deposited these traces in the archive."<sup>16</sup> As a writing practice, critical fabulation encompasses both a critical re-reading of existing archives and, in Hartman's words, "speculative arguments," which in no way means the invention of life or history. The concept of critical fabulation is derived from playing with narrative events and "rearranging the basic elements" – as she explains, "by re-presenting the sequence of events in divergent stories and from contested angles, I have attempted to jeopardize the status of events, to displace the received or authorized account, and to imagine what might have happened or might have been said or might have been done."<sup>17</sup> Reading against the grain of the archives simultaneously stages the "impossibility of a representation" of an unknown, enslaved life through a narrative.

*So why tell such a story if it can only fail?* If the telling of violent history has any value at all, "it is in illuminating the way in which our age is tethered to hers."<sup>18</sup> The importance of telling history moreover lies in "interrogating the production of our knowledge about the past"<sup>19</sup> and making the limits of historiography visible. The writing of history can reveal the limiting power of the colonial archive and the limits of historiography, which does not succeed in overcoming the inscribed violence and empty spaces in the archives.

However, narratives of violence also require a responsible approach on the part of the viewer or reader. When asked about the fine line between witness and spectator in *Scenes of Subjection* (1997), Hartman points out that "Those of the privileged sector, those who imagine themselves as sovereign and comfortably inhabit the violence of the imperial gaze, can operate in utter ignorance of the forms of terror and the modes of domination that have produced the world, that produced their wealth, their safety, their good. [...] that is a key difference between witness and spectatorship: What does it mean to be or



belong with? It's not only about sharing that vulnerability to violence; it's also about what the witness is commanded to do, the commitments that attend to looking."<sup>20</sup>

The Ghanaian-Nigerian artist Nnenna Onuoha addresses this question of witness and spectatorship in the past and present when she confronts the viewer almost directly with media representation of the Nigerian civil war of the 1960s and sheds light on the present with historical footage.

In the summer of 1968, media images from Biafra, which was shaken by civil war and suffering from famine, flooded Western living rooms. To draw attention to the humanitarian crisis in eastern Nigeria, missionaries, activists, and journalists staged the suffering of Biafra's starving population. Just a few years after Nigeria had gained independence in 1960, political tensions between the dominant ethnic groups in its three main regions led to unrest and coups. Civil war finally broke out in July 1967, after the Republic of Biafra in the east of the country declared independence and Nigerian troops entered its territory. While, despite the high death toll, the war remained unnoticed by the international community, "the situation [...] changed abruptly when the conflict took on a humanitarian dimension. [...]"<sup>21</sup> Around the middle of 1968, 'Biafra' became a globally known term within a few weeks." Behind this term and a charged media campaign, the complex background of the conflict disappeared.<sup>22</sup> In Onuoha's *Baby Picture*, the globally disseminated media reports are scrutinized for the limitations of history that they imposed and that still operate today. Despite all the differences between the archives of slavery, by which Hartman shows the limits and gaps of colonial history and reflects on the present, Onuoha's renewed observations are also dedicated to the attempt to extract a different history from a past that has condensed into an image, and, in its reconsideration, to make statements about the present.

The thirteen-minute, two-channel film begins by eliciting a different perspective from the documentary footage. It is the story of a first-person narrator who begins to speak off-screen. Her narrative counters the widespread media portrayal of those suffering during the Nigerian civil war and the repeated exposure of vulnerable, unheard people by telling the story of the war from the perspective of personal experience. These are the memories of a person who fled her homeland as a child, leaving behind not only photographs of her childhood but also a part of her own history. The female voice, speaking in Igbo and subtitled in English, is accompanied by black-and-white photos on one of the two monitors, images that are being looked through in an archive. This viewing of the photographs is the starting point of the narrative, which uses personal memories to bring the past into the present. Contrary to what the film's title suggests, these are not childhood photos; rather, they document the lives of children under conditions of war, and are now stored in the archives of the World Council of Churches and the International Committee of the Red Cross, both headquartered in Geneva.

There is little room for the narrator's personal memories, because after about a minute, a patronizing male English-language commentator's voice breaks into the narrative with the words "Biafra, 1968." With this, documentary footage from the war zone appears on the second screen, the color and image quality of which reveal it to be historical footage.<sup>23</sup> The information provided by the off-screen commentator locates the report in the form of keywords, but the parallelism of differently narrated and situated moving images on two monitors makes them clash almost violently. The two different modes of presentation and moments of speaking, and the different involvement and positioning of the speakers, means that they compete with each other, acoustically and visually, and vie

for the attention of the audience, which can follow only one of the narratives.

The discrepancy between perspectives can be experienced directly in the competing narratives. In addition to the subjective narrative, which recalls the flight and mourns the loss of history, the colonial stereotypes that were incorporated into the images and texts of the war coverage are particularly prominent: the supposedly objective but condescending gesture of the reportage of the 1960s, the humiliating Western view of the famine and humanitarian crisis in the former British colony. From the first scenes of war to flight and humanitarian aid, the most revealing images shown in what follows are, above all, those of dying and starving children with signs of deprivation. The catchphrases used in the found footage, such as "misery and death," which supposedly classify the images, further depoliticize and reduce what is seen. The reporting culminates in sequences in which vultures on the hospital roofs seem to announce imminent death, while the commentator's voice ends with "...something never to be forgotten."<sup>24</sup>

In fact, these images have not been forgotten; rather they have produced the "visual figuration of the African continent as the problem child of the global community," as historian Lasse Heerten puts it. In 1968, Biafra not only became a "cipher for human suffering," but also "a pars pro toto for the post-colonial decline of Africa, embodied by the icon of the starving 'Biafra children'.<sup>25</sup>" At the same time, the documentary footage confirms an observation that Sontag also makes – namely that, if the place is far away and exotic, "the more likely we are to have full frontal views of the dead and dying. Thus postcolonial Africa exists in the consciousness of the general public in the rich world – besides through its sexy music – mainly as a succession of unforgettable photographs of large-eyed victims, starting with figures in the famine lands of Biafra in the late 1960s [...]."<sup>26</sup> The first-person narrative counters such a one-dimensional

image and the dehumanization and hierarchization it implies. But Onuoha's counter-narrative, which reflects on what it means to have no photos of childhood and to be unable to pass on one's own history to one's children, has long since fallen silent at this point in the film. After just a few minutes, the documentary footage from the 1960s gains the upper hand and can be seen on both monitors.

The literal doubling of violence and dehumanizing images raises the question of a necessary critique of this reproduction and affirmation of violence, discrimination, and injury in the artistic approach. At the same time, it is this doubling and repetition of images, of camera angles and image staging that are always the same, which show the stereotypes and stigmatization of these representations even more clearly. The problematic aspect of these images is that they fundamentally expose the suffering of the people before the eyes of the viewer and reproduce a hierarchy between Western television viewers and Nigerian civil war victims which follows a colonial matrix. The images are part of the continuity of epistemic violence which Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak associates with "the remotely orchestrated, far-flung, and heterogeneous project to constitute the colonial subject as Other" and as "the asymmetrical obliteration of the trace of that Other in precarious Subject-ivity."<sup>27</sup>

Onuoha risks the drastic reproduction and doubling of the images to make precariousness and epistemic violence visible. In the artistic adaptation of images that exhibit the suffering of others, the continued colonial gaze of the reporting and the "iconographic pattern of Biafra's representation"<sup>28</sup> becomes almost shockingly conscious – especially in the exhibition context, in which the perception of the image rhetoric used and the situation of viewing shifts further into the reflexive distance.

The second narrative level opens a different view of what was seen. The narrative of an eyewitness does not take away the violence of war, but her memories open up the possibility of

perceiving a different perspective that undermines the epistemic violence and anonymity of precarious subjects through a narrated life. But *Baby Picture* shows very clearly that a different perception of these images is almost impossible to achieve. The dominance of stereotypical and learned ways of perception, which erases the Other, makes it impossible to hear stories that do not fit the imperial worldview. The new stories fall silent in the face of the overwhelming power of the already familiar, medially disseminated images. Onuoha therefore accepts the repetition of violence to show how these images dominate the perception and knowledge of a privileged audience. It is right to ask at whose expense this aggressive doubling of images takes place, and whether a “Black death for their enlightenment” is required, as Hartman states with regard to an audience of “sovereign innocents.”<sup>29</sup> In the double exposure of the images, Onuoha goes beyond “enlightening” the viewer. The affirmative display points back to the viewer’s involvement in hierarchizing structures of representation and power. *Baby Picture* not only enlightens the viewer about a visual figuration and makes past violence visible – it challenges the viewer to relate to this hegemonic system of representation, whose mechanisms and modes of perception enable discrimination, exclusion, and voids in a comparable way to this day.

In the context of photographs documenting the 2013 Rana Plaza factory collapse in Bangladesh, Tom Holert speaks of *epistemic counterviolence*, using the example of photographs by Ismail Ferdous and Taslima Akther. Holert leaves no doubt that their images of “victims of the structural violence of global capital and its local realities” are problematic in many respects – and should be, “for their ‘violence’ (as visual fact) could as well be read as symptom of those who consume them from a geopolitical and geo-economic distance. In other words, the ‘violence’ of the visual document registers the violence inflicted on the workers killed and harmed at Rana Plaza factory

and the social worlds that surrounded and sustained them.”<sup>30</sup> In relation to their own position in the global economic hierarchy, the activist photographs reveal a twofold violence: “a violence against the victims of structural, racialized, and gendered violence who sue those responsible for the massacre; and a violence that resides in the resistance against continuing colonial power relations, the unfinished business of decolonization.”<sup>31</sup>

The violence in Onuoha’s film is situated differently in terms of time, but the showing of the images can also be understood here as resistance against the continuity of epistemic violence and the demand for responsibility from “sovereign innocents.”

Can the showing of these violent images be justified in this way? Onuoha addresses the associated problems in the film itself. A short telephone conversation between the artist and Charles Spiropolous, which follows the first part of the film made from found footage, speaks to the appropriateness of showing these documents. Together with John Mozie and Edozie Ezeife, Spiropolous is one of the editors of the book *Through the Eyes of the Child: Anthology of the Nigerian Civil War* (2022).<sup>32</sup>

This assembles the voices of people who fled Biafra as children, including the memories of the three editors. In a conversation about the problems of what he has seen before, Spiropolous, as an eyewitness, justifies the showing of documentary authenticity.

The film ends with a further framing, thus returning to Sontag’s criticism of the expressiveness of photographs. Onuoha provides contextualizing and explanatory information alongside a selection of three portrait photos of children from the archives of aid organizations. While the first parts of the film, by doubling and confronting the viewer with documentary footage from the war and personal memories, act primarily affectively and throw the viewer back on their own perception and repertoire of knowledge about events in post-colonial Nigeria in the late 1960s, the information provided here contextualizes the

historical and political conflict that has disappeared behind the previously shown images and the staging of a humanitarian crisis to this day. In a few sentences, Onuoha summarizes the historical perspectives and transnational interests, and gives a “picture” of the complexity of a post-colonial conflict in which colonial power relations, old alliances, and economic interests were more important than the lives of millions of people. The strategic mobilization of images produced to attract international aid, as the second text panel states, “created an entire visual language i.e. poverty porn, which transformed how humanitarian media was made in the decade since.”

Finally, a third text panel describes the downplaying of the conflict as the suppression of history and the erasure of the victims’ experience by the Nigerian post-war government. In Sontag’s sense, the three panels can be understood as extended captions of what we have just seen. They make comprehensible the scope of the staging of suffering, as produced by activists and journalists for the purpose of humanitarian appeals for help; they make it clear that we mostly see these images without such knowledge and contextualization. “The reporting was determined by an iconography that depoliticized and decontextualized the conflict,” writes Lasse Heerten. “In effect, this humanitarian vision made the conflict interchangeable. In the decades that followed, similar images from Ethiopia, Somalia and Sudan appeared in global media: Ghostly apparitions of new ‘Biafras’ that reminded few of Biafra, some of the Holocaust, but constantly produced new variations of the visual figuration of the African continent as the problem child of the global community. The Nigerian Civil War, however, fell into oblivion.”<sup>33</sup> Also forgotten were the personal stories and memories of the “Biafra children,” who became a faceless stereotype.

Through the depicted visual violence and inscribed epistemic and cultural forms of violence, the documentary footage used makes visible the persistence and continued effect of colonial

patterns of perception and their deep anchoring in visual culture. To escape them, as Onuoha's film shows, it is not enough to carry out further critical contextualization of the material. As Hartman explains in conversation with Frank B. Wilderson, III, the visual is so strongly linked to racist thinking that it heightens "the threat of blackness" in a special way: "Fanon's 'Look! A Negro': that's the formulation, and within the racial classificatory schema that is how much of the work is done, especially in terms of the way racialization has operated: how it disposes of bodies, how it appropriates their products, and how it fixes them in the visual grid."<sup>34</sup>

Resistance to the colonial grid of the visual and the protection of racialized subjects is the driving force behind Belinda Kazeem-Kamiński's film *Unearthing. In Conversation* (2017). The critical-analytical approach to "old ethnographic material" allows her to develop a process that transcends the boundaries of the grid of established historiography without itself participating in the reproduction of discriminatory representations.

## Talking to the ghosts...

*Unearthing. In Conversation* (2017, 13 min.) focuses on the analysis of photographs by the Austrian-Czech ethnologist Paul Schebesta, and thus the question of how to deal with colonial photographs without reproducing violence. Unlike in Onuoha's film, the viewers of Kazeem-Kamiński's will not be allowed to see these photographs because, as the artist herself puts it in the film, they "still invite and enable us to become colonial actors."<sup>35</sup> In her opinion, showing these images can only reproduce the objectifications of the white gaze and satisfy the desire for Black suffering.<sup>36</sup>

The racializing objectifications of the supposedly "scientific" gaze are more than obvious in Schebesta's photographs, taken in the 1930s on research trips to the Belgian Congo, now the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Staged photographs



repeatedly show the researcher amid racialized subjects, in which he literally creates the visual grid through gestures. As we learn in the artist's narrative in the film, her first encounter with these photographs, in an exhibition in Frankfurt in 2014, triggered hauntings. According to sociologist Avery Gordon, hauntings are "one way in which abusive systems of power make themselves known and their impacts felt in everyday life, especially when they are supposedly over and done with (slavery, for instance) or when their oppressive power is denied (as in free labor or national security)."<sup>37</sup> For Kazeem-Kamiński, it follows from the haunting, which in Gordon's words "has a real presence and demands its due, your attention,"<sup>38</sup> to turn to these photographs in order to break through the colonial grief of representation and the reproduction of the white gaze.

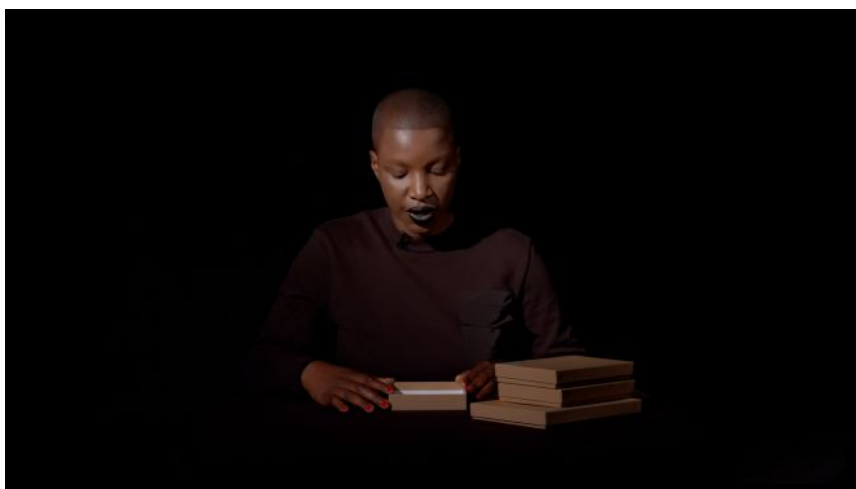
In the film, the critical analysis of colonial representation in Schebesta's photographs leads to a strategy of withdrawal and refusal to view historical photographs, and at the same time forms the basis for an approach that goes beyond the photographs' visuality. For Kazeem-Kamiński, too, the telling of other stories and the approach of initiating the self-critical positioning of the viewer are central. To avoid exposing the photographed subjects to voyeurism or reproducing violations, Kazeem-Kamiński develops a strategy in which she herself acts as a mediator between past and present, between the colonized people in the photographs and the audience, depriving the latter of an unlimited view. Instead, the artist turns her attention to the people in the photographs in the role of narrator in the film. For this purpose, she sits down on the stage of an empty movie theater that is only slightly lit by a projector and begins to speak.

While the artist recapitulates the process of intervening with the photographs, the camera perspective changes: sometimes the viewer looks with the artist toward the light of the projector, sometimes she sees the artist frontally, sometimes she looks over her shoulder and sees the photographs lying on a table.

However, no image is projected; the structure of the cinematographic reproduction apparatus is interrupted. Instead, the artist sits in the place of the projection screen and speaks against the light of the projector, against the imaginary space of the cinema. Perspectives, visual regimes, and the position of the spectator are thus thematic from the outset. Sitting on the stage, Kazeem-Kamiński provides insight into the interventions she has made in the photographs, and talks about procedures and considerations, but also doubts and reasons, for discarding individual strategies. These consist of covering parts of the photographs, cutting the colonized subjects out of the photo for reasons of protection, or using an underlying mirror to reflect the viewer's gaze.



Belinda Kazeem-Kamiński, *Unearthing. In Conversation*, 2017. Film stills. © Belinda Kazeem-Kamiński



Belinda Kazeem-Kamiński, *Unearthing. In Conversation*, 2017. Film stills. © Belinda Kazeem-Kamiński

In the artist's view, none of these interventions can contain the colonial violence; on the contrary, they leave too much room for the repetitive act of violence, the staging of the researcher, and the recurring gesture of measuring and subordinating, while the colonized subjects are once again made invisible. The epistemic and cultural violence incorporated into the historical photographs cannot be overcome on the level of the visual; on the contrary, the interventions also lead to misunderstandings, as we hear the performer say, when the colorful coverings applied are not understood as a reference to their use in the national flag of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, but as a form of pop art.<sup>39</sup>

The unlimited view is therefore denied to the spectators in the film, their voyeuristic gaze rejected. The non-showing of the photographs – or more precisely the photographed subjects – and the re-framing by the text spoken by the artist, intervene on various levels in the constellation of still photography and passive observation. First, it is the artist's monologue directed at the photographed subjects that overcomes boundaries in space and time and discriminatory viewing regimes. The photographer's perspective is not only denied but transcended, because the monologue imagines a counterpart that goes beyond the captured objectification. Beyond the visible, a presence emerges that ignores the boundaries of the archives and the limitations of historiography.

Photographs are part of a colonial apparatus of legitimization and hierarchization. The artist and theorist Ariella Aïsha Azoulay described this operation in 2019 in *Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism* as an "imperial shutter."<sup>40</sup> She borrows the term from camera technology to describe the operations of inclusion and exclusion of imperial thinking, which continue to shape archives, museums, and historiography to this day. Like photographs, archives, museums, and Western historiography show the world from the perspective of imperial

logic. According to Azoulay, the shutter is used to cut out in a matter of seconds what is considered irrelevant or should be suppressed. With precision and without leaving a trace, the “shutter” applies violence in several ways by creating boundaries: in time, in the space between the front and back of the camera (and thus as a regulation of space), and in the body politics between those who own cameras and appropriate their products and those whose faces are stolen and whose labor is exploited.<sup>41</sup>

For Azoulay, unlearning the violence of the imperial shutter means unlearning its authority and resisting its exclusions, classifications, and constraints. This begins, for example, with making the “underlying information” in photographs accessible, asking what was not recorded, refusing to accept the photographer’s perspective, and adopting an unexpected perspective. For her, photographs are valuable for what they do *not* show and what we have learned *not* to see. In this sense, the imagined conversation with the photographed subjects (excluding the ethnologist) can be understood as an unlearning, as it goes beyond the moment depicted and transcends established boundaries.<sup>42</sup> It gives life and voice to the photographed subjects, which become possible and audible through the artist.

Alongside or despite this evoked presence, the necessity of an oppositional gaze becomes apparent, which documents the gaze of the ethnologist and his ideological system. The term “oppositional gaze” used by the artist refers to a text of the same name by bell hooks, in which she describes a critical strategy of Black female spectators for Hollywood cinema.<sup>43</sup> Staring back and observing means an agency, because the oppositional gaze resists discriminatory fixations. This gaze may be subordinate in terms of its position of power, but it can document what it sees; it is an active gaze and resists domination insofar as it develops an

understanding of the structures that dominate it.

In *Unearthing*, the artist adopts this position of critical documentation: she stares at the ethnographer; she reconstructs the hidden colonial contexts and names the structural violence.

And although she does not speak to us, we are also taken into consideration, confronted with a gaze that inevitably makes it understandable that the white gaze is being spoken about.

Kazeem-Kamiński thus provokes reflection on patterns of perception and a reversal of the privileges associated with the “old ethnographic material” – namely between those who have the right to see and those who are exposed to the gaze and become objects of the camera without consent.

## Taking responsibility for the gaze?

In her book *The Civil Contract of Photography*, published in 2008, Ariella Azoulay calls for an understanding of photography that obliges the viewer to actively see and gives them responsibility for how and what they see. The photographic act, which is enclosed in the material object of the photograph, must be unlocked again, and the event of photography reconstructed. A prerequisite for this is to go beyond the identification of what is depicted.<sup>44</sup>

For photography is necessarily to be understood as the product of an encounter, “even if a violent one – between a photographer, a photographed subject, and a camera, an encounter whose involuntary traces in the photograph transform the latter into a document that is not the creation of an individual and can never belong to any one person or narrative exclusively.”<sup>45</sup> She therefore asks viewers not simply to *look* at photographs but to *watch* them – which is clearly inscribed with a temporal dimension of perception when used for moving images.<sup>46</sup> “The act of prolonged observation by the observer as spectator has the power to turn a still photograph into a theater stage on which what has been frozen in the

photograph comes to life."<sup>47</sup> Her aim is not to forget a violent past but to imagine other forms of life – and this requires the active participation of the viewer, and an alliance, albeit a belated one, with the oppressed.<sup>48</sup>

Kazeem-Kamiński adopts such a responsible position of viewing and imagines those photographed as an equal counterpart, breaking the colonial framework with an imagined presence. She presents us with the possibility of unlearning by approaching the photographs differently and going beyond what archives have taught us to see. However, she does not allow us to see the photographs without restriction. The risk of repetition and wounding is too great. She does not trust us to be responsible viewers; she does not trust us to overcome the violent epistemes and the structural violence of culturally shaped patterns of perception.

The denial of seeing and the exclusion from imagined dialogue thus appear as an intervention in the viewer's learned self-awareness, or what Gayatri Spivak calls "sanctioned ignorance."<sup>49</sup>

Although Spivak later distanced herself from her first conception of unlearning, the frequently cited "unlearning one's privilege by considering it as one's loss"<sup>50</sup> seems helpful here to reflect further on the situation of the viewer. Privilege, as Spivak explains, always also means an exclusion from another knowledge to which we have no access due to our social position and which we cannot understand. The unsettling of the self-evidently privileged position of the beholder thus also refers to thinking about what it means to be a spectator in this constellation. But it also means experiencing exclusion.

At the end of *Regarding the Pain of Others*, Susan Sontag looks at a photograph by Jeff Wall, *Dead Troops Talk*, a large-format Cibachrome slide mounted on a lightbox – a staging



Belinda Kazeem-Kamiński, *Unearthing. In Conversation*, 2017. Film stills. © Belinda Kazeem-Kamiński

whose fictionality is clearly marked in its subtitle: *A Vision After an Ambush of a Red Army Patrol near Moqor, Afghanistan, Winter 1986*. This staged photograph in the format of a history painting and with art-historical references shows severely injured and dead soldiers who come back to life and seem to be making fun of the absurdity of war: "Engulfed by the image, which is so accusatory, one could fantasize that the soldiers might turn and talk to us. [...] These dead are supremely uninterested in the living: in those who took their lives; in witnesses – and in us. Why should they seek our gaze?"<sup>51</sup> The experience of the war cannot be mediated. But Wall's photograph is "exemplary in its thoughtfulness and power"<sup>52</sup> as an anti-war image, whose sensual experience makes the viewer think or act (although Sontag concedes more efficiency to a literary unfolding).<sup>53</sup>

Onuoha's decision to show the film only in selected contexts and to work with the found materials from Nigeria can be understood from this difference between knowledge and experience. In doing so, she interrupts the reproduction and circulation of images, and at the same time shows them to an audience which previously had little access to these documents. In the place where they were created, they are often the only evidence of a not too distant past. In this context, they can be understood and read differently; they can be children's photos and evoke other memories.

The artistic strategy of provocative showing, which already invokes various forms of recontextualization and localization within the film, is given a further framing that makes the shifting degrees of spectatorship and commitment all the clearer, and demonstrates how much we are still at the beginning of decolonization processes that affect white visual rhetorics, patterns of perception, ways of thinking and acting. For unlike Jeff Wall's photography – "the opposite of a document" – Onuoha uses historical records whose documentary character

is not affected. A different performativity as a possibility of other readings cannot be asserted at the present moment. The (temporary) withdrawal of the film or the selective choice of presentation, to protect and take care, is therefore more than understandable. At the same time, this once again limits the archives, whose critical re-reading is required for a relational space of negotiating the contemporary social world.

From the outset, Kazeem-Kamiński shares with the viewer the process of reflecting on the boundaries, of overriding the “imperial shutter” on the level of the visual. However, the transgression of spatial and temporal boundaries cannot resolve the haunting. The “unresolved social violence”<sup>54</sup> persists and continues to demand attention.

The history of these photographs remains unresolved, and the film thus points to the need for further examination. But Kazeem-Kaminski also makes us an offer: at the end of the cinematic performance, she opens another box and places a photograph on the table. While the artist talks about continuing to work on “finding resistant ways of looking,” we are given a direct view of a photograph for the first time.

It is difficult to determine what it shows. Unlike the photos used previously, this one does not reproduce any of Paul Schebesta’s photographs. The almost black photo has a dark structure that is difficult to grasp, from which, when viewed for longer, eyes seem to emerge. They look out at us, almost ghostly. But we cannot form a picture of a counterpart. Identifying and discriminating vision is suspended. We can neither fixate the outlines of a figure or a face, nor locate them spatially in the photograph. Learned ways of perception reach their limits, because it is not possible to fix or identify what exactly can be seen in this photograph. This unsettling effect allows us to see more precisely.



- 1 Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Picador, 2003), 7.
- 2 In her second book on photography, Sontag revises her earlier assessment of the declining effect of photography she had described in *On Photography* in 1977.
- 3 Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, 91.
- 4 Sontag, 106.
- 5 Christopher A. Nixon discusses the question of “visual justice” using the example of the installation *Poison soluble. Scènes de l’occupatoin américaine à Bagdad* (2013) by French artist Jean-Jacques Lebel, which led to a controversial debate during the 12th Berlin Biennale about the possibilities and limits of depicting violence, which, according to Nixon, is a symptom of the fact that “society, cultural policy, artists and the media are currently struggling to reposition the relationship between aesthetics and ethics as well as art and politics.” See: Christopher A. Nixon, “Die verwundete Welt und ihre Heimsuchungen. Geschichte, Erinnerung und visuelle Gerechtigkeit,” *Kritische Berichte* vol. 52, no. 2 (2004): 21.
- 6 Nicholas Mirzoeff, *White Sight: Visual Politics and Practices of Whiteness* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2023).
- 7 See note 5. Discussions about and criticism of depictions of violence in art are not new and depend heavily on contemporary assessments and social debates. Cf. *Ästhetik der Gewalt - Gewalt der Ästhetik*, eds. Anna Pawlak and Kerstin Schankweiler (Weimar: VDG, 2013). Representative of the comprehensive discussion of the violence of photographic media, see: John Roberts, *Photography and its Violations* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014).
- 8 *Baby Picture* is a work in progress, which Onuoha has shown in the version discussed here at various exhibitions and screenings. In a conversation with the author following a screening of the film in July 2023, she stated that she no longer wanted to show it in European or predominantly white contexts for the time being. For this reason, no visual material has been added to my contribution. I will come back to this.
- 9 Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, 95.
- 10 Sontag, 102–103.

- 11 See: Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995).
- 12 Saidiya Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," *Small Axe* no. 26 (vol 12, no. 2) (June 2008); 1-14: 13.
- 13 Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," 2.
- 14 Hartman, 3.
- 15 Huey Copeland et al., "Between Visual Scenes and Beautiful Lives. A Conversation with Saidiya Hartman," *October* no. 180 (Spring 2022); 81-104: 101.
- 16 Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," 11, 2.
- 17 Hartman, 11.
- 18 Hartman, 13.
- 19 Hartman, 14.
- 20 Copeland, "A Conversation with Saidiya Hartman," 82.
- 21 Lasse Heerten, "Der Biafra-Krieg als globales Medien- und Protestereignis," *ApuZ* no. 32-33 (2021), (accessed October 24, 2024).
- 22 For a long time, "Biafra" was just such a buzzword for me too, which I learned about as a child through television reports about the children of Biafra who were marked by hunger and deprivation, even though I grew up much later. It is from the experience of these *learned* images, whose repertoire extends far beyond the representation of Biafra in terms of space and time, that I write here.
- 23 I am referring to an installation of the work in progress that was on view from December 3, 2022, to January 15, 2023, in an exhibition of the Berlin program for artists at KW Institute for Contemporary Art in Berlin. See views of the installation on the artist's website: <https://nnennaonuoha.com/portfolio/baby-picture/>.
- 24 Quote taken from Nnenna Onuoha's *Baby Picture*, 2022.

- 25 Heerten, "Der Biafra-Krieg." For a more in-depth analysis of the political and historical dynamics of a civil war that was initially marginalized, to then become a global media spectacle and the cause even of protest, cf. Lasse Heerten, *The Biafran War and Postcolonial Humanitarianism: Spectacles of Suffering* (Cambridge et al.: Cambridge University Press, 2017).
- 26 Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, 70–71.
- 27 Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Can the Subaltern Speak?*, in: *Can the Subaltern Speak? Reflections on the History of an Idea*, ed. Rosalind C. Morris (New York: Columbia University Press 2010), 35.
- 28 Heerten, "Der Biafra-Krieg."
- 29 Copeland, "A Conversation with Saidiya Hartman," 82.
- 30 Tom Holert uses the term in reference to two photojournalistic and activist projects that documented the collapse of the Rana Plaza factory building. See: Tom Holert, "Epistemic Violence and the Careful Photograph," *E-Flux Journal* no. 96 (January 2019), 4.
- 31 Holert, "Epistemic Violence," 4.
- 32 *Through the Eyes of the Child: Anthology of the Nigerian Civil War*, eds. John Mozie, Charles Spiropoulos, and Edozie Ezeife (London: ScribbleCity, 2021).
- 33 Heerten, "Der Biafra-Krieg." On the relevance of the Biafra War in the discussion of genocide studies, cf. Lasse Heerten and A. Dirk Moses, "The Nigeria-Biafra War: Postcolonial Conflict and the Question of Genocide," *Journal of Genocide Research* vol. 16, no. 2–3 (2014).
- 34 Saidiya Hartman and Frank B. Wilderson, III, "The Position of the Unthought," *Qui Parle* vol. 13, no. 2 (Spring / Summer 2003); 183–201: 191.
- 35 Quote taken from Belinda Kazeem-Kamiński's film *Unearthing. In Conversation* (2017). The film, distributed by sixpackfilm, is part of the following collections: CNAP, Centre National des Arts Plastiques, Paris, France; mumok – Museum moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig Wien, Vienna, Austria.

- 36 Belinda Kazeem-Kamiński, "Unearthing. In Conversation: On Listening and Caring," *Critical Ethnic Studies* vol. 4, no. 2 (Fall 2018); 76. In this text, the artist discusses the theoretical concepts of visibility and visibility in relation to Blackness that have shaped the treatment of spectatorship, gaze, and visibility in film.
- 37 Avery F. Gordon, "Who's there? Some answers to questions about ghostly matters," in: *Der Standpunkt der Aufnahme – Point of View*, ed. Tobias Hering (Berlin: Archive Books, 2014), 462–481: 464.
- 38 Gordon, "Who's there?," 464.
- 39 Kazeem-Kamiński, "Unearthing. In Conversation," 90.
- 40 Ariella Aïsha Azoulay, *Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism* (London, New York: Verso, 2019), 1–57.
- 41 Azoulay, *Potential History*, 5.
- 42 Azoulay, 370–371.
- 43 bell hooks, "The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectators," *Feminist Film Theory: A Reader*, ed. Sue Thornham (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999), 308.
- 44 Ariella Azoulay, *The Civil Contract of Photography* (New York: Zone Books, 2008), 14.
- 45 Azoulay, *The Civil Contract of Photography*, 13.
- 46 Azoulay, 14.
- 47 Azoulay, 169.
- 48 Ariella Azoulay, "Photography Consists of Collaboration: Susan Meiselas, Wendy Ewald, and Ariella Azoulay," *Camera Obscura* no. 91 (vol. 31, no. 1) (2016); 187–201.
- 49 Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present* (Boston: Harvard University Press), 2.
- 50 Donna Landry and Gerald MacLean, "Reading Spivak," in: Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *The Spivak Reader: Selected Works of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak*, eds. Donna Landry and Gerald MacLean (London / New York: Routledge, 1996), 4.
- 51 Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, 125.
- 52 Sontag, 122.
- 53 Cf. Elisabeth Bronfen, "Unsaubere Schnittflächen. Mit Susan Sontag den Krieg

betrachten," in: *Radikales Denken. Zur Aktualität Susan Sontags*, eds. Anna-Lisa Dieter and Silvia Tiedtke (Zürich: Diaphanes, 2017) 195-218.

- 54 Avery F. Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (Minneapolis, London: The University of Minnesota Press, 2008), xvi.

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