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Bie Michels

Dialoguing Gaze

'Today there is a related paradigm in advanced art on the left: the artist as ethnographer. The object of contestation remains, at least in part, the bourgeois institution of autonomous art, its exclusionary definitions of art, audience, identity. But the subject of association has changed: it is now the cultural and/or ethnic other in whose name the artist often struggles. And yet, despite this shift, basic assumptions with the old productivist model persist in the new quasi-anthropological paradigm.'

—Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real*, Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1996, p. 302

In her work the Belgian artist Bie Michels centers on observing, registering, and questioning the representation of the 'other'. Her videos, prints and installations not only question her own position with regard to the subject, but in the process of her creation she allows 'others' to collaborate or comment on them. Thus the gaze or the view of the 'outsider(s)' is an inherent part of the final result. Michels experiments with cooperative projects and juggles with narrative structures, which allows her to undermine the dominant Western gaze and the myth of the univocal story. The exhibition *Dialoguing Gazes* sheds light on some of the strategies the artist uses to mix up various points of view, histories and story lines in their work.

As an artist, Bie Michels (b. 1960, Kimwenza, Congo, lives and works in Antwerp) calls her practise (mostly paintings, installations and films) the practise of a onlooker. Because she wants her work 'to speak with the voices of others' and 'to tell different truths', she often involves in her creative process various outsiders. These may be artists, experts or labourers (for example fishermen and women in the film installation *Surrounding Water*, 2013), but also people closely involved (her father in the film *His Field*, 2015). Furthermore, she explores the complex relations (culturally, historically, interpersonal,...) of a variety of individuals and groups with objects, in order to better understand both their surroundings and their own 'being'.

The works in *Dialoguing Gazes* take us to Madagascar. In the exhibition, Michels deals with recent and historical developments in Madagascar. In the works presented here the culturally and emotionally charged object of the brick functions as a powerful metaphor for the colonial history and the later postcolonial development of the country.

It is the gesture of the physically moving to another place and the interaction with people there that constitute —both formally and (almost) coincidentally—the basis for the realization of the works shown here. The artist prefers personal human interaction over formalized developments such as the ones within casual concepts such as 'Society' or 'History'. This results in underlying pertinent questions. What is an adequate method to learn from other cultures (instead of merely understanding them)? How, as a creator, can one maintain a critical distance, keeping away from sentimentalism and the 'prevailing' discourse? How can one avoid voyeurism and the subordination of the 'object' or the 'other' in an audio-visual work? Michels develops complex (visual) narratives about uses, habits or values within both intercultural and (post)colonial international contexts. (Ive Stevenheydens)

WORKS

Circular Construction versus Human Body – Referring to Toshikatsu Endo

420 x 250 cm, 15,000 topas-bricks, 2018.

As an overture to the exhibition, Michels has created a sculpture with bricks. In the three weeks preceding the opening of the exhibition, the artist built the work on site, aided by students of the

bricklayer school of the Flemish Employment Agency in Vilvoorde. This cooperative way of working is in keeping with the artist's philosophy—the same philosophy she stuck to in Madagascar, as can be seen in the 3-channel video *La couleur de la brique* (screened at the back of the exhibition). *Circular Construction versus Human Body – Referring to Toshikatsu Endo* incorporates various types of brickware bonds (namely header bond, cross bond, Dutch bond and monk bond, the stretcherbond ascending left and right, and a course of soldiers). These refer to different traditions and cultures. In this respect, too, the construction is characterized by different personal contributions: the sculpture bears witness to a variety of human contributions. The work is installed near the entrance of the exhibition and leaves precisely sufficient space to allow the visitor to walk completely around it (a thing the artist encourages for that matter). While the work is the result of an intense cooperation and embraces diversity, its robustness also radiates a certain threat. A double meaning: the sculpture can also be seen as an obstruction.

As the title indicates, with this collaborative project Michels refers formally to the work of Toshikatsu Endo. In the 1970s this influential Japanese artist started to create monumental sculptures and installations with natural materials, such as wood, earth, fire and water. Often his works are huge cylindrical constructions that refer to old rituals. Influenced by both Western minimalism and Eastern Zen philosophy, Endo, like Michels, wants to stimulate the imagination of the public/participant and aspires to strengthen the collective identity. (IS)

Letters of Cameron and his Fellow Missionaries between 1825 and 1875

2018, 34 photographic prints, 34 x 21cm each.

Some of missionary James Cameron's successes—the manufacture of bricks and soap, the construction of churches—are mentioned in the writings of other missionaries, as well as in Cameron's correspondence with fellow missionaries, and with his mother and sister. His personal correspondence from the period 1822-1832 is now stored in the School of Oriental and African Studies Archives at the University of London.

An in-depth study of these letters by scientists such as the Canadian Gwyn Campbell has revealed that the letters may result in a distorted version of Madagascar's 'history', as it were the missionaries and other visitors who were the first to describe the customs and practices of the native inhabitants, and to construct their 'history'. Many histories of nineteenth-century Madagascar are based on the published writings of missionaries sent by the London Missionary Society, notably those of William Ellis (1794-1872). After many years investigating the archives, historian Gwyn Campbell revealed that the work of Ellis and most other missionaries deliberately sought to highlight the benefits of British protestant and government policy and its impact in Madagascar, and in so-doing neglected missionary correspondence which questions the dominant view.

This was not the only issue that alarmed Michels: she was also distressed by the fact that today these sources are in the UK and consequently, Madagascans have practically no access to them.

At the exhibition, the correspondence is shown on 34 photographic prints. The letters were mainly written by Cameron and his fellow missionaries in Madagascar (such as David Johns, David Jones and James Freeman) and were addressed at the headquarters of the London Missionary Society. They move and surprise us not just because of their content, but their graphical quality is sometimes particularly fluid. Some fragments of these letters were transcribed by the artist in a white font, which she simply printed over the original. It makes the text more readable, but also creates a contrast between the intimacy of the handwriting from the past and the present-day font.

It is these printed fragments that Michels asked locals in Madagascar to read aloud, which she filmed for her video work *Ingahy Kama*, on view at the exhibition. (GC/IS)

Vero Rabakoliarifetra and Rafolo Andrianaivoarivony – Untitled (Documentary about James Cameron)

1999, 24', video, colour, Madagascan spoken (unrestored copy).

Recently Bie Michels had a poor-quality VHS copy of this documentary about James Cameron digitized. The artist had received the copy from one of the makers, the anthropologist Rafolo Andrianaivoarivony, who provided the theoretical infrastructure, and who also plays an important part in Michels's installation *La couleur de la brique*.

At the exhibition, the copy functions not just as an *objet trouvé*, but it also reminds us of the recent political unrest in the country. Thus the official master of this unusual document was destroyed on 26 January 2009, when during the public protests the entire archives of TVM (Télévision Madagascar) went up into flames. (IS)

ON JAMES CAMERON

The London Missionary Society sent James Cameron (1800, Scotland – 1875, Antananarivo) to Madagascar as an artisan and missionary to set up shop as a carpenter and to teach the local population how to work with spinning machines and looms. He proved a technical genius and turned out to be of major importance for the development of the island. Thus he installed the first printing press and he printed booklets on gravity and geometry, on measures and weights. He had a huge water reservoir and a canal constructed, which made it a lot easier to supply the capital with all sorts of goods. His force resided in the use and discovery of local sources: he introduced an improved production process for making bricks, set up quarries, produced sulphuric acid and lime. He was the first to make soap using local plants, which not only improved hygiene, but also delighted the queen, who for some years continued to tolerate the presence of missionaries, despite increasing opposition against the influence of Christianity.

Yet after some years, i.e. in June 1835, Cameron moved to Cape Town, taking his wife and two children with him. Years later, in 1863, he returned to Madagascar to build memorial churches, hospitals and palaces. He died in Antananarivo in 1875. (BM/IS)

Ingahy Kama

2017-2018, video, 24', colour, English spoken, English subtitles.

In this new video work, inhabitants from Madagascar and its capital Antananarivo read aloud (fragments of) the correspondence of James Cameron and other missionaries. The fragments refer directly to the series of 34 photographic prints of letters that are on view at the exhibition (the work *Letters of Cameron and his Fellow Missionaries between 1825 and 1875* (2018)). The fragments that are read aloud here, have been transcribed by the artist with white print, which allows the viewer to seek a personal interpretation.

Michels's *Ingahy Kama*, which translates roughly as *Mister Cameron* in the local language, links/contrasts the written world with spoken language. The work also illustrates the tension between the sometimes seemingly incontestable power of 'historiography' and the relevance of the weight of personal experience(s).

For indeed, the interpretation of history is never univocal—and neither is the history of Madagascar and (the figure and heritage of) James Cameron. Yet the letters and writings by him and other missionaries, which are today conserved in London—and which are therefore practically inaccessible to Madagascans—are often used for writing 'local' history. Furthermore, it were the missionaries which were the first to write down the local languages.

In this audiovisual work Madagascans read out fragments of the correspondence in a homely atmosphere—and through this act Michels 'gives back' these letters symbolically to them. The close-ups alternate with shots of the letters and with impressions of the towns where Cameron left his traces. Cameron himself is represented by a Scottish actor, who also interprets the parts of other Scottish and English missionaries that were his contemporaries. Cameron never enters the image and seems to speak to us from the past.

The fragments Bie Michels has chosen, illustrate merely a tiny snippet of Cameron's influence in the evolution of the country. We hear not just about improvements, such as the manufacture of bricks, but also about the missionary's doubts. Cameron for example wanted to share his knowledge about

melting iron, which could have resulted in a tremendous progress, but also in the production of weapons (canons). Of course, this confronted Cameron with a moral issue.

To conclude we also gain insight in the position of the missionaries and the troubled relationship between Christianity and the local traditions. On the one hand, there are particularly dubious statements by and controversial opinions of the missionaries (about 'teaching the right faith and civilization'), but on the other hand *Ingahy Kama* also tells about how locals who converted to Christianity were persecuted by their rulers. (IS)

La couleur de la brique,

2014-2018, 3-channel video installation, 47', colour, French spoken, English subtitles.

The 485 km long Ikopa river passes through Antananarivo, the capital of Madagascar. In the middle of the wide river there is what looks like a miniature town, right in the middle of the metropolis. Here, on a manufacturing site called La Digue, the inhabitants use the river mud to make bricks. Elsewhere in the city and in the countryside there are similar sites. Often the production line from soil to house is a direct one: clay is dug on site, moulded, dried, fired and the bricks are then used to build a house. Thus kneading clay or mud, moulding the bricks and drying them in the sun, firing them in stupa-like constructions (field kilns) and building houses directly with them, is a process that can be encountered both in the middle of town and in the highlands.

Michels was right away fascinated by this miniature town, by the ways the piles of brick constitute idiosyncratic structures, i.e. carry their own 'architecture' in them. (Michels: 'A fictitious world of non-identifiable settlements and strange architectural shapes.') As an artist, she wanted to capture these places and the people around them, especially La Digue. However, when she picked up the camera, she felt like adopting an aggressive position. The camera seemed like a sort of weapon that captured, even 'stole' the life of these labourers.

What ethical question arise when a 'non-local' artist presents herself in a postcolonial context as a (visual) 'anthropologist'? In 2016, the Antananarivo brick culture launched *La couleur de la brique*, an interactive and intercultural art project that with regard to the content was supported by Petra Van Brabandt and her research group Art&Narrativity from Sint Lucas School of Arts Antwerp. The project focuses on the gaze and registration, the construction of a narrative and issues relating to postcolonialism and feminism.

Michels's 3-channel video shows various stages of her research and cooperative process in Antananarivo. The project is a cooperative one, with contributions by for example local labourers and artist, the art centre CRAAM (Centre de Ressources des Arts Actuels de Madagascar) and anthropologist Rafolo Andrianaivoarivony.

With regard to the content, *La Couleur de la brique* tunes in to the philosophy of the artists group Performing Objects, which includes Michels among its members. The artists group regularly organises active sessions to examine the potential of objects to act as an active performer. Performing Objects also explores various ways in which artists anticipate this process as their ideas and the concept of their work develops.

The video features several Madagascan artists who interact with the bricks on the site itself. The footage of these improvisations is screened parallel with images of the labourers at work. Michels juxtaposes the area where the clay is dug and the (cracked) soil—the basic material—and the stones drying in the sun. She often appears on screen herself. We see her asking questions to the labourers. She piles up stones. Or we see details from her, such as her hands that feel the freshly dug clay, almost massaging it. Beside the images of the town and nature surrounding the site, the narrative of the Madagascan anthropologist functions as the binding element. He tells about the relation of the people to the earth, about the importance of clay and other natural materials—then and now. He explains that at the end of the nineteenth century Queen Ranaivalona II allowed the use of stone for constructions for the living. Before that, there used to be a rule that said houses had to be built with 'warm' materials, such as wood and vegetable matter. Stone was for tombs, for the dead. The

anthropologist places these stories in the context of 'History'. He relates about the Europeans who visited the land, about the influence of the British, the French and even the Belgians on Madagascan culture. Thus in Michels's installation the bricks and the various ways to work with them turn into a powerful metaphor for the colonial history and the subsequent postcolonial development of the country. (IS)