

Visual artistic interventions into contemporary post-colonial realities and potential futures in Namibia. A multivocal art-anthropology encounter

Pröpper, Michael; Antunes, Reginaldo; Mbewe, Masiyaleti; Ndjiharine, Vitjitua; Remmert, Urte; Schnack, Erik

Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version

Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Pröpper, M., Antunes, R., Mbewe, M., Ndjiharine, V., Remmert, U., & Schnack, E. (2020). Visual artistic interventions into contemporary post-colonial realities and potential futures in Namibia. A multivocal art-anthropology encounter. *EthnoScripts: Zeitschrift für aktuelle ethnologische Studien*, 22(1), 129-167. <https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:gbv:18-8-15708>

Nutzungsbedingungen:

Dieser Text wird unter einer CC BY-SA Lizenz (Namensnennung-Weitergabe unter gleichen Bedingungen) zur Verfügung gestellt. Nähere Auskünfte zu den CC-Lizenzen finden Sie hier: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/deed.de>

Terms of use:

This document is made available under a CC BY-SA Licence (Attribution-ShareAlike). For more information see: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0>

Encountering post-colonial realities in Namibia

Volume 22 Issue 1 | 2020

Michael Pröpper, Reginaldo Antunes, Masiyaleti Mbewe, Vitjitua
Ndjiharine, Urte Remmert, Erik Schnack

Visual artistic interventions into contemporary post-colonial realities
and potential futures in Namibia.

A multivocal art-anthropology encounter

Ethnoscripts 2020 22 (1): 129-167

eISSN 2199-7942

Abstract

Several artists have been occupied with the subject of decolonization in Namibia lately. By means of dialogue between five contemporary Namibian visual artists and one anthropologist, in this article we thematize exemplary perspectives on and interventions into postcolonial realities. Dialogues about selected artworks and additional subjects like healing of past wounds, the Afrofuture and arts potential to reveal social complexities expose visibly how artists intervene very differently into undoing colonialism. It illustrates artistic suggestions for a future that opens up a cultural space on earth for Black peoples belonging, a post-racial world which is not subverted, devalued and discriminated against, and a space for the celebration of the uniqueness and innovation of Black or/and African culture. We thus highlight arts capacity to expose complex nuances, associate ruptures, challenge the viewer, and offer some sort of reorientation. The exposed and discussed artworks are able to open up new views which are truthful about a postcolonial moment in time.

Publisher:

Universität Hamburg
Institut für Ethnologie
Edmund-Siemers-Allee 1 (West)
D-20146 Hamburg
Tel.: 040 42838 4182
E-Mail: lfE@uni-hamburg.de
<http://www.ethnologie.uni-hamburg.de>

eISSN: 2199-7942



Dieses Werk ist lizenziert unter einer Creative Commons Licence 4.0
International: Namensnennung - Weitergabe unter gleichen Bedingungen.

Visual artistic interventions into contemporary post-colonial realities and potential futures in Namibia. A multivocal art-anthropology encounter

Michael Pröpper, Reginaldo Antunes, Masiyaleti Mbewe,
Vitjitua Ndjiharine, Urte Remmert, Erik Schnack

Intro

In several places, talks and publications on contemporary Africa the terms *afrofuturism*, *afrotopia*, *afrofuturism* or *afromodernity* have emerged (Comaroff and Comaroff 2012; Heidenreich-Seleme and O'Toole 2016; Mbewe 2017; Sarr 2019). Especially salient seems their use within a young, self-conscious, urban generation that experiences art as means of expressing new positions on society's struggles. Local black narratives seem to use a rhetoric of venturing into new terrain that works as counterpart to stereotypical narratives about the African continent and a as a move towards decolonization and potentially even the healing of colonial wounds. Against this background some contemporary Namibian art may be expression and platform for the imaginary constitution of a society that is open for change, a society that thrives to being more than a post-colonial emulation of former colonists. Talking about her own work as interventions into social conditions the Namibian artist Vitjitua Ndjiharine (VN) expressed this circumstance with the words 'It seems that we are just beginning to wake up'.

We would like to take this observation of a historical momentum of opening or waking up to new possibilities and narratives within the Namibian visual arts scene to thematize exemplary perspectives on and interventions into post-colonial realities in contemporary Namibia in this article (see as well the Editorial). That means that visual arts, which can be described as a certain sector of/or a distinct scene within the contemporary Namibian society will be the main focus. Several artists/ authors have been occupied with the subject of art, colonialism, the challenge of decolonization and the healing of past wounds in Namibia lately. Nashilogweshipwe Mushaandja has provided a critical reflection of over 40 art positions towards the subject of German colonialism, a discourse that is taking place in Namibia and Germany (Mushaandja 2019). Other reflections also especially thematize the German colonial period as part of an emerging discourse in Germany about the highly problematic colonial history (Lehmann 2019, forthcoming; Wienand 2019) but as well other periods of time as pre- and post independence (Hofmeyr 2015; Mtota 2015; Palumbo 2006; Sarantou 2014).

The methodological approach chosen here will involve an anthropological encounter with contemporary artistic positions towards post-colonial realities since Michael Pröpper (MP), a German academic anthropologist and artist initiated the process as part of the research excursion that shaped this special issue (see Editorial). The outcome is an attempt at a *dialogue* – in researching as well as in writing. This endeavour does not explicitly focus on any colonial period and touches upon ethical, decolonial and methodological questions. What is the encounter, what is an encounter? How do the artist and the anthropologist meet and how do they talk to each other while there is a third self-speaking actor – the artwork, which is a main part of the encounter? Some salient methodological challenges of this situation include a.) involving an experiential embodied dimension as ideally both are physically, bodily experiencing the material presence and the phenomenological expansion/ complexity dimensions of the artwork (as the third agent); b.) experiencing the materiality of the artwork as substance for deep understanding – for artistic producing and thinking, e.g. by visiting the artists studios; and c.) entering into a dialogue with the artist. Is anthropology suggesting concepts and art delivering realisations? Artists are entering into that sort of dialogue by expressing their own views, describing backgrounds. A consequence of the peculiarity of the artistic work (work as a third self-speaking actor in a triangular relationship) is the fact that an exchange with artists who speak through their works takes place.

Central to us, therefore, is a *dialogical field research* work with and on the work that addresses and elaborates on equal perspectives and thus iteratively approaches the topics of intervention and complexity. During this sort of ‘research’ encounters in exhibitions, art-schools, workshops and in ateliers took place. Also interviews and conversations took place on the side, on the phone, in the street and on parties and vernissages. Standing in front of artworks, explaining, getting to know each other was always a starting point. The encounter outcome is ‘only’ a written dialogue between MP and five artists. However, the core tenet of a first approach towards a decolonized way of writing about post-colonial art was not talking about but talking *with* artists, not writing about but writing *with* artists.

The positions/ artworks that will be the basis for the dialogues outlined here will be presented in a thematical order that will become clear in the text and does not mean to privilege any artwork. They were pieces from salient exhibitions in 2019, namely Vitjitua Ndjiharines work ‘We Shall Not Be Moved’ for ‘Ovizire Somgu – From where do we speak?’ at NAGN and Masiyaleti Mbewes work ‘Gender on the Moon’ for ‘We me – Womxn’ at the National Art Gallery of Namibia (NAGN). Two additional positions will also play a key role: Erik Schnacks ‘Scramble’, a kinetic installation that was shown in 2012 at the College of the Arts Boilerhouse (Katutura Community Arts Centre) and

can be seen as a video on the internet¹ and Urte Remmerts work ‘Talk to me: Finding a new Namibian Language’ that was published by the Würth foundation in 2016 (Weber 2016). Lastly Reginaldo Antunes work ‘Celebration’ for the 2019 exhibition ‘What if’ organized by the Namibian Arts Association will be presented.

The idea to this article and the choice of artistic positions was exclusively MPs responsibility. That means that it must be seen as an opportunistic sample, guided by the time of MPs being in Namibia in 2019 and represents an attempt to get an overview through exhibition visits and multiple expert interviews with key players in the Namibian Arts Scene. Consequently, it can only be seen as a first entry for deeper investigations into the interventive contributions of Namibian artists. It is though not meant in any exclusive manner and not meant to discriminate any other artist/ project/ position that the current authors might have not chosen, omitted or not been aware of.

Next to the afrofuturity a central role will be played by the terms ‘complexity exposure’ and ‘intervention’ which will be explained below. As outlined above the term intervention proved to be fruitful and intuitively understandable in the discussion that MP had with Namibian artists and art practitioners during personal discussions in Namibia in 2019 and during subsequent dialogues via e-mail, phone and social media. The term was initially encountered in the exhibition ‘Ovizire somgu – From where do we speak?’ that was conceptualized and shown in Hamburg, Germany and later travelled to Windhoek, Namibia.²

In the remainder of the article we will display a theorizing of key concepts followed by some words on methods and the Namibian visual arts scene. The main part will present the exemplary art projects in a dialogic fashion which will be comparatively discussed in the end.

Theorizing key concepts and background

By now the mutual interests, coincidences and overlaps – as well as the differences – between anthropology³ and art in coming to more sensually holistic ways of understanding and representing different realities in a globally transforming world have been thoroughly described, however remain a matter of discussion (Foster 1995; Grimshaw and Ravetz 2015; Ingold 2019; Pink et al. 2010; Pröpper 2015; Schneider and Wright 2010). Compared to other disciplines anthropology is close to art in using a holistic ethnographic approach to understanding peoples complex realities, a fact that has caused a lot of interest in the arts about the so called ‘ethnographic turn’ and in sensual

1 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8Lb4pRTgHHU> 18.02.2020

2 <https://www.kolonialismus.uni-hamburg.de/2019/07/04/unsere-ausstellung-ovizire-somgu-from-where-do-we-speak-geht-nach-namibia/>

3 The problematic colonial history of anthropology has been thoroughly discussed in the introductory chapter of this volume.

imaginative anthropology (Elliott and Culhane 2016; Grimshaw and Ravetz 2015; Rutten et al. 2013). On the other hand increasingly art can be understood as a sort of *research* into life's complex secrets (Borgdorff 2009, 2011; Finley and Knowles 1995; Ingold 2019; Noë 2015). By now there exists an increasing number of people with hybrid identities and roots in both fields. So what can be emphasized here is a mutual interest in *exposing/ revealing the complexity⁴ of reality*. Elsewhere this approach of combining anthropology and art was described by MP as to “attune our sensorial and emotional and perceptive capabilities to ultimately better understand multiple dimensions of a ‘*qualitas occulta*’⁵ of that thing reality that unites anthropologists and artists. The endeavor is about ‘laying bare’ of hidden gaps of perception and knowledge, as well as structures of powerful narratives and the discursive penetration of all spheres of our social life” (Pröpper 2015: 18).⁶

Due to the encounter-nature of this article the focus will be twofold: Firstly, the focus will be on mutual interests in the *post-colonial condition*⁷ and artistic positions towards what could be called interventive (self-)decolonization and maybe even healing. By dialoguing about exemplary artworks and positions and comparing their ‘narrative properties’ we intend to create a preliminary overview of exemplary artistic commentaries and interventions into post-colonial realities.

Secondly, a first understanding of the hypothesis of *exposing/ revealing complexity* is attempted for Namibia (Kössler 2015). It is only a first step to state that artistic research somehow deals with complexity, but it is a further (analytic) step to attempt to ‘map’ the contributions, to attempt to achieve a certain ‘typology’ of types of complexity revelations or a certain grammar-like overview. This is a complex issue in itself asking the question “Which and what aspect of the complex post-colonial discourse did artists choose for what reason?” that cannot be fully answered here. However, looking at aspects of visualization, exposure and discovery (making visible formerly invisible or not yet seen connections and dimensions, exposing the absence

4 Complexity (*cum* ‘with’, or ‘together with’ and *plectere* ‘braid’ or ‘merge’) is a behavior and property of systems/ situations/ nexus/ facts meaning that many components/ details/ dimensions/ goals/ motivations/ emotions/ behaviors can interact/ braid/ merge/ contradict in often nonlinear ways and processes that aggravate simplifying perceptions, descriptions and abstractions. Complexity grows with the number of interacting dimensions and is an essential feature of social, societal and cultural systems. Complexity thus has a lot to do with demands on human perception through variety and multiplicity as well as questions of order, disorder and hierarchy.

5 A hidden, invisible quality or dimension

6 While here we lay a focus on the qualitative understanding of the exposure of complexity as a strength of anthropology it can also be argued that anthropology also has a *scientific* interest and approach and thus is also on the side of science in general *reducing* complexity wherever possible.

7 See the introductory chapter

of understanding, showing crooked metaphors, wrong examples, imprecise models, misunderstandings and discovering a new positionality) may give us first insights into arts role in exposing the complexities of the decolonization discourse.

Finally, a few words should be said on the terminus of intervention. What are 'artistic interventions' into post-colonial society? One could ask the question differently "What art is not an intervention in this sense?" This whole issue touches the very matter of choice of artworks. Is a personal blog entry, a posted selfie at Heroes Acre, a painting of the Namib desert, or a smartphone video of a ritual not also a potential intervention, maybe less political but in an aesthetic sense also exposing complexity? That means that it is a difficult question how to narrow a choice of artworks. Here, however, we have suggested to focus on intended, research-based, professional and publicly exhibited art contributions that somehow were directed towards societal/ political/ post-colonial issues – as the choice of exhibitions has already been outlined above.

One can further ask what the nature of an intervention is in comparison to a commentary/ an exhibition or a contribution and what makes that intervention a successful exposure of e.g. post-colonial deficits? That is at least partly an empirical question that will have to be answered by the artists in comparison in a similar manner as above asking "(Why/how) do you intervene?"

Lastly, visual artists intervene through the artwork. Artists thus seem to intervene less directly as a person but rather as some sort of distant, hidden, depersonalized type of intervention. A special feature of the visual artistic search for knowledge is that artists do not primarily speak themselves, but rather create works that speak about complexity. So there is a self-speaking third 'agent' parallel to the verbal communication about the world, consequently a triangular relationship arises. A conversation takes place originally *with* the artwork and sometimes only exceptionally with the artist in a (then) triangular relationship. As a result, research with and about artists must take this challenge into account. This aspect will be, among others, further touched upon below.

Main part: Exemplary artistic positions

In this part, we will present several artistic positions with images headed by an introductory part describing the peculiarity of the encounter, the exhibition background and the questions that arise. The dialogues are followed by a short closing summary.

Vitjitua Ndjiharine: 'We Shall Not Be Moved'. Painted photographs

Introduction on Ovizire · Somgu MP: I first experienced the work of Vitjitua Ndjiharine in Hamburg visiting the exhibition 'Ovizire · Somgu: From Where Do We Speak?'. When in Namibia we met and started a conversation about her work, and the subject of intervention.

'Ovizire. Somgu' is a collaboratively curated exhibition that is centered on a photographic inventory housed at the Museum at Rothenbaum (MARKK) in Hamburg, which was produced and collected by German scientists, settlers, merchants and military personnel during the period of German colonialism in Namibia (1884-1915). The exhibition was initially opened in December 2018 in two locations in Hamburg: the Museum at Rothenbaum (MARKK), the former Museum of Ethnology, and the neighboring non-profit art space M.Bassy. It travelled to Namibia in 2019.

The words *ovizire* and *somgu* in Otjiherero and Khoekhoegowab cannot be reduced to any single meaning, but can be translated to mean 'shadow' or 'aura'. This cross-disciplinary exhibition proposes a critical reading of the legacies of the colonial gaze and its photographic archive through exploring gaps and shadows in the archive.

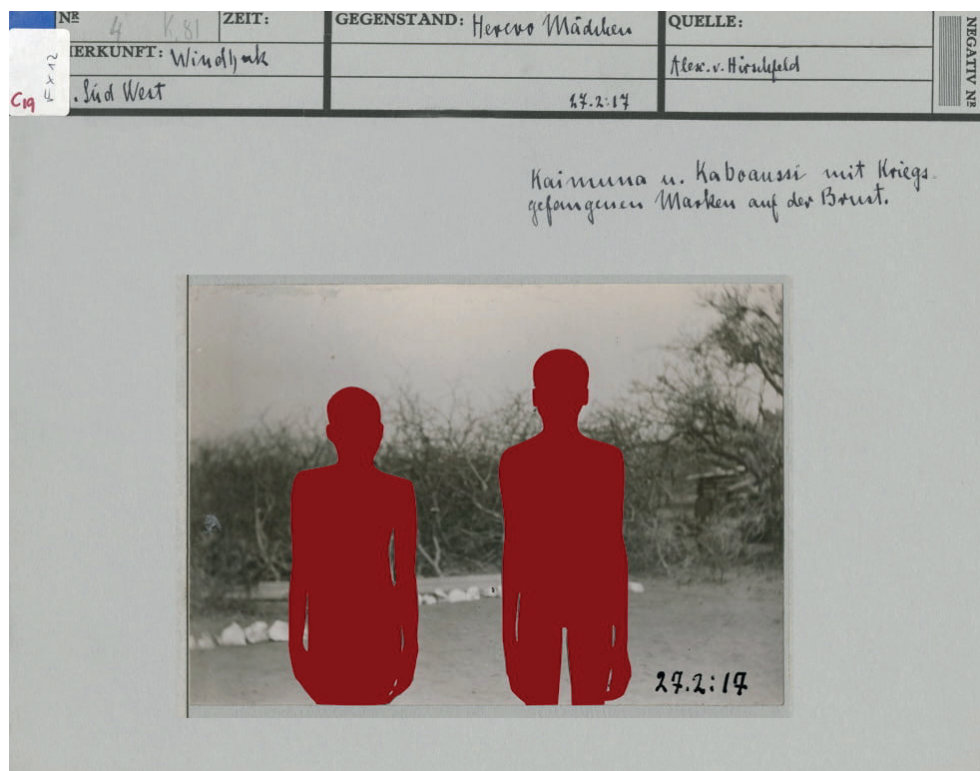


Image 1: (Untitled) The Shadows Kaimuna and Kaboaussi on *Ikono*-card (2018). Photo by Vitjitua Ndjiharine

At its centre, 'Ovizire · Somgu' interrogates colonial representations and psycho-social spaces associated with legacies of power that previously dominated or silenced counter-histories and diverse voices. In particular it brings to the surface the uneven remembrance of the colonial genocide (1904-1908). Consisting of video, photography, mixed media collages, soundscape, sculpture and performance interventions, the works exhibited have emerged out of an ongoing conversation and creative collaboration between artists, curators and scholars in Namibia and Germany over a period of several months in 2018 and 2019. In turn 'Ovizire · Somgu' celebrates the possibilities of new voices of solidarity, resistance and healing (Text partly compiled from exhibition description).

MP: I would perceive your great work 'We Shall Not Be Moved' for Ovizire · Somgu as a perfect example of a intervention into colonial memory culture and thus an attempt to create awareness for and protest against the ongoing persistence of colonial imagery in everyday post-colonial life. It creates a very strong feeling for the ongoing exposure and vulnerability of the photographed people by protecting them from further gazes by stencilling them out, repainting them and thus rewriting a historical narrative. How do you see that?

VN: My approach to the colonial archive is to rebel against established forms of historical knowledge about the colonized world and its people. This stance attempts to question the limits of contemporary knowledge. Paramount to this is the idea that historical information is never neutral and that the intersection of identity plays a role in how information is received, perceived and archived. The archive at the center of the project 'Ovizire. Somgu: From Where Do We Speak?' was produced and collected as a result of abject historical entanglements between the German colonial empire and its former colony German South-West Africa (today Namibia) and the Namibian-German War of 1904-1908. Engaging with these troubling colonial photographic collections, and the institutions in which they are preserved, requires a critical reflection in order to include a broad range of entangled themes related to power, positionality, the colonial gaze, gender and queer intersectionality. However, and most importantly, a critical reflection is only a starting point, and on its own is not enough. A direct disruption or intervention is further required. Together with a critical reflection, the method of disruption can be a productive way to engage with problematic colonial photographic collections.

Historian Patricia Hayes argues that constitutive quality of photography allowed for the construction of ideas concerning the colonized world and its people (Hartmann, Silvester and Hayes 1999). The setting and the circumstances leading to the production and distribution of colonial photographs, was predominantly controlled by white European men. In the Namibian colonial setting the photographs therefore represent a projection of German

white male dominance over the colonized Namibia and its peoples, and thus, they will always require a critical intervention.

The white male colonial fantasy, that painted the black subject as sub-human, uncivilized and easily dominatable, and that made a “new world” visually available to German audiences played an important role in legitimating colonial governance. How can we diverge from this point of view? The goal of my artistic approach is to completely undermine any representations of the colonized by the colonizer. I do this by utilizing the manipulation of colonial photography in order to provide a complete and holistic re-thinking of hierarchies of knowledge. One way I manipulate these photographs is by literally cutting them into pieces to do away their original meaning. This method offers a post-colonial interpretation that assumes the position of disruption and subversion as a precondition for change, and renders the colonial archive as a site of encounter and cultural exchange that might have transformative capacities. I will illustrate my points by using two bodies of work as examples: ‘Mirrored Reality’ and ‘We Shall Not Be Moved’.



Image 2: ‘We Shall Not Be Moved’ (2018). Installation at M.Bassy in Hamburg.
Photo by Vitjitua Ndjiharine

MP: Is your artistic intervention by disruption being noticed? What makes an intervention successful?

VN: Engagement, conversation and critical thinking is what makes an intervention successful in my opinion. ‘Mirrored Reality’ directly returns the viewer’s gaze by using a reflective film in place of the photographic subjects. More specifically, the black photographic subjects who make up the bulk of the content found within the colonial archive. In this conceptual art installation, the black bodies are cut out of the frame and replaced with a mirror film which in turn allows the viewer to see themselves or their immediate surroundings. Enlarged *Ikono*-cards⁸ provide the basis for this installation. These so-called *Ikono*-cards are the material make up of the *Ikono-catalogue*⁹, and each card contains referential information about the photographic subject which is handwritten by the museum’s archivists as the photographs entered their inventory.



Image 3: ‘Mirrored Reality’ (2018). Installation at Akademie Schloss Solitude in Stuttgart.
Photo by Vitjitua Ndjiharine

- 8 *Ikono*-cards are inventory cards used at the Museum am Rothenbaum. These cards contain descriptions of place, origin and a title of the images that make up the *Ikono-catalogue*. The knowledge and language transmitted through these labelling and categorization processes is highly racist and still forms part of the potent colonial knowledge system.
- 9 The so-called *Ikono-catalogue* consists of photographs taken by settlers, merchants, soldiers, scientists, most of all private citizens during the time of German colonialism in Namibia (1894-1917). These include photographs of landscapes, people and cultural objects, as well as the activities of the military in the colony. In the early 1920s the Museum am Rothenbaum used the catalogue as a teaching tool for students of Ethnology. This catalogue consists of photographs that are pasted on so called *Ikono*-cards.

In most cases, the information on these cards is derogatory and is designated for the purpose of categorizing the photographed black subjects. I reflect on these cards as an example of a colonial order of knowledge, and therefore obscure the sexist or racist designations that are used to describe the subject to prevent further dissemination of this knowledge. This work is a reflexive art exercise that allows us to reflect on our postures of gazing, and provides a refraction of the colonial gaze that can help recalibrate historical knowledge. This work was conceived as a conceptual art installation which covered the entrance of the exhibition hall in the MARKK where our first iteration of the 'Ovizire. Somgu' project was exhibited.

MP: What does your art have to do with your personal biography/ position in Namibian history and society?

VN: My personal biography very much informs my positionality as an artist and researcher. My work 'We Shall Not Be Moved' is created out of my personal connection to the colonial archive as Namibian and more urgently as a Herero woman whose ancestors are "victims" of this history.



Image 4: 'We Shall Not Be Moved', close up (2018). Photo by Vitjitua Ndjiharine

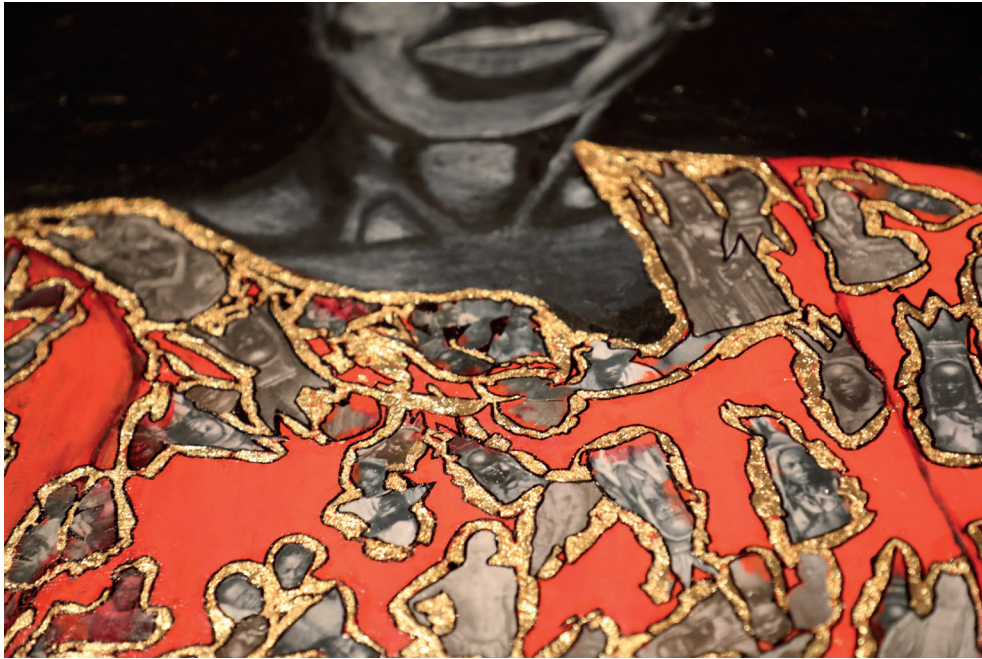


Image 5: 'We Shall Not Be Moved', close up (2018). Photo by Vitjitua Ndjiharine

MP: Do you perceive an increasing involvement of Namibian artists in the subjects of decolonization/ resolution/ healing? Whom?

VN: Yes I do. And in disparate ways, using a variety of mediums from poetry and literature to new media. I also anticipate more Namibian youth take on these subjects as it pertains to their own identities.

MP: What problems and challenges still exist?

VN: There are challenges from the political side of things, as far as coming to terms with colonial history and moving through our decolonial turn. There are challenges for Black artists living and working in an economy controlled not only by foreign interest, but a minority White population.

MP: You are dealing in these works with a disruption and recalibration of established historical knowledge. I would perceive this as an attempt at some sort of decolonization? How do you see that? Is healing a term that would go together with decolonization for you? Or what needs to be done (in the current post-colonial situation)?

VN: I see decolonization as a multi-step process that will require not only time but effort from various facets of society. In the same way that the process of colonization happened over a number of years, using not only military but political, religious and economic means to ensure a complete takeover of a territory, the process of decolonization will require us to re-think these aspects and more. And at the end of this very long, multi-level process, when restorative justice is implemented could there be something like collective healing.

MP: Several writers and artists develop new visions of a decolonized/ post-colonial future. What is your position/ opinion towards this/ the terms afro-future, afrotopia etc...?

VN: These terms exist for me because black artists and writers crave a post-racial world where the color of one's skin does not determine one's success or access. For me these are very important terms in conceptualizing such a world, and since this world does not exist today, nor has it existed in the past, we have to look to the future. We have to write, or visualize ourselves in a post-racial world.

With her work Vitjitua Ndjiharine rebels against established forms of historical knowledge. She argues for a critical intervention by means of disruption that manipulates (e.g. by using collage, painting, mirrors to reflect the viewer, or cutting apart colonial photographs) and undermines any representations of the colonized by the colonizer, and provides a refraction of the colonial gaze that can help recalibrate knowledge. She perceives decolonization as a long multi-step process that will require not only time but effort from various facets of society as well as restorative justice before collective healing can be achieved. For the future black artists crave and visualize a post-racial world.

Masiyaleti Mbewe¹⁰: 'Gender on the moon'. Photo

The NAGN in 2019 launched an exhibition called 'We me – Womxn'. Using the spelling womxn which explicitly includes 'womxn' of transgender women and non-binary persons the exhibition aimed at beginning "a conversation about the inclusion of women within the discourse of Namibian art" and an attempt at "changing that narrative" (Hambunda 2019). The artwork by Masiyaleti Mbewe was part of this exhibition.

MP: I think that your work fit in really well as you have proposed and strongly advocated a new vision of an African Future – with a focus on gender diversity. Could you talk about how this image was created and shot, the genesis of the artpiece?

MM: I was working closely with Simeone Johannes a Namibian designer on this project. We sat down and conceptualised what each character in the Afrofuturist Village would look like and what that meant for the overarching themes the photographs wanted to communicate. The photograph was taken in the Moon Valley on the way to Swakopmund and everything just came together. Jay Aeron and Rumano Fabrishh were my models. They don't conform to any gender roles/ identities and that's why they were ideal for this aspect of the work; exploring what gender looks like in the future. They (Jay and Rumano) constantly alter our ideas on gender. This photograph is also loosely based on

10 Masiyaleti Mbewe <https://www.letsbebrief.co.uk/the-masiyaleti-mbewe-skyscraper-is-ready-to-create-art-on-every-floor/>; accessed 09.06.2020.



Image 6: 'Gender on the moon'. Photo by Masiyaleti Mbewe

SunRa's 'Space is the Place'¹¹, I had some ideas around whether Black people would have ventured into space to form communities in the future but I still wanted to maintain the grounding concept of there being a space on Earth for Black people.

MP: I would see the work as an attempt to break with old (colonial?) stereotypes and habits and to come to new liberated models, metaphors and ways of thinking 'being African'. As such I would call it a strong artistic intervention into current post-colonial gender debates (and others). Also, following my theorizing of the term 'complexity exposure', I would read it in a way that your work 'Gender on the moon' exposes very strongly the long way to go towards gender-futurism beyond toxic heteronormativity, discrimination and the like, by putting the question into the very real Namibian desert looking like the far away moon.

MM: I think what I aim to do with the photography is make visual suggestions of possible African futures. The art has definitely sparked dialogue around the concept of afrofuturism and what a photograph like 'Gender on the Moon' does is interrogate what visually triggers someone to label something "afrofuturist". My main point of deviation was always to expand the visual cues to more than just Black people in space. Space has been a huge theme; how Black people now and in the past negotiated their space and what is really

11 An afrofuturist science fiction film from 1972 written by the US-American artist SunRa https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Space_Is_the_Place; accessed 09.06.2020.

important now is owning space. What I wanted to radicalize was the concept of Black people actually staying on earth and living because we belong here. I think I'm seeing more people choose to engage with future spaces differently and a lot of afrofuturist work tended to be very cisheteronormative and ableist. This work wants to undermine that.

MP: Could you further explain your interest in space ... is that a geographical, political, social, cultural meaning of space? A contested, colonized space? Identity space ...

MM: It is informed by all of those things. My work aims to unpack our ideas about space around Blackness. There is a basic understanding of space that I am trying to confront; space for Black people has very different contextual meaning. Whether geographical, political, social or cultural; all of these theses are interlinked.

MP: Does the undermining intention of the work mainly target afrofuturist work or does it also aim at current very heteronormative society (politics, gender practices and convictions etc.) at large? I ask this question because I would consider you a prominent advocate of afrofuturism and am a bit astonished that you aim to undermine other afrofuturists positions ...

MM: I'm undermining the heteronormative concepts of Afrofuturism AND society at large. It's very easy within concepts to replicate normative ideologies by continuing to centre them (the male gaze, ableist ideas, etc). I advocate for an inclusive Afrofuturism and I believe it is my place within the movement to critique problematic aspects of it.

MP: What does your art have to do with your personal biography/ position in African/ Namibian history and society?

MM: I am Zambian, I grew up in Botswana and when I was 19 moved to Namibia. I've been in Namibia for 10 years now. My art is a personal extension of myself, my experiences with negotiating spaces as a Black queer womxn and my politics. My approach to art is not a clinical dissection of history, I work from an instinctive place. There is a constant conversation around the concept of space and time and I think my work speaks to that and takes all of these histories and possible futures into account.

MP: Do you perceive an increasing involvement of Namibian artists in the subjects of decolonization/ resolution/ healing? Whom?

MM: Absolutely. The recent Odalate Naiteke Project curated and directed by Nashilongweshipwe Mushaandja¹² that took place at the Katutura Community Arts Centre. Work like Julia Hango's which was featured in the project

12 "Odalate Naiteke means 'the fence/wire must break' – a slogan used by the contract workers' protest in 1971. The idea is to crush all kinds of borders, the economic, the gender, the cultural, the spatial, the political" says Mushaandja <https://www.namibian.com.na/197278/archive-read/Operation-Odalate-Naiteke>Returns-to-Katutura>; accessed 21.05.2020.

is incredibly important because of its very purposeful shift i.e. the work is created for the people and not for the white gaze. This work is reaffirming in the consciousness of Black artists lately; we aim to create work that is representative of our experiences and is not exploitative.

MP: You said that we are in constant need to decolonize at the moment. How? Is the term *healing* that points into a direction of forgiving appealing to you at all?

MM: I maintain that there needs to be a recalibration of who we make the art for. We have to create with intention. African/ Black artists; our work is almost always viewed from the white gaze; it is explained and aimed to be understood from those perspectives. By controlling the gaze, we control the narrative and get the art to who needs it.

Healing? Well, Afrofuturism is healing for me. It was through this movement that I was able to find purpose and able to create meaningful work. Forgiveness? Has there been an apology? From whom? This is what I mean when I speak about the gaze, an assumption that I am making the work to meet and reconcile with people that have harmed and hurt Black people, that would be centering *them* and that would defeat the purpose of my work. My work is unapologetic, it is for Black people.

MP: What problems and challenges do still exist?

MM: Funding has been a very real issue for many artists myself included but what I really find more jarring is the creation of art for the white gaze, there needs to be a decentering (of the white gaze).

Masiyaleti Mbewes photo art is offering visual suggestions of African futures for African people. She is radicalizing a concept of future geographical, political, social or cultural space on Earth for Black people because they belong here. Likewise she aims to undermine cisheteronormative and ableist concepts in afrofuturism and society. Her Afrofuturist work is unapologetic and not made to reconcile with people that have harmed and hurt Black people and represent the white gaze – something that needs to be decentered.

Erik Schnack: 'Scramble'. A kinetic installation

MP introductory comment: I was introduced to Erik Schnacks 2012 multimedia kinetic installation SCRAMBLE¹³ through the artist upon a visit at his studio. That means that I saw and felt the enormity of the installations pieces by seeing and touching them being stacked in a garage. Then I watched the video on a computer screen together with Erik and later watched it a few times again alone. During our subsequent conversations we used an unpublished manuscript of a booklet about 'Scramble' that was supposed to be published by the artists and was written by Margo Timm-Forster, and was

13 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8Lb4pRTgHHU>; accessed 18.02.2020

unfortunately never finally realized (unpublished Manuscript). The following description of the experience of ‘Scramble’ is inspired from Timm-Forster.

Artwork description: In a vast industrial building¹⁴ a screen on the ceiling bears the sepia projection of a constant cascade of cloud. Metal cables from the ceiling suspend three sets of horizontal undulating metal tracks. They hold speakers emitting a composition of mechanical sound combined with sounds of water and unsettling guitar improvisation. This sound accompanies the movement of castor wheels along the tracks, the continuation of which is ensured by the slow rise and fall of three buckets holding sand. The wheels, which proceed at a slow hesitant pace, suspend and therefore move eight parachute-like assemblages beneath them. In turn each of these has metal cables bound to a ring inserted through the tail of an elongated-root like form resembling a sperm’s flagella, which is connected by a hinge to a cast of a human hand. The presence of the hands and flagella like arms as well as the buckets is enhanced by light emanating from them. Spotlights illuminate the stitched metal segments which cover the parachutes and reflect corrugated silver glints subdued by hues of rust. The light also reveals the mechanical components in some of the hands and arms. Whilst there is slight movement of the articulated fingers, three arms glow with fluorescence. The procession is reflected below on the surface of a pool of water held by a six meter diameter circle of sand. Mesmerized, the observers remain transfixed while the grim cycle continues. (compare Timm-Forster, unpublished Manuscript)

MP: My first impression of SCRAMBLE was that of a baroque medieval venetian cabinet play. It reminded me as well of E.T.A. Hoffmans piece “Der Sandmann” which is also playing with the idea of hybrid machine-like beings and is a bit scary. So my emotional approach was ambivalent – very fascinated by the aesthetics and solemnity and beauty and craftsmanship but also a bit disturbed by the scariness of the hanging human parts and the dark atmosphere. Unfortunately in comparison to Timm-Forster I did not experience the installation physically but only saw the parts at your place and saw the video.

Finally noticing the title of course I immediately thought of ‘The scramble for Africa’ and thus an association with hands grabbing for the unchartered territory came up. I think that this impression is supported by the fact that the hands come ‘flying’ from above hanging on parachutes. However this movement is being interrupted as the hands/ arms cannot reach the ground but rather move in a horizontal way. So there might be this moment of interruption and stop, and the hands also do not claw but rather hang/ touch/ point – hence the gesture is less aggressive.

14 The *Boilerhouse* at Windhoek Katuturas College of the Arts – a former kitchen building of Apartheids migrant labourers.



Image 7: 'Scramble' (1). Photo by Eric Schnack



Image 8: 'Scramble' (2) Photo by Erik Schnack

ES: Yes, I agree. There is the association between the uncanny and the machine (Freud, *The Uncanny* 1919). My intention was to imbue these 'vessels' with a grandiose presence, to appear somewhat like amusement park hot air balloons of various sizes and impressive shapes. They are represented as weathered, over-used and perhaps abandoned objects. I wanted to achieve this aesthetic, while also being inspired by Leonardo Da Vinci's aviation drawings, Jean Tinguely's automated sculptures and the Dadaists. You are right about the title that also plays with the colonial disregard of Africans and their environment, something that still continues unabated. 'Scramble' is an uncanny depiction of neo-colonialism in a post-colonial socio-political milieu. The universal scope of the work aims to trigger debates on sustainable resource extraction rather than to acquire them by means of greed and exploitation. Questions should also arise on how Africa's resources can have economic benefits for Africans rather than corporates and individuals.

My imagery of parachute and hand originally represents greedy exploitation. The hands made from real life casts despite their non-aggressive gestures for me actually invade, inspect prospect and pillage. The joints of finger's have been connected together and to the hands so that they are able to move clumsily and in their own way together with the movement of the whole installation on the tracks. Movement is thereby achieved by inertia. The hands rather than grabbing appear to be limp. Somewhat useless. They go along with the flow of things, inspecting, prospecting and removing. Here human hands are engineered for a specific purpose, as suggested by the hybridity of machine and human organism. They are not linked to a brain of an

individual, but are rather linked to the parachute (institution/ power/ greed). The limbs prey like vultures over the water, waiting for an opportunity to grab whatever they can when no danger is in sight. Water, which is very rare in Namibia needs to be taken special care of. Like our resources, water is increasingly becoming scarcer. The artificial waterhole lures wildlife to be prayed on. The reflection of the hands on the water surface suggest that the hands 'Scramble' from within.

An earlier installation I did in 2008 of parachutes and hands, ironically titled 'Helping Hands' is an interpretation of greedy exploitation under the guise of pretending to aid African countries and so is my animation movie 'Machines of Progress and Destruction' which was made in 2000.

The parachute assemblages could be associated with alien/ foreign shapes. They may represent different institutions of power, but that are difficult to associate or identify. This could even portray beautified lies/ sordid schemes, so as to camouflage/ hide them or make them unrecognisable, even acceptable. Additionally, in reference to an era where indigenous identity and values became nameless, the human limbs of the installation dramatically replay a dehumanizing process and the human body is regarded as a piece of machinery. 'Scramble' may therefore also speak of the colonized victims who become complicit in the exploitative scheme.

The heavy duty wire rather had a practical function for 'Scramble'. To suspend its heavy components. My intention therewith was to give the whole installation and its different components a floating appearance. Something that is alien and has emerged from an unknown space. Something that is difficult to grasp or reach.

The meandering metal racks performed a practical function: So that parachutes and hands move up and down as they glide across the tracks from left to right and from right to left. This up and down movement hints towards inspecting/ prospecting and removal. However, whatever is being removed remains invisible (behind everyone's backs). The sand buckets had the function to move up and down. The sand being our land/ earth. Mining and removing. Bucket's are representative of the land and the removal of resources. The corrugated iron has become synonymous with poverty. Inequality is recognised on the ground with growing informal settlements. This aesthetic quality is present in miniature form in tin cans. The cloud projection hints that the alien parachutes (invisible forces/ institutions) are linked to Earth (they are human made) and are universal. The sound is sinister, dramatic and unsettling.

MP: The way you describe it 'Scramble' can also be read as a comment on the current post-colonial condition. That means the fact that a touching/ grabbing/ longing for resources, people, power etc goes on and is not at all over. Post-coloniality in the sense that the past is still very present, undiscussed, unhealed. That a system that involves everyone and everything cannot trans-

form without the traces of the past. That a subject is still in the air, like a record that is stuck and plays the same melody over and over again. ...

ES: I agree

MP: We talked about the term intervention while I was in Namibia. In what way was 'Scramble' meant to be a (critical) intervention into a public discourse on (...) or anything else? Is it a comment? This is especially interesting to understand a bit more about how Namibian artists purposely (or subconsciously) intervene at all..

ES: What I wanted to create with 'Scramble' was an art installation whose function and meaning could not be restricted or censored in any way by an art gallery. My intention therewith was to make an enigmatic commentary about our country's resources, and the manner in which they were being exploited during the apartheid era. Under the new constitution for an independent Namibia, as by the Act 33 of 1992, the extraction of our resources must be beneficial for all Namibians. With a certain uneasiness in that regard I began to question if that was really the case. Such questioning I wanted to probe with the creation of a sculpture that has a monumental impact.

At the beginning I tried to create an artwork that I had complete control and authority of. I wanted something massive in scale and something that also could move automatically together with sound and movie projections. This vision compelled me to work with a team of artists as well as experts outside the field of art. As a result 'Scramble' became a collaboration piece where sculpture fused with non-art practises. The space 'Scramble' was set up in itself very overpowering. I wanted to create something equally overpowering, something that did not get lost within the space. I also wanted to work with ordinary materials and objects, materials and objects that are unconventional to the tradition of sculpture. Also the technique I applied to create 'Scramble' was multidisciplinary as in fusing handcraft techniques with high technology.

All this was something new to the Namibian art scene. Art was taken out of the art gallery and placed into an alternative architectural space. Instead of working in isolation I searched for expertise outside artistic conventions.

Interestingly, although I tried to dictate my artistic vision to my fellow collaborators, often some results created by them took their own course. This resulted in a narrative which was no longer only my own. As such it became something I would like to describe as an organically evolving and multifaceted narrative about exploitation. All these unconventional decisions made in art making definitely shaped new meanings in public discourse.

A review about 'Scramble' in a newspaper stated that I confused the public with my work, but there was no mention about how confusion can also become meaningful. I am convinced that all the alternative approaches of artmaking I mentioned above in the making of 'Scramble' helped shape a multiplicity of new ways of thinking in regard to contemporary Namibian life.

I hoped therewith to reveal a paradoxical re-engagement with the tradition of sculpture and therewith unpack unusual visual metaphors that challenge the current status quo. By combining a range of practises from handcraft and composing music and light and welding to filmmaking and anthropology to mechanical engineering, it was my intention to use sculpture as a means to change the way we perceive our relationship with the world.

MP: What can be visual art's contribution to a sustainability discourse? My answer would be that art is able to *reveal the true complexity* of phenomena while science is always trapped with a reduction for analysis... Your installation 'Scramble' offers a perfect example of "provocative polyvalence and complexity" that is also called fragility later on ...I think that it is quite important that for certain phenomena (like the sustainability challenge) we gain an understanding of the true complexity before we start playing around with solutions... What do you think? Was that intended?

ES: I think that ideas about sustainability discourse are necessary to improve our lives. That is if such ideas are not regarded as an ends in themselves, but rather inspire a multiplicity of more ideas that trigger furthermore more new ideas ad infinitum. Although solutions eventually need to be taken during the growth of ideas, old solutions that are no longer sustainable need to be continuously replaced by new ones. This processing of ideas and solutions is in itself a fragile affair.

It was not my intention to dictate a solution with 'Scramble', but to open up invisible nuances surrounding acts of contemporary exploitation. Such acts, I find, are hidden behind greed and power that are simultaneously presented as something majestic and beautiful. Such combination triggered me to create something overpowering that is both beautiful and uncanny.

MP: Is there a perception of a link between an afrofuturist subject and decolonization?

ES: Yes, I do recognise a link between the two concepts, despite their differences in meaning. African or/and black sci-fi is often associated with Afrofuturism as a means to celebrate the uniqueness and innovation of black or/and African culture. It is a term applied by creatives who intersect African culture with technology and therewith may also make metaphorical references to decolonization. The undoing of colonialism is an intervention towards a progressive African presence. A presence which is not disempowered, devalued and discriminated against. Creatives increasingly confront and challenge colonial representations of African identity by subverting them with creations that reflect a positive afrofuturist.

MP: Is healing a core motif?

ES: If you mean economic healing rather than psychological healing, then yes. My intervention intends to trigger an uncomfortable realisation or denial

of something not being right, the manner in which the economic benefits of Namibia's resources are shared with its people.

MP: What problems and challenges do still exist?

ES: The National Art Gallery of Namibia is an inherited colonial architectural space, which remains unaltered. Innovative additional fixtures and a reorganization of space which caters for unconventional artforms may boost creative post-colonial discourses. Occasional sensoring of art and subject matter by art galleries is still a norm. Such suppression of freedom of speech denies art the emergence of pressing themes that need urgent confrontation. National art education, remains under-developed. Art education is not offered in national schools. This may contribute to a society that does not value art intervention. Lastly a Euro-centric art discourse needs to be replaced by an Afro-centric one and be convincing enough to make an impact on the global art discourse.

Erik Schnacks kinetic installation composed of hybrid machine and human organisms is an uncanny and spatially overpowering depiction of greedy exploitation and resource extraction and thus powerful neo-colonialism in a post-colonial socio-political milieu. It speaks of the dehumanizing loss of indigenous identity and values of the colonized victims who become complicit in the exploitative scheme. Schnack makes an independent commentary about resources, and the manner in which they were being exploited during the apartheid era. He aims to open up invisible nuances surrounding acts of contemporary exploitation.

For him the undoing of colonialism is an intervention towards a progressive African presence which is not disempowered, devalued and discriminated against. Afrofuturism is a means to celebrate the uniqueness and innovation of black or/and African culture. In art a Euro-centric art discourse needs to be replaced by an Afro-centric one.

Urte Remmert: 'Talk to me: Finding a new Namibian Language' and complex fabrics of 'Patchwork People'

MP introductory comment: I first discovered the works 'Talk to me: finding a new Namibian language' and 'The ABC of Namibian Affairs' in the Würth Catalog (Weber 2016). Next to the images the catalogue provides an author bio-text that contains the following words: "Remmerts current mixed media collages bring together material from various sources that on further inspection cut right to the core of Namibia's contemporary realities. Her eclectic style is born of a process that involves extensive sketching and research whereby much of this material resurfaces in her final artworks" (ibid.: 172). These words strongly matched my own perception that here was an artist who by explicitly commenting on public discourse was focusing on some-

thing like fragmentedness, layeredness, processuality and multivocality by using a sort of research approach.



Image 9: 'Talk to me: finding a new Namibian language'. Photo by Urte Remmert

Upon my next visit to Swakopmund I met Urte and we started a conversation. In the course of our encounter and further communication via email, and social media Urte also introduced me to her newest project 'patchwork people' which will be part of the 2020 Triennale in Windhoek.

MP: I find your work exciting because it deals with language and a somehow layered and unprocessed situation. While the general discourse suggests "What should we do and what should we deal with during the post-colonial period?" you can also see that a lot has not been processed, touched and 'healed'. Based on this I would like to find out more about how and with what intention they were created and to what extent they represent a comment or an intervention in contemporary society/ discourses for you?

UR: My thoughts behind the work were not so much based on the Biblical connotation of Babel, but more on the inability to use language to convey thoughts, feelings, frustrations and demands in order to create a common ground for debate and understanding.

This inability might be the result of the colonial and Apartheid systems which oppressed certain people by declaring them less valuable and capable citizens than others! To my mind this oppression led to resulting feelings of hurt, revenge and compensation which are still ongoing in parts and have far-reaching implications in Namibian society. Our problems with genderbased violence, un-equality in education, neglect of old people or children, the unwillingness to understand other people and reaching certain goals might be solved in the long run with a better and honest communication in all sectors of the Namibian society. Listening is part of communicating!

My artworks these days seem to be more an evocation or affirmation, a very strong wish/ belief/ prayer/ adjuration....a kind of making whole, healing and mending what was hurt, torn, neglected and broken in the past. The colonial footprint is ever-present in everyday life: Dominance and patronisation are often still the way to treat less privileged members of the community.

Rather than command and implementation there should be discussions/ dialogues on how to best reach a solution. The success of interaction depends on how we approach the other person, the way we use language and how we see a fellow human being as a valuable member of society and not as a lower person which is unfortunately still the case in some better-off Namibians, be it whites or the new rich black elite.

MP: What I find interesting is the thought of healing. Ultimately I agree that this is the only solution for a torn and hurt society. But I also perceive that for some artists this is too early yet as they have been vulnerable and victimized and need to demand that these wounds have to be seen and acknowledged, that excuses have to be spoken etc. Is it easier for a member of the privileged white community to call for healing?

UR: I find myself as a white, elderly female artist in an African country that experienced horrific human rights abuses and exploitation of its peoples. This fact alone is already an extremely difficult starting-point for making relevant art, aiming towards the concepts of Afrotopia. However, I strongly believe in the creative and innovative power that is the result of a culturally diverse community. This interaction has cross-pollinated all over Africa, so-called 'black' people do not live in a bubble.

If ethical progress in any sphere of life is aimed at, ALL the inhabitants of the African continent need to engage in dialogue and use their collective experiences as a vehicle to achieve greater understanding and disentanglement of subliminal misconceptions.

Mandela's moral standing was that he believed in the redemptive power of forgiveness and talking together. 'Reconciliation does not mean forgetting or trying to bury the pain of conflict, but that reconciliation means working to correct the legacy of past injustice.' Griswold sheds light on public apology, such as the essential component of truth-telling or the use of narrative.

I personally believe that we can only realize small acts to pave the way for understanding and healing in our communities by learning about each other, by opening up to sincere dialogue and acting responsibly towards others in our communities. Especially in Namibia's case, where the perpetrations were committed a long time ago, the descendents of the perpetrators and the victims need to start finding a common ground by discourse and understanding. That is why in 'Talk to me: Finding a new Namibian Language' there are single persons talking and not political parties, congregations or tribes. I put myself into the right- hand side (red face), because I am part of this ongoing process.

MP: I also find the new works that you call 'Patchwork People' very interesting. What are they? Signs? Ironic comments on advertisers? Complex hybrid paper people? Images of an unequal society? Are they all 'folkloristic' or vulnerably torn? So here too the question is to what extent are they a comment or an intervention? And what should happen to them?

UR: The 'patches' on the three canvases are made of simple materials - paper in all variations (old yellowed book pages and sheet music, cover sheets, invoices, pieces from my torn old drawings and linocuts, old maps and printed structures with lace doilies, jute , Feathers, flowers and leaves). (I also drew some figures from magazine photos). All of these 'patches' describe the many layers that form and overlap during our lifetime. The figures are drawn with charcoal, charcoal as a sign of fire, pain and the ephemeral - but the black and white spontaneous lines also underline the strong character traits of the people depicted. They should look vulnerable, torn, cut and put back together – a kind of healing summon and also a symbol of the layers of life.

Many of the people are friends or relatives, colleagues, often also chance acquaintances. They are people from all parts of society, hard-working caring mothers, people who spread happiness but also people who experienced suffering, disease, disillusion and desperation.

Bishop Tutu uses the term UBUNTU, which points out that those who seek to destroy and dehumanize are also victims. 'Victims, usually, of a pervading ethos, be it a political ideology, an economic system, or a distorted religious conviction. Consequently, they are as much dehumanized as those on whom they trample. Griswold in his book on forgiveness states: 'But forgetting is the path to ignorant repetition, and remembering is a necessary condition of living both wisely and in light of the truth...Without honest assessment of the past, no memory worth having, without honest memory, no present worth living; without apologies for injuries done, no future worth hoping for.'



Image 10: 'Patchwork people' (1). Photo by Simone Kauert



Image 11: 'Patchwork people' (2). Photo by Simone Kauert

On the one hand, my artwork is primarily a critical commentary on Namibian society. People of all backgrounds live and interact in this country, which is also historically torn and scarred (colonization/ wars/ patronizing of the inhabitants under the apartheid regime). It is a complex fabric made of many different layers, strands and patches that has left its imprint on the country and its inhabitants. At the same time, it is an argument with the Namibian Society that is one of the most unequal in the world (rich and poor).

I created this work (drawings/ collages with installation) for the Windhoek Triennale in order to give the viewer the opportunity to have a 'dialogue' with the people portrayed, as well as with other visitors to the exhibition. Of course, just the 3D effect of the standing figures in front of the canvases will make it an intervention. I want and hope that visitors stop, pause and maybe reflect on their own lives in Namibia and society. The work should promote understanding and hopefully initiate discussions.

The whole thing can of course also be seen as an allegory of life: As in Gauguin's great work 'Where do we come from? Who are we? Where are we going?' my collage and installation questions meaning and purpose of life from cradle to death.

I think of the struggles of indigenous people to receive recognition and reparations from colonial masters. We, the next generations, can and should enter into serious dialogue to find a mutual understanding of the past crimes. We need to find a common denominator to build our country, we need to open up for the sake of our country's and our descendents' future, to shape the new beginning for all of us!

At the core of Urte Remmert's collages and drawings is the 'patchiness' and 'layeredness' of persons, personal histories, aspirations, dreams and of society as something that has gone to pieces during the events of a troublesome life/ a history of Apartheid and colonialism. Hence the work is a critical commentary and an evocative attempt at making whole, healing and understanding based on finding a new language and common ground in a situation of dissent, healing wounds and vulnerabilities.

Reginaldo Antunes: 'Celebration'. Photo of a performance

MP Introduction: In 2019 the NAA called for Namibian artists think about 'what if' questions regarding all sorts of (future) aspects of life. "What if the sky was green or you were a woman and a man or you had wings or you could speak through your eyes or children could make rules or the desert could cry or Windhoek was the gateway to Mars. What if ... you could envision or dream another reality for our world, for yourself? What would it look and feel like? What if English was a forbidden language?" I was really fascinated by the work 'celebration' when I encountered it in the Exhibition 'What if' at the Namibian Arts Association in Windhoek.



Image 12: 'Celebration' (1). Photo by Reginaldo Antunes

Reginaldo and I started a conversation in front of the piece. He asked me for my spontaneous interpretation which, since I had seen the piece for the first time, was rather premature but had something to do with cultural change, consumption, ritual, social post-colonial critique, sexuality and some other issues that are very prominent in current day's anthropology and other disciplines. Then Reginaldo gave me a breakdown of his own ideas and intentions which caused us to dive into a dialogue that later on we repeated via email.



Image 13: 'Celebration' (2). Photo by Reginaldo Antunes

RA: Looking at the picture from the viewer's side on the righthand side is a termite hill commonly found in the northern part of Namibia. I created a water fountain inside this termite hill. The hill is shaped like different animals representing the creation of the world and evolution of animals. That's why I put a globe and plants next to it. If you look closely at the top there is a figure that looks like a primate; our "distant cousins" and he is holding his hand out towards the humans, especially me (the person in the center) who has been crowned. That in a way symbolizes envy or something being given to humans that they in the animal kingdom don't have. The human now is more aware of his environment, has creativity/ intelligence/ intuition/ the gut feeling/ God inside him/ his inner guide or spirit/ his true self, the true voice that speaks inside him beyond instinct. The animals may envy the most evolved conscious being in the world or at least that we are aware of.

The indigenous people you see are the Ovahimba tribe, a part of the Bantu people to which my ancestors come from. This serves as a point of reference to what Africans looked like before others (the white man) came and made us repress and suppress our identity. The lady dressed in white is of mixed race, and her attire is a mixture of the Ovahimba traditional attire and modern material. Again showing us that even though we come into contact with others from a different identity we will not remain stagnant, but will interact with them, take what we think is good from what they brought to us, and adapt to our new environment. Not forgetting where we come from.

So do the shoes I'm wearing, and the cloth wrapped around my waist (which is evident in the previous picture); embracing that of others but not forgetting ours. The unidentified figure behind the lady dressed in white represents a divine entity, whom in the previous picture crowned me with the headpiece giving me the gift that makes me different from the other animals. The gift that enables us to make fire, mold soil to pottery, make glass, mirrors, music and television; cars and planes to explore the skies. So now we gather here and celebrate; the young child (our future) holding the cellphone and globe has a chance to be aware of this knowledge that he has dominion over the world and a gift, to make a difference. So, we celebrate. The playground represents this perfect world to which we are born into complete, so we come play and enjoy with others like us. As long as we play fair. The church behind the playground which is evident in the previous picture symbolizes the institution that even with its good teaching was misguided and used to mislead in so many ways.

MP: What I was seeing before I got your breakdown is first of all something very new that I have not seen before in (African) Art. To me this art piece offers a lot of loose *additional* ends of complexity dimensions. To me it speaks like a diorama of the complex 'modern' and post-colonial society, a disrupted society in transition. It looks like a very physical *comment* on the ambivalences of forced cultural change (e.g. through new consumer items, play-

ground) and the forces of tradition to brace themselves against this losing the roots. The whole thing looks like a family photo of a somehow religious but also somehow threatening (the person with the hidden face in the back) transition-ritual. The connection to the amorphous being is hard to grasp as it looks like made from desert sand and pointing in an accusing way. Is such a reading as a *critical comment* or *intervention* envisaged by you at all and is as well acceptable to you? Another term that I am grappling with is the 'afrofutur'. Is that something that matters to you and that could be related to your work/this special piece?

RA: As we are born into society we come finding belief systems and indoctrinations that set out "what is right!" "And "what is wrong!" "And simply "what is!" "Ultimately creating how we perceive the world, those around us, and ourselves. The exhibition 'What if' created a safe haven to which a question mark is placed on these, some "immutable" belief systems, I had to interrogate. Creating questions, something every human being is entitled to for these belief systems dictate your worldly experience and journey. As living things, we have senses that collect impulses thus creating the world we see, feel and hear. So we should question all belief systems and indoctrination's with the use of those senses. Awarded the opportunity with the exhibition I did just that and I disregarded almost everything my mom pastor and friends told me. I came up with a photo series that touches on some very important belief systems and religious events that in a contemporary society shape how we exist.

The last photo in the picture series and is titled CELEBRATION because it is expected that we have become aware of knowledge that is life changing, so let's celebrate. We celebrate for now, we know that we are the most conscious, most creative, smartest creatures that we are aware of or can see, and that makes us like God, the Gods of the world, superior to all other living creatures. We celebrate because we rule the world, the earth, a beautiful heaven a playground complete at nature. The Monkey may now envy that even though it is physically stronger than the human being, yet because the human being is more aware of its surroundings it gives him dominion over the monkey, dominion over the world. We celebrate for now that we are conscious of our surrounding world, we can now manipulate this self-sustaining environment.

We celebrate because this magic power of knowledge was given to man for no other animal can make this magic, for example, fire to cook and/or to keep warm. We celebrate for now we do not have to pray to God when winters are cold so he can send shelter and blankets from heaven to keep us from suffering and dying from the cold cause he answered all our prayers with a self-sustaining world to which we have control and our intelligence and creativity to keep us warm. Surely no human being should suffer so that's why we celebrate.

We also celebrate because we know that we shall not be ashamed of our identity our stories of the impulses, the environment that we have and our ancestors have been exposed too and survived. We celebrate cause now we know that no other with a different story from a different environment shall come make us disregarded our past stories our language, our names and ways that kept us alive, for if we let others control our identity they control our senses they control us and how we perceive the world and can take advantage of us, However now we know so we celebrate that we will take pride in where we come from, yet we shall be open to interact with others from other environments and other ways that kept them alive. Taking from their ways with what our senses feels resonates with our identity evolving and securing our knew stories our knew identity in the present and future.

MP: I find your explanations highly interesting but would ask some critical questions. I am trying to challenge you – not to offend you. Is the very religious thought of dominion over the earth not also very problematic? Did humans not also massively spoil the “beautiful heaven a playground complete at nature” (exploitation of nature, climate change, waste)? Is the celebration of scientific knowledge not omitting all the massive problems that science has brought to humanity (over-rationalization, loss of sensuality, individualization...)? Are all the ‘positive’ things that you celebrate and have been brought to Namibia e.g. saltwater-purifying, medicine, airplanes, videocalls, etc. not a *baggage of colonialism* that also brought a lot of suffering (Apartheid, exploitation, suppression of cultural identity, exploitation, of land and nature...)? Is that whole knowledge/ modernity project not also to be perceived a bit critical? And is that not also ongoing in today's neo-colonial system? The key point for me is that I think that your artwork could also be read in a critical/ ironic way but that you seem to resist/ argue against this reading for some reasons... ;)

RA: The very fact that you can point out that our dominion over the earth is problematic is also another reason to celebrate. It shows that we as humans can see where our problems lie. Unlike the other animals who just act by instinct and cannot recognize the harm they would commit towards this beautiful heaven, which they don't, because their highest level of ingenuity is building homes or using basic tools like sticks to catch insects so they can eat, just to mention a few. But the irony is that even though we are aware of the fact that we have this gift, this magic that makes us like God we still harm the world and people are suffering. Why? What is it that we are doing with this magic that instead of directing it in ways to fix problems we doing the opposite.

Again magic can either be used for good or it can be used for bad, yet we are aware that humans behave cause they are programmed or like I mentioned indoctrinated to behave a specific way on how to perceive themselves and the world. So if we are aware that we are behaving in a destructive way

maybe we need to question the belief systems around us before just accepting them. Maybe we need to question the systems that govern this magic, before just accepting them. In a world where technology is directed for profit and where people are being programmed to want more than what they need. Clearly pharmaceutical companies would not create medicine to heal but rather focus on profit and exploit the world and those like them to gain more profit and more of that, that they don't really need. Clearly if our African leaders loose their identity and are told to be "modern black man" to which they are told to disregard the ways of their fathers, of being Ubuntu so for now they speak foreign, eat foreign, dress foreign and name their kids foreign names, clearly they will not create policies that protect their identity which includes those like them, but rather be controlled by those who gave them a new identity, and a way of doing things, driving around in cars not comprehending their main function and purpose but for the impression they were told it befitting their new identity "a modern black man". Wearing clothes not that of their fathers but wearing "modern clothes" priced on perception of that, that would identify a modern black man. Perceiving the world not through their own senses any more, but view themselves through the eyes of others who inherently would protect their interests and own identity first and fundamentally. For as I mentioned in the narrative above, with time and interaction with others does it not mean you should forget your ways and merely take the ways of others giving them control over you.

But now we are aware of this. Don't get me wrong I did not intentionally mention the bad and criticism brought by the fact that we as human beings while having this gift, knowledge awareness and magic, as one goes through the previous pictures in the photo series they are supposed to realize those elements are part and parcel of the duality in the narrative. Meaning at this point when you reach the picture 'celebration' you are supposed to become aware of our inherent problem created and experienced by human beings, and have a changed attitude. One would "expect" a person would want to change the world knowing the misfortune so we can secure our survival as individuals, different races and the Gods that rule this world. For even religion has shown it to us, that it is up to us through it's fundamental teachings that only through loving each other and working our technologies/ magic and awareness together, not for fundamentally profit, but for the better and love of mankind, as a guide to sustain the survival of our species and the world at large. For now we are aware of this so we CELEBRATE.

Reginaldo Antunes work is a final piece in a photo-performance series that is celebrating the possibilities of current human life-changing knowledge and skill while aiming at critically questioning established belief systems and indoctrinations. While simultaneously celebrating human dominion over the world, the earth, as a beautiful heaven a playground it does not attempt to neglect the problematic side of that. It is rather celebrating the resilience of

culture, identity and knowledge against destructive modern historical-colonial advances towards a future of knowledge based change of belief systems and attitudes.

Closing discussion

The comparative display and dialogue has highlighted five contemporary artworks from Namibia relating to broader questions of post-coloniality. It can be seen as a first entry for deeper investigations into interventive contributions by Namibian artists. It has There is an increasing involvement of artists in the subject of decolonization recognizable as all the chosen artworks take a colonial past as some point of reference.

While the approaches and types and pointing-directions of interventions have some similarities they also differ. Interventions aim at a break-away from *past* events and practices in the sense of rewriting and refractions of certain types of historical knowledge (Ndjiharine) decentering a historic white cisheteronormative gaze towards a recentering around African people (Mbewe), visualizing the patchiness and vulnerabilities of people and society (Remmert) as well as the colonized's victimization and complicity in past as well as ongoing/ continued processes of neocolonial exploitation (Schnack), and lastly celebrate the resilience of culture, identity and knowledge against destructive modern and historical-colonial belief systems that should be overcome (Antunes).

Differences are visible towards a potential core motif of healing. Remmert in her art most clearly advocates dialogue and reconciliation as a necessary future path towards some sort of personal and social healing. This dialogue could be a step in the right direction, but will not result in instant cures/ forgiveness/ understanding. Antunes argues in a somewhat optimistic way for a new form of enlightenment with human life-changing knowledge and skill being the foundations of a change of indoctrinating belief systems and destructive attitudes that have dominated the past. The other artists are more sceptical or even opposed to a simplified metaphor of healing. Schnack reminds us that the project of decolonization is far from over and thus there is no end point by some sort of reconciliation but rather ongoing dominant discourses and new forms of paternalisation and exploitation which make healing also an economic challenge. Ndjiharine perceives decolonization as an effortful multi-step process that will require first and foremost restorative justice before healing can be achieved. Mbewe most clearly rejects any need by the hurt to reconcile with the perpetrators and representatives of a white cisheteronormative gaze and rather advocates the claiming of a formerly non-existing future geographical, political, social or cultural space on Earth for Black peoples belonging.

In the dialogues about breaking away from past alternative visions of an Afro-centric future were layed out. Ndjiharine described the craving to overcome a racist past towards a post-racial world. Schnack also voiced the desire to reach a positive progressive Afro-centric presence which is not subverted, devalued and discriminated against and described Afrofuturism as a celebration of the uniqueness and innovation of black or/and African culture. There is an interesting link here to the artpiece of Antunes which actually does exactly that. Mbewe most prominently uses the term Afrofuturism as a means of personal healing as well as offering visual suggestions about new spaces of being to empower Africans.

It can be argued that parallel to and beyond the above attempted comparisons the chosen artpieces expose different dimensions of formerly invisible complexities. Erik Schnack called this genuine capability of art in relations to 'Scramble' the attempt "to open up invisible nuances surrounding acts of contemporary exploitation". In regards to a visualization of the invisible elephant in the room also 'Gender on the moon', 'Scramble' or 'CELEBRATION' bring forward formerly unseen connections like a very strong feeling for the remoteness of gender equality or the enormous bridges to gap past exploitation and present. Likewise one can argue that artpieces are able to expose things that are not visible because they are absent, be it from discourse or from our understanding. That would be the absence and marginalization of an Afro-centric (art) space or the absence of non-heteronormative discourse which artpieces turn our attention to. In the end all this is about discovery exposing the absence of understanding, showing crooked metaphors, wrong examples, imprecise models, misunderstandings and discovering a new positionality. It is an important visual discovery that history and life-histories are about layers and patches, that many overlaying patches work simultaneously, and that thus linear explanations of events do not do justice to the layeredness and entanglement of life. In this sense the presented artpieces are all forcing something open. They are associating ruptures, making artistic thinking and knowledge production fruitful, challenging the viewer, and offer some sort of reorientation. That means an opening up of unforeseen perspectives on some emotion/ thought that is truthful about a post-colonial moment in time.

Literature

- Borgdorff, Henk (2009) *Artistic research within the fields of science*. Bergen: Bergen Academy of Art and Design - Sensuous Knowledge 6.
- Borgdorff, Henk (2011) The production of knowledge in artistic research. In: Biggs, Michael and Henrik Karlsson (eds.) *The Routledge companion to research in the arts*. Oxon et al.: Routledge: pp. 44-63.
- Comaroff, Jean and John L. Comaroff (2012) Theory from the south: or, how Euro-America is evolving toward Africa. *Anthropological Forum* 22 (2): pp. 113-131.
- Elliott, Denielle and Dara Culhane (2016) *A different kind of ethnography: imaginative practices and creative methodologies*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Finley, Susan and J. Gary Knowles (1995) Researcher as artist/ artist as researcher. *Qualitative Inquiry* 1 (1): pp. 110-142.
- Foster, Hal (1995) The artist as ethnographer? In: Marcus, George E. and Fred R. Myers (eds.) *The traffic in culture. Refiguring art and anthropology*. Berkeley: Univ. of California Press.
- Freud, Sigmund (1919) The Uncanny. The standard edition of the complete psychological works of Sigmund Freud, 17. London: pp. 219-256.
- Grimshaw, Anna and Amanda Ravetz (2015) The ethnographic turn – and after: a critical approach towards the realignment of art and anthropology. *Social Anthropology* 23 (4): pp. 418-434.
- Hambunda, Anne (2019) 'We Me' exhibition launches at NAGN, The Namibian. Windhoek.
- Hartmann, Wolfram, Jeremy Silvester and Patricia Hayes (1999) *The colonising camera: photographs in the making of Namibian history*. Athens: Juta and Company Ltd.
- Heidenreich-Seleme, Lien and Sean O'Toole (2016) *African futures: Thinking about the future through word and image*. Bielefeld: Kerber.
- Hofmeyr, Retha-Louise (2015) Arts development and promotion in Namibia: the role of the government since independence. *Journal of Namibian Studies: History Politics Culture* 18: pp. 123-133.
- Ingold, Tim (2019) Art and anthropology for a sustainable world. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 25 (4): pp. 659-675.
- Kössler, Reinhart (2015) Two modes of amnesia: complexity in post-colonial Namibia. *Acta Academica* 47 (1): pp. 138-160.
- Lehmann, Fabian (2019) From periphery to focus (and back again?) The topic of colonialism in cultural productions in Germany. In: Goethe-Institut Kamerun and Goethe-Institut Namibia (eds.) *German colonial heritage in Africa – Artistic and cultural perspectives*. Windhoek: Goethe-Institut Kamerun/Goethe-Institut Namibia: pp. 21-34.
- Lehmann, Fabian (forthcoming) *Postkoloniale Gegenbilder. Künstlerische Reflexionen des Erinnerns an den deutschen Kolonialismus in Namibia*. Unpublished Dissertation, University of Bayreuth.
- Mbewe, Masiyaleti (2017) Afrofuturism: women, queerness and the future. *Sister Namibia* 29 (4): pp. 12-13.

- Mtota, Ervast (2015) *Socio-political and cultural identity in the visual arts in Namibia. A study of transitional and post-independent Namibian visual arts, focusing on John Muafangejo, Joseph Madisia and Ndasuunye Shikongeni*. Windhoek: University of Namibia.
- Mushaandja, Nashilongweshipwe (2019) Documenting and representing legacies of violence: (de)coloniality? In: Goethe-Institut Kamerun and Goethe-Institut Namibia (eds.), *German colonial heritage in Africa – Artistic and cultural perspectives*. Windhoek: Goethe-Institut Kamerun/Goethe-Institut Namibia: pp. 35-46.
- Noë, Alva (2015) *Strange Tools: art and human nature*. New York: Hill and Wang.
- Palumbo, Meredith (2006) *Alienation, consciousness, and reclaiming: the trajectory of the visual arts in Namibian nation building*. Bloomington: Indiana University.
- Pink, Sarah, Phil Hubbard, Maggie O'Neill and Alan Radley (2010) Walking across disciplines: from ethnography to arts practice. *Visual Studies* 25 (1): pp. 1-7.
- Pröpper, Michael (2015) Shifting patterns, zooming layers, focusing processes. *Art and anthropology in a transforming and translucent world*. *Ethnoscripts* 17 (1): pp. 5-22.
- Rutten, Kris, An van Dienderen and Ronald Soetaert (2013) Revisiting the ethnographic turn in contemporary art. *Critical Arts* 27 (5): pp. 459-473.
- Sarantou, Melanie Augusta Chilion (2014) *Namibian narratives: Postcolonial identities in craft and design*. Adelaide: University of South Australia.
- Sarr, Felwine (2019) *Afrotopia*. Berlin: Matthes & Seitz.
- Schneider, Arnd and Christopher Wright (2010) *Between art and anthropology*. Contemporary ethnographic practice. Oxford: Berg.
- Timm-Forster, Margo (unpublished Manuscript) *Encounters with Erik Schnack's Scramble*. Erik Schnack and Clara Mupopiwa. Windhoek.
- Weber, Sylvia C. (2016) *Namibia - Kunst einer jungen Generation: Sammlung Würth und Leihgaben*. Künzelsau: Swiridoff Verlag.
- Wienand, Kea (2019) "Deutsche" Kolonialgeschichte als Thema postkolonialer Kunst. In: Bechhaus-Gerst, Marianne und Joachim Zeller (eds.) *Deutschland postkolonial. Ende und Nachwirkungen des deutschen Weltmachtstrebens*. Berlin: Metropol Verlag: pp. 432-453.

Reginaldo Marcelino Antunes was born and raised in Namibia. Next to his art he is currently about to complete his undergraduate degree in logistics and supply chain management and works for the national carrier airline Air Namibia as a flight attendant and is a model. He believes that it is every human's duty to be an activist to that which they think is right and express it through the way they live and their artistic talents to help others in the hopes of bettering the community and world at large.

Masiyaleti Mbewe is a writer and photographer who in 2015 gave a TEDx talk at the University of Namibia on the topic Afrofuturism. She defines the world as “a cultural philosophy of science, and philosophy of history that combines elements of science fiction, historical fiction and fantasy, encompassing a range of media and artists, with non-Western traditions in order to evaluate not only the present-day dilemmas of black people, but also to revise the historical events of the past” (Mbewe 2017: 12).

Vitjitua Ndjiharine is a multidisciplinary visual artist. Her work is a culmination of her skills as a painter, illustrator, visual designer, art director and front end web developer. Her approach draws inspiration from different academic disciplines – such as history, cultural anthropology, ethnography, mass media and communication as well as visual culture – to create work that is layered with historical and socio-political contexts. This approach attempts to link the present and the past, through empathetic storytelling that is both tangible and approachable for people in and outside academia. She thus produces creative and rigorous work about the reclamation and transcendence of history. In 2017, Ndjiharine received her Bachelor's Degree in Studio Art from The City College of New York. In 2018, she was awarded a research fellowship by the Gerda Henkel Foundation in collaboration with the research centre for “Hamburg's (Post-)Colonial Legacy.” This fellowship has allowed her to work in the archives of the Ethnological Museum in Hamburg and the National Archives of Namibia in order to develop strategies of deconstructing and re-contextualizing the pedagogical function of images and texts found within colonial archives. Ndjiharine has previously exhibited her work in New York City, Hamburg, Stuttgart and Windhoek.

Michael Pröpper is a cultural anthropologist and visual artist. He is a permanent lecturer at the Institute for Social and Cultural Anthropology at the University of Hamburg with a focus on environmental and sustainability anthropology and art anthropology and has many years of experience in international research projects, especially in southern Africa. He is also internationally visibly active artistically, e.g. with contributions in the National Gallery of Namibia, at the Biennale in Venice or at Art Karlsruhe.

Urte R. Remmert was born in Germany but has lived her whole life in Namibia. She studied BA (ART) and a Teaching Diploma at the University of Cape Town (1970-1973). She has been teaching at all levels in Namibia at State Schools from 1974- 2017. Remmert was Chief Moderator for Art and Design Gr.12. Over the years Remmert has made a name experimenting with various media. Remmert's current mixed media collages bring together material from various sources that on further inspection cut right to the core of Namibia's contemporary realities. Her eclectic style is born of a process that involves extensive sketching and research whereby much of this material resurfaces in her final artworks.

Erik Schnack was born 1969 in Windhoek, Namibia. Studied for BA Hons (FA) at the University of Cape Town until 1993. Coordinator of the Oshana Art and Environment Project in Ongwediva, 1995. Completed Post-(HED) at UNISA in 1999. From 1996 until 2000 lectured in African Visual Art Studies at various schools, colleges and regions, employed by the College of the Arts (COTA). Freelanced from 2001 until 2003. Lectured in Product Development Diploma, COTA from 2004. Acting Head of Department, Visual Arts and Crafts, COTA from 2008 - 2009. Currently employed at COTA, Visual Arts Diploma.