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# Practicing Decoloniality in Art: Sammy Baloji's and Kehinde Wiley's exhibitions in Italy in 2022

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## **INTRODUCTION**

The topic of this dissertation revolves around the relationship between art and decoloniality, analysing how contemporary artistic practices can be useful to enhance a decolonial re-thinking of consolidated museum practices, as well as to question typical forms of representation that have been fostering unbalanced colonial relations since the early modern period. To better understand how art can acquire decolonial meanings, this dissertation will focus on the examples of the artistic approaches adopted by the Congolese artist Sammy Baloji and the Afro-American artist Kehinde Wiley, who exhibited two personal shows in Italy – respectively at the Uffizi Galleries in Florence and at Fondazione Giorgio Cini in Venice – in 2022. The artists address and question in their own ways the persistence of coloniality in present society and their artworks are aimed at revealing other concealed narrations and possible keys of reading behind the dominant colonial discourse.

The birth of social movements such as Black Lives Matter and Decolonize This Place and the waves of protests that have been taking place in the last decades clearly testify to the compelling centrality of the issues of violence and racism in contemporary society, as well as the urgency to re-think public institutions like museums that struggle to lose the colonial narrative they were born to support. My personal concern and interest for such issues, along with my interest for the implementation of strategies of inclusivity within cultural spaces, have been a strong motivation behind the decision to discuss such argument. The possibility I was given to work as cultural mediator for the exhibition of Kehinde Wiley in the context of the 59<sup>th</sup> exhibition of the Venice Biennale and as internship trainee at the Uffizi Gallery during the exhibition of Sammy Baloji has provided me with the opportunity to learn more about both artists, their context of origin, and their artistic approach and to actively feel involved in their projects and their positive outcome. Indeed, in both occasions I was trained to lead visitors' tours within the exhibition and to answer possible questions in relation to the artists and their works. Moreover, I contributed to the promotion of the exhibitions and co-organized educational activities for high school and university students, as well as separate meetings with teachers to discuss education strategies that could enhance decolonial narratives in school.

As I learned during these experiences in the two exhibitions, in spite of the diversity of their artistic projects, Baloji and Wiley share common intentions at the core of their practice: unveiling the partiality of the dominant colonial discourse, disclosing the different narrations and histories which threatened the Eurocentric control over the colonies and were therefore concealed, and showing the instrumental use of selected narrations and forms of representation to sustain dominant ideologies and colonial ambitions at the expense of those cultures considered “Other”. Such intentions behind their artworks and exhibitions can surely be read in a decolonial perspective, as they counteract the hegemonic Western narration while enhancing new keys of reading and new perspectives on official history to ultimately stimulate visitors’ reflection on the issue. Accordingly, one of the main objectives behind this dissertation will be that of highlighting how the decolonial message can be developed in unique ways by artists from different backgrounds and through different media, who – starting from a shared underlying view – wish to treat different decoloniality-related topics.

Throughout the dissertation, I will rely on studies, books and other relevant sources provided by anthropologists, art historians, philosophers, museum directors and other professionals who have engaged with the relationship between decoloniality and art at different levels. Moreover, I will provide the knowledge acquired during my internship experiences at Wiley’s and Baloji’s exhibitions. Indeed, since one of my main tasks on both occasions was ensuring that exhibitions’ visitors understood the artists’ intentions and messages completely, I will do the same also in this dissertation while discussing the two exhibition itineraries, providing the necessary key of understanding.

As far as the structure of the dissertation is concerned, the work will begin with an introductory chapter on decoloniality and art, providing the essential theoretical context to understand the practice of Sammy Baloji and Kehinde Wiley. Starting from historical premises, the chapter will outline the birth of the concept of decoloniality and its objectives, before analysing how it can be intended and applied to the art field. Indeed, the contemporary necessity to decolonize art-spaces leads to the increasing emergence of new possibilities, as well as challenges. The first chapter will provide examples of criticalities in such sense, along with possible recommendations suggested by researchers and professionals.

The second chapter will be instead dedicated to Congolese artist Sammy Baloji and its exhibition *K(C)ongo, Fragments of Interlaced Dialogues. Subversive Classifications* held at the Uffizi Galleries. To better understand the meaning of the project, this chapter will begin with an analysis of ethnographic museums in history and their contemporary struggles to overcome the colonial format they were conceived to support. After discussing some possibilities of re-thinking such museums, the chapter will introduce the artist and the exhibition project. Lastly, I will lead a virtual tour through the exhibition rooms to analyse each artwork and its significance in the exhibition context.

The third and last chapter of the dissertation will deal instead the Afro-American artist Kehinde Wiley and his exhibition *An Archaeology of Silence* held in Venice. In this case, too, the introductory section will provide the required framework to comprehend the exhibition and the artist's approach in general. Indeed, the canonical forms of representation of the black body and their changes in history and in art have greatly influenced Wiley's practice, leading him to occupy traditional iconography, devoid it of its original meanings and ultimately fill it with new significance and messages. After an overview of Wiley's life, artistic practice and themes, the chapter will close with a tour of the exhibition spaces as well.

In the concluding section I will briefly retrace the path of the dissertation, recapitulating how decolonial messages and strategies can be implemented in art through various and unique artistic approaches that stimulate reflection, and how different issues ascribable to decoloniality can be treated in original and engaging ways by different artists such as Sammy Baloji and Kehinde Wiley.

## **FIRST CHAPTER – Decoloniality and Art**

### **1.1. Decoloniality as an option to delink from the colonial matrix of power**

In order to prevent confusion concerning terms that I will use throughout the dissertation, in this preliminary stage I will briefly explain and underline the difference between the concepts of decolonization and decoloniality. Following the discussion on these topics, I will then introduce the notions of border thinking and delinking.

After World War II, the term decolonization was employed to describe the process of political emancipation that took place in the 20<sup>th</sup> century in those territories that, after centuries of domination, ceased to be colonies of the European colonial Empires.

It is in this context that in the 1970s post-colonial studies made their appearance. Originating from post-modern theories, post-colonialism was mainly interested in the confrontation between cultures engaged in unbalanced relations and on colonial marginality at spatial, cultural and political level. Its three main lines of inquiry – historicist, deconstructionist and psychoanalytic – generally shared an interest in the effects of colonial representations on formerly colonized and colonizers subjects, and in the psychological and political violence of the colonial projects. However, post-colonial studies were criticised, in the wider critique moved against postmodernism, of deconstructing traditional knowledge without questioning and abandoning the Western critical thinking and postulates as grounds for this discussion<sup>1</sup>. Some other objections regarded the inaccuracies concerning the very term post-colonial, since the use of the prefix “post” seems to imply colonialism ended with decolonization, which unfortunately did not happen.

Indeed, it is notorious that the state politics behind decolonization failed, thus causing the failure of the nation-states created after independence, as might be verified considering several regions in Asia or Africa. Even though the former colonies gained formal independence, colonialism did not leave with the colonisers. Subtle and well-rooted in those territories, colonialism still is “all-saturating, overflowing, ever-present, persistent and fundamental to the experience of contemporary life”<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> R. Borghi, *Decolonialità e privilegio. Pratiche femministe e critica al sistema mondo*, 2020, pp. 64-67.

<sup>2</sup> E. Edwards, *Addressing Colonial Narratives in Museums*, in “The British Academy”, 19 April 2018; <https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/blog/addressing-colonial-narratives-museums/> [last access on 16 October 2022]

The failure of decolonization became already clear by the 1990s, with colonial patterns continuing both internally within the newly created countries and in their relations to global structures. At this point, coloniality was unveiled and decoloniality, its counterpart, was born. It was the Peruvian sociologist Anibal Quijano who, at the turn of the 90s, named the concept of *coloniality*. Shorthand for *coloniality of power* or *colonial matrix of power*, it describes the composite structure of management and control of four interrelated domains: economy (land, labour, natural resources), authority (army, institutions), gender and sexuality (family, education), and lastly subjectivity and knowledge (epistemology)<sup>3</sup>. Significantly, coloniality is a decolonial concept, created in the Third World, in the context of Latin American subaltern studies, and not in Western academia. Even though decoloniality has its roots in the modern/colonial matrix of power conceptualized by Quijano, it is an active response to it that finds its field of action in the everyday praxis of living. In her book *On Decoloniality: Concepts, Analytics and Praxis* (2018), co-written with Walter D. Mignolo, Catherine Walsh describes the praxis of decoloniality as

the continuous work to plant and grow an otherwise despite and in borders, margins, and cracks of the modern/colonial/capitalist/heteropatriarchal order. The pedagogies of this praxis are multiple, they are sown and grown in the contexts of decolonial struggle, wherever and however this struggle is conceived, situated, and takes form. And they are sown and grown in the methodologies and as pedagogies of struggle itself.<sup>4</sup>

This definition provides a useful summary of the main characteristic of decoloniality. While decolonization is a fixed moment in time identified with the acquisition of political independence, decoloniality is continuous, ongoing, requires repetition, and does not have a point of arrival. Decoloniality then requires practical actions in our everyday life to build an alternative way of thinking, feeling, doing, and living. This alternative must be implemented, planted, in the hopes to see changes happen in time. To be more precise, the “decolonial attitude”<sup>5</sup> comprises a plurality of ways, since it is based on the recognition and inclusion of multiple perspectives, starting from the points of view of those who have never been considered before. Moreover,

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<sup>3</sup> W. D. Mignolo, A. Escobar, *Introduction. Coloniality of power and de-colonial thinking*, in *Globalization and the Decolonial Option*, London: Routledge, 2010, p. 156.

<sup>4</sup> W. D. Mignolo, C. Walsh, *On Decoloniality: Concepts, Analytics and Praxis*, Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2018, p. 101.

<sup>5</sup> N. Maldonado-Torres, *Against War: Views from the Underside of Modernity*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008.



decoloniality has no pretension of being universal, or it would not be any different from coloniality and it would reproduce its same mistakes. On the contrary, we can argue that decoloniality encompasses a plurality of decolonial perspectives and projects that are different from each other depending on the peculiar features of the territory where they are practised and the impact of colonialism on people living there. Divergent colonial histories require different languages, formulations, and concepts to develop decolonial projects in relation to each specific context, but as common feature we might recognise the intention to depart from European postulates as starting point, thus distancing from the post-colonial studies' approach.

The decolonial interest for enunciation practices and epistemology comes from the awareness that coloniality is also a coloniality of knowledge<sup>6</sup> reinforced through language. In order to “legitimize” control over foreign territories, colonialism has always carried with it racial and racist ideologies, the censorship of local identity cornerstones such as language, traditions and religion, and the promotion of the Western system of knowledge as universal<sup>7</sup>. The European colonial Empires imposed their Eurocentric epistemology at the level of enunciation, claiming to provide actual descriptions of existing worlds when in truth these representations were being instituted at the same time of the enunciation. As claimed by Mignolo, “what *there is* depends on how we have been programmed to name what we know” and it is right in the sign systems and language we use that colonial differences are simultaneously produced and concealed<sup>8</sup>.

Borrowing the words of bell hooks<sup>9</sup>, language might also be understood as a “place of struggle” on account of the endeavour of the Afro-American people to find and use their broken voice, and to speak using the “oppressor’s language” in everyday life. According to hooks, more than through words, it is in the ways of living that a counterhegemonic discourse might be produced, and its location is found in marginality, intended not as a condition to lose but rather as positioning one wishes to

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<sup>6</sup> A. Quijano (1989) in W. Mignolo, *Delinking: The Rhetoric of Modernity, the Logic of Coloniality, and the Grammar of De-Coloniality in Cultural Studies*, Taylor and Francis Online, vol. 21, p. 451; <https://doi.org/10.1080/09502380601162647> [last access on 17 November 2022]

<sup>7</sup> C.E. Ariese, M. Wróblewska, *Practicing Decoloniality in Museums. A Guide with Global Examples*, Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2022, p. 11.

<sup>8</sup> W.D. Mignolo, C. Walsh, *On Decoloniality: Concepts, Analytics and Praxis*, cit., p. 148-150, 186.

<sup>9</sup> bell hooks, with the initials in lowercase, is the pen name of Gloria Jean Watkins.

keep, since it grants a radical perspective that enables to see, imagine, and create alternatives<sup>10</sup>. Her view of language as a place of struggle and marginality as a site of resistance finds an echo in the above-mentioned definition of decolonial praxis given by Walsh in relation to its field of action: the places of struggle at the periphery of the colonial matrix of power, in the attempt to tear it from its margins and borders. These borders – which rather than being simply geographical are also racial, sexual, religious, epistemic, etc. – shape the decolonial concept of border thinking. First introduced in 1989 by Gloria Anzaldúa in her book *Borderlands/La frontera, The New Mestiza*, and developed by decolonial thinkers, border thinking means engaging to use alternative knowledge traditions and forms of expression, such as the Islamic or Chinese philosophical and scientific thoughts. Border thinking, together with border epistemology, represent the means through which it is possible to produce an operation of delinking (“*desprenderse*”<sup>11</sup>) from the colonial matrix of power to understand and affirm subjectivities that have been neglected under its narrative. Decolonial delinking procedures imply both the unmasking of the partiality and limitations of the politics of knowledge and at the same time an expansion of its scope<sup>12</sup> through the inclusion of a multitude of perspectives.

Decoloniality is therefore a project of *pluriversality* that considers a world of several entangled cosmologies interrelated by colonial power differential to counterbalance the universalistic approach. Indeed, although it is a collective project, decoloniality is not unique. As professor Rachele Borghi suggests, decoloniality helps us to see reality as if we were looking through the lens of a kaleidoscope enabling us to perceive things differently and build ever new images of reality, without centres or peripheries<sup>13</sup>.

Thus far I have described the praxis of decoloniality in terms of context, features and aims. However, it is important to remark that decoloniality is not an objective to be achieved. Rather, decoloniality is a proposal to stop reproducing a colonial world,

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<sup>10</sup> b. hooks, *Choosing the Margin As a Space of Radical Openness*, in *Framework: The Journal of Cinema and Media*, No. 36, Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1989, pp. 16, 20.

<sup>11</sup> A. Quijano, *Colonialidad y modernidad/racionalidad* in “Perú Indígena” 13, No. 29, pp. 11-20, 1992; <https://problematicasculturales.files.wordpress.com/2015/04/quijano-colonialidad-y-modernidad-racionalidad.pdf> [last access on 17 November 2022]

<sup>12</sup> W. D. Mignolo, *Delinking: The Rhetoric of Modernity, the Logic of Coloniality and the Grammar of De-Coloniality*, cit., p. 485.

<sup>13</sup> R. Borghi, *Decolonialità e privilegio. Pratiche femministe e critica al sistema mondo*, cit., pp. 39-40.

involving and making those belonging to either the privileged or the dominated side aware of the existing system and their positioning in it. Decoloniality is an option of liberation from the colonial matrix of power among other undertakings of liberation which might not be decolonial. As such, decoloniality should not be considered as an imperative but rather as a proposal<sup>14</sup>. Even though it denounces the colonial world-system we are embedded in, the decolonial approach does not ask for Western recognition: doing so would simply reiterate and maintain the central position of the West. Instead, decolonial theories claim, affirm, enunciate. They make their voice heard to remind the West that they exist too<sup>15</sup>.

Finding innovative and maybe uncommon ways to confront the hegemonic narrative is crucial, both to avoid the impression of seeking its approval and recognition, and in the attempt to build a different reality. Since “the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house”<sup>16</sup>, we necessarily need to detach from the conceptual and methodological tools inherited from the Renaissance and the Enlightenment and changing the lenses through which we look at reality.

## **1.2. Decolonial aesthetics (aestheSis) and artworks**

It is a universal human practice to distinguish between what is considered familiar and the unfamiliar space beyond. In our mind a boundary is arbitrarily set up to create this distinction, even though those, whose territory and mentality are cut off by this imaginative boundary, might not be aware or acknowledge such threshold<sup>17</sup>. That is the operation that the Western countries performed historically when they encountered new cultures beyond their reassuring borders: the construction of the “other” which could be handled and controlled, given its unfamiliar – and therefore troubling – nature. Alterity was essentially conceived and disseminated in representational practices. Indeed, representation is part of the process through which meaning is produced, exchanged and shared between members of a culture. Such an operation involves language and signs, as we already discussed, and images, which stand or represent things to allow a shared interpretation of the world by people who share the

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<sup>14</sup>W. D. Mignolo, C. Walsh, *On Decoloniality: Concepts, Analytics and Praxis*, cit., p. 224.

<sup>15</sup>R. Borghi, *Decolonialità e privilegio. Pratiche femministe e critica al sistema mondo*, cit., p. 72.

<sup>16</sup>A. Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*, Berkeley, CA: Crossing Press, 1984, pp. 110-114.

<sup>17</sup>E. W. Said, *Orientalism*, New York: Vintage Books, 1979, p. 54.

same cultural codes<sup>18</sup>. It is through representation that cultural identities are created, usually assuming also their steadiness in time. But people and experiences subjected to the dominant regimes of representation were not simply constructed as “other”. According to Hall, by subjecting and conforming peoples to the dominant discourse, colonial regimes even made them perceive and experience themselves as “other”. Such perspective challenges the presumed steadiness and stability of cultural identity. Indeed, cultural identity is produced at the unstable points of suture between history and culture and therefore it appears to be more a positioning than a fixed essence<sup>19</sup>. Thinking for instance of the African diaspora people, by which we mean the worldwide communities descendent from native Africans or people from Africa, we may notice how their cultural identity is necessarily shaped by hybridity, by heterogeneity and by a diversity of experiences, given their different journeys and points of arrival worldwide. It would be unreasonable, for example, to expect coherence between the cultures of African descendants in the Caribbeans and in the United Kingdom without considering the radically contexts they settled in and as if their identities had not changed from the moment when European arbitrarily classified them under the unifying label of “other” centuries ago. Diaspora identities are constantly under production and transformation, united in their common origin and in their experience of fragmentation and dispersal, from which other forms of living and traditions of representation emerge alongside the dominant discourse. The production of cultural forms that appropriate elements of the master-codes of the dominant culture to re-articulate them with new symbolic meanings, in hybrid forms, has been acknowledged as “diaspora aesthetics”<sup>20</sup>. Within the context of decolonial studies, in the early 2000s the expression “decolonial aesthetics” was coined, testifying the inclusion of art as a scope of interest alongside epistemology, political theory and economy. More recently, the decolonial theorists and experts gathered around Mignolo and Vázquez have collectively opted for the adoption of the notion “decolonial *aestheSis*” in substitution of “aesthetics” to challenge modern epistemology and the hegemonic ideas of art. Indeed, the Kantian notion of aesthetics has been epistemically criticized in a

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<sup>18</sup> S. Hall, *Representation: Cultural Representation and Signifying Practices*, London: The Open University, 1997, pp. 15-17.

<sup>19</sup> S. Hall, *Cultural Identities and Diaspora in Undoing Place?*, London: Routledge, 1997, pp. 225-227.

<sup>20</sup> S. Hall, *Cultural Identities and Diaspora in Undoing Place?*, cit., pp. 235-236.

decolonial perspective as a normative standard that superimposed its own sense of beauty over the world. We could consider aesthetics as enacting a double operation of reduction: on the one hand, the Kantian theory of beauty reduced the plurality of the senses which were condensed in the Greek word *aesthesis* to a single visual sense; on the other hand, non-Western ways of sensing were denied behind the aesthetics' universalist claims. Decolonial aestheSis should therefore be intended as an option that critiques and challenges the hegemonic aesthetics and which aims to decolonize the senses that have been regulated by such hegemonic discourses until now. At the same time, its mission is granting visibility to decolonial subjects engaged in artistic forms of resistance, spacing from artistic installations, sculpture, theatre, musical performances and visual arts in general to literature and poetry. Decolonial aestheSis perceives the colonial wound concealed behind the rhetoric of modernity and unveils it, to recognise the dignity of all the aesthetics' practices which have been excluded from the canons of modern aesthetics.<sup>21</sup> Once we have explored the purposes of the decolonial approach towards art, we may now analyse how artists implement such attitudes in their artworks, tracing in their different works some shared features. An interesting study on such characteristics of artworks was developed by Cameron McCarthy and Greg Dimitriadis in 2000. Although the essay refers to "post-colonial" art forms, the authors specify that "post" in this case is not to be intended as a temporal separation, as departure point from a precise moment in history, but rather as cultural marker of a spatial contestation against Western coloniality. Given this premise, we may well consider the characteristics of the post-colonial artworks treated in the work in decolonial terms, also taking into account the objectives such works pursue, as we will see shortly. In particular, the authors recognise three recurring features in post-colonial artworks. The first one is the intention to challenge realism, verisimilitude and the technologies of truth which support a hierarchy of discourses that preserves the subjectivity of the West. Traditional colonialist aesthetics would usually depict a single individual at the centre of a painting or a book as a fully integrated subject in the implied viewing or reading intelligence (thinking for example of perspectival oil

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<sup>21</sup> W. Mignolo, R. Vazquez, *Decolonial Aesthesis: Colonial Wounds/Decolonial Healings* dossier in *Decolonial Aesthesis* in "Social Text Online", 15 July 2013, [https://socialtextjournal.org/periscope\\_article/decolonial-aesthesis-colonial-woundsdecolonial-healings/](https://socialtextjournal.org/periscope_article/decolonial-aesthesis-colonial-woundsdecolonial-healings/) [last access on 16 November 2022]

paintings in the 17<sup>th</sup> century or 19<sup>th</sup> century novels). But if it was easy in traditional colonial aesthetics to represent a central, coherent and stable identity in the pages of a novel or in oil painting, it is a usual effort for contemporary artists to reproduce a multiple, hybrid and fragile community within their work. This happens because the decolonial self is always already inserted in a collective context to which his/her personal experience is strictly linked to. Secondly, the post-colonial work of art refuses the binary logic of oppositions promoted by Western epistemology and rewrites the narrative of modernity. To do so, artists use the strategy of double or triple coding, which means activating more than one field of idiomatic reference in a work, combing at once for example the traditional and the modern, images of the West and images of the East. Such practices can be traced back to African slaves' revision of Catholicism in the Voodoo, for example, which helped to circulate meaning beyond the gaze of plantation owners. Lastly, artists convey in their post-colonial works an emancipatory vision by which they suggest that the possibilities of change need to be worked for in everyday life. In a way, their artworks become a reminder for their communities that emancipation must be built from the bottom up with unpredictable outturns.<sup>22</sup>

However, the authors do not fail to consider post-colonial artworks contradictions and limitations, as well. They underline the double-edged sword effect of discharging realism, which has also been analysed by hooks. Challenging the links between realism and stable social identities, indeed, might spoil the bond between artists and their audiences, considering that narrative realism is a recurrent motif in popular art today that resonates with questions of ethnic and racial identity within several marginalized populations. Back in the 1960s, the assumption that naturalism or realism are more accessible to the masses than abstract forms was already supported by the Black Arts Movement, an artistic current that originated in Harlem and which discloses two other possible limits of post-colonial artworks. Several Afro-American writers, painters, musicians and critics joined the movement because art was considered a useful tool to help black people in the struggle for liberation. The "black aesthetic" born in those years was meant to firmly tie artistic production to revolutionary politics, since the potential of art to bear social and political messages has never been underestimated.

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<sup>22</sup> C. McCarthy, G. Dimitriadis, *The Work of Art in the Postcolonial Imagination*, in *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*, vol. 21, no. 1, 2000, pp. 60-71; <https://doi.org/10.1080/01596300050005501> [last access on 16 November 2022]

Unfortunately, this bond saw the subordination of arts to politics, with the dismissal of all cultural forms that did not comply with the movement criteria. Those artworks which were deemed too abstract – and thus not immediately accessible to the masses – or which were not politically-engaged enough, were discharged. Such situation meant the unrecognition of the complexity of black life and the devaluation of creative agency. In response to it, many Afro-American artists adopted a retrogressive position which denied links between politics and art in defence of a transcendent and pure art. While evaluating critically the merits and limits of the Black Arts Movement, hooks makes some interesting reflections on Afro-American aesthetic. Firstly, she states that cultural decolonization should not just reject western culture but rather refuse it as the one and only location where aesthetics could be discussed. In addition, in her view, Afro-American artists should move away from racist assumptions that their cultural productions could only have meaning for a black audience. There could be more audiences for their works, as there are more aesthetic measures to assess their value. This pluralism should be applied to critically re-think aesthetics as constantly changing, according to the continuously mutating locations, needs and concerns of people. Resuming her view on art as critic and artist, hooks is committed to an aesthetic that restores the links between art and revolutionary politics, but one which offers critical foundations in its evaluation and that is embedded in the purpose of beauty, in the artistry of everyday life and in the lives of poor people.<sup>23</sup> Her perspective is useful to discuss the ultimate role of artists in contemporary society. Indeed, an artistic production that conveys social or political critiques or reflections is of course to be welcomed, as long as it does not become radical or restricts artists' creativity. Moreover, decolonial art is strictly committed to the lives of the marginalized and oppressed communities to which artists often belong, and to which artists wish to show the possibility of the different world that might be achieved through a multicultural dialogue and through practices of inclusion. Decolonial art recognises that, in the heterogenous world we live in, artists take new responsibilities to promote a journey of encounter that challenges the established order while advancing new possibilities.

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<sup>23</sup> b. hooks, *An Aesthetic of Blackness – Strange and Oppositional in Lenox Avenue: A Journal of Interarts Inquiry*, vol. 1, Chicago: Center for Black Music Research - Columbia College Chicago, 1995, pp. 65-72.

### **1.3. Decolonizing art-spaces: challenges and proposals**

To better grasp the context in which the decolonial artists Kehinde Wiley and Sammy Baloji have been working, it is useful to know the principal features and challenges that art institutions are facing nowadays. I talk about challenges because, for institutions like museums which have kept their structure almost identical since their very foundation, adapting to the social changes taking place today may be complicated. In general, we could say that the approach of contemporary art spaces is more receptive than it used to be towards the social dynamics, and that new politics to assure inclusion and visibility are being increasingly developed and implemented.

Unfortunately, welcoming these perspectives is usually easier said than done. Or sometimes the way in which new strategies are adopted, despite being well-intentioned, leads to huge failures, re-opening old wounds and thus obtaining the opposite result to what expected.

Returning for instance to the example of the museum, it would be optimistic to expect from a European invention – born during the Enlightenment to reassure privileged Europeans that chaos can be tamed by ordering all the available (obviously biased) knowledge within a rationally organized space – to adapt to the social changes of our times without hesitation or mistakes. However, sometimes it is very recent projects, specially designed to respond to these claims of inclusion, that happen to fail, obtaining an “othering” effect that accentuates segregation, as I will explain more in detail in 1.3.2.

In other words, finding suitable strategies and solutions to positively respond to the social turmoil of these times is not just a task for creaking institutions of the past, but for all those projects of new foundation as well. There is no unique nor right way to reach such an objective, as there are no guarantees that a strategy that appears to be effective in the short term will not prove to be inconsiderate to some categories of people shortly after. Although it might seem discouraging to act in such an uncertain context, we should not be afraid of trying and failing. Indeed, we should see failures as starting points from which it becomes easier to move forward. Knowing how and where a project went wrong already tells us at least what approaches should not be repeated. At the same time, knowing the challenges that art spaces are facing nowadays – to which no suitable answers have been given yet – might be extremely useful to



make creative hypotheses about possible solutions to implement. It is with this view in mind that in the following pages I will treat challenges concerning the working staff of old and new art spaces and some examples of “failures” of decolonial practices in arts, along with some useful suggestions to develop encouraging projects.

### **1.3.1. Decolonizing art spaces starting from the players involved**

The art system comprises several professional figures whose competencies and responsibilities vary greatly. All these figures should be taken into consideration while implementing a decolonial approach. Thinking for example of the museum institution, if its collection were reorganized to be more thoughtful to certain topics but the working personnel was still treated unfairly, could we consider it to have ever really changed? And within the museum walls, who should be and feel entitled to represent, depict and speak of a culture to which one may or may not belong? That is why the first step towards a decolonial art system should be done considering the role of the people working within it. In this section, I will address just three exemplary categories of professional figures in art spaces that are closer to the topics I am dealing with in this work: curators, artists and cultural mediators.

The contemporary difficulties and snares of curating art exhibitions, collections and events cannot be underrated. Many points of view now need to be accounted for, and they ask to be represented by people with a similar cultural background. Recently, great debates have been initiated concerning the racial issue of curators in art exhibitions, given the white predominance of professionals appointed in general, but specifically for African art collections. An example is the case of the Brooklyn Museum of New York, which in 2018 hired two new white curators, one of which for the African art department<sup>24</sup>. This provoked great dissatisfaction among the Afro-descendent community living in Brooklyn which saw once again people not representing their identity and heritage being chosen to curate it, in spite of the availability of qualified curators of the African diaspora and thus somehow suggesting their inadequacy to be responsible for their own legacy<sup>25</sup>. In some cases, appointed

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<sup>24</sup> The same applies to Latin American and Native American art curatorship, as well as to art produced by all racialized cultures that ask to be represented by members belonging to their communities.

<sup>25</sup> T. Adisa-Farrar, *Why Are White Curators Still Running Collections of African Art?* in “The Guardian”, 3 April 2018; <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/apr/03/brooklyn-museum-white-curators-african-art-open-letter> [last access on 7 November 2022]

white curators try to avoid inconvenient situations by distancing from more political and social purposes in favour of artists and artistic practices. But circling around the problem instead of facing it often ends up aggravating the situation. An example could be the 57<sup>th</sup> edition of the Venice Biennale in 2017, when curator Christine Macel tried to avoid conflicts by adopting a neo-humanist approach centred around artistic production and a system of nine trans-pavilions complementary to the traditional national pavilions. However, the rhetoric of separation between art and politics usually has the remarkable drawback of ending up with the underrepresentation of non-white perspectives. One of the critiques moved against Macel's Biennale has been this unbalanced artistic participation and the promotion of an ethnographic gaze to look at diversity, present for instance in videos showing the everyday life of indigenous tribes of Latin America<sup>26</sup>.

Similar critiques are directed towards artists, as well. That is because they often occupy an ambiguous position and because of the contents they create and the meanings they convey in them. To be in condition to work, usually artists rely on art institutions and private galleries. In some cases, though, those supporters are or depend on questionable sponsors for their funding. In such situations, it is difficult for artists to carry on a consistent artistic project with a meaningful social message when the funds allowing their activity are exploiting people's lives elsewhere, along with the environment. Moving from more contingent sources of controversy, the very meanings and intentions behind artists' works might be very problematic, too. This does not happen just in relation to social or political accusations against governments or contemporary issues they veil within artworks, but also because sometimes they feel entitled to tell someone else's story, and, it should be clear by now, this is problematic in a decolonial view. A key example was the case of the work *Open Casket* by artist Dana Schutz presented at the Whitney Biennial in the edition of 2017. The white artist depicted the heart-breaking disfigured body of an Afro-American teenager, Emmett Till, who was violently killed in 1955 by two white men. Schutz based her painting on a photograph of the corpse that Till's mother allowed to be captured as proof of the

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<sup>26</sup> P.C. Vega, *The 2017 Venice Biennale and The Colonial Other* in "Third Text Online", 1 November 2018; [http://www.thirdtext.org/domains/thirdtext.com/local/media/images/medium/Paula\\_Clemente\\_Vega\\_The\\_Venice\\_Biennale\\_and\\_the\\_Colonial\\_Other.pdf](http://www.thirdtext.org/domains/thirdtext.com/local/media/images/medium/Paula_Clemente_Vega_The_Venice_Biennale_and_the_Colonial_Other.pdf) [last access on 7 November 2022]

reality of the racist violence. Soon afterwards, the artist was submerged with critiques claiming she was appropriating a subject that was central to the black experience and exploiting black pain for profit. Peaceful protests took place in front of the painting: another artist, Parker Bright, obscured its view, wearing a shirt with the words “Black Death Spectacle” on the back (Ill. 1). Saying that she empathized with motherly pain was not enough as a justification for Schutz, given the negligible risk of white people’s children to be beaten for the colour of their skin, while black mothers live with this daily fear<sup>27</sup>. Would it have been fair to remove the work from view, even to destroy it as some suggested, or would it have gone against artistic freedom? Were there other ways Schutz could have painted what she wanted without being unthoughtful? Is there a line between what white or black artists can rightfully depict and if so, is it not a form of border itself? How do we deal with it in a decolonial view? Again, since we are moving on shaky ground, it is essential for artists to take note of the failures they experience, on the critiques they receive, and be more receptive and adaptive in the future.



Ill. 1 – Parker Bright in front of *Open Casket*, photo by Scott W. H. Young via Twitter, 2017.

Sometimes, artists do not live a problematic relationship just with the institutions they work for but also with the community they live in. Indeed, in some cases artists feel the “burden of representation”, the pressure of representing, thanks to their public role,

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<sup>27</sup> A. D’Souza, *Can White Artists Paint Black Pain?*, in “CNN”, 24 March 2017; <https://edition.cnn.com/2017/03/24/opinions/white-artist-controversial-emmett-till-painting-dsouza/index.html> [last access on 9 October 2022]

an entire community and its social and political aspirations<sup>28</sup>, such as we saw happening with the black aesthetics in the 1960s. The growing importance of communities – also called “source communities”<sup>29</sup>– and cultural mediators as stakeholders in art spaces needs indeed to be acknowledged. Practices aimed at the decolonization of colonial collections and the restitution of objects to their country of origin have become commonplace, and I will focus in the second chapter dedicated to Sammy Baloji. What is important to consider now is that these activities are ever more developed in parallel with the collaboration and engagement of people who are linked to museums’ collections. James Clifford touches upon the question in his essay *Museum as Contact Zones* (1997), where he provides the example of Portland Museum of Art, in Oregon, that in 1989 gathered museum staff, anthropologists, art experts and people belonging to the Tlingit tribe. During this meeting, objects from the collection were brought about, and even though the museum staff was expecting discussions to collect advice or information around them, Tlingit people used them as *aides-memories*, as an opportunity to sing and tell stories. Basically, in that occasion the museum became something more than a place for consultation: it became a *contact zone*, “the space of colonial encounters, the space in which peoples geographically separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relationships [...]”<sup>30</sup>. At this point Clifford posed the opened question on how it could be possible to reconcile those meanings evoked by the Tlingit with those imposed in the context of a museum of art, how it could be possible to display an object simultaneously as a formal composition and as an object with traditional functions in tribal life that still “evokes an ongoing history of struggle”.<sup>31</sup> Some institutions tried to solve this problem implementing projects and initiatives which try to keep communities always updated and involved in museum practices, for example organizing meetings before the realization of exhibitions to be sure that the messages to be conveyed are rightfully conceived, or by cooperating with “native advisors” to receive constant feedbacks

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<sup>28</sup> B. Ferrara (edited by), *Cultural Memory, Migrating Modernities and the Museum Practices*, Milano: Politecnico di Milano, 2012, p. 134.

<sup>29</sup> A.K. Brown, L. Peers, *Museums and Source Communities: A Routledge Reader*, London: Routledge, 2003.

<sup>30</sup> M. L. Pratt in J. Clifford, *Museums as Contact Zones in Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late 20th Century*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997, p.192.

<sup>31</sup> J. Clifford, *Museums as Contact Zones in Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late 20th Century*, cit., p. 191.

throughout the exhibitions, as does the Abbe Museum in Bar Harbour, Maine<sup>32</sup>. Some other interesting initiatives invite community members of tribes or marginalized people who share the same context of origin of the collection to become cultural mediators or be included in museum activities. A few Italian examples considering the area of Tuscany are for instance the Amir project<sup>33</sup>, the MOC - Museum of Communities<sup>34</sup> and the regional project “SOCIAL fabrics” by Museo del tessuto (Prato). . The first one is a research project started in 2018 by a net of museums in the territory which proposes guided tours by foreign citizens, especially from non-Western countries. MOC was created in 2020 and is run by the Royal Palace in Gödöllő (Hungary) and the Museum of King Jan III's Palace at Wilanów (Poland). The programme’s aims are encouraging local communities to engage in voluntary work in museums and creating an educational tool to support volunteers and educators in the organization of a narrative that listens to and takes on different points of view. Lastly, the project by Museo del tessuto, referring in the title to the museum focus on fabrics, has been coordinated by the University for Foreigners of Siena since 2020 and aims at designing interactive paths for adult visitors belonging to the more present foreign communities in the area of Prato, mainly Chinese, Albania, Maghreb and Pakistani. We could also observe that museums are becoming ever more concerned with politics of inclusion even within their working staff, trying to incorporate fairly quotes of sexualised and racialised categories of people in their workforce. Despite the good intentions behind all these actions, this inclusivity runs the risk of being considered tokenistic<sup>35</sup>. If, for example, the opinions of staff members hired to represent a community are not listened to, or even when they are, they do not get considered, these people may rightly feel hired just out of appearance reasons, as a way for institutions to wash their hands off the matter, and this is especially true if there is a salary gap in comparison with other working personnel. Referring to the practice of European museums to invite artists and activists of the African diaspora to “mine the museum”,

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<sup>32</sup> C. Catlin-Legutko, *We Must Decolonize Our Museums*, TEDxDirigo, YouTube [video lecture], 6 December 2016; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jyZAgG8--Xg> [last access on 17 October 2022]

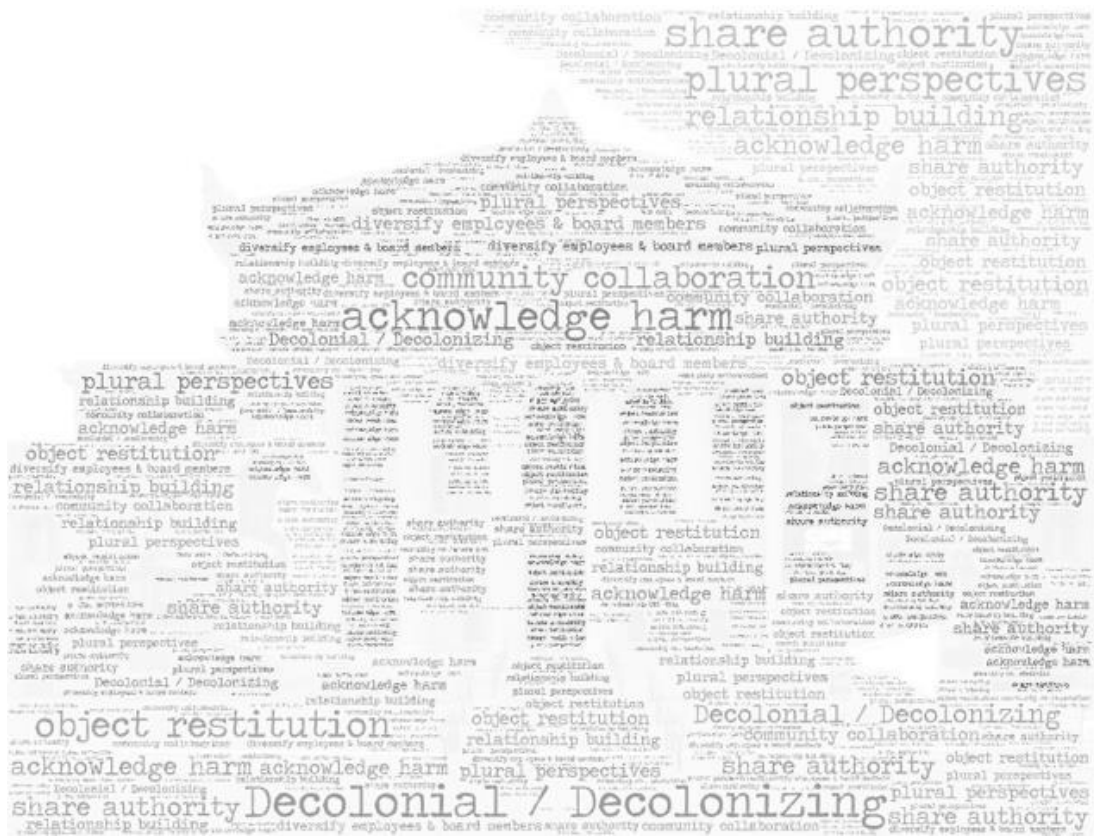
<sup>33</sup> Amir Project Italia, official website; <https://www.amirproject.com/> [last access on 17 October 2022]

<sup>34</sup> Stazione Utopia, official website; <https://www.stazioneutopia.com/moc> [last access on 17 October 2022]

<sup>35</sup> C.E. Ariese, M. Wróblewska, *Practicing Decoloniality in Museums. A Guide with Global Examples*, cit., p. 40.

Namibian scholar and artist Nashilongweshipwe Mushaandja coined the term *museuming*, which basically consists in asking the victims of colonialism to handle its baggage<sup>36</sup>. That is because when the effort of an art institution or organization is not moved by genuine intentions and able to create an attentive collaboration, it only seems to ask communities out of a paternalistic or tokenistic interest. The conclusion that Clifford finds to all these interlaced questions, which is obviously not a real conclusion, only hints that “neither community ‘experience’ nor curatorial ‘authority’ has an automatic right to the contextualization of collections or to the narration of contact histories. The solution is inevitably contingent and political”, linked to the tastes of museums’ assumed audience but also to museums donors and trustees, which need to be pleased<sup>37</sup>.

### 1.3.2 Decolonial practices in art: examples, “failures” and recommendations



<sup>36</sup> G. Valley, *Decolonization Can't Just Be a Metaphor*, in “Africa Is A Country”, 11 December 2019; <https://africasacountry.com/2019/11/decolonization-cant-just-be-a-metaphor> [last access on 9 November 2022]

<sup>37</sup> J. Clifford, *Museums as Contact Zones in Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late 20th Century*, cit., p. 208-209.



Ill. 2 – A decolonial museology word cloud (the list of terms is suggestive rather than exhaustive). Image by Erica Lehrer, in *Decolonizing Museum Cultures and Collections: Mapping Theory and Practice in East-Central Europe*, keynote address, 21 October 2020.

Now that we have defined the concept of decoloniality and discussed some contemporary art system's features and challenges, it is finally time to consider how these topics merge: how decolonial practices might (or might not) be carried out in relation to the artworld.

The book *Practicing Decoloniality in Museums* (2022)<sup>38</sup> effectively summaries the main kind of initiatives that have been adopted since the development of post-colonial theories in 1970s. These decolonial practices include exhibitions projects that tried to change the Eurocentric perspective (*Magiciens de la Terre*, Centre Pompidou, 1989 and *Mining the Museum*, Maryland Historical Society, 1992), the foundation of institutions entirely dedicated to formerly under-represented communities (the International Slavery Museum Liverpool in 2007, the National Museum of African American History and Culture in 2016), the birth of movements and organizations to affect museums' structure and human resources policies (Museum Detox in 2014 and Museum Hue in 2015) and also the appearance of alternative guided tours that tell a counteractive story compared to the official narrative (Alice Procter's *Uncomfortable Art Tours*, Museum Hack, Audio Tour Hack). Surprisingly, we could also consider protests as decolonial practices. Indeed, organizing an art strike, occupying an art infrastructure, or taking part in a boycott can be considered as productive forms of withdrawal. They are occasions of collective creativity through which existing art infrastructures and their aesthetical concepts are unmade and reinvented together to re-think and shape new institutional assemblages and practices<sup>39</sup>. Decolonize This Place (DTP) is probably the most known example of a productive withdrawal that combines art and activism achieving remarkable goals, such as the famous removal of Theodore Roosevelt's statue from the entrance of the American Museum of Natural History of New York. However, it should not surprise us by now to learn that DTP, along with other movements, has been accused of violent behaviours among

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<sup>38</sup> C.E. Ariese, M. Wróblewska, *Practicing Decoloniality in Museums. A Guide with Global Examples*, cit., p. 12.

<sup>39</sup> K. Szreder, *Productive Withdrawals: Art Strikes, Art Worlds, and Art as a Practice of Freedom* in "e-flux Journal", issue no. 87, December 2017; <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/87/168899/productive-withdrawals-art-strikes-art-worlds-and-art-as-a-practice-of-freedom/> [last access 16 October 2022]

participants and of assuming too radical positions in some circumstances. As for every initiative we have mentioned so far, decolonial projects, initiatives and protests are often accompanied by criticism along with praises due to the ever changing and complex society we live in, where a sharp polarization between right and wrong, whether possible, would be unproductive and dangerous. Indeed, perhaps we should worry more when an issue does not receive critiques, as it could mean people do not really care about these issues or that there is no space for a constructive dialogue leading to improvements.

Anyhow, it is with this context in mind that I wish to talk shortly about a few extremely interesting and multifaced controversial decolonial projects which, in spite of being well-intentioned, obtained opposite or counterproductive results and judgements. Since they are not the main cases on which this works is going to be focused and what concerns us are just the general dynamics that made them to be considered failures, I will summarise the cases and suggest a more-in-depth study.

We could start from the above-mentioned example of *Magiciens de la Terre* (1989). Extremely well-known, the exhibition raised critiques because, although the intention of curator Jean-Hubert Martin was to avoid ethnographic categories and show artists from all over the world, the selection ended up decontextualizing the African artworks to create an exotic allure, reaching once again an “othering” effect and advancing a specific vision of non-Western art: tribal, constituted by rites. In other words, a kind of art that is contemporarily non-art<sup>40</sup>. Despite the post-modern premises, the selection criteria were still modern and depended more on heterogeneity than on post-modern ideas<sup>41</sup>. A second example relates to the question of community involvement and is the case of the controversy that took place in 2017 around the public sculpture *Scaffold* by Sam Durant. The work, acquired by the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, depicted gallows that represented seven state-led executions between 1859 and 2006. Intended as a critique to the persistence of death penalty in the USA, it was perceived instead as a painful reminder by local indigenous, which saw in it the scaffold used to execute many Dakota-Sioux men in 1868. The artist, following protesters’ demands,

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<sup>40</sup> G. Noto, *Les Magiciens de la Terre 25 anni dopo*, in “Artribune”, 15 agosto 2014; <https://www.artribune.com/attualita/2014/08/les-magiciens-de-la-terre-25-anni-dopo/> [last access on 12 November 2022]

<sup>41</sup> O. Enwezor, O. Oguibe, *Introduction in Reading the Contemporary. African Art from Theory to the Marketplace*, London: MIT Press, 1999, p. 9.



dismantled the sculpture and gave intellectual property rights to the Dakota people, who buried the wood of the play-ground sculpture in a location of spiritual importance for the tribe. Both the artist and the at-the-time museum curator Olga Viso took responsibility for the episode, since the only moment of confrontation with the Dakota people took place after the protests had already begun and not before the installation of the work, to learn how to behave considerately in advance<sup>42</sup>. Different from these examples is the final case of *Exhibit B* (2013). Conceived both as a travelling installation and performance, *Exhibit B* dealt with post-colonial and decolonial issues. Depending greatly on audience's engagement, the exhibition aimed at creating a disorienting effect: initially spectators would think they were in a common ethnographic museum but then notice real people exhibited there – as it happened in freak shows of 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century – and they would engage with them in ways that questioned the hegemonic perspective and the ordinary ways of exhibiting ethnographic objects. The fate of *Exhibit B* reminds of the case of *Open Casket I* already mentioned: being a white South African artist, the director Brett Bailey was thought to have no right to represent black struggle and accused of re-enacting the objectification of African people. In 2014 critiques against *Exhibit B* began to spread in Berlin, moving then to actual protests in the United Kingdom, where the show was on programme. The battle was started by a black woman from Birmingham, whose position was greatly supported, leading an oppositional movement to compare the exhibition to the representation of black people inside human zoos or to the imprisonment and exploitation of Jewish people by the Nazis. The protest found a great support also in France, sustained for example by English professor John Mullen. Apparently, the majority of those complaints against the exhibition were coming from people who had not actually seen it but just heard of it<sup>43</sup>. The opponents signed a petition against the peculiar exhibition, leading the artist to suspend it.

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<sup>42</sup> A. Battaglia, S. Douglas, A. Russeth, *After Announcement That Olga Viso Will Step Down as Walker Director, Museum Professionals Largely Praise Handling of 'Scaffold' Controversy* in "ARTnews", 17 November 2017; <https://www.artnews.com/art-news/news/announcement-olga-viso-will-step-walker-director-museum-professionals-largely-praise-handling-scaffold-controversy-9350/> [last access on 22 November 2022]

<sup>43</sup> J.L. Amselle, *Il museo in scena. L'alterità culturale e la sua rappresentazione negli spazi espositivi*, Milano: Meltemi, 2017, pp. 80-84.

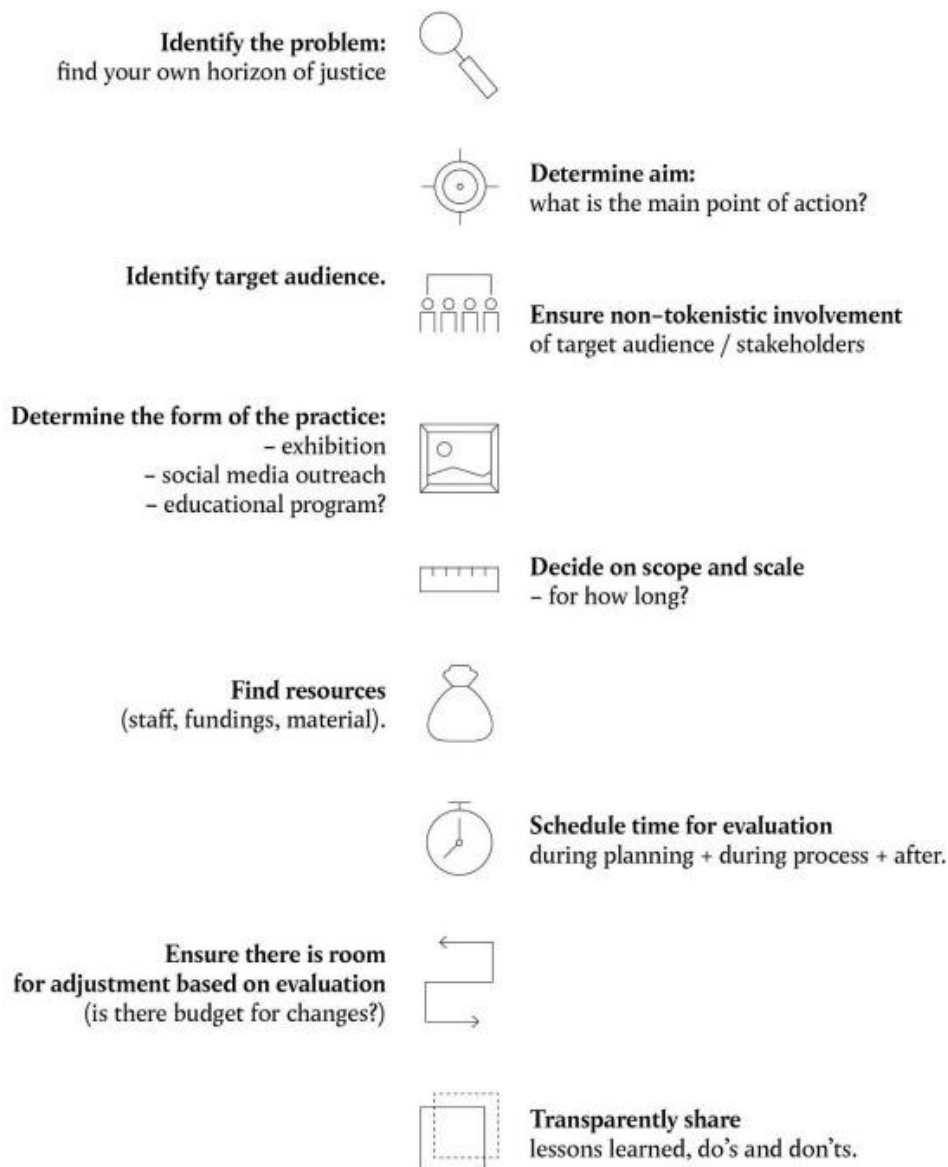
There are certainly many other cases I could have mentioned but I believe these three, in different ways, cover some of the most compelling subjects of the debate regarding decolonial art projects, which once again represent interesting food for thought, allowing us to imagine how things could have been (and could be) handled differently. And it could also be interesting to analyse how these examples failed with respect to the decolonial aims identified by Csilla E. Ariese and Magdalena Wróblewska. Indeed, in their recent work *Practicing Decoloniality in Museums. A Guide with Global Examples* (2021), the authors develop a conceptual framework as guidance for museums which wish to start or continue practicing decoloniality in their agenda. In their work, they identify a set of possible aims of decolonial practices within art institutions. In other words, they elaborate a kind of checklist to help art practitioners, equipped with several examples of different nature and scale. The idea came from their wish of producing a different kind of work which would not focus primarily on the type of museum institution, since most literature often distinguishes between art museums and ethnographic museums, or among departments of the same museum. Their different approach enables them to advance a more thematic division of six broad goals to be pursued, always with the ultimate aim of delinking museums from the persistent coloniality worldwide. The first objective is creating visibility for people and histories previously marginalized; the second is increasing inclusivity, welcoming perspectives of “others” into the museum; the third is decentring from the norm; the fourth deals with the implementation of empathy among staff and visitors; the fifth concern museums transparency, for example concerning their controversial history; the last goal is embracing vulnerability, accepting painful experiences and admitting that both museums and their staff lack something and need help to move in this direction<sup>44</sup>. Since these objectives are just an authorial selection of possibilities and decolonial projects may vary greatly, these initiatives can be identified as targeting more than one goal, of course. Moreover, each museum and art space should always start by developing a suitable and specific strategy that is consistent with its objective(s), without assuming that a methodology which works for an institution may reproduce the same results in another context. In general, though, the six points

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<sup>44</sup> C.E. Ariese, M. Wróblewska, *Introduction in Practicing Decoloniality in Museums. A Guide with Global Examples*, cit, p. 14-15.

analysed in *Practicing Decoloniality in Museums* provide a useful tool to know which direction to take to engage in more thoughtful decolonial practices, as general guidance lines to follow also beyond the institutional context, I would argue.

## How to design your own decolonial practice?



Ill. 3 – Infographic *How to design your own decolonial practice*, image by Anna Piwowar, 2021.

#### **1.4. The decolonial practices of Sammy Baloji and Kehinde Wiley**

The issues touched in this first chapter aim to be propaedeutic, to provide the preliminary context and concepts necessary to understand the background on which the artists Sammy Baloji and Kehinde Wiley produce and exhibit their works. In the following chapters dedicated to each of them I will briefly analyse their artistic production in general, dedicating most of the discussion to the two exhibitions that have taken place in Italy in 2022, at the Venice Biennale and at the Uffizi Galleries, that showcased their works. While doing so, it is my intention to link each artist to a specific decolonial issue that is clearly being addressed in his/her work. Although they are strictly related to the topics above mentioned, these specific decolonial issues have intentionally not been discussed yet, if not only through a quick mention. Such choice allows both to avoid repetitions between this introductory chapter and the following units and to reserve to these matters more space for discussion in relation to the importance they are given by the artists.

## **SECOND CHAPTER – Sammy Baloji. *K(C)ongo Fragments of Interlaced Dialogues. Subversive Classifications (2022) at the Uffizi Galleries***

Before approaching the artistic practice of the Congolese artist Sammy Baloji, especially in relation to his exhibition held at the Uffizi Galleries this year, I will provide the necessary general knowledge about traditional ethnographic museums and their possibilities to adapt to contemporary times. Indeed, Baloji's works and exhibitions are deeply concerned with the colonial appropriation of objects – as well as with the exploitation of slaves and natural resources – from the Kongo reign, to which correspond approximately the present Republic of Congo, the Democratic Republic of Congo and Angola. Since ethnographic museums and their archives have hosted and displayed plundered items for centuries, they have been deemed complicit in the perpetration of the colonial narrative until today. The first part of this chapter will provide a brief background of the ethnographic museum and the objects it collects, in order to gain an insight on its evolution and the characteristics it acquired in time that make it a controversial institution today. Re-thinking the museum's organization starting from its nature of colonial appropriations' showcase appears indeed to be quite problematic. In the second part, I will treat the decolonial possibilities that have been (or may be) implemented by ethnographic museums to engage with their collections in new thoughtful ways. Doing research, I came across an impressive number of possibilities and practices to be adopted. Some of these have already been explored and enhanced, although the conflicting opinions about their outcomes testify to a need for further adjustments in their implementation. In this second section I will try to identify common trends in those several different projects, in order to provide a framework of traceable initiatives. It will certainly be an incomplete framework, since I am sure there are other approaches that could be added which I did not encounter so far or that are being implemented just now. Still, such framework will be helpful to understand the context behind Baloji's artistic practice in relation to ethnographic museums, which will be the focus of the last section of this chapter. The third part will indeed introduce Sammy Baloji's background and origins, his photographic practice – for which he is most known – and the series of exhibitions called *Fragments of Interlaced Dialogues* which began in the occasion of documenta 2017 and arrived at the Uffizi Gallery this year with *K(C)ongo. Fragments of Interlaced Dialogues*.

*Subversive Classifications*, the exhibition we are going to analyse in detail. In this chapter, we will learn the modalities Baloji adopts to establish a dialogue between contemporary art and “ethnographic” objects, between Africa and Europe, between past and present, as well as future. Moreover, we will understand why his artistic practice can be read in decolonial terms.

## **2.1. A decolonial re-thinking of ethnographic museums**

### **2.1.1. Genealogy, characteristics, and limits of ethnographic museums**

Collecting artworks and precious objects was already a common practice in Roman times, considering military campaigns’ spoils of war<sup>45</sup>. Another kind of collecting was common in Asia, where sacred items with special meaning and value were kept safe by elders in store houses. In the Middle Ages art collections in Europe grew around religious centres, especially cathedrals and convents, and within noble courts. It is inside these buildings that, around the 16<sup>th</sup> century, religious leaders, sovereigns, and aristocrats began to dedicate intimate spaces, usually small rooms, to the private collecting of objects of various nature, depending on the owner’s interests and uses<sup>46</sup>. An Italian *studiolo* in Renaissance time would display for instance ancient art and books, contemporary artworks, precious stones, musical instruments, geographical maps, as well as scientific instruments, natural findings or rare objects which were collected also in cabinets of curiosities or Wunderkammers all over Europe<sup>47</sup>. Within such spaces, items were organized following mnemonics principles, reflecting the owners’ attempt to organize the available knowledge and collect their thoughts while rearranging the physical display. The objects would generally fit the categories of *naturalia*, *artificialia* and *scientifica*. Interestingly, those coming from remote worlds were grouped under the category of *exotica*<sup>48</sup>. Indeed, the elites of the time were fascinated by the increasing number of unknown objects and materials that were arriving in Europe thanks to the geographical explorations and trades of the time. The

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<sup>45</sup> *La storia dei musei*, 15 May 2018; <https://myedu.it/i-musei-hanno-una-storia/> [last access on 24 October 2022]

<sup>46</sup> A. Rizzi, *Naturalia e mirabilia in “Storia della civiltà europea” a cura di Umberto Eco (2014)*; [https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/naturalia-e-mirabilia\\_%28Storia-della-civilt%C3%A0-europea-a-cura-di-Umberto-Eco%29/](https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/naturalia-e-mirabilia_%28Storia-della-civilt%C3%A0-europea-a-cura-di-Umberto-Eco%29/) [last access on 25 October 2022]

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> *Natura e Cultura. All’origine della Wunderkammer*; <https://www.centromusa.it/en/la-mostra-della-natura/266-natura-e-cultura-all-origine-della-wunderkammer.html> [last access on 26 October 2022]

interest for these items was mainly aesthetic, linked to their beauty as objects to exhibit<sup>49</sup> – the craftsmanship and the preciousness of materials were often remarkable – rather than their actual use in the culture of provenance. Initially, the possibility to admire such varied collections was reserved to the owners of the cabinets of curiosities and the few guests they welcomed to prove their prestige and power<sup>50</sup>. Over time, collections were amassed also by academic and religious societies, thus becoming accessible to scientists, scholars and students. Starting from the 16<sup>th</sup> century but especially in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century, during the Enlightenment, there was a re-organization of the huge collections distributed between noble families, religious centres and universities that led to a rational organization and division of the collected items in separate buildings, according to their use and nature<sup>51</sup>. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the first modern museums in Europe were born and, following the example of the World Exhibitions held in various places around the world, they opened to non-elite visitors. The main idea behind this opening was linked to museums potential to “educate” and “civilize” common people<sup>52</sup>. At the dawn of modern nations and in the heyday of colonialism, the modern institution called museum was a useful tool to produce knowledge about the world and its history, as well as to fabricate “truths” about individuals and communities, to make people imagine – and feel part of – a nation. As temple of art, it could transform individuals into citizen-subjects of the nation-state by fostering citizenship<sup>53</sup>. As building dedicated to items’ collection, it could apply the organizing principles inherited from the Enlightenment in the attempt to concentrate and display all available knowledge in a limited space. Non-European objects collected in colonial times were represented with the pretension of providing a truthful, scientific and universally acceptable representation of the world and its inhabitants – somehow

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<sup>49</sup> *Fragments of Interlaced Dialogues: Sammy Baloji in conversazione con Eike Schmidt e Lucrezia Cippitelli*, recorded live-stream conversation at the Uffizi Galleries, 1 March 2022; <https://www.uffizi.it/video/fragments-of-interlaced-dialogues-conversazione> [last access on 14 December 2022]

<sup>50</sup> D. Durante, *Lo studiolo nel Rinascimento*, in “Diario dell’arte”, 13 February 2021; <https://www.diariodellarte.it/studiolo-nel-rinascimento/>

<sup>51</sup> A. Russo, *La nascita dei musei in Italia*, in “Finestre sull’arte”; <https://www.finestresullarte.info/percorsi/2010/04-nascita-dei-musei-in-italia.php> [last access on 2 February 2022]

<sup>52</sup> C. E. Ariese, *Decentering*, in *Practicing Decoloniality in Museums. A Guide with Global Examples*, cit., p. 38.

<sup>53</sup> D. Preziosi, *The Museum of What You Shall Have Been*, in *Rethinking Heritage: Cultures and Politics in Europe*, edited by R. S. Peckham, London: I. B. Tauris, 2003, p. 172-174.

legitimizing the violence behind most appropriation practices. Such representation was perpetrated also in the archives, strategically constructed to sustain this narrative and conceal power relationships behind the acquisition processes. Between the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century, museums grouped items around two main categories: artworks, to be conceived aesthetically, and cultural artifacts, to be only considered scientifically. Such cultural artifacts coming from non-European countries through colonial acquisitions and ethnographic expeditions were gathered and exhibited in ethnographic museums to be studied in an evolutionary perspective. Indeed, while objects were collected for their rarity in the Wunderkammer of the 17<sup>th</sup> century and out of taxonomic reasons in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the evolutionary theory of the 19<sup>th</sup> century would guide the displaying of exotic artefacts to classify non-European cultures as previous stages of human development that culminated in the triumph of present Europe<sup>54</sup>. A taxonomic approach was still present, aimed at cataloguing, “civilizing” and organizing cultural objects within specific ethnic and racial boxes, not dissimilarly to the logic that guided the displaying of butterflies’ collections, for instance<sup>55</sup>. The value assigned to cultural objects was, and sometimes still is, linked more to their materials, historic context and craftsmanship than to the human history of the populations of origin, immobilized and disciplined in museum’s representation, through their objects, as butterflies in a glass case. However, the transparency of the window display is deceptive, concealing the seizing gaze that colonial Europe directs to the “Other”, which is useful for self-definition and confirmation. Indeed, “the traditional glass cases of the museum present little impediment to the eye but they are not ideological transparent”<sup>56</sup>. More than see-through surfaces to admire the objects inside, then, museums’ showcases act as a mirror for the West to affirm itself. Through its practices of appropriation, decontextualization, classification, labelling, and re-contextualisation of exoticized objects and bodies, the ethnographic museum has, in a certain way, cannibalised them<sup>57</sup>. As a matter of fact, by depriving the items of their

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<sup>54</sup> J. Clifford in G. Grechi, *Decolonizzare il museo. Mostrazioni, pratiche artistiche, sguardi incarnati*, Milano: Mimesis edizioni, 2021, p. 147.

<sup>55</sup> J.L. Amselle, *Il museo in scena. L’alterità culturale e la sua rappresentazione negli spazi espositivi*, cit., p. 14.

<sup>56</sup> Classen, Owes in G. Grechi, *Decolonizzare il museo. Mostrazioni, pratiche artistiche, sguardi incarnati*, cit., p. 145.

<sup>57</sup> G. Grechi, *Decolonizzare il museo. Mostrazioni, pratiche artistiche, sguardi incarnati*, cit., p. 104, 144.



human dimension and bonds, the museum has both fetichised and used them to confirm Europe's identity and underpinning narrative of centrality<sup>58</sup>. It is important to stress the de-humanizing connotation of museum practices: in their context of origin, these objects were made to be used, either as everyday objects and tools or for rituals and social events. And even trying to make them fit the usual Western functions for objects would be an unsuccessful attempt, since "it is not very useful for us to call it religious object in a world where everything is religion, or to speak of an art object in a world where everything is art. Art here begins in the spoon and ends up in the statue. And it is the same art"<sup>59</sup>. What is certain is that they were not meant to be displayed in Western museums, where they are deprived of their "primordial forces"<sup>60</sup>. Thinking for instance of the African masks that greatly influenced cubism at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, they were clearly conceived as objects to be touched, worn and used in rituals and dances. Since the modern museum compels its visitors to keep a physical distance from the collected items, the masks that had been conceived to be admired in motion, on faces, are on show on static supports behind a glass-case. Such immobilization is underlined also by the typical use of the so-called "ethnographic present", by which anthropologists used to – and in some cases never ceased to – present artifacts and their descriptions as fixed in a present time, without expecting variations neither in the past nor in the future of the described cultures. Their present was often ignored or denied not too dissimilarly from their history, thus producing an effect of historic immobility, a repetition of traditional models and a negation of contemporaneity<sup>61</sup>. Atemporality in ethnographic museums is also remarked by the format of the permanent exhibition. Some limits of such typology of display include the impossibility to show all the objects collected – of which a great number remains on the archives' shelves – as well as a strict encyclopaedic division, more attentive towards geographic provenance than to narrative and interpretative quality of the display. On a temporal level, the permanent structure has a stifling effect on the

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> A. Resnais, C. Marker, G. Cloquet, *Les statues meurent aussi (Statues Also Die)*, Frech essay film produced by Présence Africaine, Tadié Cinéma, 30 min., 1953.

<sup>60</sup> M. Orabona, *Spaces of Invention: Between Delegation and Capture*, in B. Ferrara (edited by), *Cultural Memory, Migrating Modernities and the Museum Practices*, Milano: Politecnico di Milano, 2012, p. 143.

<sup>61</sup> J.L. Amselle, *Il museo in scena. L'alterità culturale e la sua rappresentazione negli spazi espositivi*, cit., p. 13.

dialogic potentiality of the ethnographic museum, that is found in its provisional nature, subject to constant changes as well as the documented societies are<sup>62</sup>. As typical feature of ethnographic museums, atemporality is usually paired with anonymity. Indeed, Western academic art studies have always been centred on artists and the historical succession of art movements of the West, while artworks created outside such context have often been reduced to products of anonymous figures. As a matter of fact, individual creativity in the artwork was often denied and concealed behind a sense of community<sup>63</sup>: artists were thought to simply use their craftsmanship to represent their tribes and ethnicity, complying with very ancient traditions' precepts rather than creating original artworks. Such attitude of disinterest might have been driven by a sense of superiority of Western art, whose uniqueness was emphasized in the comparison, if not by disinterest and lack of proper knowledge, since ethnographic objects were often carelessly plundered from their contexts of origin. A reflection on the topic is provided in the interesting essay film *Les statues meurent aussi* (1953). Along with the idea of the museum as a place for the dead, since "When men die, they enter into history. When statues die, they enter into art", the narrating voice focuses for most of the film on the emotional qualities of African objects, on their crafts and use, with images of such objects running in the background and approached almost as living things<sup>64</sup>. Interestingly, the narrator also says:

Black art, we look at it as if it had its reason for being in the pleasure it gives us. The intentions of the black who created it, the emotions of the black who looks at it, all of that escapes us. Because they are written on wood, we take their thoughts for statues and we find the picturesque there, where a member of the black community sees the face of a culture<sup>65</sup>.

In the last decades, though, researchers are increasingly applying historical-artistic approaches to artworks produced by non-European artists to adjust such picture, increasing knowledge around individual artists' lives and artistic developments in time<sup>66</sup>. However, this aesthetic re-evaluation is not the only significant provision adopted to reconsider ethnographic museums' collection. The issue of objects

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<sup>62</sup> G. Grechi, *Decolonizzare il museo. Mostrazioni, pratiche artistiche, sguardi incarnati*, cit., p. 123.

<sup>63</sup> A. Mbembe in M. Orabona, *Spaces of Invention: Between Delegation and Capture*, in B. Ferrara (edited by), *Cultural Memory, Migrating Modernities and the Museum Practices*, cit., p. 145.

<sup>64</sup> A. Resnais, C. Marker, G. Cloquet, *Les statues meurent aussi (Statues Also Die)*, cit.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> S. Price, *I primitive traditi. L'arte dei "selvaggi" e la presunzione occidentale*, Milano: Johan & Levi editore, 2015, pp. 73-76.

restitution to their countries of provenance is indeed far more popular and debated now, witnessing both examples of important restitutions by some Western museums and a strong resistance of others. Much literature on the topic already exists and is continuously being produced, concerning also the frequent requests of restitution promoted by the countries where the plundering took place. The fact that a blockbuster film like *Black Panther* (2018) dedicated a scene to the matter is perhaps even more telling of its relevance in contemporary society also outside the academic circle.

However, it is probably less known that colonized people sought ways to resist and impede the spoliations back when they were happening. As a matter of fact, their attempts, often violently repressed, were ignored by scholars. In some cases, local people even damaged their own objects, not to be forced to disclose their meanings or not to transfer the objects' power to the colonizers. We could consider for instance a sculpture, mentioned by art curator and professor Ariella Aïsha Azoulay in an interview<sup>67</sup>, that is now at the Royal Museum of Central Africa in Tervuren (Belgium) but which in 1950s, under the Belgian occupation of Congo, was kept in a chief's house there. Trying to prevent its plundering, local people had deliberately broken one of its arms, as it is still visible in the Belgian museum today. Aïsha Azoulay learned of it from a booklet of images by a Belgian art historian who took a photograph at the time and reported the episode in its caption. So, although the art historian understood the concealing intention of the people, s/he nonetheless took a picture of the object which is still on show at the museum but without a caption to acknowledge the resistance behind its capture<sup>68</sup>.

This episode testifies to an active response of resistance that reminds of the decolonial encouragement to act, to challenge the coloniality hidden in contemporary society and to show other possible routes to take which do not comply with the hegemonic colonial ambitions. The ethnographic displaying of objects with cultural significance was once hindered as it is criticised and challenged today, along with the objects' hostage condition in museums' archives and warehouses. Historians, scholars and anthropologists, as well as the very stakeholders of museums, are increasingly

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<sup>67</sup> S. Alli, Ariella Aïsha Azoulay: *'It Is Not Possible to Decolonize the Museum without Decolonizing the World.'* in "Guernica", 12 March 2020; <https://www.guernicamag.com/miscellaneous-files-ariella-aisha-azoulay/> [last access on 29 November 2022]

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

concerned with the implementation of alternative ways to present or deal with their collections which might unhook them from a condition that denies their integration in history – both past and future – and negates authorship and cultural relevance. The range of possibilities to conceive new ethnographic museums will be the focus of the following section, including also the involvement of artists and art curators.

### **2.1.2. Towards a decolonial ethnographic museum: a multitude of possibilities**

The idea that the traditional museum needed an updating to attune to its public led to the conceptualization of the New Museology, a new approach towards museum practice that appeared in the 1980. Scholars and historians, such as Charles Saumarez Smith, Ludmilla Jordanova and Peter Vergo claimed that the museum was isolating from the modern world, privileging its collection-based function and addressing the cultural tastes of particular social groups<sup>69</sup>. The museum appeared to still be anchored to the mission it had acquired on its foundation, namely the social role of “civilising” and “educating” the general public to make people fit their position in society. The New Museology was conceived instead to promote new ways of communicating within collections-centred museum models and to redefine the relationship with people and their communities<sup>70</sup>. An increasing awareness of the social accountability and responsibility of museums towards their public seemed to encourage a wider representation and inclusivity, in order to actively contrast social inequality and discrimination. Up until now, the objectives of the New Museology have only been partially achieved. Indeed, an increasing in representation and access, to make cultural heritage more inclusive, has only been implemented in a limited number of museums. In addition, in some cases the organisational changes promoted by the new approach to museology have been adopted in dubious ways, either going against museums’ educational purposes or being applied only in theory, with museums attributing the activities they were already doing to the principles of the New Museology<sup>71</sup>.

Although the principles of the New Museology may struggle to be applied, they surely testify to a change in the way of thinking museums which entails practical actions. According to anthropologist and professor Giulia Grechi, a critical and reflective

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<sup>69</sup> P. Vergo (edited by), *The New Museology*, London: Reaktion Books, 1989.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

analysis on the ethnographic museum, considering its colonial roots, could make it become a laboratory of decolonialization practices, a place for action, operativity and re-mediation, where multiple points of view meet and where a subversion of traditional epistemology takes place<sup>72</sup>. Her reflection on the topic was inspired by a 2020 seminar of ICOM South Africa and COMCOL (International Committee for Collecting) significantly titled *Decolonizing as a verb: Reinterpreting collections and collecting* which claimed that, given the colonial legacy in today's society, decolonization in museums should not deal only with representation and repatriation. Rather, it should act on the language and archives used to communicate and categorize, on the design of buildings, on the ways objects and issues are researched and, ultimately, on the way knowledge is produced and dispensed<sup>73</sup>.

We could start our analysis of the decolonial possibilities aimed at re-thinking ethnographic museums right from a revisitation at the level of language. Indeed, in recent years many museums have worked to restyle their institutional names, internal graphic and museology language used. Several ethnographic museums, for instance, have been renamed “Museum of Civilization” or “Museum of Cultures”. The Museo Nazionale Preistorico Etnografico Luigi Pigorini (Rome) is now Museo delle Civiltà, and the Museum of Civilization of Europe and the Mediterranean (MuCEM), opened in Marseille in 2013, is the descendant of the National Museum of Popular Arts and Traditions, the Ethnographic Museum of Trocadero and the Museum of Man, for example. However, there are circumstances in which the very notion of “museum” is problematic. In the case of Indigenous communities in Canada and the USA, the traditional museum mechanism hardly fits their traditions, not to mention that in the eyes of American Indians the traumatic experience of exploitation and plundering of culture and lands is associated to museum practices. For this reason, starting in the 1990s – following the civil rights movement in the USA and New Museology approach – Indigenous communities developed their own museum-like institutions under the name of “centres”, where alternative practices were embraced. Some centres focus only on oral histories and intangible heritages, for example, while others keep as such

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<sup>72</sup> G. Grechi, *Decolonizzare il museo. Mostrazioni, pratiche artistiche, sguardi incarnati*, cit., p. 22.

<sup>73</sup> *Decolonizing as a verb: Reinterpreting collections and collecting*, seminar, 25-26 November 2020; <https://comcol.mini.icom.museum/special-projects/decolonizing-as-a-verb/> [last access on 19 November 2022]

the objects that are considered living items<sup>74</sup>. At the level of language, the restyling has involved, along with institutions' names, also artefacts labels. In 2019 just in the UK, for instance, three major museums – the Pitt Rivers Museum, the British Museum and the Victoria and Albert Museum – worked to increase their transparency by reviewing the labels of thousands of items – in particular those acquired in colonial times – to include information concerning the history of such items' arrival in European collections<sup>75</sup>. More in general, museology language is increasingly being questioned because it has kept almost the same structure it had when the modern museum was first conceived and its primary function was organizing objects and stories rationally and chronologically. Artefacts' captions would present biased descriptions of objects' acquisitions while relying often on specialist language that would fail its premise of educating the masses. Altogether, the linguistic restyling of the ethnographic museum in terms of names and labels is surely to be welcomed but not sufficient. The relabelling process, for example, is dubiously capable to trace back and clarify all objects' trajectories, if it is not sustained by wider projects of recontextualization, as it is being done for example by the Museo delle Civiltà of Rome (its very homepage welcomes users with the announcement that the museum “has started a process of progressive yet radical revision that aims at questioning and rewriting its history, its institutional ideology, and its research and pedagogical methods”<sup>76</sup>), the Victoria and Albert or the Tropenmuseum of Amsterdam. In such context, the enhancement of ethnographic museums' international networks to plan specific research and re-mediation activities are of crucial importance. It might be argued, as well, that the adoption of new names – more suitable to the diasporic world we live in – only conceals better the colonial stain still visible in terms of content. Therefore, along with linguistic adjustments, ethnographic museums should decolonise and revise their contents, which ultimately assert their positioning. Starting from the very nature of museums as construction tools for the European geopolitical and cultural identity, an interesting change in museum' contents could be based on a

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<sup>74</sup> C. E. Ariese, *Decentering*, in *Practicing Decoloniality in Museums. A Guide with Global Examples*, cit., pp. 60-62.

<sup>75</sup> M. Wróblewska, *Improving Transparency*, in *Practicing Decoloniality in Museums. A Guide with Global Examples*, cit., pp. 83-84.

<sup>76</sup> Museo delle Civiltà, official website; <https://museociviltà.cultura.gov.it/> [last access on 2 February 2023]

change of perspective. An extreme example could be the reversal of the viewpoint, as suggested in the 2008's installation *Museum of European Normativity*, which was realized in the city of Trento (Italy) for *Manifesta 7* – the European Biennial of Contemporary Art – in the context of the exhibition *The soul (or, Much Trouble in the Transformation of Souls)*. In the installation, the curators adopted anthropologic methods and scientific language ironically, addressing European cultures with the very means and terminology used by the Western modernity to describe those cultures considered “other”, thus inverting the classical relation and representation of power<sup>77</sup>. Although similar changes of perspective would be difficultly implemented in ethnographic museums to rethink their contents definition, it is still possible to be more honest about the acquisition of objects, thus revealing – in this case as well – that the items have been acquired and exhibited responding to a specific (Western) point of view. Today, the technological means at our disposal allow ethnographic museums to improve their transparency. Indeed, it is not uncommon for contemporary museums to make their collections available to the general public through the creation of digital archives, which include information on the acquisition of colonial artefacts and on their provenance, thus facilitating research<sup>78</sup>. As such, digital technology contributes to a reconfiguration of the ethnographic patrimony, enabling a discussion over the object's ownership and the right to narrate its explanation, simultaneously increasing connections through the creation of networks<sup>79</sup>.

Moreover, modern technology represents a useful resource in the practical rethinking of museums also for the formulation of new museum formats. A way for ethnographic museums to detach from traditional museology is indeed represented by the possibility to restyle their exhibiting practices, departing for example from a chronological to a thematic display, or advancing audience' engagement with other senses rather than sight. Technology turns out helpful to achieve such practices. An interesting example could be the exhibition *Spitzmaus Mummy in a Coffin and Other Treasures* held at the

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<sup>77</sup> G. Grechi, *Decolonizzare il museo. Mostrazioni, pratiche artistiche, sguardi incarnati*, cit., pp. 71-94; *Manifesta 7*, official website; <http://www.manifesta7.it/locations/show/> [last access on 8 December 2022]

<sup>78</sup> M. Wróblewska, *Improving Transparency*, in *Practicing Decoloniality in Museums. A Guide with Global Examples*, cit., p. 84.

<sup>79</sup> I. Chambers, *Introduction*, in B. Ferrara (edited by), *Cultural Memory, Migrating Modernities and the Museum Practices*, cit., pp. 24-25.

Kunsthistorisches Museum of Wien in 2018. Taking inspiration from the travelling exhibition *Raid the Icebox I with Andy Warhol* (1969-1970), in which artist Andy Warhol had unconventionally selected different objects and methods of representation, the museum in Wien developed a program of artist-curated exhibitions which saw the participation of director Wes Anderson and illustrator and author Juman Malouf. In their exhibition, Anderson and Malouf selected objects from the enormous collection of pictures, antiques, arms and instruments of the KHM – amounting to more than 14 million items – and displayed them in untraditional ways, for example according to their shades of colours<sup>80</sup>. The contribute of modern technology was indispensable to display in the same case objects of various nature, dating and climate control needs. Surely, the exhibition managed to provide visitors with an unusual museum experience, where they also had to find out the connections between the selected objects themselves, given the absence of labels and descriptions<sup>81</sup>. As far as senses are concerned, since it opened up to the masses the European modern museum has given prior importance to visitors' visual appreciation of their collection. The rules of conduct for museum visitors formulated at the time – to impede physical contact with the exhibited objects and thus guarantee objects' preservation – still regulate our experience of ethnographic museums today. Thanks to modern technology, sight can be challenged or enhanced differently, for instance by presenting visual reconstructions of life scenarios of different people that increase visitors' involvement, using sometimes also augmented reality and VR devices. For this type of museums, usually considered the most static and distant from contemporaneity, the possibility to use technology is therefore essential to increase engagement.

To make the permanent collections less stationary, a restyling of the traditional ethnographic display may also concern the organization of temporary exhibitions on specific topics. Exhibitions could for instance relate certain activities and practices of different peoples in different times and places to today's habits of living in distant parts of the world, enabling visitors to find connections between them and to understand better the cultural context behind silent objects. Focusing less on the artefacts and more

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<sup>80</sup> C. E. Ariese, *Decentering*, in *Practicing Decoloniality in Museums. A Guide with Global Examples*, cit., pp. 58-60.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.



on the processes and symbolic value around such items, temporary thematic exhibitions could be helpful to change our way of perceiving ethnographic museums. Moreover, temporary exhibitions enable the movement of ethnographic objects according to the selected topic(s) to be treated. As such, they seem to encourage Clifford's rethinking of museum's collections and display as an "unfinished historical process of travel", given that museums' items are "travellers" in the first place<sup>82</sup>. By enabling mobility, museums requalify as places of transit that facilitate a dialogue between different cultures along the objects' journey. Considering how meaningful such objects still are to their culture of origin in most cases, a decolonial re-thinking of museums should rely on source communities while planning similar exhibitions and transfers. Somehow, we already anticipated the importance of source communities' engagement in section 1.3.1. while discussing their involvement in museums' activities and cultural mediation, as well as the possible drawbacks of not considering their perspective and sensitivity, like it happened in the case of *Scaffold*. Such mediation is of crucial importance, since objects remind and tell ongoing stories of struggle which should be integrated in museum narratives. Indeed, ethnographic objects bear at the same time indigenous memories and the "contact histories"<sup>83</sup> that shaped them after colonial appropriation and their arrival in Western collections. These different narratives should be acknowledged and incorporated within the ethnographic museum to offer alternatives to the official narration and avoid the "dangers of a single story", an expression used by the Nigerian writer Chimamanda N. Adichie in a TED talk of 2009<sup>84</sup>. In her speech, Adichie was referring to her debut as early writer and the influence that Western readings had on her early texts, in which – in spite of her Nigerian background – blue-eyed characters played in the snow and drank ginger beer<sup>85</sup>. Through her personal experience, Adichie proved how a single story can create stereotypes which are problematic not because of their deceitful nature but rather due to their incompleteness, based on a partial view of reality that makes one story become

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<sup>82</sup> J. Clifford, *Museums as Contact Zones in Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late 20th Century*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997, p. 213.

<sup>83</sup> J. Clifford, *Museums as Contact Zones in Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late 20th Century*, cit., p. 193.

<sup>84</sup> C. N. Adichie, *The Danger of a Single Story*, TED talk [video lecture], July 2009; [https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda\\_ngozi\\_adichie\\_the\\_danger\\_of\\_a\\_single\\_story](https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_ngozi_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story) [last access on 7 December 2022]

<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

the only one<sup>86</sup>. The multitude of stories provided by community members could definitely help challenging the existing stereotypes promoted also in museum's display and narrative. Moreover, the participation of source communities in museums' activities and planning is important to allow a reconnection of peoples with the objects of their cultural legacy – of vital importance if restitution is longed for but debated – and also, perhaps, to foster a change in objects' presentation and display. Indeed, communities may identify themselves in the exhibited objects – as forms of cultural expression used to make sense of the world – but they may not recognise themselves in the objects' display in the museum: conceived as a mirror of self-affirmation of European status and habits of living, it represents rather a “deforming mirror” for the cultures of provenance<sup>87</sup>. The interaction and confrontation with source communities could reveal different and more thoughtful options towards a rethinking of museums display. Involving specific communities at the different stages of museum's programming transforms the museum into a “participatory museum”, where intangible cultural heritage – comprising stories, individual and plural memories – is enhanced and where memory becomes plural: continuously modified, enriched and linked to present times depending on visitors' experience and fruition<sup>88</sup>. Another interesting practice to increase identification and empathy in the ethnographic museum, along with communities' engagement, could be a re-telling of museums' collections through the association of a single object to the life of a historical individual. The National Museum of Denmark, for example, addressed its colonial history through the exhibition *Voices from the colonies* (2017), where objects from the museum collection were singularly associated to thirty-four historical characters who lived in the colonies<sup>89</sup>. Or again, to make the ethnographic museum become a more polyphonic space, the adoption of dialects and repressed languages as official languages might be

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<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

<sup>87</sup> G. Grechi, *Decolonizzare il museo. Mostrazioni, pratiche artistiche, sguardi incarnati*, cit., p. 25; M. Aime in J. L. Amselle, *Il museo in scena. L'alterità culturale e la sua rappresentazione negli spazi espositivi*, cit., pp. 8-9.

<sup>88</sup> G. Grechi, *Decolonizzare il museo. Mostrazioni, pratiche artistiche, sguardi incarnati*, cit., p. 181. To learn more about the participatory museum see <https://www.participatorymuseum.org/> and the TED Talk “Opening up the Museum” by Nina Simon available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aIcwIH1vZ9w> [last access on 7 December 2022]

<sup>89</sup> L. Sebro, *Voices from the Colonies*, presented during the Annual Conference of the Research Center for Material Culture ‘Reckoning with History: Colonial Pasts, Museum Futures, and Doing Justice in the Present.’ YouTube [video lecture], 19 September 2018; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=si3uOz5wYGI> [last access on 7 December 2022]

considered along with the reformulation of labels and names we previously discussed. An interesting example is Museo Tula, founded in 2007 in Lagun, in the Caribbean Island of Curaçao, with the mission to represent local Afro-Caribbean community. The museum not only lets Afro-Caribbean community members undertake tour guides to tell Tula's history from their perspective: it also adopted Papiamentu – a creole language developed presumably by enslaved persons in the 17<sup>th</sup> century and repressed for centuries – as its official language<sup>90</sup>. Such choices surely increase communities' engagement and sense of commitment, making them feel represented and able to tell their perspective on historical events.

The communities link with the past, however, should always be balanced with present and future possibilities. Indeed, memory could become problematic for groups which identify with tragic and painful historical events. Sharing the same trauma, such groups run the risk of closing themselves into exclusionary circles united by past experiences rather than present possibilities to cope with history in new, open and meaningful ways. In-between, we find those who do not recognise themselves neither in the compulsion to salvage shared past traces nor in the state-constructed narration and are rather concerned with the present and future that could be reached working together. These are the “open memory communities” mentioned by Alessandra De Angelis in the essay *Recovering, Archiving, Contaminating*, to which she provides the example of District Six Museum<sup>91</sup> in Cape Town, which more than a static display is a living memorial of various aspects of District Six life. Inaugurated in 1994 in response to the governments' wish, in the post-apartheid era, to repopulate District Six, the museum presents itself as a platform for discussion and co-participation: instead of evoking multi-ethnic and harmonized past deeds in a picturesque way, it leaves room also for conflict and contestation, taking care both of memory and the present<sup>92</sup>.

The intention to account for the present as well as for the past was also at the basis of the project *Maison des civilisations et de l'unité réunionnaise* (MCUR), a museum launched in 2000 in Réunion Island, a former French colony of the Indian Ocean, and

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<sup>90</sup> C. A. Ariese, *Championing Empathy*, in C.E. Ariese, M. Wróblewska, *Practicing Decoloniality in Museums. A Guide with Global Examples*, cit., pp. 72-74.

<sup>91</sup> District Six Museum, official website; <https://www.districtsix.co.za/> [last access on 7 December 2022]

<sup>92</sup> A. De Angelis, *Recovering, Archiving, Contaminating*, in B. Ferrara (edited by), *Cultural Memory, Migrating Modernities and the Museum Practices*, cit., p. 95, 103-106.

ended in 2010, when the conservatives came to power in the Regional Council and cut its funds. It was also called Museum Without Objects, given its peculiarity of not being founded on a collection of objects, thus at odds with the average museum worldwide. The reasons behind such choice depended on its initiators' perspective – according to which the accumulation of objects was to be associated with an economy of predation and consumption, aimed at celebrating the wealth of a nation while looting the resources of others – but mostly on the shortage of surviving objects that could testify Réunion's colonial history<sup>93</sup>. Indeed, only few objects could witness the lives of the enslaved people brought to the island since it became part of the French territory in 1663. The museum started right with an acknowledgement of such absence and was conceived as a transformative space, showing creolisation processes and its context while inviting viewers to suggest other meanings to what they saw. Interestingly, the project started by questioning “how practices and processes that belonged for the most part to ‘immaterial’ or ‘intangible’ culture could be expressed visually without falling into a reductive ethnology”<sup>94</sup>. Accordingly, it could be said that MCRU represented an attempt to rethink the (ethnographic) museum in a way which could show that museums collections, either tangible or intangible, should not be reduced to matters of the past: they have a dialogic feature which provides space for social changes and reflections concerning the past as well as the future.

The process of effectively “contemporizing” museums' heritage represents indeed one of the major difficulties encountered by museums in the attempt to respond to contemporary demands. We could think for instance of the Musée du Louvre, where in 2000 the Pavillon des Sessions was opened dedicated to the exhibition of “other” cultures and “arts”, to make the historical museum more open towards contemporary issues. However, the exhibition of other cultures has been carried out in what could be considered an exotic and anesthetizing way, showing the museum's attempt to universalize cultures<sup>95</sup>. Another example is Musée de quai Branly, which in 2006 substituted the Musée de l'Homme, exhibitions dedicated to contemporary non-

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<sup>93</sup> F. Vergès, *A Museum Without Objects*, in *The Postcolonial Museum: the Arts of Memory and the Pressures of History*, edited by I. Chambers, A. De Angelis, C. Ianniciello, M. Orabonachapt., chapt. 1, pp. 25-38, London: Routledge, 2017, p. 29.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid.

<sup>95</sup> J.L. Amselle, *Il museo in scena. L'alterità culturale e la sua rappresentazione negli spazi espositivi*, cit., p. 13.

Western artists or specific topics have been organized to make it more suitable for contemporary times, along with seminars held by post-colonial thinkers. Even in this case, though, exhibitions and interventions conceived to balance the static feature of “primitive art” collections have a primitivizing effect, showing for example the link of exotic cultures to nature or failing to present beliefs and practices from a critical distance<sup>96</sup>. A different approach might be that of adopting a unique display to show both modern and ancient objects – reminding of a Wunderkammer – like it is done by the Musée de le Confluences in Lyon (opened in 2014), even though a similar operation might be seen to deprive the objects of their history and context of provenance to make them become fetishes<sup>97</sup>. However, problematics and critiques seem to arise also when the post-colonial requirement of contemporaneity in museums seems to be met. The National Museum of the American Indian of Washington, for example, was conceived in collaboration with the Indian communities of the USA to focus on the contemporary dimension of their culture, exhibiting for instance baskets and beaded ornaments. In this case, critiques were moved by critics who considered the objects to be ugly or at least not complying with the typical objects you could find in ethnographic museums, but also by American Indian researchers concerned by the curators’ overlooking of the issues of colonization and the American Indian genocide<sup>98</sup>.

To conclude the section, the last possibility of decolonial rethinking of ethnographic museums I would like to discuss concerns artistic and curatorial practices of engagement with the museum’s archive and depository. The archive is constituted both by things that are physically present and “things” which are absent, which have been concealed, deleted or simply neglected by the rigour of archive’s grammar, functional to a selective and strategic categorization. If a disruption of the archive’s order has to take place to show what was previously kept in the shadows, curators and artists could be deemed more suitable to perform such operation than ethnographers or anthropologists. Indeed, the external gaze of an artist, a curator or a source community’s member could see something more in the stored objects and ask them different questions, possibly revealing what has been concealed by traditional

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<sup>96</sup> Ibid., p. 10.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid., pp. 32-33.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid., pp. 34-35.

museology<sup>99</sup>. Curatorial projects that enable contemporary artists to engage with museums' archives and deal with the historical collections are not uncommon today. Such artistic projects confront the stored materials, considering them as forms of colonial representation. In other cases, artistic projects start with a deconstruction of the archive itself, questioning its authority. To better understand how artists practically operate with archival collections, we may consider the case of the installation *The Repair from Occident to Extra-Occidental Cultures* (Ill. 4) realized by artist Kader Attia for *DOCUMENTA* in 2012. The installation gave visitors right the impression to enter an ethnographic museum's basement, with a high shelving containing objects of various nature, spacing from volumes of cosmetic surgery to art catalogues. Interestingly, in the shelves the artist also placed reproductions of sculptural portraits taken from the visual archives of the First World War and from ethnographic archives of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Those marble or wooden portraits depicted the disfigured or mutilated faces of soldiers – reconstructed by the developing cosmetic surgery – along with the faces of the “native” peoples of non-European territories. Basically, the artist showed bodies considered “imperfect” by the European gaze and canons of beauty, based on integrity. In the background, a slideshow was showing the before and after of the soldiers' chirurgical interventions and objects repaired by non-European hands, where the mending was left visible. The “reparations” exhibited by the artist could be intended as forms of cultural re-appropriation, in particular of the “dead archives” at the basis of European modern identity<sup>100</sup>. The sculpture on the shelves, indeed, re-enacted the archival photographs, giving back tridimensionality to the bodies while allowing the audience to come closer to the exhibited objects than it would have been possible in a traditional museum display<sup>101</sup>. Kader Attia installation's approach towards the ethnographic archive is an example that could be confronted with Sammy Baloji's exhibition *K(C)ongo Fragments of Interlaced Dialogues. Subversive Classifications* at the Uffizi Galleries, as in both cases the artists juxtapose their contemporary works with stored materials. However, Baloji attributes a different

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<sup>99</sup> G. Grechi, *Decolonizzare il museo. Mostrazioni, pratiche artistiche, sguardi incarnati*, cit., p. 32.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid.

<sup>101</sup> G. Grechi, *Decolonizzare il museo. Mostrazioni, pratiche artistiche, sguardi incarnati*, cit., p. 185-190.

meaning and reading key to archival objects, as we will see in the following section while learning more about Baloji's practice and exhibitions.



Ill. 4 – View of the installation *The Repair from Occident to Extra-Occidental Cultures* by Kader Attia, 2012, dOCUMENTA 13. Source: Financial Times.

## 2.2. Sammy Baloji: life and artistic practice

Sammy Baloji was born in 1978 in Lubumbashi, in the Democratic Republic of Congo, and currently lives between his hometown and Brussels. After graduating in Arts and Humanity, Computer Sciences and Communication at the University of Lubumbashi, he attended the Haute Ecole des Arts du Rhin in Strasbourg and in 2019 he began an art research doctorate at Sint Lucas Antwerpen university titled *Contemporary Kasala and Lukasa: towards a Reconfiguration of Identity and Geopolitics*. Today, Baloji's



career as artist, photographer and actor of international relevance is testified by his participation at temporary exhibitions and major museums worldwide. Nonetheless, Baloji has always been very active in the cultural production of his hometown, intended both as collective practice of research and visual production. Indeed, together with Picha – the artists’ and cultural professionals’ collective he co-founded with artists of his age in Lubumbashi – Baloji started Lubumbashi’s Biennial, the Picha art centre and the artistic education projects Ateliers Picha, to make art more accessible in the area. Appointed Knight of Arts and Letters in France, Sammy Baloji has been awarded many awards and acknowledgements, in particular at Rencontres Africaines de Photographie de Bamako (Mali) and at the Biennale of Dakar (Senegal). Between 2019 and 2020 he resided at the French Academy in Rome at Villa Medici, and since 2018 he has been teaching at the Sommerakademie in Salzburg. Some recent monographic exhibitions he had are, for instance, *Sammy Baloji, Other Tales* (Lunds Konsthall and Aarhus Kunsthall, 2020), *Congo, Fragments d’une histoire* (Le Point du Jour, Cherbourg, 2019) and *A Blueprint for Toads and Snakes* (Framer Framed, Amsterdam, 2018). In recent years he also participated at the Biennale of Sydney (2020), Documenta 14 (Kassel/Athene, 2017), the Lyon Biennale (2015), the Venice Biennale (2015) and at the Photoquai Festival at Musée du Quai Branly (2015). In 2020, he was included in the ranking “Power 100” of the most influential people in art by the British magazine “ArtReview”.

Since 2005, Baloji’s theoretic and artistic research has focused on the Democratic Republic of Congo’s history and relationship to world history, to reinterpret the European modernist history and its power relations with the rest of the world, from the Renaissance to the present days. In his work, Baloji deals with the cultural, architectural and industrial heritage of the Katanga region, underlining the colonial impact on the African continent in terms of ethnographic exploitation of people and environment and the stabilization of the Western narrative<sup>102</sup>. Indeed, a common thread retraceable in Baloji’s artworks is the intention to reveal the bijective relationships and identities that, over the centuries, were reduced to a single narration which de-humanized the non-European other. He is particularly critical to the way in

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<sup>102</sup> L. Taiuti, *Dall’Africa all’Europa. Intervista a Sammy Baloji*, in *Artribune*, 13 May 2020; <https://www.artribune.com/arti-visive/arte-contemporanea/2020/05/intervista-sammy-baloji/> [last access on 13 December 2020]



which ethnography and the western sciences born between the 17<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century shaped our perception of the other by means of categories, asking himself how we could begin to tell the story of the other's world starting from the Indigenous people's knowledge instead<sup>103</sup>. Geological or geographical categorial studies, for instance, would establish typologies of minerals as well as ethnies – distinguishing among 400 ethnic groups in Congo – without considering that the way pre-colonial societies defined themselves or negotiated their territories may not correspond objectively to the statistical data<sup>104</sup>. Baloji's works aim at revealing the ambiguity of such limiting categorizing devices that constitute our perspective. This approach, supported by in-depth research, is noticeable in his video works, his photographic series, his editing of colonial archives' images, as well as in his site-specific installations in profound dialogue with the surrounding space they are inserted in.

Baloji's artistic practice is decolonial in the sense that, instead of aiming at the impossible mission of re-writing history, it fosters a re-thinking of the present to incorporate the "other" perspectives and methodologies which were previously only seized but never actually included. His artistic research, which spaces from the first relations between Europe and Africa in the 14<sup>th</sup> century to the modern extraction-based economy that still shapes our present relationships to the African continent, proves us that the cultural stereotypes which shaped our collective memory still inform our perception of today's world. "I'm not interested in colonialism as nostalgia, or in it as a thing of the past, but in the continuation of that system. My work is really about what is going on now", he significantly said in an interview with *The Funambulist* on the issue *Decolonial Ecologies*<sup>105</sup>, where he referred to the persistence of coloniality in the capitalistic system and its traces on Congolese people's daily life, which is the focus of his interest. In addition, Baloji agreed with the interviewer Léopold Lambert that the question of decolonization – to annihilate the framework which fabricates

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<sup>103</sup> L. Lambert, *Colonial Extractivism and epistemic geologies in the Congo. A Conversation with Sammy Baloji*, in "The Funambulist", from Issue 35: *Decolonial Ecologies*, 1 May 2021; <https://thefunambulist.net/magazine/decolonial-ecologies/colonial-extractivism-and-epistemic-geologies-in-the-congo> [last access on 13 December 2022]

<sup>104</sup> Ibid.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid.

otherness – has to be approached on smaller scales rather than a global one, and this is indeed what he does starting from Lubumbashi’ context in his works<sup>106</sup>.

In his artistic practice – based on collecting facts, histories and visual materials – photography appears to be the preferred medium. Since 2005, indeed, Baloji began his photographic documentation of the modernist buildings and the people of his hometown, which still marked from the colonial experience. Between the 15<sup>th</sup> and the 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, the reign of Kongo occupied indeed three present-day territories: the Republic of the Congo (colonised by France), Angola (colonised by Portugal) and the Democratic Republic of Congo (colonised by Belgium). Recalling the scramble for Africa at the Berlin Conference (1884-1885), it is notorious that the territory was acknowledged by the European sovereign nations as “Congo Free State”, owned by King Leopold II of Belgium. During his regime, the king savagely exploited the population and the natural resources, causing an estimate of 10 million deaths for the collection of rubber. However, along with rubber and workforce, in the territory the colonisers also found an abundance of minerals, especially copper and uranium. Even after 1908, when Leopold II was forced by the Belgian government to abandon control over the colony due to the major international scandal his abuse had caused, the mining industry kept working both under the Belgian government and once the formal independence was reached in the 1960s. Besides the capital Kinshasa, the two next largest cities of Lubumbashi and Mbuji-Mayi are both “mining towns”: Baloji uses this expression to underline the impact of mines in the structuring of the city, of society, of work and of the territory<sup>107</sup>. In the 1980s, for example, daily life was punctuated by sound of the mine’s siren, giving the rhythm to society and life<sup>108</sup>. And it is right in the mining sites that some of Baloji’s photographic series were shot. In his work *Mémoire* (2006), for example, the artist associates fake-panoramic photographs of the Gécamines industrial site (formerly known as Union Minière du Haut Katanga and renamed after the independence) with archival images of the same

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<sup>106</sup> K. Vistrup Madsen, *Sammy Baloji – interview: ‘I’m not interested in colonialism as a thing of the past, but in the continuation of that system’*, in “studio international”, 2 September 2019; <https://www.studiointernational.com/sammy-baloji-im-not-interested-in-colonialism-as-a-thing-of-the-past-but-in-continuation-of-that-system> [last access on 13 December 2022]

<sup>107</sup> L. Lambert, *Colonial Extractivism and epistemic geologies in the Congo. A Conversation with Sammy Baloji*, cit.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid.

company: figures of Congolese people from the black-and-white archival photos are cropped and superimposed onto a coloured – but still obscure – contemporary background showing the mining sites where they were forced to work, exposing their vulnerability and uneasiness. The association and photomontage of two sets of images – recent and old, made and found – is also used in *Congo Far West* (2010-2011) and *Kolwezi* (2010-2012) and connects the colonial past to post-colonial exploitation to assure the progress of Western technologies. The comparison between the two kinds of images is not limited to showing a mere contrast: rather, it produces more complex and interlaced meanings<sup>109</sup>. According to what Baloji told in a 2020 interview with Lorenzo Taiuti for *Artribune*<sup>110</sup>, the artist adopts the photomontage technique to evoke an experience of Lubumbashi and the whole Katanga region, which used to be lively centres before colonisation and are now only a ghostly shadow of their past glory. Overall, Baloji's images question the enduring social, political, and environmental legacy of colonialism. By appropriating and assimilating the industrial history of mining industry during Belgian occupation, Baloji opens the different temporal and personal fragments to a contemporary reading that stimulates contemplation as well as reflection. And he wants us to reflect on the erasure of local memory in favour of the dominant one which followed the arbitrary, political and administrative construction of Congo by Western countries:

When I started to work on images, I was struck by the erasure of history. [...] My work, it just so happens, consists in borrowing the process of erasure and re-establishing undone connections. It is situated as much in the dissection of the layers of oblivion and in an interest in the methodology of disappearance as in the re-establishment of links<sup>111</sup>.

Since 2013, Baloji's work includes installations combining images, transformed objects and sound. An example could be the *Photographic Essay on Urban Planning* (2013), where the artist displayed a series of twelve images within a grid, alternating aerial views of Lubumbashi to historical boards of flies and mosquitoes, referring to the mapmaking techniques in its grid-like structure to an increased number of viewpoints through the faceted sight of flies. Other kinds of artworks comprehend

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<sup>109</sup> C. Barthe, *Sammy Baloji*, in "Critique d'art", 54, 2020, pp. 98-100.

<sup>110</sup> L. Taiuti, *Dall'Africa all'Europa. Intervista a Sammy Baloji*, cit.

<sup>111</sup> *Rétablir les connexions défaites, Sammy Baloji en conversation avec Lotte Arndt*, in *Sammy Baloji: arracher quelques bribes précises au vide qui se creuse*, 30 March-30 April 2018, Rennes: Galerie Art&Essai, 2019, p. 14.

imprinted forms and sculpture in copper, relating to the extraction processes, and the interlacing of textiles, in which the photographic negative/positive and the patterns of scarification play a key role, as we will understand while analysing *K(C)ongo, Fragments of Interlaced Dialogues. Subversive Classifications*.

### **2.3 The project and stages of *Fragments of Interlaced Dialogues***

The exhibition *Kongo, Power and Majesty* (2015) held at the Metropolitan Museum of New York has been a great source of inspiration for Baloji. It exhibited embroidered fabrics, mats of woven raffia and other Kongo items of clothing and objects that, after leaving the colonies, have entered European and American ethnographic museums. Those fabrics and cloths, used for clothing or as decorative pieces, carried within them – expressed in geometrical motives – different cultures, knowledge, history and philosophy. *Fragments of Interlaced Dialogues*, shown for the first time at dOCUMENTA 14 (2017), has been conceived by the artist as a reflection upon the origin and evolution of symbols and language as bearers of knowledge and culture, and upon the role of visual language in creating, changing or consolidating power relations. The series *Copper Negative of Luxury Cloth. Kongo Peoples; Democratic Republic of the Congo, Republic of the Congo or Angola, Seventeenth–Eighteenth Century* (2017) were the main objects on display, consisting on bronze and copper wall sculptures made as casts from 3D reproduction of Kongo cloths and fabrics arrived in European museums in colonial times. Indeed, starting from photos of those fabrics, Baloji printed their 3D versions to be used as moulds for the copper sculptures. In other words, the copper casts of textiles are the negatives of positive 3D reproductions of the precious fabrics.

Before arriving at the Uffizi Gallery in 2022, the project *Fragments of Interlaced Dialogues* was shown in different European museum, developing in time. In 2018, for example, it was shown in occasion of a duo exhibition of Baloji with artist Sven Augustijnen at the Museumcultuur Strombeek, Ghent (Belgium), whereas in 2019 it was exhibited in Le Point du Jour, Cherbourg-en-Cotentin (France), under the title *Congo, Fragments d'un histoire*. Finally, in 2021 *Sammy Baloji - K(C)ongo, Fragments of Interlaced Dialogues* was presented at the Beaux-Arts de Paris in occasion of the Festival d'Automne. During the years, the typologies of exhibited works have grown, although textile artefacts remain a mainstay of the exhibition in

Florence as well. Surely, the main artistic intention which can be traced behind every exhibition of the project is directed at showing the interconnection of events that appear distant in time, space and meaning due to colonial fractures, but also at challenging the Eurocentric narration adopting a decolonial gaze. With *Fragments of Interlaced Dialogues*, Baloji tries to mend those fractures in the temporal line to make pre-colonial knowledge resurface.

#### **2.4 Sammy Baloji. K(c)ongo. Fragments of Interlaced Dialogues. Subversive Classifications**

In Florence, *Fragments of Interlaced Dialogues* has been hosted inside the Andito degli Angiolini of Pitti Palace, which belongs to the Uffizi Galleries, between the 26<sup>th</sup> of April until the 27<sup>th</sup> of November 2022. First solo exhibition of Sammy Baloji in Italy, it was curated by Lucrezia Cippitelli (Brera Academy, Milan), Chiara Toti (Uffizi Galleries) and the collective BHMF (Black History Month Florence), which has been collaborating with the Uffizi Galleries since 2019 in the occasion of the exhibition of the Ethiopian artist Tesfaye Urgessa. In the rooms of the Andito degli Angiolini, the artworks by Baloji dialogue with archival materials and important Kongo objects borrowed from the Museo di Antropologia e Etnologia (Florence) and the Museo delle Civiltà (Rome), along with objects coming from the Uffizi's collection. Differently from the previous stages of *Fragments*, the exhibition in Florence has seen the creation of two site-specific works, *The crossing* and *Gnosis*, and has acquired in its title the part *Subversive Classification*. The choice indicates the purpose of the exhibition to highlight the “subversive” profile of Kongo artefacts, which exceed the modern “exotic” or “ethnographic” classifications deriving from the slave trade and the Scramble for Africa<sup>112</sup>. Indeed, the correspondence held between King Afonso of Kongo and the Portuguese sovereign Manuel I, the copper and bronze plates *Negative of Luxury Cloth* as well as the loom-sculpture *Goods Trade Roots* – all exhibited works we will analyse in detail – testify to a horizontal relationship between

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<sup>112</sup> *The History of the Kingdom of Congo in the Medicean Residence of Palazzo Pitti: Sammy Baloji's Installations Tell the Tale*, press release of the exhibition, 26 April 2022; <https://www.uffizi.it/en/events/the-history-of-the-kingdom-of-congo-in-the-medicean-residence-of-palazzo-pitti-sammy-baloji-s-installations-tell-the-tale> [last access on 14 December 2022]

Europe and Africa, between equals, thus overturning the “exotic” narration that became predominant in time<sup>113</sup>.

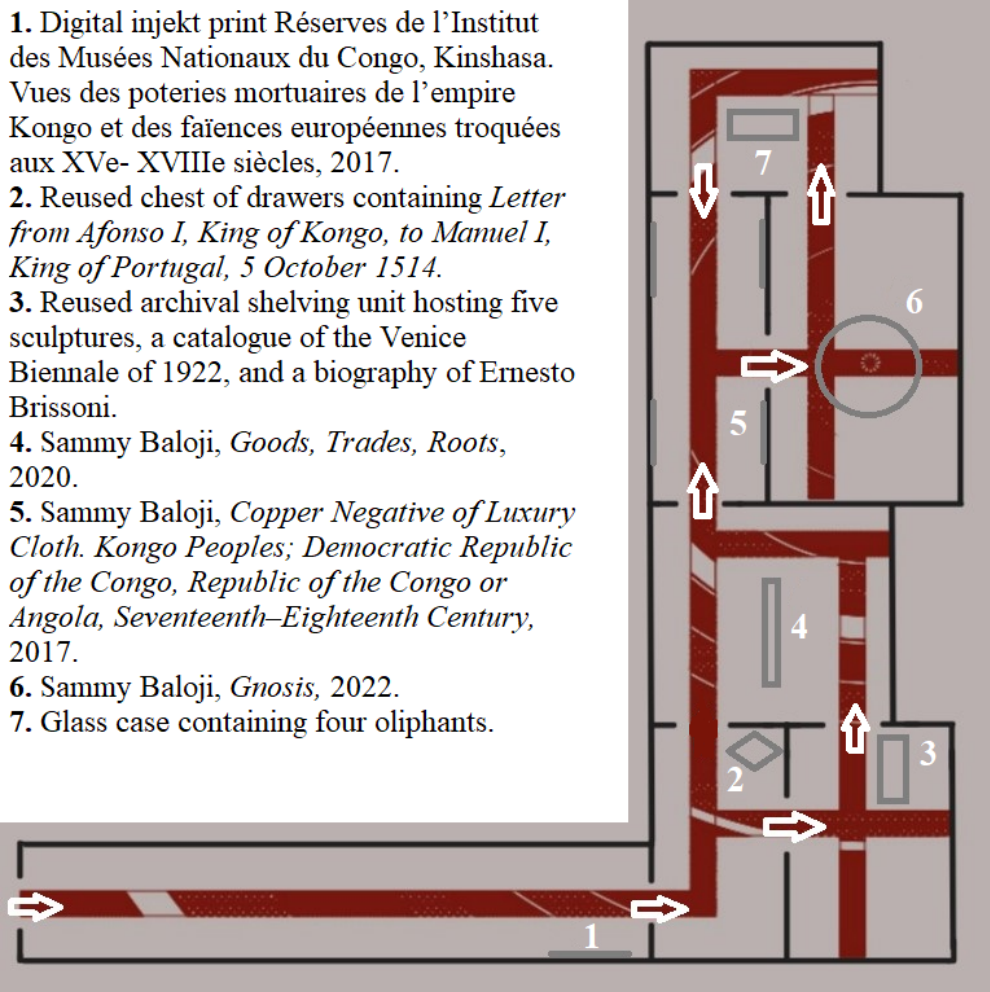
Together with the art historian and curator Lucrezia Cippitelli (Brera Academy, Milan), Sammy Baloji began his research on the Kongo objects belonging to the Uffizi galleries – usually ethnographically considered and exhibited in the Treasury of the Grand Dukes – which arrived in Italy at the beginning of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, and which Baloji had the opportunity to study while he was a scholarship recipient at Villa Medici in Rome. However, when these objects first arrived in Europe, ethnography still had to be invented: such artefacts were used in horizontal relations of exchange, for example as diplomatic gifts between sovereigns. The objects in the Uffizi collection, among the rare surviving examples of their kind and gathered especially around the figure of Cosimo I, were deemed precious for their artistic value, their aesthetic taste, and out of a genuine interest of the private collectors, rather than simply complying with the current classifications we are used to. In ethnographic and natural history museums, objects of this kind undergo the museum narration, but within Baloji’s exhibition they prove to have never lost their original value and meaning. *K(C)ongo Fragments*, then, encourages visitors to reconsider the ethnographic classification and contextualisation of Kongo objects according to their original significance<sup>114</sup>.

To understand better how the artist intended to stimulate similar reflections in the exhibition, I will take a tour guide through the various rooms which composed it, signalling the exhibited works and their story and meaning.

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<sup>113</sup> Ibid.

<sup>114</sup> *Fragments of Interlaced Dialogues: Sammy Baloji in conversazione con Eike Schmidt e Lucrezia Cippitelli*, cit.



1. Digital inkjet print *Réserves de l’Institut des Musées Nationaux du Congo, Kinshasa. Vues des poteries mortuaires de l’empire Kongo et des faïences européennes troquées aux XVe- XVIIIe siècles*, 2017.
2. Reused chest of drawers containing *Letter from Afonso I, King of Kongo, to Manuel I, King of Portugal, 5 October 1514*.
3. Reused archival shelving unit hosting five sculptures, a catalogue of the Venice Biennale of 1922, and a biography of Ernesto Brissoni.
4. Sammy Baloji, *Goods, Trades, Roots*, 2020.
5. Sammy Baloji, *Copper Negative of Luxury Cloth. Kongo Peoples; Democratic Republic of the Congo, Republic of the Congo or Angola, Seventeenth–Eighteenth Century*, 2017.
6. Sammy Baloji, *Gnosis*, 2022.
7. Glass case containing four oliphants.

Ill. 5 – Map of the exhibition *K(c)ongo. Fragments of Interlaced Dialogues. Subversive Classifications* inside the Andito degli Angiolini (Uffizi Galleries). Courtesy of the Uffizi Galleries.

Between the ground and the first floor of the Uffizi, in the mezzanine floor, a glass door welcomes visitors into a large corridor, which opens the exhibition and preceded the entrance to the Andito degli Angiolini. As soon as they enter through the glass door, they step on a particular red carpet: *The Crossing*, one of the two site-specific works mentioned above, whose 88 meters wind in all the seven rooms. Meant for people walk on it, its decoration shows original geometric motives that will acquire meaning during the way. Close to the entrance door of the Andito, on the left, visitors are presented, on a metal grill, a large photo of a museum’s warehouse. The image, a digital inkjet print titled *Réserves de l’Institut des Musées Nationaux du Congo, Kinshasa. Vues des poteries mortuaires de l’empire Kongo et des faïences européennes troquées aux XVe- XVIIIe siècles* (Ill. 5), was taken by Baloji in 2017 at the depository of the Institution des Musées nationaux du Congo (Kinshasa), which



stores 450.000 historical objects of the Democratic Republic of Congo. On the right, the image shows shelving hosting European porcelains, used as exchange currency between the 15<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century and preserved next to Kongo funerary goods in pottery, on the left shelving. Such modality of preserving cultural heritage is surely unusual and in contrast with Western classifications, which stores objects in relation to their geographical provenance<sup>115</sup>. Somehow, the photo already summarizes the topic of the exhibition, based on the relationship between Africa and Europe. In addition, the use of a metal grill to sustain the picture is not a casual choice: indeed, the storing device was recovered specifically from Pitti's warehouse, along with other archival supports employed in the exhibition, to invite visitors to position in front of those elements which visually remind of a storage room.



Ill. 6 – *Réserves de l'Institut des Musées Nationaux du Congo, Kinshasa. Vues des poteries mortuaires de l'empire Kongo et des faïences européennes troquées aux XVe- XVIIIe siècles.* Courtesy of the Uffizi Galleries.

Following the carpet and going down a few steps, visitors enter the second room. Here, the gaze is captured by a reused archival drawer unit from Palazzo Pitti's warehouse (Ill. 6). Inside the open drawers, Baloji displayed the facsimile of a letter written by king Afonso I (1465-1543), the second Christian monarch of Kongo, to the Portuguese

<sup>115</sup> L. Cippitelli, *Classificazioni sovversive*, in Sammy Baloji. *K(C)ngo, Fragments of Interlaced Dialogues, Subversive Classifications*, exhibition catalogue (Firenze, Gallerie degli Uffizi, Palazzo Pitti, Andito degli Angiolini, 26 April - 26 June, 6 September - 27 November 2022), edited by L. Cippitelli, C. Toti, BHM Collective, Giunti Editore, 2023.



sovereign Manuel I (1469-1521) on the 5<sup>th</sup> of October 1514, whose original is kept at the Arquivo Nacional da Torre do Tombo (Lisbon). King Afonso articulated the content, written in Portuguese by four secretaries whose signatures have been preserved, and which Baloji had translated in English from a French translation<sup>116</sup>. While several letters from King Afonso – varying from a length of ten pages to a few lines – have been conserved, fewer are the available examples of the replying letters from King Manuel I and Joao III of Portugal (successor of King Manuel I), since there is no longer a repository of old archives from Kongo<sup>117</sup>. One recurrent topic in the correspondence and discussed also in the letter of 1514 is the victory of Afonso I over his pagan half-brother Mpanzu in Mbanza Kongo (1506). After the success, though, the king was still concerned with the persistence of pagan rites in the territory, especially the cult of elders. In the letter of 1514, the king confides to Manuel I the bitterness for the unanswered request for help he had sent to Portuguese governor of São Tomé, Fernão de Melo, which forced him to eradicate the cults with his own means only. In addition, the letter was a request to Manuel I for the sending of missionaries to foster the work of evangelization of the population and to open new churches and schools. Indeed, the education of young people, mostly nobles and relative, was a dear topic to Afonso I, who also sent his son Henrique to study in Portugal, where he became auxiliary bishop of Madeira (the first bishop ever from Central Africa in history) in 1518. However, the most interesting topic of the correspondence is perhaps the slave trade that highly concerned the Kongo monarch. Indeed, although he had initially opposed to slavery, Afonso I had soon understood that slaves were the most valuable bargaining chip in his possession to the eyes of the Portuguese, so he eventually relented to sustain the economy and started sending war captives and criminals. Soon enough, though, Portuguese demands exceeded the potential supply, menacing a depopulation of Kongo. Moreover, Afonso I lamented the violent Portuguese soldiers and merchants' behaviours, prone to robberies and to illegally purchase free Kongo people regardless of social ranks. The letters thus testify to an horizontal relationship between Kongo and Portugal that progressively degenerated:

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<sup>116</sup> Letter from Afonso I, King of Kongo, to Manuel I, King of Portugal, regarding the burning of the 'great house of idols', Kingdom of Kongo, 5 October 1514; [https://www.villamedici.it/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/sammy-baloji-congos-fragments\\_book\\_en.pdf](https://www.villamedici.it/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/sammy-baloji-congos-fragments_book_en.pdf)

<sup>117</sup> L. Jadin, *Correspondance de Dom Afonso, roi du Kongo, 1506-1543*, Brussels: Royal Academy for Overseas Sciences, 1974.

from the confidences between two monarchs united in their common faith to the ignored requests of Afonso I to stop the dehumanizing practice of the slave trade, which eventually caused a gradual disintegration of the Kongo reign in favour of Portugal towards the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. What struck Baloji of the letter by Afonso I was the profound sense of solitude it conveyed<sup>118</sup>.



Ill. 7 – Reused chest of drawers from the Uffizi Galleries containing *Letter from Afonso I, King of Kongo, to Manuel I, King of Portugal, 5 October 1514*. Courtesy of the Uffizi Galleries.

In the third room of the exhibition, another reused archival shelving unit hosts different objects: five sculptures coming from the Belgian Congo (now conserved at the Museo di Antropologia e Etnologia, Florence), a catalogue of the Venice Biennale of 1922, and a biography of Ernesto Brissoni written by Monica Zavattaro (Museo di Antropologia e Etnologia, Florence) (Ill. 7). The connection between them has to be found in the *Mostra di scultura negra* hosted at the XIII Esposizione Internazionale della Città di Venezia (later called Venice Biennale), which was the first exhibition dedicated to African art in Italy. The reasons behind such exhibition can be traced back to a decade sooner, when a general interest for African art spread in Europe and was testified by several shows, for example in Prague in 1911, in Paris in 1913 and at the

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<sup>118</sup> M. De Leonardis, *Sammy Baloji. La lettera ritrovata*, in “Il manifesto”, 15 August 2020, <https://ilmanifesto.it/sammy-baloji-la-lettera-ritrovata> [last access on 20 December 2022]

291 Gallery by Alfred Stieglitz in New York in 1914. The interest for the *art nègre* – intending art from both Africa and Oceania – was evident also in literature, considering for instance the books *Negerplastik* (1915) and *Afrikanische Plastik* (1921) by Carl Einstein, art curator considered the “discoverer” of African art in Europe. However, the European fascination with African art is most renowned for the impact the African sculptures and masks had on European art, considering Cubism and the artistic production of Matisse, Braque and Picasso, for example. In such context, Italy appeared to be a wide step behind the rest of Europe, although some Italian artists living in France had the chance to experience the revolutionary impact of African art, such as Amedeo Modigliani and Ardengo Soffici. It was with the intention to catch up with the other European nations that the exhibition was conceived, thus fulfilling also the wish of the critic Ugo Ojetti. Before entering the executive board of the exhibition, indeed, Ojetti had been the promoter of an Italian show on African art at least since 1912, when he had published an article on “Corriere della Sera”<sup>119</sup> in appreciation of its positive influence on European art. The commissioners of the exhibition of that year, Carlo Anti (Museo Nazionale Preistorico Etnografico Luigi Pigorini, Rome, now Museo delle Civiltà) and Aldobrandino Mochi (Museo di Antropologia e Etnologia, Florence) gathered for the occasion thirty-three African objects from both institutions. The selection had somehow been anticipated by Anti in his article *Scultura Negra*<sup>120</sup>, which was published in the journal “Dedalo” previously that year, and which showed also the only picture published in the catalogue: the sculpture of the *Dea Allattante* belonging to art Mayombe (the catalogue on show at *K(C)ongo Fragments* is opened on this very page). In the article, Anti commented the African sculptures as artistic expressions rather than ethnographic finds, and this was the main approach Aldobrandini and Anti wanted to convey in the exhibition, although African art was still described as “simple”, “naïve”, and “primitive”. The exhibition’s attempt to align Italy to the other European countries in the artistic debate was, however, a failure. First of all, the show was conceived along two other “special” exhibitions – one dedicated to Argentine artists and a retrospective of Antonio Canova – which surely highlighted the extraneity of the exhibition with respect to the local artistic inclinations. Secondly,

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<sup>119</sup> U. Ojetti, *Cubismo*, in “Corriere della Sera”, 8 novembre 1912, p. 3.

<sup>120</sup> C. Anti, *Scultura negra*, in “Dedalo”, Milano - Roma: Bestetti e Tuminelli, I, febbraio 1921, pp. 592-621.

the few traces left of it – and especially the lack of photos of the display – prove the episodic character of the exhibition. Moreover, *Mostra di scultura negra* was sceptically welcomed by the press, if not argued or omitted. Clearly, then, the attempt of providing a new artistic potentiality in Italy did not work.

All the five wooden sculptures on the shelving at *K(C)ongo Fragments* participated to that edition of the Venice Biennale, as it is testified by the surviving tags under their bases and by the list of loans of the Florentine museum<sup>121</sup>. Four of the five sculptures arrived in Italy thanks to Ernesto Brissoni (1875-1941), the man whose biography is shown next to them on the exhibition shelving. During his military service in the Belgian administration of Congo, he collected more than three-hundred artefacts that, along with other objects in private Florentine collections, constitute the precious African collection of the ethnographic museum in Florence<sup>122</sup>. Indeed, the quality of its objects and its documentation, regarding provenance and owners of the items (especially belonging to the Luba tribe), make of the collection one of the most interesting of its kind. The choice of the reused shelving connects to the precedent rooms and makes the visitors question whether it refers to a museum or a storage room, whether it contains artworks or material culture. Congo sculptures are valued for their formal and artistic essence, diverging from ethnographic museums' display where they are amassed within glass cases among many other items<sup>123</sup>. Ultimately, the installation of the room prompts a reflection on the role of ethnographic museums in the process of “othering” cultures to affirm national identities, as well as a consideration on the way art exhibitions or art tendencies may re-classify and bend artefacts to support their narrative, replaying colonial ambitions. Within the Palazzo dell'Esposizione of the Biennale of that year, the closeness of *Mostra di scultura Negra* to the contested exhibition of Modigliani (*Mostra individuale di Amedeo Modigliani*, 15 April – 31 October 1922) has indeed suggested, for example, the possibility of a legitimizing role of the first in favour of the second<sup>124</sup>.

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<sup>121</sup> C. Toti, *Maggio 1922: La scultura Negra irrompe a Venezia*, in L. Cippitelli, C. Toti, BHM Collective (edited by), *Sammy Baloji. K(C)ngo, Fragments of Interlaced Dialogues, Subversive Classifications*, cit.

<sup>122</sup> *Collezioni etnografiche*, Sistema Museale di Ateneo, Università degli Studi di Firenze; <https://www.sma.unifi.it/cmpro-v-p-599.html> [last access on 20 December 2022]

<sup>123</sup> L. Cippitelli, C. Toti, BHM Collective (edited by), *Sammy Baloji. K(C)ngo, Fragments of Interlaced Dialogues, Subversive Classifications*, cit.

<sup>124</sup> E. Bassani, *Carlo Carrà e l'arte “negra”*, in “Critica d'arte”, 130, 1973, pp. 7-17.



Ill. 8 – Reused archival shelving unit hosts different five sculptures coming from the Belgian Congo, a catalogue of the Venice Biennale of 1922, and a biography of Ernesto Brissoni written by Monica Zavattaro. Courtesy of the Uffizi Galleries.

Following again the motives of the red carpet, visitors enter the fourth room, which is dominated by a loom (Ill. 8). This time, they are facing an original work by Baloji, titled *Goods Trades Roots* (2020) and made of Afzelia wood, usually employed for parquet floors. Interestingly, though, the weaving at the centre of the loom is made of cotton yarns interlaced with acrylic copper, reminding of the extractive economy of Congo and the ongoing exploitation and trade of mineral resources and goods. Along with copper, other materials massively extracted in the territory are uranium, coltan and lithium. The uranium used in the Second World War to construct the first atomic bomb came right from there, although this detail is often overlooked along with the involvement of Africa in the World Wars and the consequences they had on the continent, if not for the way it was re-divided among the winning European countries. However, African people fought and fell too, and workers were made to produce more copper for bombs. Coltan and lithium, then, might be familiar for their present use in modern technology, such as in mobile devices and computers' hardware, and also in the production of green energy, given their presence in the batteries of electric cars. The inspiration for the work came from the already mentioned exhibition *Kongo, Power and Majesty* (2015) at the Metropolitan Museum of New York, which exhibited cloths and fabrics from Kongo, and in particular a "M'fuba" mat in fibre of screw pine



from the Vili culture, now in the collections of the Anthropology Department of the National Museum of natural History, Smithsonian<sup>125</sup>. The geometrical motive is taken from a cloth preserved at the Museo delle Civiltà (Rome), dated back to 17<sup>th</sup> century. Indeed, the museum in Rome preserves the richest collection of raffia clothes from Kongo, as Baloji learnt while studying several collections worldwide (from the Museum of Central Africa in Tervuren to the Metropolitan Museum of New York, indeed). From this study, Baloji took the inspiration for *Goods Trades Roots* as well as for the artworks in the consecutive room.



Ill. 9 – Sammy Baloji, *Goods Trades Roots*, 2020. Courtesy of the Uffizi Galleries.

In close connection to the loom, the following room presents visitors the five wall sculptures of the series *Copper Negative of Luxury Cloth. Kongo Peoples; Democratic Republic of the Congo, Republic of the Congo or Angola, Seventeenth–Eighteenth Century* (2017) already exhibited in *Fragments of Interlaced Dialogues* and hanging on the same kind of metal grills encountered in the first room to support the photo of Kinshasa’s Museum depository (Ill. 9). As I previously anticipated, the wall sculptures are transfers which have been created from fabrics’ photographs with a highly

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<sup>125</sup> *Sammy Baloji Goods Trades Roots*, 2020; <https://www.artsy.net/artwork/sammy-baloji-goods-trades-roots> [last access on 20 December 2022]

technological process that included imaging, encoding, 3D printing and moulding. The original objects, probably pillow covers with weavings in raffia fibre, are now kept in North European museums (the three on the left) and at the Museo delle Civiltà of Rome (the two on the right), and their dating ranges from the 16<sup>th</sup> to 18<sup>th</sup> century<sup>126</sup>. Analysing the raffia threads, visitors notice how the fibre interlacing creates a grid-like surface upon which motives and patterns are designed. Although polychromy was sometimes employed in textile creations, colour did not have the same importance as grain and shade variations that emphasized the motives. The contrast between light and shadow, brilliance and opaqueness represented the actual palette of Kongo's craftsmen. The simple interlacing at the base, the patterns on the additional layer and the additional ornaments – such as pom-poms and tassels – all derived from different manufacturing processes of the same material and had ancient origins. The basilar decorative unit of the fabrics was the diamond shape, that can be admired both in low and high relief and act as unifying element for the apparently heterogeneous motives, thus showing a varied but balanced final work. In addition, such decorative frameworks were profoundly tied to other visual media and retraceable in pottery, braiding, scarification practices and ivory carving, as will be noticed in the last room of the exhibition. That is because, most probably, such refined patterns had different levels of interpretation that went beyond an aesthetic appreciation. It is very likely, indeed, that similar motives articulated a complex grammar of meanings. Along with their aesthetic use as emblems of social prestige, meant for nobility and royalty, the Kongo fabrics acted indeed as epistemic media. As such, they encapsulated and passed down different forms of knowledge, concerning for example the technical aspects behind their production and the ideas encoded in their geometries. Unfortunately, their meaning was not documented and the colonial aggression that took place between the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century interrupted the transmission of any knowledge regarding their production or importance in central Africa. Indeed, the elaborated raffia fabrics charmed foreign people, especially Europeans, as the particular technique and

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<sup>126</sup> Sammy Baloji *Fragments of Interlaced Dialogues*, 2017 - *Copper Negative of Luxury Cloth Kongo Peoples; Democratic Republic of the Congo, Republic of the Congo or Angola, Seventeenth-Eighteenth Century*, 2020; <https://www.artsy.net/artwork/sammy-baloji-fragments-of-interlaced-dialogues-2017-dot-dot-dot-copper-negative-of-luxury-cloth-kongo-peoples-democratic-republic-of-the-congo-republic-of-the-congo-or-angola-seventeenth-eighteenth-century-fig-3> [last access on 20 December 2022]

aesthetic qualities fully complied with the requirements of 16<sup>th</sup> century Europe, based on excellent craftsmanship. Between the 16<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century, then, Kongo fabrics entered European collections. While they were firstly exchanged as royal gifts and were sometimes kept in courts, in most cases they were later moved to cabinets of curiosities. With their arrival to the new continents, the status of these objects changed: from luxury items and emblems of social prestige, they became exotic and bizarre treasures to be exhibited in private collections among many other kinds of objects used to build European knowledge. Starting from the 18<sup>th</sup> century, when cabinets of curiosities and other opulent forms of collecting were substituted by the new museum spaces, Kongo objects were sorted and moved to different museum typologies. They could be found either in ethnographic museums as ethnographic examples, in decorative art galleries as craftsmanship objects or, since the last decades of the past century, in encyclopaedic collections which opened to geographies beyond Europe. In present days, visitors can admire fabrics and ivory objects in ethnographic collections or palaces that have become sites of cultural heritage, such as Palazzo Pitti. Their role within the different locations continuously changes, alternatively being presented as artworks or artefacts or ornamental objects but always estranged from their original intellectual and aesthetic context. The installation of pillow covers' negative moulds within the Andito degli Angiolini evoke the atmosphere of the Kongo court in the 16<sup>th</sup> century and visitors can almost imagine the expensive tapestry that covered the walls of palaces like Palazzo Pitti at the time<sup>127</sup>.

The geometrical complexity of the original objects is maintained in the artworks of Baloji, who emphasizes the “modern” visual component of the raffia fabrics and overcomes the ethnographic gaze that is usually destined to them.

A final interesting curiosity concerning the *Copper Negative of Luxury Cloth* series is that two of them have been acquired by the Museo delle Civiltà (Rome). The Italian Ministry of Culture has indeed launched a funding programme, named PAC (Piano per l'Arte Contemporanea), aimed at enhancing contemporary art heritage. To do so, PAC sustains those museums and public cultural sites which wish to expand their contemporary art collection or wish to start programmes dedicated to contemporary

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<sup>127</sup> V. Schulz, *Un tappeto tra il K(C)ongo e la luna. Idee planetarie di ordinamento*, in Sammy Baloji, *K(C)ngo, Fragments of Interlaced Dialogues, Subversive Classifications*, cit.



art. Thanks to this opportunity, the Museo delle Civiltà will exhibit the negative transfer of the Kongo fabrics close to the positives they were taken from.



Ill. 10 – Sammy Baloji, *Copper Negative of Luxury Cloth. Kongo Peoples; Democratic Republic of the Congo, Republic of the Congo or Angola, Seventeenth–Eighteenth Century*, 2017. Courtesy of the Uffizi Galleries.

While admiring the wall sculptures, it is already impossible not to notice the huge installation on the adjacent room: *Gnosis* (2022) (Ill. 9). Taking inspiration from conceptual and visual model offered by the Hall of Geographical Maps in Palazzo Vecchio, commissioned by Cosimo I de Medici to Giorgio Vasari and realized between 1561 and 1565, Baloji conceived the penultimate room of the exhibition as a kind of Renaissance Wunderkammer. The Hall of Geographical Maps contains 53 geographical charts of the world as it was known at the time, painted on wooden panels by Stefano Bonsignori and Egnazio Danti, who also designed the globe in the central position in the room. In *K(C)ongo Fragments*, in collaboration with the studio Traumnovelle of Bruxelles, Baloji re-enacts and reinterprets the hall: a tall globe without geographical details and coordinates, black and reflective, in the centre of the room is surrounded by a series of world maps. Those maps, printed on forex, are provided by the foundation Afriterra, a non-profit cartographic library which collects African maps dated from 1478 to the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The 37 maps selected by Baloji and its team present portions of the African continent, considering the territories which now belong to the Democratic Republic of Congo, as they were conceived between

the 15<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century, from the Columbus Mappa Mundi attributed to Cristopher Columbus, to the maps of the Congo Free State elaborated after the Berlin Conference. The maps faintly reflect on the globe, where visitors can admire both their reflection and a new world map, constituted only by fragments of Africa. Ranging from the map of the Manicongo reign (among the 53 maps in the Old Wardrobe of Cosimo I) to the maps of Belgian Congo – presenting the principal mineral deposits in the region – the installation proves the strategic and economic centrality of the area in premodern and modern history. At the same time – reminding of the European cabinets of curiosities and Wunderkammer – the room refers to the European insatiable desire to know and define the world outside their borders, which accompanied the colonial missions starting from the Renaissance and shaped the European thought. The Hall of Geographical maps, for example, was a sort of celebration of the cosmos known at the time, with the majority of maps still based on Ptolemy’ treatise *Geography* (around AD 150). But the Hall was also a celebration of its owner. Indeed, “*Cosmo Cosmoi Cosmos*” (“Cosmos is the ornament of Cosimo”) was Cosimo’s motto, with the Greek word *kosmos* meaning “world” and “ornament” at the same time. However, European knowledge and documentation transmission of Africa were always asymmetric, privileging some information and sources over other, such as the alphabetic writing and bidimensional maps, with the conviction these could reveal minerals positions and, thus, their exploitation. While favouring similar kind of knowledge transmission, Europeans were ignoring or underestimating the potential of other means, such as the Kongo motives and patterns, which enclosed spatial knowledge similarly to maps<sup>128</sup>. The partiality of the information they gathered is testified by the several maps produced at the time, which can be admired – in their segments – also at Baloji’s exhibition. There, visitors can notice for example how, in spite of the updating by Mercatore and Gastaldi to the Ptolemaic geographic notions at the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the maps would depict African people as mutants or represent three over-dimensioned mountains at the centre of Africa: the so-called *Lunae Montes* (Mountains of the Moon), presumed to be the source of the Nile. While the reconstruction of the coasts was very reliable, thanks to the Portuguese merchants’

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<sup>128</sup> V. Schulz, *Un tappeto tra il K(C)ongo e la luna. Idee planetarie di ordinamento*, in Sammy Baloji. *K(C)ngo, Fragments of Interlaced Dialogues, Subversive Classifications*, cit. pp. 40-29.

trade activities on the coasts, the interior of Africa was very little explored and very much imagined. It was only at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, for example, that the main source of the Nile was traced back to the river Kagera, along with others. The installation title, *Gnosis*, refers to the book *The Invention of Africa. Gnosis, Philosophy, and the Order of Knowledge* (1988) by the Congolese writer YvesValentin Mudimbe. The topic of the book is Africa’s cultural construction as an idea produced both outside and inside the continent, revealing the colonial and decolonial expectations and narrations which characterised the last five hundred years<sup>129</sup>. *The Invention of Africa* – which could be compared to Said work’s *Orientalism* on Asia, North Africa and the Middle East – has been constructed on the basis of centuries of diaries, reports and accounts which constructed Africa as a stereotype, often without mentioning the consequences of colonization. Such construction has also been promoted in the African educational system. As Baloji reports, growing up in the Democratic Republic of Congo he did not learn the colonial history of his nation. And if colonialism was mentioned, it was only in relation to the Western notion of “bringing civilization” through what was presented as a philanthropic mission. Moreover, while doing research in ethnographic museums in Belgium, such as the Royal Museum for Central Africa in Tervuren, he realized that colonialism is not referred to in Belgium either, or if it is, it is discussed differently. On both sides, then, Baloji recognises a lot of storytelling<sup>130</sup>. Indeed, it is quite common to make the narration of African history coincide with the arrival of Portuguese merchants at the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> century or with the arrival of the British explorer Henry Morton Stanley around 1870. Although it did not have handwriting, though, Central Africa did have history, and it began way before European’s arrival. Baloji’s installation, then, reveals a net of relations between the two continents: starting from Florence and the Medici’s collection – containing objects and maps of every part of the worldwide – to the heart of Africa, which the artist recognises as the central point from which to reveal power mechanisms and create a visual decolonial

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<sup>129</sup> L. Cippitelli, *Classificazioni sovversive*, in *Sammy Baloji. K(C)ngo, Fragments of Interlaced Dialogues, Subversive Classifications*, cit., pp. 62-75.

<sup>130</sup> K. Vistrup Madsen, *Sammy Baloji – interview: ‘I’m not interested in colonialism as a thing of the past, but in the continuation of that system’*, in “studio international”, 2 September 2019; <https://www.studiointernational.com/sammy-baloji-im-not-interested-in-colonialism-as-a-thing-of-the-past-but-in-continuation-of-that-system> [last access on 17 December 2022]

grammar. As Baloji reported in an interview for “Studio International”, his approach to maps is about making things visible but also abstract at the same time. Indeed, among the fragments of historical geographical maps, he placed his work *Geological and Mineral Map of the Democratic Republic of Congo* (2006), where the country is presented as a kind of puzzle made of squares in different colours and sizes (Ill. 9). Such choice refers to the Scramble for Africa, which saw the continent geometrically divided among the European countries and valued only for its natural resources. With the map, the artist makes the processes of extraction and colonialism visible and shows how the materials production is socio-politically situated. At the same time, he hides things or shows them in fragments, cropping out information or the context that allows its reading. As Baloji explains, doing this operation he reproduces the colonial process, which strategically erases or conceals information, too<sup>131</sup>.



Ill. 11 – (on the left) Sammy Baloji, *Geological and Mineral Map of the Democratic Republic of Congo*, 2006; (on the right) *Gnosis*, 2022. Courtesy of the Uffizi Gallery.

<sup>131</sup> K. Vistrup Madsen, *Sammy Baloji – interview: ‘I’m not interested in colonialism as a thing of the past, but in the continuation of that system’*, cit.

The last room of the exhibition explains the motive of *The Crossing* and sums up the relationship between Europe and Africa to draw some conclusions. Entering the room, indeed, visitors may find on the lateral walls two banners, one in Italian and one in English, which recap in a sort of chronological timeline a selection of the most important events of encounter between the continents and between the Kongo and Florentine court especially, proposing again the occurrences discussed in the previous rooms. However, visitors' attention is especially drawn by the glass case in the centre of the room, exhibiting four olifants (Ill. 10). These objects are ivory horns made from elephant tusks, as the origin of the word tells (the ancient French *olifant* comes from the Latin *elephantus*). In the Middle Ages, ivory was used to produce many precious objects, among which we could find the refined olifants, whose first specimen can be traced back to the 9<sup>th</sup> century. Initially of oriental or byzantine origins, the horns were mostly adorned with animal decorations, since they were used as hunting horns or to give signals during battles and gatherings. A famous example of oliphant is conserved at the museum of the Dome of Prague and is associated to the horn Roland played Roland's horn in Roncesvalles in the *Chanson de Roland*. When Europeans penetrated the African continent, they found a great provision of both horns and skilled artisans, which initiated the European commission of horns to African craftsmen and explain their presence within Baloji's exhibition. Among the four Kongo oliphants on show, one comes from the Museo delle Civiltà di Roma while three come from the Treasury of the Grand Dukes, where they are conserved among several precious objects from all over the world – such as Chinese porcelains, Mexican masks, artefacts made of Mexican or Peruvian feathers – and constituted a kind of *Kunstkammer*, testifying to the collecting practice of the Italian elite in the early modern period. But why did the Kongo oliphants arrive at Cosimo's court? Apparently, they were sent as diplomatic gifts by King Afonso I of Kongo, the same sovereign we encountered at the beginning of the exhibition with his letter to the Portuguese monarch Manuel I. The reasons behind the sending of the oliphants, which are registered in an inventory of 1533 as property of Cosimo I, may be traced to Afonso's son consecration as bishop in 1518. But their arrival seems also related, somehow, to Cosimo's wedding to Eleanor of Toledo, daughter of the Spanish viceroy of Naples Pedro Álvarez de Toledo, perhaps as a nuptial gift to honour a marriage that would strengthen the political claims of an

ally, Cosimo I, in Florence and Tuscany. Of the oliphants which arrived in Italy, though, the only one historically ascertained is conserved at the Museo di Antropologia e Etnologia (Florence) which shows on its protective cover the coat of arms of the joint family de' Medici and Toledo, leaving no doubts about its significance.

Analysing the oliphants, experts noticed how they combine European and African features. Indeed, while the decorations and the lateral mouthpiece are Kongo (the typical European mouthpiece would be on one extreme), the supporting rings used to transport the horns are a European detail. This led experts and historians to formulate two hypotheses: either the oliphants were carved for local use but based on European examples – since horns were used in Africa as well, probably for hunts and rites – or, more probably, they were commissioned by Europeans and destined to the exportation. Since the Portuguese mediation of European artefacts seems to have had an impact on the realization of the carved horns, and given the fusion of characteristics, they have been qualified as Afro-Portuguese ivories: African objects destined to European sovereigns that acquired European details.

Observing the oliphants, visitors notice their enormous material and artistic value, being made in ivory and presenting extremely refined decorations. Apart the smooth surface of one of the three oliphants of the Treasury of the Grand Dukes (only made in the 19<sup>th</sup> century), the other oliphants of the 16<sup>th</sup> century present indeed carved and harmonious geometric motives. Those adornments make the oliphants look as if they were covered in precious raffia fabric – like the pillow covers in the previous room – with the very design that was applied in Kongo from the fabrics to every kind of material and support, including wooden objects, baskets, funerary porcelains and vases, as well as architecture and human skin, through the process of scarification. Carving ivory, the craftsmen transposed the typical low reliefs of the textile objects to the tusks, reducing their thickness with great artistry so that light could be crossed by light and create interesting visual effects. The Kongo ivory tusks, like the embroidered fabrics, are simultaneously aesthetic and epistemic artefacts, whose visual grammar manifested Kongo's knowledge and transmission<sup>132</sup>. Such decorations have been object of study since the beginning of anthropological studies and have been compared

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<sup>132</sup> C. Fromont, *Nella spirale del Congo: estetica, sapere, esposizione*, in Sammy Baloji. *K(C)ngo, Fragments of Interlaced Dialogues, Subversive Classifications*, cit. pp. 28-39.

to Celtic knots, the Greek frets or meanders, or to the ornamental schemes of Islamic objects. However, the most common terms of comparison were the Italian manufactures. Indeed, to make those objects and fabrics more decipherable by their readers, European missionaries, explorers and experts would compare them to the Italian velvet, well-known at the time. Interestingly, a visual effect similar to that of velvet is obtaining but *The Crossing*. Moreover, the long red velvety surface of the carpet has been worked to faithfully reproduce – as visitors are now able to tell – the design of the Kongo oliphants in the glass case (Ill. 11)<sup>133</sup>. Thus, taking inspiration from the oliphants' decoration and being consequently related to the fabrics and the loom, but also to the Italian craftsmanship, *The Crossing* can be read as a crucial point in the net of relations between Italy and Kongo, Europe and Africa, ethnographic objects and artworks, Renaissance and contemporary art. Spreading all over the exhibition, the carpet acts as a unifying element for visible epistemic systems which are now unreadable. In addition, the carpet confers to the Florentine Palace an aura which reminds of the ceremonies at the central African courts during the early modern period<sup>134</sup>. As it happens in every room of the exhibition, contemporary artworks – in this case *The Crossing* – dialogue with ancient works, like the oliphants. And in Baloji's exhibition, the horns are presented as artworks, too, within the same walls that hosted them as sumptuous treasures for centuries. Indeed, they have always been admired by Europeans with curiosity but also with detachment, being isolated from the context of origin, reduced to diplomatic tools, ethnographic objects, fetishes or simple decorative elements, and recognised only in their collective dimension rather than as product of individual creativity. Moreover, they could shift rapidly from a category to fit another, given the extremely variable nature concerning their classification and European narration to which they were subjected, as well as a great ambiguity concerning the objects' nature. Kongo objects, for instance, were often mistaken for Turkish or Indian in historical inventories, or the ivory they were made from was mistaken for mother-of-pearl. The same was true for objects coming from

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<sup>133</sup> V. Schulz, *Un tappeto tra il K(C)ongo e la luna. Idee planetarie di ordinamento*, in Sammy Baloji. *K(C)ngo, Fragments of Interlaced Dialogues, Subversive Classifications*, cit., pp. 40-29.

<sup>134</sup> C. Fromont, *Nella spirale del Congo: estetica, sapere, esposizione*, in Sammy Baloji. *K(C)ngo, Fragments of Interlaced Dialogues, Subversive Classifications*, cit., pp. 28-39.



all over the world and for the very Italian objects used as reference standard, too<sup>135</sup>. A proof that objects were subjected to unstable dominant narrations is also the very fact that one oliphant – the one with the Medici-Toledo coat of arms on the cover – was moved to the ethnographic museum of Florence after the re-organization of de Medici’s collection once it was acquired by the Lorena family in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The other two oliphants which are visible in the exhibition remained instead in the Treasures because they were inventoried under the “armoury” section. Displayed within a case in a context connoted as art, Baloji offers the horns to the visitors’ view as forms of art, in their formal refinement and complexity, to subvert the exoticizing and racializing gaze and, more in general, the coloniality behind the Eurocentric perspective<sup>136</sup>.



Ill. 12 – View of the last room of *K(c)ongo. Fragments of Interlaced Dialogues. Subversive Classifications*. Courtesy of the Uffizi Galleries.

<sup>135</sup> V. Schulz, *Un tappeto tra il K(C)ongo e la luna. Idee planetarie di ordinamento*, in Sammy Baloji. *K(C)ngo, Fragments of Interlaced Dialogues, Subversive Classifications*, cit., pp. 40-29.

<sup>136</sup> L. Cippitelli, *Classificazioni sovversive*, in Sammy Baloji. *K(C)ngo, Fragments of Interlaced Dialogues, Subversive Classifications*, cit., pp. 62-75.





Ill. 13 – (on the left) Detail of oliphant. Courtesy of the Uffizi Galleries.

Ill. 14 – (on the right) Detail of *The Crossing* (Sammy Baloji, 2022). Courtesy of the Uffizi Galleries.

## 2.5 A post-ethnographic museum

The exhibition *K(c)ongo. Fragments of Interlaced Dialogues. Subversive Classifications* challenges the colonial features that are evident inside ethnographic museums and in European relations to Africa. Letting his contemporary works dialogue with archival materials and African objects, the artist Sammy Baloji achieves the aim of subverting the ethnographic classifications we are used to and our notions of history, letting other readings emerge from African objects showed this time in an artistic context and from a different perspective.

Baloji's exhibition stimulates reflections that fit into the debate concerning the re-thinking of ethnographic museums, of which we saw some possibilities in relation to changes of contents, objects' display and mediation. More in general, scholars hope for a "post-ethnographic" museum and identify some characteristics it should have, linking it to re-mediation processes that go beyond the restitution and re-appropriation of plundered objects. First of all, a museum of this kind should abandon its stable and indisputable structure in favour of precarity, as much in the definitions and meanings it provides as well as in the knowledge it promotes. Such change is necessary to keep being a "public" space that represents citizens, since contemporary identities are ever more shaped by transculturation processes that are unstable by definition. Thus, the museum should be self-critical and self-reflective, available to be confronted with different perspectives and competencies even when it means putting its scientific

authority in discussion, given that “the previously established ethnographic and aesthetic distance that permitted the museum space to ‘other’ its objects is now itself othered in the elaboration of an emerging critical space”<sup>137</sup>. The post-ethnographic museum, as critical space, would probably register an increasing in the production of ethnographic and colonial knowledge, which might be linked to the contemporary identities of citizens and make them feel effectively represented and involved. When a museum renounces to its claims of scientific incontestability, it embraces vulnerability, which is one of the points individuated by Ariese and Wróblewska in *Practicing Decoloniality in Museums* (2022). This implies being open to criticism, welcoming opposing views, and letting source communities participate. Surely, openness to critiques and dissent would make the ethnographic museum more receptive towards the varying social needs and changes happening in society. The very ethnographic patrimony is the outcome of a historical and political process of acquisitions and trades, as unsteady were also the museography’ strategies of accumulation, conservation, cataloguing and exhibiting, which depended on the narrations they had to support. The narrative we are commonly taught, permeated with colonialism, is not permanent nor unquestionable. Indeed, it can be recognised and dynamically deconstructed to reveal decolonialized practices and knowledge previously unknown. A post-ethnographic museum welcomes such different perspectives and does not resolutely possess the objects it contains: objects are travellers, as we already saw. Whether a museum acquired items illegally or legally does not really count, since in the exchange objects are still subject to a historical or political negotiation. Either way, if museums were less tied to their centrality and authority, they could become places of transit and encounter, enabling intercultural dialogues and thus truly representing contemporary society<sup>138</sup>.

We need a new type of museum: one that’s not afraid to admit it doesn’t have all the answers and actually welcomes critique and dissent, that will let in a multiplicity of responses and voices without defensiveness. We need a different script on acquisition, possession and repatriation: it’s not enough to insist that

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<sup>137</sup> I. Cambers, *Introduction*, in B. Ferrara (edited by), *Cultural Memory, Migrating Modernities and the Museum Practices*, cit., p. 26.

<sup>138</sup> G. Grechi, *Decolonizzare il museo. Mostrazioni, pratiche artistiche, sguardi incarnati*, cit., pp. 31-32, 151-153.

finders are keepers, or to hide behind outdated acts that don't actually prevent the disposal of objects.<sup>139</sup>

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<sup>139</sup> A. Procter, *UK Museums Should Be Honest about Being Stuffed with Stolen Goods*, in “The Guardian”, 20 February 2019; <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/feb/20/uk-museums-honest-stolen-goods-imperialism-theft-repatriation> [last access on 20 December 2022]

### **THIRD CHAPTER – Kehinde Wiley. *An Archaeology of Silence* (2022) at Fondazione Giorgio Cini for the 59<sup>th</sup> International Art Exhibition of the Venice Biennale**

The African American artist Kehinde Wiley and his collateral exhibition at the Venice Biennale will be the focus of attention of this last chapter. However, in order to understand the several layers of meaning of the exhibition – as well as of Wiley’s artistic practice in general – a necessary premise needs to be made. Indeed, Wiley’s artworks could be considered not simply as the artist’s challenge and response to extremely contemporary issues regarding race and representation, but also as a reaction to the very socio-historical processes that shaped the traditional iconography of black people. Since the very first encounter of Europeans with new territories and “Other” cultures, written reports and visual representations have been crucial for the newcomers to try to comprehend and make sense of what they saw. Their attention was particularly drawn to the Other body, which was observed, studied in its context of origin but also exhibited in Europe and America in occasion of World Exhibitions and Expos and similar public events. Body representation – charged with stereotypes – was useful to fix a difference between the colonizers and the colonized and to justify colonization, slavery and the subjugation of people<sup>140</sup>. The use of the black body representation was therefore crucial to legitimize unbalanced relations of power and to justify the control over the colonized. Such situation reflected in art history, where black bodies were excluded from more official and privileged forms of representation – if not included in a submissive and marginal role – and depicted instead by cartoonists and illustrators in extremely stereotyped portraits that accentuated their physical difference from the colonizers. As far as African art is concerned, many art movements of the first part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century devoted a fetishist interest to African masks and sculptures, although “primitive” art was still considered from a Eurocentric perspective and in view of the creative inspiration it could provide to traditional Western art<sup>141</sup>. Gradually, in time, the influence of the cultural and postcolonial studies, along with the human rights movements and the direct participation of black artists and activists in the socio-political discourse managed to challenge the

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<sup>140</sup> G. Grechi, *La rappresentazione incorporata*, Milano: Mimesis edizioni, 2016, pp. 78-79.

<sup>141</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 124.

stereotypes and beliefs behind black people's representation. Several black artists working since the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century engaged indeed in counteracting the dominant visual discourses, opposing the rooted colonial stereotypes in creative ways. In this view, we will analyse briefly a performance held in 1992 by Cuban artist Coco Fusco and a more contemporary exhibition by Afro-American artist Simon Leigh in 2022, before focusing our attention on Kehinde Wiley's approach. Artistically active since the early 2000s, Wiley engages with such historical legacy and with the production of stereotypes in an extremely original way. Indeed, by occupying the master visual codes of classical art – especially portraiture from the 18<sup>th</sup> century – and ascribing new meanings to it, the artist reveals the arrogance of celebrative art of the past and the power imbalance hidden behind it, as we will learn in the following sections.

### **3.1. The black body in colonial and artistic representations**

#### **3.1.1. The colonial interest for the “Other”**

In the previous chapter, in relation to Sammy Baloji's practice, we analysed and questioned the classificatory role of museums in supporting the Eurocentric ambition to organize knowledge, to affirm European identity and superiority in comparison to those cultures considered “Other”, and to ultimately justify the occupation and ruling of territories and their inhabitants. However, such process of classification has not been confined only within museums' walls or exclusively dedicated to ethnographic objects: it is important to acknowledge, indeed, that such attitude was also applied to human bodies – dead or alive – which were described, studied and considered as ethnographic objects themselves since the very beginning of the geographical explorations of the early modern period<sup>142</sup>. Starting from the 15<sup>th</sup> century and for the whole Renaissance period, explorations' reports and travel journey were filled with imaginative descriptions of the new territories and their native populations. Interestingly, to narrate the novelty of what they saw in front of them, voyagers and explorers appealed on the descriptive categories they already owned, thus organizing and translating what was new to them into familiar and recognisable images (relying

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<sup>142</sup> H. Lidchi, *The Poetics and the Politics of Exhibiting Other Cultures*, in S. Hall, *Representation: Cultural Representation and Signifying Practices*, London: The Open University, 1997, p. 199.

for example on representations taken from Greek-Roman myths still used in the Medieval era)<sup>143</sup>. A similar approach already revealed a narcissist, projective, and imaginative process of invention of the Other<sup>144</sup>, relying on descriptions which appeared to be more telling of the observer's culture of origin rather than of the newly encountered culture. An example of this kind may be retraced in one of the various stereotypes Europe produced in the occasion of its encounter with diversity: the myth of the "noble savage". The customs and traditions of the "savages" were indeed immediately associated to those of the European ancestors, and therefore positively evaluated and idealized<sup>145</sup>. The absence of private property, clothes, relations of subordinations, and sexual or religious taboos, for example, draw these populations closer to an epoch perceived by the explorers as a golden age irremediably gone for Europe. However, as philosopher Cvetan Todorov noticed, the exotic representations of the noble savage proceeded by negation or overturning of characteristics attributable to Europeans<sup>146</sup>. As such, the representation of the Other was completely and exclusively dependent on the relationship to the observer, mirroring the author's society of provenance more than the one described. The positive myth of the noble savage, dominant between the 16<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century, was accompanied by and alternated to more derogative representations – that of the "cannibals", for example – which in time became functional to justify the wider process of occupation of the territories and the submission of local peoples<sup>147</sup>. More in general, we could consider the first explorers' written and visual forms of narration to have somehow influenced the mode of representation of the indigenous bodies – which was crucial in the process of othering – until the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Over time, such accounts and narrations deriving from the direct encounter with the native populations of newly "discovered" territories were integrated with exhibition practices of colonized bodies in Europe. Indeed, places and events like Freak Shows, World Exhibitions, anthropo-zoological gardens and museums enabled citizen of the colonizing countries to get acquainted with people from the colonies. However, even before being shown at the Freak Shows, the bodies considered to be "monstruous" (with genetical or physical mutilations or

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<sup>143</sup> G. Grechi, *La rappresentazione incorporata*, cit., p. 71.

<sup>144</sup> G. Grechi, *La rappresentazione incorporata*, cit., p. 71.

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 76-77.

<sup>146</sup> C. Todorov, *Noi e gli altri. La riflessione francese sulla diversità umana*, Einaudi, 1991.

<sup>147</sup> G. Grechi, *La rappresentazione incorporata*, cit., pp. 78-79.

signed by racial or ethnic difference) were already exhibited at the circus, at the fair or during popular festivals, arousing a mixed feeling of repulsion and curiosity in the viewers<sup>148</sup>. Such contradictory emotions participate in the ambivalent concept of monster: in its etymological meaning, the Latin *monstrum* has nor a value-based neither a moral connotation, since it rather describes the appearance of something prodigious which, while showing itself, generates wonder and shock at once<sup>149</sup>. Until the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the monstrous body is either considered as proof of God’s wrath or as a trick of nature, and it is right in its combination of what is impossible and what is prohibited that its fascination lies, granting it the access to collections and museums of curiosities during the Enlightenment<sup>150</sup>. During the 19<sup>th</sup> century, along with the birth of new scientific disciplines (such as Genetics), the exhibition of those “anormal” bodies was deemed as an occasion for scientists to study their physical deformities and frame them into well-defined pathologies, shifting what was formerly considered as a prodigy of God or a trick of nature into a scientific object of study<sup>151</sup>. Moreover, the possibility to observe “primitive” people closely influenced also the newly born discipline of anthropology of the mid-1850s. These authentic living “specimens” carried on their bodies the traces of gone cultures and were therefore considered as survival evidence to be analysed<sup>152</sup>. However, in spite of the scientific elaboration of body diversity, the anormal body kept the visual meaning condensed in *monstrum*, and both the anormal and the racialized bodies became icons of deviation for their irreducible and well evident corporeal diversity. Moreover, these bodies functioned as a mirror for the modern European citizen who, experiencing the deviancy of the bodies exhibited, was reassured of his/her belonging to normality, intended in universal terms<sup>153</sup>.

One of the most remarkable occasions when citizen could make such experience of the diverse body was represented by Universal Exhibitions. Along with a colonial narrative that presented colonized countries as underdeveloped both at a cultural and technological level – as it was already visible at *The Great Exhibition of the Works of*

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<sup>148</sup> G. Grechi, *Decolonizzare il museo. Mostrazioni, pratiche artistiche, sguardi incarnati*, cit., p. 49.

<sup>149</sup> <https://www.treccani.it/vocabolario/monstrum/>

<sup>150</sup> G. Grechi, *Decolonizzare il museo. Mostrazioni, pratiche artistiche, sguardi incarnati*, cit., p. 49.

<sup>151</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 50.

<sup>152</sup> H. Lidchi, *The Poetics and the Politics of Exhibiting Other Cultures*, cit., pp. 195-196.

<sup>153</sup> G. Grechi, *Decolonizzare il museo. Mostrazioni, pratiche artistiche, sguardi incarnati*, cit., p. 51.

*Industry of All Nations* at the Crystal Palace of London in 1851 – these events were also crucial in shaping the perception and representation of colonized bodies in the mind of the European public. Indeed, if at the *Exposition Universelle* held in Paris in 1867 colonial subjects were employed as service workers, since the edition of 1889 non-European subjects firstly began to be displayed to the public gaze, thus inaugurating a convention which lasted until the mid-1920s<sup>154</sup>. Within the exhibitions, these people were placed inside reconstructed and enclosed “authentic” villages and asked to re-enact their everyday life to provide the audience with the illusion of being transported in remote places worldwide. Indeed, these villages were not particularly accurate from an ethnographic perspective, rather aiming at evoking an exotic atmosphere, evident also in the “typical” activities these indigenous groups were told to perform in front of the visitors, such as dances, rituals, hunting or war activities<sup>155</sup>. Within the exhibition, narration strategies were adopted to exhibit and order artefacts and people in an evolutionary way, for instance by displaying different villages according to their presumed positions at different steps of the history of human development<sup>156</sup>. Moreover, the practices concerning the representation and exhibition of human beings was constantly subject to changes and adjustments, according to the different phases of colonialism. Indeed, if until the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the objectives of the colonial narratives were aimed at legitimizing the civilizing mission through representations of the Other as “savage”, with the new century the colonial discourse presented the savage as “civilized indigenous”, to testify the positive outcome of the colonial mission and to get the public acquainted with the products and resources provided by the colonial domains<sup>157</sup>. An additional characteristic in the representation of those other cultures, retraceable since the very first encounters, consisted in taking a single individual as representative for an entire culture. Much like it happened also for collected objects within museums and exhibitions, by isolating a subject from its context of origin and consequently inserting it into a different “order”, it would come to symbolize an abstract totality<sup>158</sup>. An eloquent example is provided by Saartjie Baartman, a South African woman from the Khoikhoi tribe who was

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<sup>154</sup> H. Lidchi, *The Poetics and the Politics of Exhibiting Other Cultures*, cit., pp. 195-196.

<sup>155</sup> G. Grechi, *Decolonizzare il museo. Mostrazioni, pratiche artistiche, sguardi incarnati*, cit., p. 60.

<sup>156</sup> H. Lidchi, *The Poetics and the Politics of Exhibiting Other Cultures*, cit., p. 196.

<sup>157</sup> G. Grechi, *Decolonizzare il museo. Mostrazioni, pratiche artistiche, sguardi incarnati*, cit., p. 62.

<sup>158</sup> G. Grechi, *La rappresentazione incorporata*, cit., pp. 83-84.



already exhibited to public scrutiny many years before the display of non-European people at the World Exhibitions. Indeed, Baartman was brought to England in 1810, where she became known as the “Hottentot Venus”. After her arrival in Europe, she was regularly exhibited in Freak in Shows London and Paris, as a representative of her tribe of origin. In those “performances”, which attracted a considerable audience, she was ordered to come and go from her cage to reach a raised stage where she was meant to be observed, just like a wild animal<sup>159</sup>. While in England, Baartman learnt English (she was already fluent in Dutch, having worked as slave for a Boer family in South Africa), was baptized and got married to an African man, before dying of smallpox in 1815<sup>160</sup>. Thanks to the shows where she was exhibited, she became popular amongst the general public and was mentioned and depicted in illustrations, cartoons, ballads or newspaper reports. At the same time, her body attracted the curiosity of naturalists and ethnologists, who studied every detail of her anatomy, both when she was alive and after her death, and who measured and produced moulds and casts of her peculiar corporeal features. To raise interest in the body of Saartjie, along with her short stature (she was around 137 cm tall), was especially the steatopygia – a genetic condition which leads to the accumulation of adipose tissue in the buttock area – and her enlarged labia, caused by the manipulation of the genitalia, commonly practiced among the Hottentot people<sup>161</sup>. In the anthropological and medical study of diverse bodies such as that of Saartjie Baartman, the photographic medium played a key role. Indeed, apart from being the industrial bourgeoisie’s tool for representing its identity, photography represented a crucial tool in the medical and criminal field for cataloguing deviant bodies, as it was essential in the anthropological studies and in the overall colonial experience to build ethnographic visual archives that were useful to classify and exhibit – and thus possess – the objects and bodies considered Other<sup>162</sup>. When used in anthropological studies during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the photographic medium was combined with physical measurements and directed especially towards corporeality,

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<sup>159</sup> S. Hall, *The Spectacle of the “Other”*, in *Representation: Cultural Representation and Signifying Practices*, cit., p. 264.

<sup>160</sup> C. Elkins, *A Life Exposed*, in “The New York Times”, 14 January 2007; <https://www.nytimes.com/2007/01/14/books/review/Elkins.t.html> [last access on 25 January 2023]

<sup>161</sup> J. Parkinson, *The significance of Sarah Baartman*, in “BBC Magazine”, 7 January 2016; <https://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-35240987> [last access on 14 February 2023]

<sup>162</sup> G. Grechi, *La rappresentazione incorporata*, cit., p. 85.

to detect the difference in racial traits and thus increase scientific credibility to the biological notion of race<sup>163</sup>. At that time, photographs of racialized people were taken in decontextualized locations, such as the recreated villages within the Universal Exhibition, zoological gardens or on photographic backgrounds – which were equipped with scenic objects, costumes and accessories to increase the authenticity of the image according to a completely stereotyped consideration of the Other<sup>164</sup>. Moreover, to assert the objectivity of the representation, the authorship of the photos had to be concealed, as well as the represented subjects needed to undergo a process of negation or objectification to become representative of an entire culture, being identified in the accompanying captions simply through general labels or by their country of origin<sup>165</sup>.

The photographic reproduction of such ethnographic photos facilitated the circulation of postcards and cabinet cards beyond the scientific field, granting the bourgeoisie a convenient way of experiencing diversity within their domestic walls<sup>166</sup>. The reasons behind the wide circulation of such postcards might be linked to the industrial bourgeoisie's desire to affirm and represent its identity while recognizing its distance from who was considered different, but it could also be associated to the attempt to enhance tourism to the colonies and to the more general aim of supporting the civilizing mission. Indeed, the circulating postcards promoted tourism through images of unspoiled and savage natural landscapes, on which idealized and virtuous colonized people – responding to the stereotype of the noble savage – reproduced their everyday activities<sup>167</sup>. At the same time, the “primitive” landscapes promoted the necessity to bring civilization to these territories. Through their small size, the portable postcards and cabinet cards were ideal objects to be collected, responding to the desire to possess and control the image of the Other<sup>168</sup>. Therefore, while black portrayed subjects had no decisional autonomy over their own representation – being the postcards taken

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<sup>163</sup> Ibid., pp. 87-88.

<sup>164</sup> Ibid., p. 89.

<sup>165</sup> G. Grechi, *La rappresentazione incorporata*, cit., p. 89.

<sup>166</sup> Ibid., p. 93.

<sup>167</sup> *Simone Leigh. Sovereignty*, exhibition pamphlet of the USA pavilion (Venezia, 59. Esposizione Internazionale d'arte, La Biennale di Venezia, 23 April – 27 November 2022), p. 8.

<sup>168</sup> G. Grechi, *La rappresentazione incorporata*, cit., p. 94.

without their full consent<sup>169</sup> – such power was in the hands of those taking and possessing the images.

### **3.1.2. The instrumental use of body representation to build unbalanced power relations**

The lack of autonomy over their representation, however, is simply a symptom of black colonized people's loss of control over their bodies in favour of the colonizers, since they underwent a process of dehumanization, mutilation, and exile from their bodies as soon as they were enslaved and brought to the New World<sup>170</sup>. By systematically negating their human attributes, colonialism aimed at making the colonized people interiorize their racial inferiority and to continuously question their identity starting from a corporeal perspective<sup>171</sup>. On the matter, the Cuban American artist and writer Coco Fusco wrote that “black people's entry into the symbolic order of Western culture hinged on the theft of their bodies, the severing of will from their bodies, the reduction of their bodies to things, and the transformation of their sexuality into an expression of otherness”<sup>172</sup>. Owning and controlling colonized subjects responded to the perceived colonizers' duty to prevent the otherwise inevitable decline of their way of living and to tame their minds along with their sexually driven bodies<sup>173</sup>. To accomplish such objectives, the colonial power has based its relationship to the Other on violence and coercion, enhancing a discipling system to control and assure the productivity of the colonized bodies<sup>174</sup> which was supported – via explorers' reports, human beings' exhibitions, and photographs – at the level of representation. Indeed, as we already discussed, the process of colonization of territories and peoples has always been sustained by an epistemic coloniality, working at the level of knowledge and meaning production to legitimize such violent colonial practices. The relation between power and knowledge has arguably been most supported by the French philosopher Michel Foucault: seeing the two concepts as inseparable, he coined the joint term power/knowledge, as he discusses for example in *History of Sexuality*

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<sup>169</sup> Simone Leigh, *Sovereignty*, cit.

<sup>170</sup> C. Fusco, *The Bodies That Were Not Ours And Other Writings*, London: Routledge, 2001, p.5.

<sup>171</sup> G. Grechi, *La rappresentazione incorporata*, cit., p. 103.

<sup>172</sup> C. Fusco, *The Bodies That Were Not Ours And Other Writings*, cit., p. 5.

<sup>173</sup> A. Mbembe in G. Grechi, *La rappresentazione incorporata*, cit., p. 99.

<sup>174</sup> Ibid.

(1976). The close correlation between the two terms lies, according to the philosopher, on the consideration that knowledge is possible within a system of power relations that legitimizes it while that very system is being itself legitimized by such knowledge<sup>175</sup>. Theorists such as Professor Annie Coombes and anthropologist Burton Benedict took the discussion further by relating power and visibility, of which we may consider the human beings' displays at the International Exhibitions between the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century as a compelling example<sup>176</sup>. Indeed, in order to understand these events, the public had to attend the exhibitions while already in possession of a specific knowledge diffused by the representations found in photographs, postcards or inside museums. In other words, people participating in these exhibitions were already situated within a specific "geography of power", where the showcase of human beings was ultimately a useful display of power imbalance to legitimize the European presumption of imperial superiority<sup>177</sup>. Arguably, then, the presentation of these "authentic" villages and peoples could be considered as a socio-historical process strongly related to the representation of peoples and ethnographic objects within museums; a bond that is even clearer considering that the very ethnographic collections displayed at the exhibitions, as well as the displayed people's photographs, were often included in ethnographical collections and museums' archives<sup>178</sup>. However, in addition to the analysed relation between power and visibility, it is also possible to trace a connection between power, representation and difference which is well evident in the use of stereotypes. Indeed, if at the symbolic level power is exercised to represent things and people in ways that support the colonial agenda, stereotyping represents a functional practice to commit symbolic violence<sup>179</sup>. As it has been claimed by Edward Said in *Orientalism* (1978), through different forms of representation (comprising exhibitions, literature, paintings, etc.) a discourse encourages a racialized knowledge of the Other that is embedded in power relations; since these power relations involve everyone, such discourse affects both the colonized and the colonizers, although

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<sup>175</sup> *Power/knowledge - Michel Foucault - Social Theory Rewired*;

<https://routledgesoc.com/category/profile-tags/powerknowledge> [last access on 26 January 2023]

<sup>176</sup> H. Lidchi, *The Poetics and the Politics of Exhibiting Other Cultures*, cit., p. 195.

<sup>177</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 196-197.

<sup>178</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>179</sup> S. Hall, *The Spectacle of the "Other"*, in *Representation: Cultural Representation and Signifying Practices*, cit., p. 259.

unequally. In the context of representation, stereotypes serve right the purpose of drawing the boundary between colonized and colonizers – “deviant” and “normal”, “outsiders” and “insiders” – in which the lessened term of comparison evidently carries a negative connotation that justifies its exclusion in order to preserve the symbolic and social order<sup>180</sup>. Stereotypes work by reducing a category of people (or things) to a few essential characteristics, providing an oversimplified image of them that eventually becomes fixed<sup>181</sup>, while at the same time naturalizing and fixing a difference. The circulation of popular stereotyped representations of black people started right in the 16<sup>th</sup> century with the first contacts between Europeans and African and the beginning of slavery trades, and it continued in time, although being subject to changes and shifts in meaning according to the intention of the dominant colonial discourse in different periods of history. Representing black people by means of stereotyped caricatures was an extremely common practice among cartoonists and illustrators, who sketched black subjects reducing them to a few physical connotations of difference<sup>182</sup>. Along with their body, their attitude was stereotyped and reduced to their essence, too. The most common characteristics associated with black people in general, as a race, were laziness, servitude, loyalty towards the white household and puerility, and such stereotyped caricatures – which survived for a long time – could be found also in the American mainstream cinema from the 1930s, considering for instance the subordinated appearance of black actors playing the part of servants, loyal attendants and domestics<sup>183</sup>. In addition, another stereotyped image associated both to black men and women concerned their apparently exaggerated sexual appetite. In the case of women, such stereotype was associated to the common practice of commodifying their bodies, thinking for instance about the slave auctions where they stood on blocks for public scrutiny, or about the obsessive interest towards the Hottentus Venus’ body, whose prominent forms were considered as an unconfutable proof of a deviated sexuality closer to that of an animal than of a human being<sup>184</sup>. The attention and

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<sup>180</sup> S. Hall, *The Spectacle of the “Other”*, in *Representation: Cultural Representation and Signifying Practices*, cit., p. 258.

<sup>181</sup> <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/stereotype>

<sup>182</sup> S. Hall, *The Spectacle of the “Other”*, in *Representation: Cultural Representation and Signifying Practices*, cit., p. 249.

<sup>183</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 245, 252.

<sup>184</sup> b. hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation*, Boston: South End Press, 1992, pp. 61- 63.

treatment reserved to Saartje Baartman could be considered exemplary of the perception of black women's bodies in the eyes of white colonizers.

The colonial and slavery history shaped black masculinity's representation as well, considering how white masters deprived the male slaves of authority, property ownership and responsibility towards their families. Denied of their parental and familiar duties, black men underwent a process of "infantilization" which could be interpreted both as a symbolic "castration" of black men, dispossessing them of the masculine attributes, and also as a response to the feared-but-fantasized excessive sexual appetite attributed by white people to black men (and women)<sup>185</sup>. As claimed by bell hooks, we could retrace in white racism a "tension between the construction of black male body as danger and the underlying eroticization of that threat that always then images that body as a location for transgressive pleasure"<sup>186</sup>. The luxurious character of black men was perceived as a menace not merely for white women (presumed rape was the main reason behind the beatings of black men in the USA's Southern states until the 1950s) but for civilization itself<sup>187</sup>. As a reaction to the dispossession of their masculinity and the violent subordination they were subjected to, black men appropriated the counteractive patriarchal values of physical strength and sexual bravery, adopting a "macho" behaviour that could help them recovering some degree of control with respect to their dependent and impotent condition to the white master<sup>188</sup>. However, the incorporation of a counteractive aggressive attitude, of a hyper-masculinity, and an emphasized sexuality only seemed to affirm the white stereotype of black people's overtly sexual and uncontrollable nature. As sociologist and activist Stuart Hall claimed,

The important point is that stereotypes refer as much to what is imagined in fantasy as to what is perceived as 'real'. And what is visually produced by the practices of representation, is only half the story. The other half – the deeper meaning – lies in what is not being said, but is being fantasized, what is implied but cannot be shown<sup>189</sup>.

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<sup>185</sup> S. Hall, *The Spectacle of the "Other"*, in *Representation: Cultural Representation and Signifying Practices*, cit., p. 262.

<sup>186</sup> b. hooks, *Art On My Mind: Visual Politics*, cit., p. 205.

<sup>187</sup> S. Hall, *The Spectacle of the "Other"*, in *Representation: Cultural Representation and Signifying Practices*, cit., p. 262.

<sup>188</sup> b. hooks, *Art On My Mind: Visual Politics*, cit., p. 206.

<sup>189</sup> S. Hall, *The Spectacle of the "Other"*, in *Representation: Cultural Representation and Signifying Practices*, cit., pp. 262-263.

Since the logic of representation acts simultaneously at the conscious and unconscious level, those people trapped in a stereotype risk of unknowingly validating it while trying to contrast it<sup>190</sup>. Moreover, the categories of people who differ from the majority are commonly subjected to a binary representation which depicts them using opposite extremes – such as civilized/primitive, repulsive/attractive – at the same time<sup>191</sup>. The opposition “cannibals”/“noble savages” we already commented could also be an example of such mechanism. The double meaning implied in a representation makes fighting against stereotypes quite problematic, given the fact that black people can simultaneously be represented as childish and oversexed, for example. As such, stereotypes, along with other forms of representations we analysed, were useful to sustain the narrative of the presumed biological inferiority of black people, ultimately fixing difference and legitimizing people’s exploitation, display and colonial subordination in the framework of imbalanced power relations.

### **3.1.3. The representation of the black body in art**

Before exploring Kehinde Wiley’s artistic approach to the depiction of the black body, it is perhaps useful to learn how it has been represented in art by the main artistic currents of the last century and which changes it underwent depending on the surrounding social and historical context.

Starting from the very beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, still in the context of the public exhibition of colonial objects and subjects, a great interest was devoted in the artistic field to “primitive” art. Indeed, those forms of art which did not comply with the European academic canons and generally accepted aesthetics – in particular the art produced by children, mentally ill, and “primitive” people – were praised as renovating sources of inspiration for the naturalist and symbolist traditional European art of the time: given the shared idea that these subjects positioned themselves between civilization and barbarism, they were deemed able to reach a “pure” and “authentic” source of artistic creativity<sup>192</sup>. The modernist artists’ fascination for the primordial force of African sculptures and objects reached its climax with the *négrophilie* of the

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<sup>190</sup> S. Hall, *The Spectacle of the “Other”*, in *Representation: Cultural Representation and Signifying Practices*, cit., p. 263.

<sup>191</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 229.

<sup>192</sup> G. Grechi, *La rappresentazione incorporata*, cit., pp. 121-123.

1920s and 1930s: it spread in high culture places, like museums and exhibitions, as well as in popular culture venues like variety shows and theatres, where for instance the black singer and dancer Josephine Baker, one century after the displays of the Hottentot Venus, moved “savagely” to the rhythm of jazz<sup>193</sup>. Indeed, as argued by Coco Fusco, along with “primitive” forms of art, the black body was perceived as another source of unconventional energy that could revitalize the excessively rational but spiritually empty white society<sup>194</sup>. Moreover, such understanding of black people as more in contact with their bodies and feelings, or as permeated with vitalism, magic and rhythm, might be considered to have influenced modernists and ethnographers of the time, but more in general European and American avantgarde practices throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Considering for instance the Dadaist and Surrealist movements of the beginning of the century, those qualities of the black body were praised as a medium to explore unconscious mental processes, in an antirationalist perspective<sup>195</sup>. Both avantgardes entered also in direct relation with ethnography: while the Dadaist photomontages contested the alleged universal reading of textual iconographic meanings – and thus criticized the mechanisms of representation and significance – surrealism considered culture as a historical and contextual construction which could be confronted with other systems, for example by adopting the alternative perspectives of different cultures, even though the basis of its approach and poetics remained ethnocentric<sup>196</sup>. Still, together with the *négritude* movement of the 1940s and 1950s, Surrealism might be considered as one of the first movements to include the ethnographic approach in the artworld, in spite of the limits of both movements in exploring and radically re-evaluating otherness<sup>197</sup>. After the wars for the formal decolonisation, in the 1960s and 1970s it became clear that the Other was reclaiming and autonomously producing cultural and political representations of its own<sup>198</sup>, whose scope could be found also in the artistic representation. As far as the black artists’ representation of the black body is concerned, we could consider their approach to have changed throughout the century. Indeed, in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century art historical

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<sup>193</sup> G. Grechi, *La rappresentazione incorporata*, cit., p. 124.

<sup>194</sup> C. Fusco, *The Bodies That Were Not Ours And Other Writings*, cit., p. 9.

<sup>195</sup> Ibid.

<sup>196</sup> G. Grechi, *La rappresentazione incorporata*, cit., pp. 127-130.

<sup>197</sup> Ibid., p. 134.

<sup>198</sup> b. hooks, *Art On My Mind: Visual Politics*, cit., p. 202-203.



studies found a reticence towards the sculpting and painting of nudes in African-American art, which could be certainly due to the collective experience of enslavement, exploitation and public display of black bodies at the auction blocks and during the punitive practices of lynching<sup>199</sup>. In the 1960s and 1970s, instead, the newly-born social movements – such as Black Power and Women’s Liberation Movement – had a crucial role in underling the potentiality of the body as an instrument of power<sup>200</sup>. We could think for example of the several black male athletes, such as the boxers Joe Louis and Jack Johnson, who used their bodies as political symbols of resistance against white supremacy in the sport competitions of the 1960s (before losing their subversive potential the following decade, when their bodies were used to sell products in television commercials)<sup>201</sup>. In general, we could say that the shared idea between different movements of those years was centred on the revindication of a positive African-ness in opposition to the negative stereotypes, whereas in the following decades the influence of the cultural and postcolonial studies led to a greater awareness of the stratified complexity behind the construction of social identity<sup>202</sup>. Therefore, Afro-American artists working from the 1980s began to treat the racial question in diasporic terms and from an ethnographic perspective, analysing the racialization of the Other through stereotyped body representations and questioning scientific representations of difference<sup>203</sup>. Coco Fusco and Simon Leigh, who began their artistic careers between the 1980s and 1990s, are two examples of female artists which interrogate the question of identity and race in similar terms and deal with the colonial exhibition practices and devices we analysed. This could be observed for instance in a well-known performance of the first artist – *Two Undiscovered Amerindians Visit the West* – held for the first time in Madrid in 1992 together with artist and performer Guillermo Gomez-Peña and replicated several times in different countries and contexts. Recalling the colonial exhibitions of the colonized subjects, the artists impersonated two inhabitants of the fictional island of Guatinaus closed in a cage and dressed in costumes that mixed contemporary clothes (branded sneakers and sunglasses) to “tribal” elements. The performance was based on public

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<sup>199</sup> C. Fusco, *The Bodies That Were Not Ours And Other Writings*, cit., p. 5.

<sup>200</sup> b. hooks, *Art On My Mind: Visual Politics*, cit., p. 202.

<sup>201</sup> Ibid., 207.

<sup>202</sup> G. Grechi, *La rappresentazione incorporata*, cit., pp. 142.

<sup>203</sup> G. Grechi, *La rappresentazione incorporata*, cit., pp. 142-143.

interaction, since the two characters would dance or pose for photographs in exchange for a little money, ironically representing the Western attitude towards the exotic Other<sup>204</sup>. A more recent example might instead be provided by the Afro-American artist Simon Leigh, who has been the first black woman to represent the USA at the 59<sup>th</sup> International exhibition of the Venice Biennale in 2022 with her *Sovereignty* exhibition. Starting from the USA pavilion's exterior – which she covered with a thatched roof reminding the 1930s West-African buildings re-enacted at the Paris Colonial Exhibition of 1931 – the artist referred at different levels and through different artworks to the traditional Western representation of the feminine black body, for example through bronze sculptures reproducing the stereotype of the Jamaican black laundress which filled colonial postcards of the 19<sup>th</sup> century to enhance tourism in the Anglophone Caribbean colonies<sup>205</sup>. In the same context of the Venice Biennale of 2022 exhibited his works also Kehinde Wiley, exploring the issues of identity, race, power and gender.

### **3.2. Kehinde Wiley: life and artistic practice**

A world-renowned visual artist, Kehinde Wiley works with the mediums of painting, sculpture and video and his works challenge and re-orient historical narratives concerning black people's representation in art. Born in Los Angeles in 1977, he is currently based in New York City and has studios there, in Dakar and Lagos. His father belongs to the Ibibio people of southern Nigeria while his mother is Afro-American. Of his childhood in California, Wiley recalls several visits to the Huntington Art Collections in San Marino, where he encountered the old masters' paintings and sculptures representing privileged white aristocratic lives that were far from his own lived experience and his Nigerian and African-American heritage<sup>206</sup>. In one of these occasions, the view of the portrait *The Blue Boy* (1770) (Ill. 15) by Thomas Gainsborough was crucial for his future artistic direction. Although the identity of the young sitter has never been clearly identified, we would expect the boy to come from

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<sup>204</sup> Ibid., pp. 139-140.

<sup>205</sup> F. Merz, *La storia di Simone Leigh, Leone d'oro alla Biennale di Venezia*, in "Artribune", 6 May 2022; <https://www.artribune.com/professionisti-e-professionisti/who-is-who/2022/05/storia-simone-leigh-leone-doro-biennale-di-venezias/> [last access on 29 January 2023]

<sup>206</sup> C. Riding, *Kehinde Wiley: A Prelude*, in *Kehinde Wiley at the National Gallery: A Prelude*, exhibition catalogue (London, The National Gallery, 10 December 2020 – 18 April 2021), London: National Gallery Company Ltd., 2021, p. 10.

a wealthy or noble family, given the fine and elegant blue clothes he wears. However, the most probable hypothesis supported by art historical studies would identify the standing boy as a humble son of a carpenter<sup>207</sup>. Therefore, the lesson Wiley learned at the time was that old masters’ “language” could assign status and fame on their subjects regardless of their origins and social backgrounds. Years later, in 2021, Wiley made direct reference to Gainsborough’s painting in *A Portrait of a Young Gentleman* (Ill. 16), directly inspired from *The Blue Boy*.



Ill. 15 – (on the left) Thomas Gainsborough, *The Blue Boy*, 1770, oil on canvas, 178 x 112 cm, The Huntington Library, Art Museum, and Botanical Gardens (California).

Ill. 16 – (on the right) Kehinde Wiley, *A Portrait of a Young Gentleman*, 2021, oil on linen, 179.1 x 124.8 cm, The Huntington Library, Art Museum, and Botanical Gardens (California).

When he was eleven years old, Wiley took art classes at a conservatory at California State University and participated in a six-week art program in a conservatory of art outside St. Petersburg (Russia) where he developed his passion for portraiture. After graduating at the Los Angeles County High School for the Arts, he earned a Bachelor (1999) and a Master (2001) in Fine Arts respectively at the San Francisco Art Institute and at the School of Art at Yale University. Soon after, he became an artist-in-residence at the Studio Museum in Harlem (New York), where he had the chance to

<sup>207</sup> C. Riding, *Kehinde Wiley: A Prelude*, cit., p. 10.

put in practice the lesson he had once learnt in his childhood's cultural visits and where he began to paint his now famous portraits. Indeed, at the time of his residency in Harlem he found a crumpled mugshot of a black man in his twenties – discarded by the New York City Police Department – which struck him for the depersonalisation and negative connotations the photo assigned to the man<sup>208</sup>. Finding the photo on the street changed his understanding of portraiture and let him reflect on the portrayal of black men in the world, inspiring his paintings *Conspicuous Fraud Series* (2001) and the film project *Smile* of the same year. Years later, in *Mugshot Study* (2006), Wiley revisited and portrayed the actual suspect without the basic personal information shown in the mugshot. He translated the small photography into an oil painting – a typical medium of Western art and training – in the attempt to restore the man's dignity and individuality<sup>209</sup>. The empowering potential of historic portraiture he had learnt from *The Blue Boy*, compared to the depersonalisation of the black guy in the mugshot, led Wiley to adopt the practice of the street casting, inviting 18- to 25-year-old black men from the streets of Harlem to pose for him. The result of such casting is visible in the series *Passing/Posing* (2001-2004), which led also to his first solo show under the same title at the Hoffman Gallery in Chicago in 2002, followed by *Faux Real* (2003). The main objectives behind the artistic features he adopted at the time address the imbalance of power and lack of self-determination in images portraying black people – in police mugshots, for example – but also their involuntary inclusion as peripheral figures in several historical paintings, where they are portrayed as servants or enslaved people<sup>210</sup>. For these first series, Wiley selected people with attitude from the streets and let them select historical artworks to re-stage focusing on the poses and gestures. A photograph was then made of the sitters which could be later adapted or photoshopped. The result showed male and female heroes, saints and prophets of Old Master paintings re-enacted by young black men in hip-hop clothing. Hence, we may recognise the combination of historic art and contemporary culture as a key feature of Wiley's practice that creates, according to some commentators, a balance between unlikely poles, such as irony and enthusiasm or politics and decoration<sup>211</sup>. The

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<sup>208</sup> C. Riding, *Kehinde Wiley: A Prelude*, cit., p. 11.

<sup>209</sup> NPR Staff, *The Exquisite Dissonance Of Kehinde Wiley*, 22 May 2015; <https://www.npr.org/2015/05/22/408558234/the-exquisite-dissonance-of-kehinde-wiley>

<sup>210</sup> C. Riding, *Kehinde Wiley: A Prelude*, cit., p. 11.

<sup>211</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 12.

following series *Rumors of War* (2005) and *Down* (2008) have been conceived from the same starting concept: in the first case, Wiley substitutes heroic equestrians in historical artworks with contemporary men in team jerseys and Timberland boots; in the second series, grand-scale figures imitate the prone postures of masterpieces such as Hans Holbein the Younger's *The Dead Christ in the Tomb* and Auguste Clésinger's *Woman Bitten by a Serpent*. Since 2006, Wiley began to look beyond the United States with an ambitious multivenue project called *The World Stage*. For it, the artist adopted an international approach, staging models from urban backdrops all over the world. Starting from China in 2006 and ending in Haiti in 2014, the project travelled many other countries (mainly Nigeria, Senegal, Brazil, India, Israel, Sri Lanka, France and Jamaica). Also in this case, models are dressed in their everyday clothing and asked to assume the poses and gestures of paintings and sculptures representative of the history of their surroundings, creating a juxtaposition of the "old" and the "new", where the inheritance of the old by the new is often not visible<sup>212</sup>. Since 2012, Wiley has added women to his repertoire, as it is visible in *The World Stage: Jamaica* (2013) and in *The Yellow Wallpaper* (2020), but especially in the series *An Economy of Grace*, of that very year. Only for this specific series, the artist added an additional layer to the melding of historic art and contemporary culture thanks to a collaboration with the creative director of the French couture house Givenchy, Riccardo Tisci. Indeed, instead of making the models pose in their own clothing as he had done previously, this time they were asked to wear gown designed by Tisci. The artist and the creative director visited the Musée du Louvre and took inspiration from paintings such as David's portrait of socialite Juliette Récamier, made in 1800, in order to make Wiley's sitters perform contemporary versions of princesses, aristocrats and actresses<sup>213</sup>. In 2015 Wiley exhibited at the Brooklyn Museum of Art, with the exhibition *Kehinde Wiley: A New Republic*, quoting master works from Titian, Sir Anthony van Dyck and Édouard Manet, and he also won the U.S. Department of State's Medal of Arts. Along with this recognition, over the years he was awarded also the Harvard University's W.E.B. Du Bois Medal and the France distinction of Knight of the Order of Arts and Letters. However, we could consider 2017 as the launching year for Wiley's career

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<sup>212</sup> Kehinde Wiley Studio, official website; <https://kehindewiley.com/> [last access on 1 February 2023]

<sup>213</sup> C. Riding, *Kehinde Wiley: A Prelude*, cit., pp.15-16.



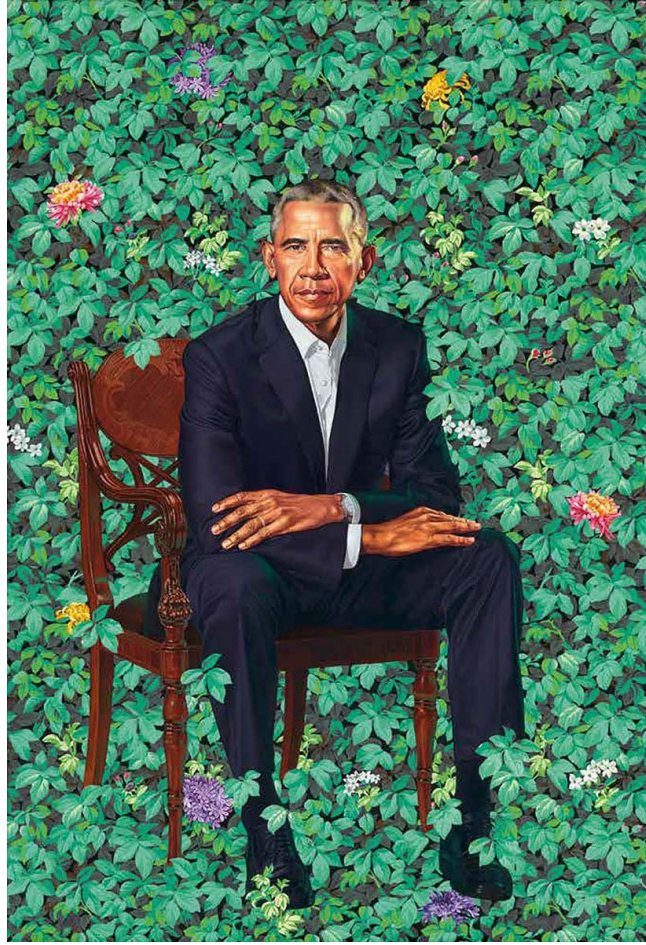
and fame internationally. Indeed, that was the year the former president Barack Obama selected Wiley to paint his official portrait to appear in the *America's Presidents* exhibition at the Smithsonian National Portrait Gallery (Ill. 15). Wiley and Amy Sherald, called to portray the former First Lady Michelle Obama, were the first black artists to paint the official portraits of the president and his wife, which were the first African American people to enter the presidential portrait collection. Unveiled in 2018, Wiley's painting was conceived as combination of convention and invention, formality and informality, distancing it from past presidential portraits in many ways<sup>214</sup>. Compared to other presidents' portraits which showed realistic representation of the sitters in their office, symbolising their authority, Obama was depicted seating casually on a mahogany chair, surrounded by foliage. Each different flower on the leafy greens pattern represents a location connected to a key event in the president's life: the chrysanthemum is the official flower of Chicago city, where he was elected senator; the African lilies symbolise Kenya, Obama's father country; lastly, jasmine recalls his childhood in Hawaii<sup>215</sup>. As far as the sitter is concerned, the pose for the portrait was not chosen by Wiley among the shots taken during photography session that preceded the painting but rather in a moment of pause in between the shots, as he felt the pose was authentic to the former president. Obama had asked the artist a relaxed representation, as man-of-the-people, and hence Wiley conveyed this image using small informal details: although wearing a traditional black suit, Obama's collar is open and without a tie, and – even if his expression is determined – he is slightly leaning forward, elbows on his knees, as if physically moving towards the viewer to listen to him/her<sup>216</sup>.

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<sup>214</sup> K. White, *Kehinde Wiley's Presidential Portrait of Barack Obama Is Arriving in New York. Here Are 3 Things You Might Not Know About It*, in "Artnet", 16 August 2021; <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/kehinde-wileys-presidential-portrait-barack-obama-3-things-1998602> [last access on 1 February 2023]

<sup>215</sup> *Former President Barack Obama by Artist Kehinde Wiley*, in Smithsonian National Portrait Gallery official website, 2018; [https://npg.si.edu/Barack\\_Obama](https://npg.si.edu/Barack_Obama) [last access on 28 January 2023]

<sup>216</sup> K. White, *Kehinde Wiley's Presidential Portrait of Barack Obama Is Arriving in New York. Here Are 3 Things You Might Not Know About It*, cit.



Ill. 17 – Kehinde Wiley, *Barack Obama*, 2018, oil on canvas, 213.7 x 147 cm, The National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution.

Still in 2017, Wiley realised the *Trickster* series to be exhibited at the Sean Kelly Gallery (New York City): it consisted of eleven large-scale depictions of renowned contemporary black artists, recalling the historical traditions of artists' portraits made by other artists but also highlighting the historical absence and marginalisation of black people in the arts<sup>217</sup>. Interestingly, all portraits of the series are characterized by a strong contrast of light and shadow that positions the central subjects in the spotlight while concealing the background in the darkness. The inspiration for such choice came to Wiley by Francisco Goya's *Black Paintings* (1819-1823, Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid) which the author conceived after the turmoil and devastation brought by the Napoleonic Wars<sup>218</sup>. Works like the famous *Saturn devouring his Son* (1821-1823) are usually understood as a reflection of Goya's physical and mental distress in relation to

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<sup>217</sup> C. Riding, *Kehinde Wiley: A Prelude*, cit., p. 19.

<sup>218</sup> *Ibid.*

the political situation and his increasingly cynical opinion on humankind. The restricted use of colour in Wiley's series recalls Goya's paintings but also, more in general, the Western art's pictorial conventions associated with the aesthetic category of the sublime, first applied in ancient Greece in the field of rhetoric and later adopted in philosophy, literature and art history at the end of the 17th century. In Wiley's artworks, as in Goya's paintings, the features of the sublime may be retraced in the mysterious and dramatic contrasts of light and dark. Wiley's figures are surrounded by darkness, which could be ambiguously read as menacing or embracing, and in most cases gaze directly the viewer<sup>219</sup>. Interestingly, even the exhibition venue where the works were shown in 2017 was painted black, with single spotlights illuminating only the figures. His quotation of the sublime is also visible in another exhibition of that year, *In Search of the Miraculous*, held this time at the Stephen Friedman Gallery (London), in collaboration with The National Gallery. Here, the sublime was addressed via the genre of Western landscape and marine art, re-enacting works by William Turner (1775-1851) and Willem van de Velde the Younger (1633-1707), for instance. Traditionally, marine painting legitimized and promoted explorations, maritime trades and conquest, and was therefore linked to the slave trade. Accordingly, the people Wiley casted to model for the series were from Haiti, object of desire for Europeans for centuries, as well as site of several sugar plantations where enslaved Africans were forced to work. Deciding to substitute the professional sailors or fishermen depicted in the original artworks with displaced people who have decided to sail in search of a better life, Wiley confronts also the very contemporary issue of migration<sup>220</sup>. In 2019, the artist undertook a different kind of project with the launching of Black Rock Senegal, a residency program for multidisciplinary artists in the capital Dakar, while in 2021 his stained-glass work *Go* – depicting black break-dancers floating among fluffy clouds in the sky and inspired by the 18<sup>th</sup> century ceiling frescoes by Giambattista Tiepolo (1696-1770) – became his first site-specific and permanent glass installation at the Pennsylvania Station in Midtown Manhattan (New York City). More recently, at the beginning of 2022, Wiley continued his dialogue with the sublime, focusing on the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries' landscapes, in his exhibition *The Prelude* that

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<sup>219</sup> C. Riding, *Kehinde Wiley: A Prelude*, cit., p. 19.

<sup>220</sup> *Ibid.*



was on show at The National Gallery of London and featured both paintings and film installations. Starring black Londoners from the streets of Soho, *The Prelude* departs from the European Romanticism focusing on suggestive oceans and mountains which find correspondence with the artworks exhibited at The National Gallery<sup>221</sup>. Considering the film projected in the exhibition, for instance, viewers would see black figures dwarfed against the absolute whiteness of snow in the fjords of Norway, underlining both the capacity of wild nature to make humanity seem insignificant and the newness of the black subjects on such a background, given their underrepresentation not only against sublime landscapes but even on their original or colonial background<sup>222</sup>. A similar operation has been performed by Wiley in the paintings – quoting artists such as Caspar David Friedrich, Claude Vernet and William Turner – although he went even further than simply replacing the original figures with black figures. Analysing for example the painting *Prelude (Babacar Mané)* (Ill. 16) – a reference to Friedrich’s masterpiece *Wanderer above the Sea of Fog* (1818) – Wiley gave his central subject and the background the same importance, without a prevailing of the sea of fog on the human figure in an emotional and suggestive way. Even though we cannot see the face of the model, his pose suggests confidence, and the cinematic rendering of reflecting colours on his back underlines his role of protagonist of the work and of his journey<sup>223</sup>.

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<sup>221</sup> C. Riding, *Kehinde Wiley: A Prelude*, cit., p. 66.

<sup>222</sup> Ibid.

<sup>223</sup> *Il Romanticismo black di Kehinde Wiley alla National Gallery di Londra*, in “Artbooms”, 11 March 2022; <https://www.artbooms.com/blog/kehinde-wile-the-prelude> [last access on 15 January 2023]



Ill. 18 – Kehinde Wiley, *The Prelude (Babacar Mané)*, 2021, oil on linen, 387.2 x 305 cm. Courtesy of Stephen Friedman Gallery (London) and Galerie Templon (Paris).

Wiley's most recent exhibition, *An Archaeology of Silence*, was exhibited in Venice in 2022 (as we will see in detail in section 3.4) and will be again on show at the Museum of Fine Arts of San Francisco between March and October 2023.

### **3.3. Occupying traditional iconography to address the themes of identity, race, power and gender**

As it should be clear by now, Wiley's artistic practice relies heavily on the occupation of traditional iconography, attributing new meanings to it. His works mix styles and influences of different periods, encompassing French Rococo, West African fabrics, urban hip hop culture and Islamic architecture, and he positions himself as descendent of a line of artists like Titian, Gainsborough and Ingres – among many other – of which he re-enacts the artworks. From the masters of Western art, Wiley acquires the visual rhetoric of the heroic, the powerful, and the sublime to apply to his contemporary subjects, thus blurring conventional and contemporary modes of representation to

place young black men in a position of power and to question compelling socio-historical issues today<sup>224</sup>.

Power – in close correlation to masculinity – constitutes indeed one of the core themes of Wiley’s practice, as it is well evident in the exemplary series *Rumors of War* (2005). The title of the series refers to a biblical passage from the New Testament book of Matthew about the promise of rebirth for the oppressed and subjugated<sup>225</sup>, and the works consist in large canvases re-enacting European equestrian portraiture. The genre implies the portrayed subjects’ high status and is immediately associated to war and to a male domain, as it is testified by the fact that the artists which inspired his first four paintings (Peter Paul Rubens, Diego Velázquez, Charles Le Brun and Jacques-Louis David) all worked for sovereigns who were military commanders<sup>226</sup>. In Wiley’s canvases, the original military commanders are substituted by Black models in contemporary clothes – wearing bandanas, jeans and puffer jackets, for instance – and the dramatic landscapes or battlefields behind the figures are turned into ornate designs and patterns<sup>227</sup>. A prime example of the series is Wiley’s version of *Napoleon leading the Army over the Alps* painted by David in 1801, where the black model, with a gold cloak over his shoulders and an ornate sword beside him, assumes the posture of Napoleon and gazes calmly at the viewer from the top of his horse<sup>228</sup>. Wiley’s sitter outfit is immediately ascribable to the contemporary hip hop culture, since he wears a military uniform, Timberland boots and red wristbands that identify him as a real individual of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, and which could be associated – through the camouflage fatigues – to the violence experienced by young black man in the streets of the USA<sup>229</sup>. On the rocky ground beneath the horse, a stone bears the historical names of Bonaparte, Karolus Magnus and Hannibal that appeared in David’s original painting. In Wiley’s version, however, these names are accompanied by the sitter’s surname – Williams – which used to be a common Anglo name imposed on black people brought from Africa to the new continent and which underlines Wiley’s inclusion of ordinary

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<sup>224</sup> Kehinde Wiley Studio; <https://kehindewiley.com/>

<sup>225</sup> Ibid.

<sup>226</sup> C. Riding, *Kehinde Wiley: A Prelude*, cit., p. 12.

<sup>227</sup> G. Clemans, *Kehinde Wiley, Napoleon Leading the Army over the Alps*, in “Smarthistory”, 21 December 2016; <https://smarthistory.org/kehinde-wiley-napoleon-leading-the-army-over-the-alps/> [last access on 30 January 2023]

<sup>228</sup> C. Riding, *Kehinde Wiley: A Prelude*, p. 15.

<sup>229</sup> G. Clemans, *Kehinde Wiley, Napoleon Leading the Army over the Alps*, cit.

black people in representation systems<sup>230</sup>. Putting himself in line of great master paintings, Wiley signs and dates his work in Roman numerals on the horse's band, as David did with his portrait. As far as the specific background of this work is concerned, the pattern reminds of sumptuous imperial French fabrics on which, however, a tiny and sperm motif swims, ironizing on the Western tradition of portraiture – especially the equestrian genre – charged with masculinity, gendered ideals of male power and control, and with political and military messages of propaganda<sup>231</sup>. Such reference was also extremely evident in the exhibition space that hosted *Rumors of War* for the first time in New York, since the room was transformed into “a hypermasculine man cave, or war room” filled with armchairs in black leather and a buffalo head<sup>232</sup>.



Ill. 19 – (on the left) Jacques-Louis David, *Napoleon Crossing the Alps*, 1803, oil on canvas, 275 x 232 cm, Österreichische Galerie Belvedere.

Ill. 20 – (on the right) Kehinde Wiley, *Napoleon Leading the Army over the Alps*, 2002, oil paint on canvas, 274.3 x 274.3 cm, Brooklyn Museum of Art, New York.

Given the contemporary relevance of the issues explored in the series, the artist continued to expand it over the years, realising also a huge equestrian bronze sculpture bearing the same title of the series in 2019. The inspiration for the statue came to him after visiting Richmond (Virginia) and seeing the Confederate Monuments on Monument Avenue. Five of the six bronze sculptures exhibited there depicted eminent members of the Confederacy from the United States Civil War, among which the

<sup>230</sup> G. Clemans, *Kehinde Wiley, Napoleon Leading the Army over the Alps*, cit.

<sup>231</sup> Ibid.

<sup>232</sup> C. Riding, *Kehinde Wiley: A Prelude*, cit., p. 15.

J.E.B. Stuart's equestrian sculpture whose pose was used by Wiley in his over eight-meter-tall sculpture of a black man in jeans and Nike shoes<sup>233</sup>. In September 2019, *Rumors of War* was unveiled in Times Square before being moved, in December of that year, to the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts in Richmond, close to the monuments of Monument Avenue it was inspired from. However, the co-existence of the statues in the same area did not last long: soon after *Rumors of War*'s installation, and in the wave of the Black Lives Matter protests that followed the homicide of George Floyd in May 2020, the five historical statues were progressively removed from their pedestals. Indeed, they were understood to perpetuate the "lost cause" mythology, according to which the pretext behind the Civil War was the defence of the Southern States' rights rather than the preservation of the slavery institution<sup>234</sup>. The only sculpture still on display is the most recent one that portrays the Afro-American tennis champion and civil rights activist Arthur Ashe<sup>235</sup>.

Clearly, the *Rumors of War* series resonates with many contemporary themes and issues at a time, among which the relation between identity, race and power in representation, and the potential of the latter to empower and provide visibility to ordinary black people. At the same time, Wiley's works are put in relation to contemporary protests and movements which fight against the celebration of major slavery supporters, eugenicist scientists and colonization enthusiasts as historical heroes. The case of the statues of Monument Avenue and the removal of Theodore Roosevelt's sculpture from the American Museum of Natural History in New York City by the Decolonize This Place Movement in 2022 are two vivid examples of challenges against traditional heroic iconography. However, instead of concealing historical artworks and monuments, Kehinde Wiley acts by adding something to them: by occupying traditional iconography, he attributes several new meanings to it, which resonate with classical representation conventions and contemporary social issues at a time.

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<sup>233</sup> V. Cassel Oliver, B. Harris, *Kehinde Wiley, Rumors of War*, in "Smarthistory", 18 January 2022; <https://smarthistory.org/seeing-america-2/kehinde-wiley-rumors-of-war/> [last access on 30 January 2023]

<sup>234</sup> S. Beetham, S. Zucker, *Monument Avenue and the Lost Cause*, in "Smarthistory", 20 September 2022; <https://smarthistory.org/seeing-america-2/monument-avenue-and-the-lost-cause/#:~:text=Monument%20Avenue%20in%20Richmond%2C%20Virginia,been%20removed%20from%20their%20pedestals> [last access on 30 January 2023]

<sup>235</sup> Ibid.



Another theme commonly traceable in the artist's works, and in relation to masculinity, is gender. As we have already seen, indeed, Wiley plays with the masculine exaltation in European masters' portraiture, but his works refer also to the hypermasculine stereotype associated to Black American men – whose genealogy we already commented – and which is especially identifiable in sport competitions and television commercials starring athletes. Indeed, popular culture and mass media could be seen as still bearing traces of the inherited stereotypes from the period of slavery, since images of black athletes often convey gender- and sexuality-related meanings<sup>236</sup>. We have also already mentioned that, until 2012 with *An Economy of Grace*, Wiley had not yet casted female models. Before that year, female saints were reproduced by men, instilling ambiguity into the artist's representations and playing with the notions of masculinity, femininity and gender roles<sup>237</sup>. When he started to select black women from New York, Wiley turned his attention to people who had experienced a sort of "double marginality"<sup>238</sup>, in art history as well as in society. With the exhibition *The Yellow Wallpaper* (2020) held at the William Morris Gallery (London), Wiley even dedicated his entire show to women, showing six large-scale female portraits in three-quarter view. Taking inspiration from American novelist Charlotte Perkins Gilman's book of 1892 under the same title – which deals with hysteria and explores the terrible consequences of depriving a woman of her independence – the exhibition attempted at using the decorative language to reunite the themes of blackness, gender, and mental illness<sup>239</sup>. Through his typical use of traditional portraiture once reserved to white aristocrats and its heroic connotation, Wiley depicts the women as autonomous and strong<sup>240</sup>. On the whole, we can notice how often Wiley changes the figures' gender while reproducing masterpieces from European art history, for example by depicting couples composed of two men instead of a man and a woman, or realizing both a feminine and masculine version of the same historical work, as we will see better in

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<sup>236</sup> S. Hall, *The Spectacle of the "Other"*, in *Representation: Cultural Representation and Signifying Practices*, cit., p. 231.

<sup>237</sup> C. Riding, *Kehinde Wiley: A Prelude*, cit., p. 15.

<sup>238</sup> Ibid.

<sup>239</sup> *Kehinde Wiley: The Yellow Wallpaper*; <https://www.stephenfriedman.com/news/202-kehinde-wiley-the-yellow-wallpaper/> [last access on 30 January 2023]

<sup>240</sup> C. Douglas, *Kehinde Wiley: The Yellow Wallpaper at William Morris Gallery, London*, in "Contemporary Art Society", 28 February 2020; <https://contemporaryartsociety.org/news/friday-dispatch-news/kehinde-wiley-yellow-wallpaper-william-morris-gallery-london/> [last access on 2 February 2023]

*An Archaeology of Silence*. Such exchangeability of genders is often used to convey specific meaning, as it could be noticed for example in *Judith Beheading Holofernes*, a work from *An Economy of Silence* where a black Judith holds a head of a white woman instead of that of Holofernes, symbolising the white standards of beauty to which black women are subjected, too<sup>241</sup>.

Given its recurrence in Wiley's artworks and its supporting role to the overall meanings conveyed in the portraits, the background can be considered to be a key feature in the artist's production, resonating also with the themes of power and masculinity. Indeed, 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries' portraits of European gentry used to depict country gentlemen surrounded by their families, their sweeping estates, and all their possessions, aiming to flaunt landed gentry's social status<sup>242</sup>. By concealing the hills and country estates behind elegant patterns – deliberately different from those in the original paintings – Wiley interrupts such celebrations of wealth and possession by rich white gentlemen. But the bright and colourful backgrounds are linked also to the issues of gender: if the sperm motif challenged masculinity by exaggeration in the *Rumors of War* series, the floral background – being flowers usually associated with femininity and beauty – is useful to question masculinity the other way round in exhibitions like *An Archaeology of Silence*.

### **3.4. Kehinde Wiley: *An Archaeology of Silence***

The exhibition *An Archaeology of Silence* was held between the 22<sup>nd</sup> of April and the 24<sup>th</sup> of July 2022 at Fondazione Giorgio Cini, on the island of San Giorgio Maggiore (Venice), which has been an international centre for cultural activities and research since 1951. The exhibition was part of the collateral events organized in occasion of the 59<sup>th</sup> exhibition of the Venice Biennale and was curated by Christophe Leribault, president of the Musée d'Orsay and Musée de l'Orangerie, who had previously organized the artists' first exhibition in France, *Kehinde Wiley: Lamentation* (2016), at the Petit Palais. The organizing institution behind the show in Venice was therefore the Musée d'Orsay, supported by Galerie Templon (Paris), which represents Wiley. As far as the content of the exhibition is concerned, for *An Archaeology of Silence* the

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<sup>241</sup> *Judith and Holofernes* by Kehinde Wiley; <https://learn.ncartmuseum.org/artwork/judith-and-holofernes/> [last access on 30 January 2023]

<sup>242</sup> C. Riding, *Kehinde Wiley: A Prelude*, cit., p. 18.

artist realised a new body of work, comprising both paintings and sculptures, to expand on the artworks he had already produced for the *Down* series (2008), which we briefly encountered while overviewing Wiley's artistic practice. Indeed, Wiley felt the 2008's series was the beginning of a promising direction he did not fully manage to accomplish, and wished therefore to expand it and create a complete circle with the exhibition of 2022<sup>243</sup>. The previous series consisted of large-scale paintings and sculptures of reclining figures, portraying young black people in a state of repose, whose poses he repeated in the creation of the additional works for Venice. The project for the exhibition was carried out entirely in Wiley's studio in Dakar staging Senegalese models, since he was forced to spend most of his time there on lockdown during the Covid pandemic. As the artist claimed when interviewed by curator Leribault, his objective was that of reconceptualizing Western easel painting, to embody the heroism and dignity of portraiture while questioning male ego and the issues of empire and domination it was imbued with, to ultimately reach the opposite of heroic in his works<sup>244</sup>. The inspiration for the prone figures came from different sources, from Titian to Sargent, but as the artist reports it was the encounter with *The Dead Christ in the Tomb* (1520-1522) by Hans Holbein the Younger which was crucial for the conceptualization of the whole series. Wiley recalls seeing it at the Kunstmuseum Basel (Switzerland) – where he found himself for the art fair of 2006 – and being struck by the painting. From that moment on, he reflected on the fallen figure, which could represent a product of the ravages of war, thus depicting a fallen warrior, but also an entombed saint, in a severe posture. The lying figures on show in Venice witness Holbein's influence on Wiley, who began to investigate the iconography of death and sacrifice in Western art through mythological, religious and historical subjects<sup>245</sup>.

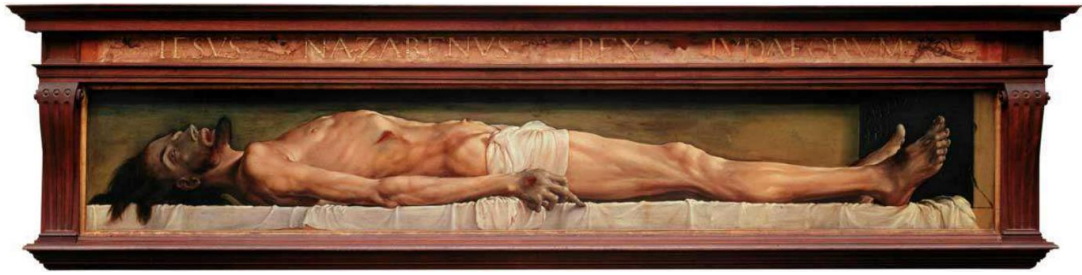
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<sup>243</sup> C. Leribault, K. Wiley, *Kehinde Wiley - An Archaeology of Silence*, in *Kehinde Wiley - An Archaeology of Silence*, exhibition catalogue (Venezia, Fondazione Giorgio Cini, 22 April – 24 July 2022), Paris: Galerie Templon, 2022, p. 10.

<sup>244</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 5.

<sup>245</sup> *A New Body of Works By Kehinde Wiley To Be Unveiled at the Fondazione Giorgio Cini on the Occasion of the Biennale di Venezia*, in *Kehinde Wiley - An Archaeology of Silence*, press kit (Venezia, Fondazione Giorgio Cini, 22 April – 24 July 2022), April 2022.





Ill. 21 – Hans Holbein the Younger, *The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb*, 1521, oil and tempera on limewood, 32.4 × 202.1 cm, Kunstmuseum (Basel).



Ill. 22 – Kehinde Wiley, *The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb (Babacar Mané)*, 2022, bronze. Courtesy of Galerie Templon (Paris).

The title of the exhibition, instead, quotes the book *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (*L'archéologie du savoir*, 1969) by Michel Foucault, where he explores the construction of knowledge in relation to the study of history. According to Foucault, while analysing historical facts, it should be recognized that their historical meaning is found in enunciations that are discursive events, subject to epistemic adjustments over time and depending on the context and time where they are enunciated<sup>246</sup>. Therefore, the content of the book resonates with the view of knowledge as a construct, which we have already commented in relation to the symbolic power exercised in a colonial context. In the specific view of the exhibition, Wiley declared: “that is the archaeology I am unearthing: the spectre of police violence and state control over the bodies of young black and brown people all over the world”<sup>247</sup>. With the show, then, Wiley intends to draw attention on the brutalities of the global colonial past while addressing its legacy, easily detectable in the several acts of violence perpetrated against black people by the police forces in the name of the state<sup>248</sup>. Those episodes of

<sup>246</sup> M. Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge and The Discourse on Language* (1969), New York: Pantheon Books, 1972.

<sup>247</sup> Kehinde Wiley: *An Archaeology of Silence*, in La Biennale di Venezia; <https://www.labiennale.org/en/art/2022/kehinde-wiley-archaeology-silence> [last access on 1 February 2023]

<sup>248</sup> Ibid.

violence, once unacknowledged or silenced, have been given more relevance with the birth of movements such as the Black Lives Matter, which highly influenced this body of work<sup>249</sup>, and are now easier to report and witness thanks to police shootings or beatings' videos and recordings. Wiley's intention to delve into the matter has probably been affected also by Wiley's upbringing in Los Angeles, since he was fourteen when the taxi driver Rodney King was murdered in 1991 by agents of the Los Angeles Police Department. Both in *Down* and in *An Archaeology of Silence*, he represents his prone models without pathos, in a state of oscillation between growth, doom, decay and abandon. When interviewed, Wiley reported that "the idea of being in repose or the idea of being struck down is a more accurate description of the project", the major idea being instead that of tearing the erect figure down<sup>250</sup>. Still, the ambiguous position of the fallen hero or dead martyr impersonated by Wiley's black models cast doubts in the viewer: are the figures dead? Are they sleeping? Are they wounded? "I think these lying figures speak volumes, in just one metaphor, while offering an infinite number of possibilities"<sup>251</sup>, the artist declared. However, there is no explicit depiction of violence in Wiley's work: with the filter of Western tradition and his own aesthetic, through the use of a piercing light, the artist confers his subjects a sense of ecstasy – as if they were experiencing a true ecstatic moment of repose – which is traditionally associated to the depiction of the divine (thinking for instance of the *Ecstasy of Saint Teresa*, 1647-1652, sculpted by Bernini). At the same time, the bodies appear to be contorted as if in erotic revelry, thus suggesting an ecstatic and erotic display at once<sup>252</sup>. The contemporary re-conceptualization of classical pictorial forms in the exhibition, then, is linked to violence, pain, mortality, as well as ecstasy. At the same time, though, Wiley's works speak of survival, resilience and even rebirth: the borrowed poses function as a powerful elegy of global resistance against state-sanctioned violence, symbolising endurance and perseverance against savagery. These ideas of rebirth and resilience are strengthened by the youth depicted and by the beauty of the floral backgrounds in the paintings and of the herbal motives in the sculptures.

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<sup>249</sup> C. Leribault, K. Wiley, *Kehinde Wiley - An Archaeology of Silence*, cit., p. 16.

<sup>250</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6.

<sup>251</sup> E. Jardonnet, *Artist Kehinde Wiley unveils an 'archaeology of silence'*, in "Le Monde", 26 May 2022; [https://www.lemonde.fr/en/culture/article/2022/05/26/artist-kehinde-wiley-unveils-an-archaeology-of-silence\\_5984747\\_30.html](https://www.lemonde.fr/en/culture/article/2022/05/26/artist-kehinde-wiley-unveils-an-archaeology-of-silence_5984747_30.html) [last access on 17 January 2023]

<sup>252</sup> C. Leribault, K. Wiley, *Kehinde Wiley - An Archaeology of Silence*, cit., p. 18.

As Wiley reported in his interview with Leribault, the artist sometimes inserted dead leaves to reinforce the effect of the dark glazes in evoking a sense of decay, but he especially insisted upon colourful flowers expressing rebirth and renewal while simultaneously creating a counterpoint to the simplicity of contemporary streetwear<sup>253</sup>.



III. 23 – Kehinde Wiley, *Reclining Nude in Wooden Setting (Edidiong Ikobah)*, 2022, oil on canvas. Courtesy of Galerie Templon (Paris).



III. 24 – Victor Karlovich Shtemberg, *Reclining Nude in Wooden Setting*, early 19<sup>th</sup> century, oil on canvas, private collection.

Another interesting consideration on the bidimensional floral backgrounds in the majority of Wiley's paintings, which substitute a perspectival view on the landscape, has been reconducted by Wiley to the tension he recognized in Western art history. Indeed, the development of a perspectival rendering, contraposed to a two-dimensional space view, shows a historical shift towards a more rational way to conceive space.

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<sup>253</sup> C. Leribault, K. Wiley, *Kehinde Wiley - An Archaeology of Silence*, cit., p. 11.

Over the centuries, a more scientific method was adopted to depict nature as accurately as possible, in the attempt to prove the rational mind's dominance over it and over space in general. Therefore, we could consider the depiction of space to have acquired, along with a more aesthetic significance, also a cultural meaning, which Wiley relates to a rational conception of the world and perhaps of nations and races<sup>254</sup>. As he reported, in his paintings he aims to recreate such tension between landscape and two-dimensional field, between a wallpaper and a 3D landscape, by depicting a representational field where the figure lies but, behind of it, the vanishing point is interrupted by the background<sup>255</sup>. Considering the selection of the decorative patterns, Wiley explains that he developed this key feature of his work already at the beginning of his career, adapting the style of the background to the artwork he was remaking. While depicting a Fragonard, for instance, he would choose a French Rococo pattern. The inspiration would therefore come to him from different epochs, and the detailed ornaments and motifs would help him create the wealthy interiors where the original works were supposed to hang. In recent years, travelling more, he has increasingly drawn inspiration from different marketplaces' textiles worldwide and incorporated them in his paintings. More recently, he has started to create his own patterns, starting from existing ones but reshaping them by means of subtractions and additions, allowing the motifs to be freer. One last consideration concerning the floral backgrounds conceived for the most recent project *An Archaeology of Silence* unveils a further layer of meaning, revealing an iconographic and allegorical struggle in the flowers. Indeed, as Wiley claimed,

Flowers, too, have been considered peripheral, invisible or just decorative, and they want to be front and centre. So, they persist, in the same way that we might consider Black bodies invasive in places like this historic location [the Fondazione Giorgio Cini in Venice]. There is this sense of uneasiness when you claim a presence: is this taken into account? Is it a presence that is considered right or is it just invasive?<sup>256</sup>

Presented in the gloom atmosphere of an old monastery (in the spaces that were once destined to the refectory), now part of the Fondazione Cini, the lying black bodies may certainly surprise viewers for their improbable location. Commenting on the way the

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<sup>254</sup> C. Leribault, K. Wiley, *Kehinde Wiley - An Archaeology of Silence*, cit., p. 11.

<sup>255</sup> Ibid.

<sup>256</sup> E. Jardonnet, *Artist Kehinde Wiley unveils an 'archaeology of silence'*, cit.

exhibition dialogues with Venice, the artist directly addresses the canonical forms of representation of black bodies in the city, for instance in the small, handcrafted jewels depicting the Moors which became popular in sixteenth-century Venice. The so-called Venetian Blackamoor jewellery used to reproduce the Moors – rivals of the Venetian Republic in the control of the Mediterranean Sea trades – wearing turbans and precious stones<sup>257</sup>, in the same way as they were depicted also in well-known artworks like the Portrait of Mehmet II (1480) by Gentile Bellini. At the same time, the artist addresses also a position of marginality reserved to the black people depicted as helpers or slaves within paintings, or sometimes even in the architecture of buildings (as slaves holding columns) and in pieces of furniture (holding candelabra, for example)<sup>258</sup>. Moreover, Wiley recognizes Venice’s importance in history and especially in art history – considering how its beauty has inspired artists for centuries – and finds that the scale and spectacle of the location encouraged him to push his work to the limits of possible, taking the aesthetic to a level of muscularity he had never hitherto approached<sup>259</sup>. This is evident in the huge dimensions of the paintings, considering that those belonging to the *Down* series represent the largest Wiley ever created. They have been conceived by the artist as a sort of response to David’s works exhibited at the Musée du Louvre, which he had the occasion to see as a graduate student and which signed a crucial moment in his career. Indeed, Wiley understood an existing relationship in art between history and scale, where large canvases were functional to communicate the ideals of statecraft<sup>260</sup>. In the Venice project, the heroic sensibility is thus to be found not only in the fallen subjects’ heroic nature, but also in their heroic scale. Insisting on big dimensions, Wiley is also trying to compensate for a sense of insecurity, a sense of smallness that he detects in marginalized people and communities which are conscious of having been made invisible. Hyper-visibility is the counter-response Wiley adopts to refuse such invisibility, adopting “a scale that pushes beyond the mere corporeal

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<sup>257</sup> M. Jovon, *Blackamoor Jewelry: history and meaning*, 11 January 2017, <https://www.eredijovon.com/en/blog/news/blackamoor-history-and-definition-the-real-venetian-jewelry-n6> [last access on 15 February 2023]

<sup>258</sup> C. Leribault, K. Wiley, *Kehinde Wiley - An Archaeology of Silence*, cit., p. 15.

<sup>259</sup> *A New Body of Works By Kehinde Wiley To Be Unveiled at the Fondazione Giorgio Cini on the Occasion of the Biennale di Venezia*, cit.

<sup>260</sup> C. Leribault, K. Wiley, *Kehinde Wiley - An Archaeology of Silence*, cit., p. 6.



and into the realm of the spiritual icons, of martyrs and saints”<sup>261</sup>. However, the huge dimension also follows another direction which is linked to the “American sensibility of the billboard”<sup>262</sup>. The large scale, indeed, allows Wiley to question the grand spectacle that it is made of the marketplace and the public space and that involves pop-culture. Claiming to explore a “post-pop-hip-hop culture”, the artist is especially critical towards the marketplace of ideas, and in particular of the model of black masculinity that is object of this hyper spectacle<sup>263</sup>, as we already commented in the previous section. Historically, the birth of large-scale paintings can be traced back to the 16<sup>th</sup> century, of which an example is *The Wedding at Cana* (1563) by Paolo Veronese. The painting is 6,77 meters tall and 9,99 meters long and was originally commissioned for the refectory of the monastery on the island of San Giorgio Maggiore, while it is now exhibited at the Musée du Louvre, where it is the largest on show. Originally, similar paintings were conceived to display historical or religious events, depicting governors, aristocrats or saints as subjects. When, over time, this type of portraiture was extended to other categories – thinking for examples of merchants portrayed riding horses like kings – the change was initially welcomed as a proof of arrogance, as the presumption of another class to be represented using the same pictorial type destined to emperors and cavaliers<sup>264</sup>. In his large paintings, Wiley ironizes on this very aspect, looking for the most pedestrian moments to celebrate simply in virtue of their humanity, considering that everybody, regardless of his/her social and economic background, has access to a similar moment of chance<sup>265</sup>. Considering now the dimensions of the sculptures on show, instead, we find that these vary greatly, with many works being around a meter long and fifty centimetres high and large, while others reach two meters of length. To realize them, Wiley created a turntable on which he positioned his models, having thus the opportunity to rotate it while taking shots. This 360° view enabled him to imagine the final result from all angles – to check whether the bodies lied beautifully before shaping the clay models

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<sup>261</sup> *Exhibition Kehinde Wiley: An Archaeology of Silence*; <https://www.cini.it/en/events/exhibition-kehinde-wiley-an-archaeology-of-silence> [last access on 17 January 2023]

<sup>262</sup> C. Leribault, K. Wiley, *Kehinde Wiley - An Archaeology of Silence*, cit., p. 7.

<sup>263</sup> C. Leribault, K. Wiley, *Kehinde Wiley - An Archaeology of Silence*, cit., p. 7.

<sup>264</sup> Ibid.

<sup>265</sup> *A New Body of Works By Kehinde Wiley To Be Unveiled at the Fondazione Giorgio Cini on the Occasion of the Biennale di Venezia*, cit.

to be used in the lost wax technique for the creation of bronze sculptures – in a process that reminded him of murder scenes in films, where dead bodies are found in the streets<sup>266</sup>. To communicate a sort of echo within the exhibition, many of those sculptures he created quote the very subject of his paintings, enabling a one-to-one correspondence and the recognition of more perspectives and connections within the rooms. In the case of the sculptures, Wiley did not rely on the accentuated polychromy he has used for the paintings: rather, he concentrated on a series of details that rejuvenate the medium and catch viewers' attention<sup>267</sup>.

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<sup>266</sup> C. Leribault, K. Wiley, *Kehinde Wiley - An Archaeology of Silence*, cit., p. 13.

<sup>267</sup> N. Barbieri, *A Venezia "An Archaeology of Silence" di Kehinde Wiley reinterpreta in chiave black gli antichi dipinti di eroi caduti*, in Artbooms, 29 April 2022, <https://www.artbooms.com/blog/kehinde-wiley-an-archaeology-of-silence-venezia> [last access on 17 January 2023]



Ill. 25 – Auguste Clésinger, *Femme piquée par un serpent*, 1847, marble, Musée d’Orsay (Paris).

Ill. 26 – Kehinde Wiley, *Femme piquée par un serpent (Mamadou Gueye)*, 2022, oil on canvas. Courtesy of Galerie Templon (Paris).

Ill. 27 – Kehinde Wiley, *Femme piquée par un serpent*, 2022, bronze. Courtesy of Galerie Templon (Paris).

Among the sculptures on show, the most remarkable is arguably the one named after the exhibition. It consists of an equestrian bronze sculpture, five-meters high, showing a fallen rider miraculously still on the back of his horse. The depicted horse is the same



one from Virginia that Wiley reproduced in his previous equestrian work *Rumors of War* (2019), which I mentioned while discussing the theme of power in section 3.3. However, this time the figure is not erect and proud anymore. Wiley explained his choice as different approach on the matter of slavery. Indeed, while *Rumors of War* addresses the generals who defended slavery, *An Archaeology of Silence* takes its very language while drawing from its power differently, repositioning the rhetorical strengths behind that dominant narration<sup>268</sup>. If public demonstrations of state power are presented through pompous military portraits, often through equestrian monuments, in this case the researched effect is the very opposite. Wiley's own practice, too, is usually directed at mining and destructing fixed identities and stereotypes by re-enacting such "heroic" portraits with the same arrogant attitude, magnifying unknown members of black and brown communities in those poses, but not in this case. *An Archaeology of Silence*, which is an exceedingly moving sculpture, shows a man that appears extremely vulnerable, pathetic, powerless: all the opposite of a heroic character. The figure's vulnerability sharply contrasts with the distorted perception of the ideal black American masculinity, which we analysed, and the cult of sport competitions in the United States. But the discourse does not limit of course just to the USA. Indeed, even though at the beginning he could not establish a real connection between the Senegalese models and the main topic, Wiley ultimately realized, once the entire body of work was ready, that the contingency of his forced lockdown in Dakar adds a unique African feature to the project<sup>269</sup>. This way, Senegal – and West Africa in general – become a metaphor for all the places worldwide where underserved black and brown communities experience violence and inequality, buried in silence, and which is decidedly not a phenomenon happening exclusively in the United States<sup>270</sup>. And Wiley's portraiture of this violence is extremely sensitive, avoiding depictions of lying bodied on the streets or between cars. Instead, the artist surrounds them with flowers, conferring them a dignified attitude. Through his huge paintings and bronze sculptures, Wiley restores dignity to the subjects of a history signed by sadness. The vulnerable poses and gestures, along with the monumental

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<sup>268</sup> C. Leribault, K. Wiley, *Kehinde Wiley - An Archaeology of Silence*, cit., p. 19.

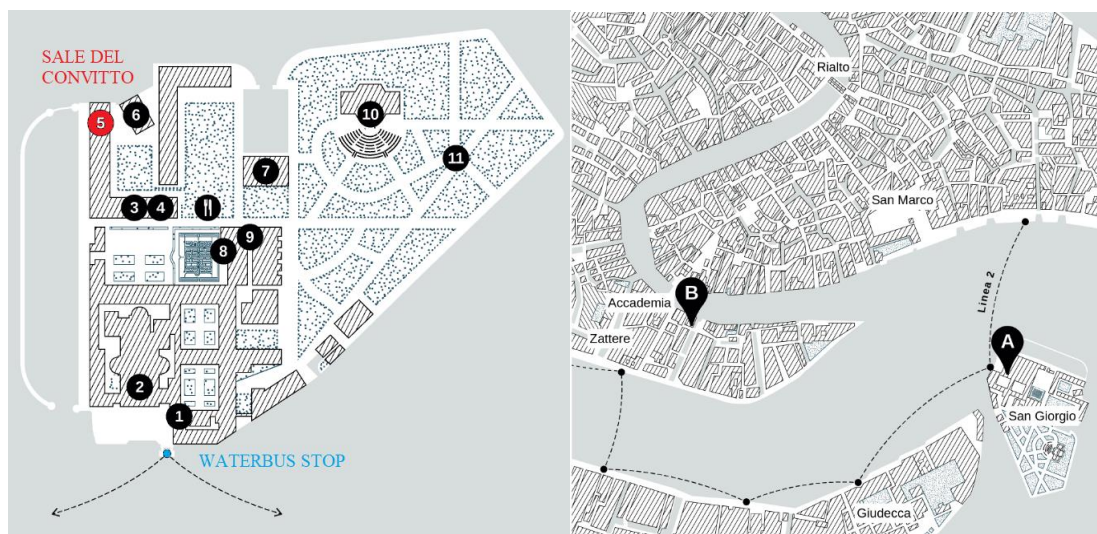
<sup>269</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 14.

<sup>270</sup> C. Leribault, K. Wiley, *Kehinde Wiley - An Archaeology of Silence*, cit., p. 14.

scale, elevate the figures to the realm of the spiritual, in a powerful elegy to youth and resilience<sup>271</sup>.

Now that we have discussed Wiley's creative process for the exhibition, his sources of inspiration and the meanings and reflections he wishes to stimulate in the audience, we possess all the tools to understand *An Archaeology of Silence* the way the artist intended it, even though this does not prevent the surfacing of other interesting keys of reading from the viewers.

As we already mentioned, the exhibition is held inside one of the many buildings of Fondazione Cini, more precisely inside the *Sale del Convitto* (Ill. 26).



Ill. 28 (on the left) – Map of the island of San Giorgio Maggiore. Courtesy of Fondazione Cini.

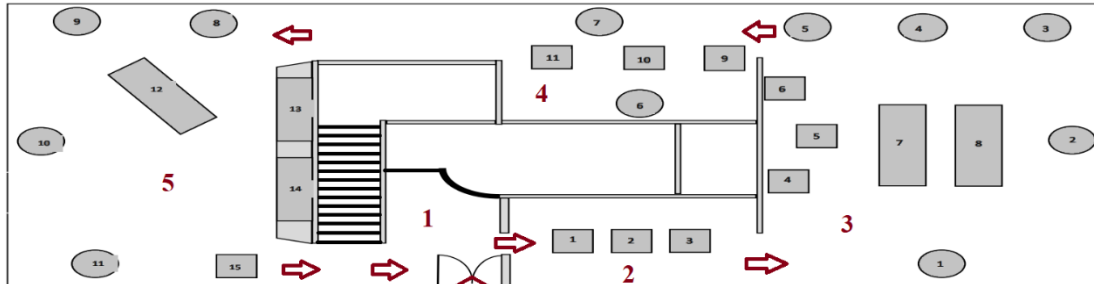
Ill. 29 (on the right) – Map of Venice and the island of San Giorgio Maggiore. Courtesy of Fondazione Cini.

Within the *Sale del Convitto*, the exhibition occupies the ground floor, whose high walls are perfectly suitable to host Wiley's huge works. While entering the exhibitions, visitors usually need a few minutes to get used to the setting and to darkness. Indeed, much like Wiley had done for the *Trickster* exhibition, the whole exhibition space of *An Archaeology of Silence* is dark. The huge windows of the buildings have been covered by thick dark curtains, shifting all the attention to the artworks on show, which are illuminated singularly by spotlights. Therefore, visitors' eyes require some time to adapt to the dark atmosphere. To make the transition more natural, the circular visit path welcomes visitors in the first room with an introductory text written on the right

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<sup>271</sup> N. Barbieri, *A Venezia "An Archaeology of Silence" di Kehinde Wiley reinterpretata in chiave black gli antichi dipinti di eroi caduti*, cit.

wall that summaries Wiley’s artistic intentions for the show, which we broadly commented at the beginning of section 3.4. Below the text, a QR code to be scanned downloads on visitors’ smartphones a map of the exhibition, showing the locations and the titles of the works on show.



#### **PAINTINGS**

1. *Young Tarentine I* (Babacar Mané), 2022, oil on canvas, 255 × 485 × 9 cm, framed.
2. *Young Tarentine II* (Ndeye Fatou Mbaye), 2022, oil on canvas, 363 × 790 × 10 cm, framed.
3. *Christian Martyr Tarcisius* (El Hadji Malick Gueye), 2022, oil on canvas, 210 × 301 × 9 cm, framed.
4. *The Wounded Achilles*, 2022, oil on canvas, 204 × 303 × 10 cm, framed.
5. *Sleep*, 2022, oil on canvas, 180 × 301 × 10 cm, framed.
6. *Reclining Nude* (Babacar Mané), 2022, oil on canvas, 179 × 394 × 10 cm, framed.
7. *Reclining Nude in Wooded Setting* (Edidiong Ikobah), 2022 oil on canvas 143 × 302 × 10 cm, framed.
8. *The Virgin Martyr St. Cecelia* (Ndey Buri), 2022, oil on canvas, 224 × 393 × 10 cm, framed.
9. *Morpheus* (Ndeye Fatou Mbaye), 2022, oil on canvas, 265 × 394 × 10 cm, framed.
10. *Femme Piquée Par Un Serpent* (Mamadou Gueye), 2022, oil on canvas, 363 × 790 × 10 cm, framed.
11. *The Death of Hyacinth* (Ndey Buri Mboup), 2022, paint and oil on canvas, 264 × 394 × 10 cm, framed.

#### **SCULPTURES**

1. *Dying Gaul* (Roman 1st Century), 2022, bronze, 53,5 × 48 × 119,5 cm.
2. *Femme Piquée Par Un Serpent*, 2022, bronze, 30 × 120 × 50 cm.
3. *Sleep* (Mamadou Gueye), 2022, bronze, 30 × 130 × 54 cm.
4. *Ariadne Asleep on the Island of Naxos*, 2022, bronze, 30 × 150 × 75 Cm.
5. *The Virgin Martyr Cecilia*, 2022, bronze, 24,4 × 105,8 × 48,5 cm.
6. *Christian Martyr Tarcisius*, 2022, bronze, 42 × 140 × 75 cm.
7. *Young Tarentine* (Mamadou Gueye), 2022, bronze, 94 × 434 × 157 cm.
8. *The Virgin Martyr Cecilia*, 2022, bronze, 66 × 388 × 178 cm.
9. *Youth Mourning*, 2022, bronze, 36 × 81 × 42 cm.
10. *Death of Two Soldiers*, 2022, bronze, 24,5 × 136 × 89 cm.
11. *Entombment* (Titian), 2022, bronze, 34 × 135 × 110 cm.
12. *An Archaeology of Silence*, 2022, bronze, 410 × 510 × 150 cm.
13. *The Dead Toreador* (Sophie Ndiaye), 2022, bronze, 41 × 262 × 89 cm.
14. *The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb* (Babacar Mané), 2022, bronze, 45 × 262 × 97 cm.
15. *Morpheus*, 2022 bronze 68 × 150 × 75 cm.

III. 30 – Map of the exhibition with artworks’ titles and details.

Moving to the second room, visitors can admire the first sculptures and get acquainted with Wiley’s lying figures. These three sculptures are quite small and reproduce respectively the Roman subject of the dying Gaul, the marble statue *Femme piquée par un serpent* (1847) by Jean-Baptiste Auguste Clésinger, at the Musée d’Orsay, and the painting *Sleep* (1771) by Jean-Bernard Restout, now at the Cleveland Museum of Art. Their positioning at the centre of the room allows visitors to move around them and admire them from all sides.



Ill. 31 – Kehinde Wiley, *Sleep (Mamadou Gueye)*, 2022, bronze. Courtesy of Stephen Friedman Gallery (London).



Ill. 32 – Kehinde Wiley, *Dying Gaul*, 2022, bronze. Courtesy of Galerie Templon (Paris).

Moving to the next space, visitors find themselves in one of the two biggest exhibitions spaces and their attention is immediately caught by the bright colours of the paintings and the incredible dimensions of the central sculptures. Indeed, this room makes the two media dialogue with each other. On the right and front walls, with respect to the entrance, visitors are faced with two enormous painted versions of the marble sculpture *Young Tarantine* (1871) by Alexandre Schoenewerk, at the Musée d'Orsay. The front one depicts a feminine subject (Ill. 32) lying on the ground, directly on green grass and moss, who is surrounded by a background of brownish leaves (decay) that accentuates the presence of several colourful flowers (rebirth). The male version of the painting (Ill. 31), on the left, represents instead a sort of exception in the exhibition, if we consider that the floral background is substituted in this case by a perspectival view on

the landscape, echoing the aerial perspective of Leonardo's paintings and showing the trees and a city's skyline progressively disappearing in the distance.



Ill. 33 – (foreground) Kehinde Wiley, *Young Tarantine (Mamadou Gueye)*, 2022, bronze; (background) *Young Tarantine I (Babacar Mané)*, 2022, oil on canvas. Photo by Ugo Carmeni.

The same subject is repeated also in one of the two huge central sculptures dominating the room, *Young Tarantine (Mamadou Gueye)* (Ill. 31). In this case, the natural ground below the figure is rendered through the addition of lianas and vines climbing onto the body and encircling it. The young man in the second huge sculpture (Ill. 32), instead, is depicted in a twisted position, with his naked torso and face reclined towards the ground. The position of his right hand, positioned as if pointing to someone or something, faithfully reproduces the hand gesture of the work it was taken from: the white marble sculpture *The Virgin Martyr St. Cecilia* (1607) by Stefano Maderno, now at the Church of Saint Cecilia (Rome), which is in its turn an accurate reproduction of the actual position of the martyr's body, found in 1599 during the excavations for the restoration of Santa Cecilia's church in Trastevere (Rome)<sup>272</sup>.

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<sup>272</sup> *Santa Cecilia scultura*, in Catalogo Generale dei Beni Culturali; <https://catalogo.beniculturali.it/detail/HistoricOrArtisticProperty/1200171784> [last access on 1 February 2023]





Ill. 34 – (foreground) Kehinde Wiley, *The Virgin Martyr Cecilia (Ndey Buri)*, 2022, bronze; (background) *Young Tarantine II (Ndeye Fatou Mbaye)*, 2022, oil on canvas.

Three other smaller sculptures accompany the two in the centre and are positioned closed to the entrance door, facing the *Young Tarantine II (Ndeye Fatou Mbaye)* on the opposite wall. Also in this case, like in the first room, it is possible for the audience to walk around them to get a 360° view of the many details concerning their pose and their items of clothing. One of them depicts a feminine version of *The Virgin Martyr Cecilia* (Ill. 33), this time modelled around Ndey Buri, whose braided head is still directed towards the ground. *Ariadne Asleep on the Island of Naxos* (1809-14, The Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, Pennsylvania) by John Vanderlyn and *Christian Martyr Tarcisius* (1868, Musée d'Orsay, Paris) by Alexandre Falguiere – are the source of inspiration for the two other small sculptures on this side of the exhibition room and also for their painted version, one of which is shown in this very space.



Ill. 35 – (on the left) Kehinde Wiley, *The Virgin Martyr Cecilia (Ndey Buri)*, 2022, bronze; (on the right) *Christian Martyr Tarcisius (El Hadji Malick Gueye)*, 2022, bronze. Photo by Ugo Carmeni.

Indeed, on the left wall of this space, visitors can also admire three large paintings. Differently from the two *Young Tarantine* on the right and front wall, these three paintings are smaller and of oval shape instead of rectangular. Moreover, stylistically, the floral pattern of the background is extremely emphasized behind the figures. The brightness of the colours, highlighted by the use of the spotlights, almost makes the works appear as if they were lit from the back, hiding their source of light behind. The painting on the right (Ill. 34) echoes the small sculpture *Christian Martyr Tarcisius* since the same model, El Hadji Malick Gueye, posed for both artworks. The only difference, apart from the medium used, might be found in the position of the model: while in the painting the torso is given a predominant role and is directed towards the viewers, in the bronze version the whole sculpted body is visible and inclined towards the ground. The central painting depicts instead *The Wounded Achilles* (Ill. 34), sculpted in marble by Filippo Albacini in 1825. The original statue represents Achilles sitting on the ground, sustaining the weight of his torso with one hand while touching with the other one the arrow that delivered the fatal blow to his ankle; wearing only his helmet, he looks up to the sky with a resigned expression of pain<sup>273</sup>. Although he takes the same pose from the original, Wiley's Achilles is instead fully dressed and gazing the viewer with a painless expression. He holds the arrow in his hand, which almost gets confused in the thick and colourful vegetation behind him.

<sup>273</sup> S. Sherwin, *Filippo Albacini's The Wounded Achilles: the pose, the arrow and his heel*, in "The Guardian", 22 November 2019; <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2019/nov/22/filippo-albacini-the-wounded-achilles> [last access on 19 February 2023]



Ill. 36 – (foreground) Kehinde Wiley, *The Virgin Martyr Cecilia (Ndey Buri)*, 2022, bronze; (background, on the left) *The Wounded Achilles*, 2022, oil on canvas; (background, on the right) *Christian Martyr Tarcisius*, 2022, oil on canvas. Photo by Ugo Carmeni.

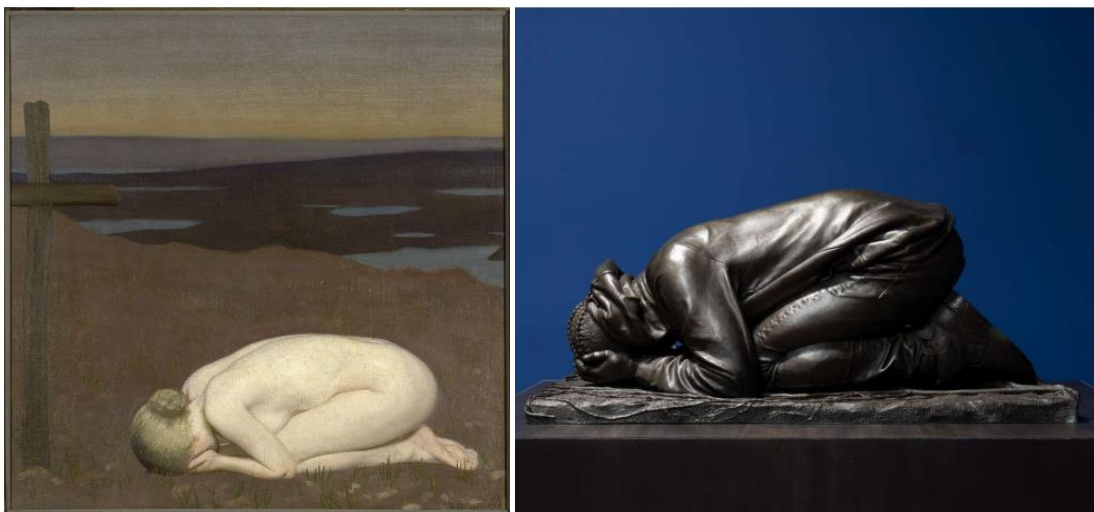
The last oval painting (Ill. 35), on the left and closer to the access to the next room, depicts *Sleep* by Restout, which we encountered as statue in the previous space. Wearing the same clothes and hat, the young figure's posture is almost identical to the statue, except for the position of the head: while it is directed upwards in the sculpture, allowing visitors to observe it from an upper viewpoint, in the painting it is slightly inclined towards the viewers, to become visible. In the painting, there is a strong chromatic contrast between the light bedsheets on which the figure lies and the dark background, revived by the red and light-yellow flowers matching the clothes.



Ill. 37 – Kehinde Wiley, *Sleep*, 2022, oil on canvas. Courtesy of Galerie Templon (Paris).



Accessing the following smaller room, three sculptures and three paintings await the visitors. On the right wall hangs the revisitation of *Reclining Nude in Wooded Setting* (Ill. 21, 22) by Victor K. Shtemberg, painted in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. A similar work executed by the same artist in that period, the *Sleeping Bacchante*, might as well have inspired Wiley for the position of the young girl, who is lying on the grass on one side and with an arm raised close to her head. In a similar position, on the opposite wall we see *Reclining Nude (Babacar Mané)* (Ill. 38), depicting this time a lying male figure whose arms are both raised to cover the head. Both paintings present flowers on the background, but while the one behind the woman is more similar to a floral wallpaper repeating the same motif, the one behind the man looks like a natural rosebush. As far as the three sculptures are concerned, they are all strictly connected to the theme of death and, in two cases, to the horrors of war. The first on visitors' path is *Youth Mourning* (Ill. 36, 37), for example, and it is inspired by the painting realized in 1916 by George Clausen, now at the Imperial War Museum of London. The original work was conceived as a response to the horrors of the First World War, in relation to the death of the fiancé of the author's daughter in the battlefield. To emphasize the grief and emptiness of death, Clausen chose to represent the subject, a woman huddled on herself, without any clothing and against an extremely barren and minimal landscape<sup>274</sup>.



Ill. 38 – (on the left) George Clausen, *Youth Mourning*, 1916, oil on canvas, Imperial War Museum (London).

<sup>274</sup> *Youth Mourning* – Imperial War Museum; <https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/5151> [last access on 1 February 2023]

Ill. 39 – (on the right) Kehinde Wiley, *Youth Mourning (El Hadji Malick Gueye)*, 2022, bronze. Courtesy of Galerie Templon (Paris).

The sculpture in central position is again related to the topic of war. Its title, *The Death of two soldiers (Ibrahima Ndiaye & Babacar Mane)* does not make direct reference to the original artwork it reproduces: the painting *Gassed* realized by John Singer Sargent in 1919 and now hosted, too, at the Imperial War Museum. Sargent, who was commissioned by the British War Memorials Committee to document the First World War, depicted in this painting the aftermath of a mustard gas attack. Differently from all the works we encountered so far, Sargent's *Gassed* represents a large group of people: most of the soldiers lies on the ground in the foreground and in the background, while a group of them stands in the middle. With their eyes covered with bandages, they help each other to move forward. Wiley's sculpted version of the painting is the only artwork in the exhibition that depicts two subjects together. The two of them lie on the ground in positions not dissimilar from those of Sargent's fallen soldiers, with their bodies touching.



Ill. 40 – (foreground) Kehinde Wiley, *The Death of two soldiers (Ibrahima Ndiaye & Babacar Mane)*, 2022, bronze; (background) *Reclining Nude (Babacar Mané)*, 2022, oil on canvas. Courtesy of Galerie Templon (Paris).

The last sculpture re-enacts instead a detail from Titian's *Entombment* (1559, Museo del Prado, Madrid). Titian's original painting, among many others he did on the same subject, depicts the Gospel account of the burial of Christ into the stone sarcophagus. The lying body of Christ is held by the Virgin Mary and other figures which helped

the entombment. Wiley's revisitation of the work only reproduces the lying body, which lies half on the ground and half on a cloth which reminds of the drapes enveloping Christ's body in Titian's painting.

A corridor then leads the visitors to the last room of the exhibition, which is a wide space just like the second room. To truthfully report an actual visitor's experience inside the exhibition, the breath-taking effect of *An Archaeology of Silence* (Ill. 39) should be mentioned before the other works in the room. Indeed, the more-than-five meters tall equestrian sculpture has a huge impact on the small visitor that enters the room from the dark corridor and finds himself/herself in front of it. The effect is even more powerful if we consider that the statue is positioned so that the horse immediately gazes the visitors as they walk past the entrance door. While making eye-contact with the horse, visitors also immediately notice the unusual position of the rider. Indeed, since we are used to knights, emperors and generals riding their horses with pride and pomposity, the view of the lying rider, miraculously still on the back of animal and eventually going to fall, destabilizes visitors. The presence of the statue is also emphasized by the colourful paintings on the surrounding walls, which create a sort of background for the dark sculpture dominating the room. In particular, right behind the horse, visitors can see the large painting *Femme piquée par un serpent* (*Mamadou Gueye*)(Ill. 24, 39), whose setting and patterned background recalls the one of the feminine version of *Reclining Nude in Wooden Setting* (*Edidiong Ikobah*)(Ill. 21). In the majority of the artworks we encountered so far, the reference to specific fashion brands in the contemporary items of clothing are visible, and particularly in the case, where the model wears a yellow shirt with black Louis Vuitton logos all over it.



Ill. 41 – (on the left) Kehinde Wiley, *The Death of Hyacinth (Ndey Buri Mboup)*, 2022, oil on canvas; (foreground, on the right) *An Archaeology of Silence*, 2022, bronze; (background, on the right) *Femme piquée par un serpent (Mamadou Gueye)*, 2022, oil on canvas.

Continuing the visit, on the right wall the viewer can admire two paintings depicting young women. The first one is a painted version of *The Virgin Martyr Cecilia*. Just like in the large sculpture of the second room, the subject is again facing her braided head towards the ground and pointing with her finger, reproducing the martyr's gestures. Next to it, the following painting is *Morpheus (Ndeye Fatou Mbaye)* (Ill. 41), inspired by the marble sculpture with the same title by Jean-Antoine Houdon, realized in 1777 and currently at the Musée du Louvre (Paris). The original work depicts the god of dreams as a winged figure reclining on an ebony bed. Similarly, the model is painted by Wiley in reclined position on some sort of base covered with a white cloth. White is indeed the dominant colour of the paintings, found in the cloth, in the woman's shoes and shirt and also in the background leaves. This choice highlights by

contrast the presence of the central figure and of the multicolour flowers all around her. Differently from the sculpted Morpheus, who is sleeping blissfully, Wiley's subject has her eyes open, as if gazing the viewer. Moving then to the left wall, on the opposite side, visitors see the painting *The Death of Hyacinth (Ndey Buri Mbou)* (Ill. 40). As the title tells, it is inspired by work by Tiepolo, painted between 1752 and 1753 and now at the Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza (Madrid). The subject, taken from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, is the fatal outcome of the love of the god Apollo for the mortal prince of Sparta Hyacinthus. While the young boy was learning how to throw the discus, the jealous Zephyr decided to deflect the object, which hit him on the head and killed him instantly. From the blood flowing from the wound of Hyacinth, Apollo gave birth to a beautiful flower taking his name. For his painting, Tiepolo based his study on Giovanni Andrea dell'Anguillara translation of Ovid, which replaced the discus with a tennis ball as killing object, referring to at-the-time popular game known as *pallacorda*, played by the nobility in the 16<sup>th</sup> century Italy<sup>275</sup>. Therefore, Tiepolo painted three balls and a racquet lying on the floor on the right side of the painting, close to Hyacinth's body and the hyacinth flower born from his wound. The lower part of the prince's dead body is indeed lying on the floor while his torso is reclined on a rich orange drape, his head lying on Apollo's knee and looking up to him. In Tiepolo's version, Hyacinth and Apollo are surrounded by witnesses, whereas for his version Wiley decided to depict only the figure of Hyacinth, embodied by a young woman. The posture of the woman's body is almost identical to that of the Spartan prince, leaning on an orange cloth. Wiley faithfully reproduced also the position of the balls, the racquet and the flower, as well as the checkerboard motive of the marble floor. However, he substituted Tiepolo's background of ancient ruins opening to the blue sky with a black background, upon which he created a sophisticated pattern of bright flowers. But probably the greatest difference from the original work is to be found in the figure's head: while that of Hyacinth is abandoned on Apollo's knee, with his eyes closed, Wiley's figure is wide awake, with her head and gaze directed towards her left, as if looking at something out of the viewer's reach. Given her position, the reclined female figure could remind of Antonio Canova's neoclassical sculpture of Paolina

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<sup>275</sup> *The Death of Hyacinthus* – Tiepolo, Giambattista. Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid; <https://www.museothyssen.org/en/collection/artists/tiepolo-giambattista/death-hyacinthus> [last access on 1 February 2023]



Bonaparte, sculpted between 1804 and 1808 and now exhibited at Galleria Borghese (Rome).



Ill. 42 – Kehinde Wiley, *The Death of Hyacinth (Ndey Buri Mboup)*, 2022, oil on canvas. Courtesy of Galerie Templon (Paris).

On the same side of the exhibition room, moving towards the exit, visitors are faced with a sculpted bronze version of *Morpheus*, staging the same model of the painting on the opposite wall. Differently from the painting, the sculpture conveys a more faithful reproduction of Houdon's sculpture, with the young woman sleeping with the head on her folded arms, reclined on two piles of rocks.



Ill. 43 – Kehinde Wiley, *Morpheus (Ndeye Fatou Mbaye)*, 2022, oil on canvas. Courtesy of Galerie Templon (Paris).

Finally, completing the overview of this room's walls before exiting the exhibition, on the wall facing *Femme piquée par un serpent (Mamadou Gueye)*, visitors will notice a different typology of works compared to the ones admired until now. Inserted on this wall, indeed, are two rectangular niches hosting the lying bronze sculptures *The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb (Babacar Mané)* (Ill. 20), and *The Dead Toreador (Sophie Ndiaye)*. The first one takes inspiration from the painting by Hans Holbein the Younger, which we already commented as the inspiring piece for the whole exhibition. While the dead body of Christ is only covered around his waist by a white cloth, Wiley's model is completely dressed. Moreover, while Holbein's figure's head is directed towards the ceiling, the young man portrayed by Wiley is slightly reclined in the direction of the viewer. The second sculpture depicts a young woman, echoing the position of *The Dead Toreador* (1864, National Gallery of Art, Washington) by Edouard Manet. The male subject of Manet's painting is indeed a toreador, whose appearance was probably influenced by a *corrida* Manet attended. The dead toreador, lying on the ground with his legs lightly spread and his left hand still holding the pink drape used in the bullfighting, is depicted by Manet from a slightly elevated perspective, to appreciate all the details of the black and white suit and the position of his right arm abandoned on his abdomen. Wiley's young woman resembles faithfully the toreador's position, although wearing jeans, a shirt and a pair of sport shoes. In a contemporary revisitation of Manet's work, the pink drape in the hand of the toreador is substituted by a smartphone in the woman's hand. Both bronze sculptures inserted on the wall show a wooden frame extremely similar to the painted sarcophagus containing the dead body of Christ in Holbein's painting. And just like that wooden frame, which reports a Latin inscription of Jesus Christ's name on the upper part, the names of the two models casted by Wiley are reported on the two surrounding frames: Babacar Mané and Sophie Ndiaye, respectively.



Ill. 44 – Edouard Manet, *The Dead Toreador*, 1894, oil on canvas, National Gallery of Art (Washington).



Ill. 45 – Kehinde Wiley, *The Dead Toreador (Sophie Ndiaye)*, 2022, bronze. Courtesy of Galerie Templon (Paris).

With these two sculptures, the visitors conclude their path within the exhibition and may move towards the exit, grasping with one last overall view the artworks occupying the room and the powerful dialogue and messages they convey.



## CONCLUSION

The main intention and scope of investigation behind this dissertation has been aimed at analysing the relationship between decoloniality and art, discussing how the first could be implemented in artistic practices and art spaces to convey decolonial messages in artworks and museums' display, towards the development of more inclusive and thoughtful art venues. In this view, the approaches of the artists Sammy Baloji and Kehinde Wiley have been useful to analyse two different core issues in the field of art which have been questioned in a decolonial perspective: the structure and display of the ethnographic museum – and more in general of all museums which struggle to lose a decolonial setting – and the typical forms of representations of the black body, sustained in history by colonial and racist stereotypes and illustrations since the early modern period.

Although the different backgrounds and artistic practices of the two artists may seem to sharply distinguish their views, in this dissertation we saw how, instead, they both conceive their artworks and exhibitions in decolonial terms, questioning and sometimes ironizing on the dominant colonial discourse that still permeates society. Through his exhibition at the Uffizi Galleries, for example, Sammy Baloji reveals and draws visitors' attention to the historical concealment of other narratives, which have been discharged from the official history. In *K(C)ongo Fragments of Interlaced Dialogues. Subversive Classifications*, the Congolese artist re-enacts those display strategies typical of (ethnographic) museums and makes visitors reflect on the different value African objects have been arbitrarily attributed in history from the Eurocentric gaze, which considered them alternatively as craftsmanship or art, but still primitive either way. Questioning instead the canonical forms of representation of black bodies in art history, Kehinde Wiley places his models in central position, granting them visibility in those classical artworks which used to confine black people at the margins. In *An Archaeology of Silence*, the Afro-American artist takes an innovative turn in his artistic practice by recovering the lying figure of the fallen hero or deceased martyr, making his sitters become symbols of resistance and resilience against racial violence but also ironizing on the stereotype of black American masculinity.

In this dissertation, Sammy Baloji and Kehinde Wiley's artistic approaches and practices have been taken in consideration to analyse and question the role of museums

and practices of representation in decolonial terms. However, the two artists and their exhibitions are just examples of many other issues related to decoloniality that could be addressed in the art field, among which for instance the stereotypical representation of black women's body that we mentioned briefly in the third chapter. The same could be said also for the decolonial options to be developed in museums – which have been discussed in the first and in the second chapter – that represent only some of the possibilities and alternatives employed at present day and which are surely subject to continuous adjustments and implementation. In any case, the meanings conveyed in Sammy Baloji's and Kehinde Wiley's exhibitions in Florence and Venice provided two meaningful examples on how art can effectively bear decolonial messages and enhance reflection on crucial social issues of contemporary society such as racism and violence. However, in order to make such decolonial messages in art effective, an active role is expected from museums' and exhibitions' visitors while approaching artworks. Indeed, as we discussed especially in the first introductory chapter, one of the core aims of decoloniality is revealing the existence of alternative viewpoints on history and reality. Therefore, the effort done by the artists to provide visitors with challenging and counteracting perspectives should not be considered as an exceptional circumstance, but rather as an invitation to adopt an attitude of openness – to be employed even outside exhibitions' spaces – to question the Eurocentric viewpoint contemporary society is still embedded in. As art critic and curator Gerardo Mosquera wrote on the matter,

[...] we should realise that the way towards an intercultural evaluation of the works of art is not just a question of seeing, but also of listening. Careful account should be taken of how artwork functions in its context, what values are recognised there, what sensibility it satisfies, what perspectives it opens, what it contributes... Only after such thorough understanding would we recognise the messages of interest that art can communicate to the viewers addressed by the exhibitions, and how it can contribute towards a general enrichment.<sup>276</sup>

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<sup>276</sup> G. Mosquera, *The Marco Polo Syndrome. Some Problems Around Art and Eurocentrism*, in *Third Text*, Issue 21: The Wake of Utopia, vol. 6, 1992, p. 223.

## APPENDIX

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