

ART TALK

Unsettling Photocollections

By Antje Van Wichelen

Still quite hidden in the archives, away from the public's eyes, are thousands of photographs from the 19th century documenting the Western view on, or creation of, the colonial Other. These images have thoroughly influenced white European ideas about the Other that live on up to this date. Why are they still hidden away? Western societies don't seem ready to deal with their colonial past. Today, it is high time to discuss these images, with their context and all they signify. I am working on a still-evolving project about these images, and want to share some of my research and questioning with you.



Genious brain. Antje Van Wichelen 2015. Eggshell buccinum undatum and polyester. 12x8x4

My research into the theme started from my interest in clichés and how they are constructed. A cliché, in short, is an image of a group of people that is constructed by a dominant group, in the formation of which the people portrayed have had no influence, no decisive power. My first steps into this topic were about the portraying of mental illness in feature films, for my master's dissertation in communication sciences. Ever since, I have been sensitive to the recognition and scrutinizing of clichés, be it about women, or artists, or poor or queer people, or the inhabitants of Brussels and their 'dirty, dangerous and poor' city, as seen by more powerful groups in other regions of Belgium. On this last item, I spent ten years leading an artistic organization countering the clichés about the Bruxellois with their actual stories¹. The unjust depiction of my city brought forth my first stop-motion movie, *Lost and Found* (2013).²

From 2010 onwards, I started looking into the most powerful clichés ever created: those about the colonial 'Other'. Researching at quai Branly on the exhibitions of humans in Europe, I stumbled upon the photographic series that went with it, specifically the collections of Le Prince Roland Bonaparte that are discussed elsewhere in this issue. The images struck me as shameful, embarrassing, and shocking from a contemporary point of view, but even worse

¹ Bruxelles nous appartient – Brussels belongs to us: www.bnabbot.be

² Trailer on www.vimeo.com/antjevanwichelen/lostand-foundtrailer

was to discover what enormous quantities of the same kind of pictures had been produced. Picture after picture, somebody had been put in a frontal and a profile position, naked, often in front of a white screen.

A brief history

This same kind of image was portraying Africans, Aborigines, North and South American Indians, Inuit, Ainu... Many photographs were taken in Europe during world exhibitions and human zoos: the people portrayed were brought out of their cages into the photographic stu-



Self portrait. Antje Van Wichelen. 2011

dio. Other people were photographed in their colonized countries.

The photographs have been produced in Victorian times, mostly between 1860 and 1880, a time during which Western science was obsessed with classification (of nature, plants, organisms). The same époque gave birth to the dominant imperialistic ideology; the human being was to be seen in the 'family of man' – a scale of values (from which women were absent) that put the white heterosexual male at the top of the family and could freely steal from, decide

about and force the 'lower' members of the family into free labor, at home as well as in the world at large. In the meantime, Western powers were using excessive violence in the colonies. Industrial and political leaders, scientists and colonial personnel joined forces to convince public opinion of the desirability of this huge economic undertaking.

Anthropology, still a young science, and its anthropometric branch, were called in to help establish this 'family' order; measurements of skulls had to provide proof that the white male was the smartest – from the rather naive reasoning that a larger brain size indicated more

intelligence. The method was discredited when scientists found Aborigines and Africans with larger brains. The premise itself – that white man was the most intelligent – was not discredited. The rise of photography was welcomed. Being more precise than drawings, it would help study and define 'types' of colonial Others. The influential leader of the Société

Anthropologique de Paris, Paul Broca (1824-1880) wrote in his *Instructions générales pour les recherches anthropologiques* (1865):

On reproduira par la photographie:
 1) *des têtes nues qui devront toujours, sans exception, être prises exactement de face, ou exactement de profil, les autres points de vue ne pouvant être d'aucune utilité; 2) des portraits en pied, pris exactement de face, le sujet debout, nu autant que possible, et les bras pendants de chaque côté du corps. Toutefois, les portraits en pied avec*

l'accoutrement caractéristique de la tribu ont aussi leur importance.

Many photographers followed these instructions. Thousands of photographs were produced. Although the aim was to show 'typologies' of people, this photography had the opposite result. Instead of reducing the multitude of people to a few 'types', it emphasized the individuality of each person. It was impossible to draw general conclusions. By 1880, anthropometric photography was no longer seen as a valid scientific method.

Often, Broca's 'instructions' were rather loosely applied; young girls were put into positions that had a sexual connotation in the western mind. Think about the contrast between their naked breasts and the strict Victorian dress codes and morale. To the large public, these photos were spread on millions of postcards, together with other 'exotic' photos that emphasized the Otherness of the depicted. Men were pictured as almost female, a hand on a hip or in profile with a big 'pregnant' belly. Much emphasis was laid on their hair, dress, jewelry, lip-discs, penis gourds and scarification. Other clichés made them be seen as wild, dangerous, sexually unrestrained and strong beasts of burden, or, on the contrary, as weak, diseased, powerless, lacking culture, and primitive people waiting to be 'civilized'.

A stop-motion movie

My first idea was that the images spoke so strongly for themselves that all I had to do would be to give them a mean-

ingful order and a good rhythm for following one after the other, at a very quick pace, and there would be a movie that would speak for itself. The horror of it would, along with the fascination with such an undertaking from a distant and no longer valid past, pour into our eyes and make itself unambiguously clear.

An artist's database?

Not so, I was soon to discover. First of all, the images were not public property as I thought they would (or should) be: the archives possessing them are not ready to let artists use them, at least not for free. The images are in the public domain, as the photographers have died more than 70 years ago. But the archives ask fees between 100 and 30 euros an image, or, in an exceptionally benevolent case, 55 euros an hour, for handling them: the work of carefully re-photographing the images for digitizing is a costly affair. Even if the cost has been covered with public money, the institutions see the fees as a chance to generate an income. These fees form a strong barrier for an independent artist like me, who needs to look for money before being able to work (I did ask for money and am waiting for an answer from a public film fund). The financial barrier completely rules out artists who have no access to financing structures; think of artists in non-European countries where often financial support for art is absent. One museum head of collections expressed to me his fear that, once he gave me the images, they would be out there and his institution would never see a euro for them again.

So the first artist obtaining the images will pay for all those that follow. Or, turning the thought around, this might open perspectives to imagine a collective fund, a shared artists' database.

Images too painful to show

A second reason to question my first idea lies within the images themselves. The photos are extremely unsettling. As they have hardly been shown and discussed, it was not easy for me to estimate how people from countries whose people had been depicted in the images would react to them. So I showed a series of images I found to a few friends of African descent. Their reactions were as if I had physically hurt them. Our discussions reinforced my idea that an image can be very strong, and however well it is contextualized when shown, it has an ability to move us and to burn itself into our memories as no words can. Apart from the fact that the images are hidden in archives behind financial barriers, might it be possible that they do not circulate for the reason that they are so sensitive? That there is, rightly or not, a collective reluctance to show them?

These questionings make me want to speak, experiment and share about the anthropological photo collections and what to do with them. What about you? Would you show them or destroy them? Who can show them? Any artist and institution that feels concerned? Only those who have a history of involvement with (anti) racist topics? Or only artists emerging from Southern countries and immigrant descent?



Glove Collection. Antje Van Wichelen 2011.
Found gloves, tags, ruler

I have written from my perspective, which is white European, and female. It is certainly not the only possible viewpoint. I am eager to read reactions from different, confronting perspectives. Please post your thoughts to: antje-primitives@constantvzw.org
I will comment on them in my blog (see bio).

Biography:

Antje Van Wichelen is based in Brussels, Belgium. Her artistic media are stop-motion film and installations. She posts her findings about the clichés on the 'Other' on her blog: www.primitives.constantvzw.org

Example of the images discussed are to be found at e.g. la médiathèque du quai Branly:

<http://collections.quaibranly.fr/pod16/#cde636b9-765d-422f-9ebe-15b145ebeb9a>

Some interesting readings:

COUTTENIER Maarten, Congo tentoongesteld. Een geschiedenis van de Belgische antropologie en het Museum van Tervuren (1882-1925). Acco, Leuven, 2005, 445 p.
McCLINTOCK Anne, Imperial Leather, Routledge Inc, 1995, 450 p.
JEHEL Pierre-Jérôme, Une illusion

photographique, *Journal des anthropologues* [En ligne], 80-81 | 2000, mis en ligne le 28 octobre 2010. URL : <http://jda.revues.org/3139>.

GRAHAM-BROWN Sarah, *Images of Women: The Portrayal of Women in Photography of the Middle East, 1860-1950*. Quartet, 1988, 288 p.
BANCEL Nicolas et al., *Zoos humains. De la vénus hottentote aux reality shows*. Eds de la découverte, Paris, 2002, 480 p.