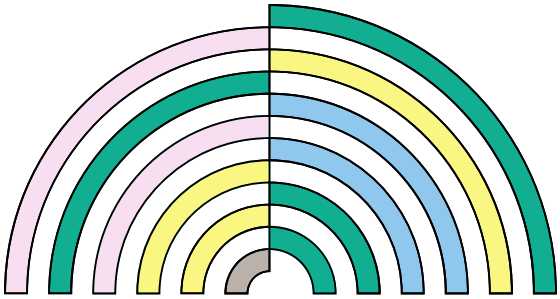


Fixing Up the House / The Passion of Photography.
Mark Sealy

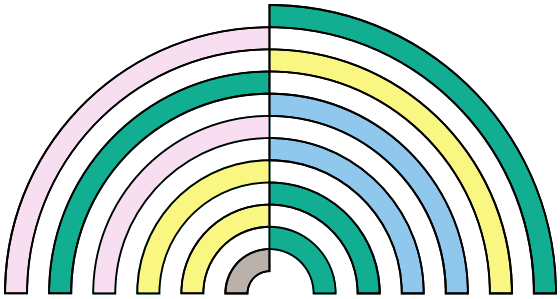
We are in a time of reckoning with photography's history. We are at a moment where salvage is required; scavenging work is necessary, and the digging up of things from the archive for new scrutiny is essential. Across the terrain of Western cultural institutions there exists a sense of unease, a cultural turn, a dizzying political bewilderment concerning how to manage visual narratives of the colonial period and the racist assumptions that infused and defined it. The museum, historically a space of affirmation and imperial knowledge exchange, has itself become an object of scrutiny, cited as a hostile place that creates "instruments of violence." (Azoulay 2019, 153).

This, then, is the dawning of the House of Other, a new kind of cultural space that is open and welcoming. In this house, the uneasy narratives of photography's history are revealed and opened to scrutiny. The House of Other is not built solely on European foundations. In this space, notions of conquest and ownership are banished. Instead, in The House of Other, difference is exalted, and indigenous cultural knowledge formations are given proper space to express themselves and realize their ends. Here, these knowledge systems are respected fully, and equally valued alongside the diverse ways of knowing in our world. In this House, the stranger is welcome, and otherness in all its forms is celebrated through cultural dreams of reparation and human generosity. This House champions justice, and the return cultural of objects to their places of origin. It welcomes formal and legal apologies for historical wrongs.

"Museums and archives today are in the throes of profound change as they grapple with the fraught legacies of colonialism, imperialism, and slavery, all of which played fundamental roles in building the cultural institutions of the Western world." (Pickering 2020, 15)

In the House of Other, recognition and reckoning are given real value. Monuments are rethought, and unsung heroes are named and clothed with dignity. In The House of Other, indigenous knowledge formations are treated as sacred and revered. They are to be deployed as acts of empowerment and liberation for those who have been isolated, racialized, disconnected, and locked out of history. Here hostile images are given new life and oxygen, allowed to breathe the fresh air of being once again. Sasha Huber, with her current work that re-dresses the violence of the Joseph T. Zealy daguerreotypes commissioned in 1850 by Louis Agassiz, the founder of the Museum of Comparative Zoology Harvard, aims to restore dignity to the victims of that racist lens. What I hope most for in photography during this cultural turn is for its practitioners to demand not only social change, but also, importantly, for their works to live as impetus for meaningful legislative change. Although The House of Other is presently an imaginary house, its design and positionality are highly influenced by the lives and works of its intellectual forebears, prominent among them are the fierce insights of Frantz Fanon, the radical photography of Ernest Cole, the bravery and inspirational qualities of Ingrid Pollard, Carrie Mae Weems, Shahidul Alam, Sunil Gupta and the many Others who have worked to unfix the past and build spaces in which the diversity of this world's understandings and ways of being can surface and be seen.

In the genocidal, broken time of photography, its early days, when the world was laid bare, ripped apart, expropriated by imperial tools, and dominated by Eurocentric scopic regimes, Western eyes reigned supreme. How the West saw the rest tells us much more

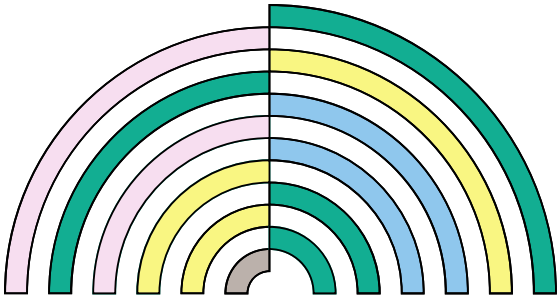


about our current human condition than anything they encountered, read, mapped, or archived concerning the Other from the times of extraction. This is the horror show of photography's past. Its messy science and its untidy history is only now beginning to surface as a tense and uncomfortable burden. Photography's soul is being interrogated, its language system, its captions, its categories, its indexical nature, its canon, provide evidence in abundance of who and what are missing from its history. Now, Photography's missing chapters are being read out loud, as archives and new photographic images from the global South confront photography's archives. The narrative now being amplified by Other curatorial voices represents an exciting visual decoloniality in the making of photography's present history. The radicality in this gesture lies in the fact that photographers must stay in the making, thinking business, to stay with the making of images, the bringing of change, and the making of difference. The old guard of photography "the stuck ones" are desperate to find ways to be associated with the decoloniality process, but they are now chained to the verso of photography's history, stuck down in old meanings and recurring archival nightmares that recall the violence of photography's imperial and colonizing lineage.

We seem to be getting closer to the ground zero of photography, an understanding of its essentializing elements. We may, with the emergence of photographers such as Eileen Perrier and La Toya Ruby Frazier, Joy Gregory and Deana Lawson, see the beginnings of what may become fully articulated archives that act as daring counter-narratives concerning the making of Black lives, nuanced, honest, complex, rounded bodies of work that have grown past the need to simply celebrate. Many dedicated scholars such as Stuart Hall, Deborah Willis, bell hooks, Ariella Aisha Azoulay, and Alanna Lockward have opened new visual and theoretical pathways through, and into, our understanding of the damage photography as an image-making mechanism in the hands of the Western colonial powers has done to our collective sense of humanity. They, acting as scholars working against the grain of imperial epistemes, do not only critic, they point towards and celebrate new formations of lens-based cultures, and offer insight, and lost hindsight, into the work photographic images can perform in culture.

This scholarly work feels ever more pressing and critically essential today, especially when we open dialogues concerning technologies old and new, museums revamped or left languishing, and, of course, the legacies of pseudo-scientific and colonizing theories advanced by scholars including Agassiz and his genocidal followers, the legacies of whom are still being propagated through the noise of Western mass media channels that are both regulated and unregulated.

We seem to be dangerously distanced and disjointed bodies floating in a deeply alienating inherited cultural space that is not of a majority-world making. It's this space that many of our contemporary photographers and cultural theorists, especially those who feel the presence of the global South in their DNA, in their gravity, in their history, in their place in time, have been trying to arrest, realign and recreate so as to build a more inclusive worldview, seeking to create a new global image bank that can function as liberatory site for all. Samuel Fosso's work sits within this tradition. He creates scenes in which the emotional,



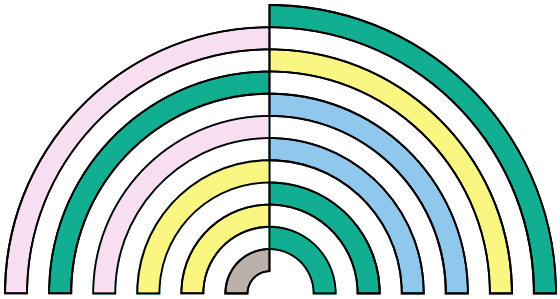
the personal, and the political meet to narrate the past, address the present, and to propose a shared a future.

“Undoing imperial violence means undoing time, space, and the body politic as given forms of experience, as the transcendental conditions of understanding, perception, action and judgement.” (Azoulay 2019, 152).

Cultural distance fails us; images may isolate us. Since First Contact with Europeans, indigenous cultures have been left precarious, constantly at risk of being erased, oblitterated, or bulldozed in to landfill, scorched, or drowned as a result of aggressive colonising policies of extraction, or contemporary neoliberalism. The photographer Gideon Mendel, concerning his recent exhibition titled, “Fire and Flood” staged by The Photographers Gallery London, and shown in their recently opened Soho Photography Quarter, an initiative that has turned the fabric of the street next to the gallery into a space for exhibitions, states that his photographs “bear witness to the brutal reality that the poorest people on the planet almost always suffer the most from climate change.” Among the interesting aspects of Mendel’s approach here is how close Mendel’s statement echoes Frantz Fanon's radical book published in 1961 titled, “The Wretched of the Earth.” A much-cited quotation from Fanon reads. “Imperialism leaves behind germs of rot which we must clinically detect and remove from our land but from our minds as well.” The correlation between Fanon, Azoulay, and Mendel in this present moment operates like a powerful time-bending force that compresses distinct historical concerns. Fanon’s words breathe through photographers such as Mendel, and are pulled forward into our present, released from the prison of history. Azoulay rightly casts aside the temporality of timelines in culture and politics. Azoulay sees the museum as “time trap,” and Mendel is driven by a desire to represent that which is widely known but still ignored, recalling what W.E. B Dubois, writing in 1910, called the “Crisis,” pulling this enduring notion back into our consciousness. Maybe, then, the task of photography’s future is to adopt a more fully pedagogic manifesto. One that works within what Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak suggests: to develop radical ways in which to learn from below, thus allowing us to discard the structures that create top-down forms of power, and to eradicate all forms of apartheid.

A 2022 report produced by two of Britain’s leading charitable organizations, Greenpeace and the Runnymeade Trust links the current climate emergency to the history of colonialism. “These injustices, and the exploitative relationships that underpin them, are the legacy of colonialism. The British Empire, and the corporations it sponsored, raked in enormous riches from slavery, cheap labor and the plunder of raw materials worth trillions of dollars. Thanks to technological advantages and colonial oppression, rich countries have squeezed huge profits out of the fossil fuel economy while setting the globe on a path of dependence on fossil fuels and causing much of the associated emissions, leaving the global South poorer and more exposed to the environmental emergency as a result.”

The interdisciplinary artist and activist Wilfred Ukpong primarily works with photography and film to raise our awareness of the devastating impact the oil industry has wrought on his community, and across the wider Niger Delta, making the area among the most polluted

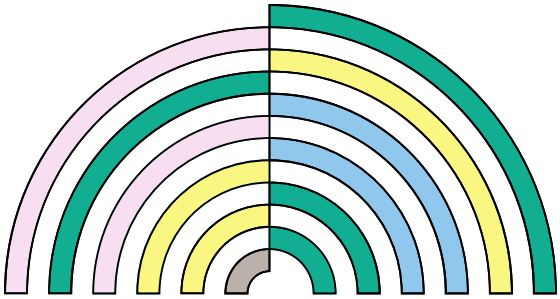


places on earth. His work is essentially a theater in which young people are given agency and are empowered to articulate the experiences of their lives through imaging new futures and new ways of being. Using forms of participatory processes, Ukpong is able to translate the neoliberal hostilities abroad across the Niger Delta to a place in which local voices can seek justice and equality and can thrive in the knowledge that they have a voice. His practice, especially his work with young people, speaks beyond the local into the global and through the historical. Ukpong refuses to work within the linear structures of this form of resistance. He imagines and makes real a system of justice that holds the neoliberal agenda to account. Here the making of things in culture through photography film, performance, and sculpture, in the most desperate of places, offers a degree of fractured, but reflective, hope. Ukpong's investigations into the impact of oil extraction from the Niger Delta region spiritually connect with the works of Sammy Baloji, who through his own praxis unearths the bleak timelines of the colonial history of the presence of Europeans in today's Democratic Republic of the Congo.

The West may have entered a new domain, a cultural turn that does not have time to fully absorb the material world beyond a subject's own reflection and desires. The camera as a tool may have become a fairground hall of mirrors in which the sense of any truth may be lost, or overly aestheticized to the point where the image of global crisis becomes a limited edition and collectible displayed in the House of False Curiosities. The hall of mirrors, the place of multiple and distorted perspectives maybe be amusing for a while, but it also creates confusion and warped realities.

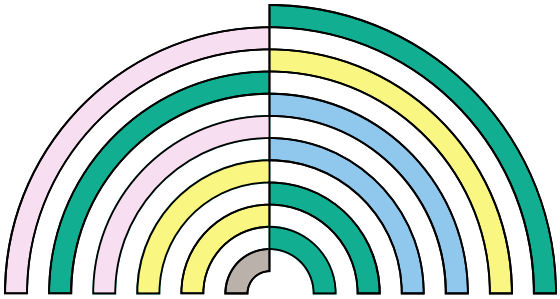
Photography conceived of as an authentic space of representation may be a lost ideal; it may be redundant. Everything and anything can now be staged, and truth(s) will always be called into question. The narcissistic inherently eurocentric sense of self-centering, that personal reflexive quality, might be the final destination for all photography. All that might be left for us to contemplate as a radical form of expression is the space of auto-portraiture, the camera turned inward as a therapeutic space of salvage from the dark framing of Europe's history. The late Nigerian photographer Rotimi Fani-Kayode, the Indian photographer Sunil Gupta, the British photographers Ajamu and Joy Gregory, along with the South Africa photographer Muholi are all artists who have liberated countless minds by means of their transgressive restagings of the self. Through the work of artists such these audiences can see new futures, experience different cosmologies, encounter indigenous epistemes, and, ultimately, be induced to challenge reactionary attitudes and regimes power.

In the theatre of photography, the traumas we experience, as well as the pleasures we seek, become a new visual landscape in which we can be free to wonder. Landscape, in this context, becomes not an external, material place on earth, but an internal space of contemplation, fantasy, desire, and sometimes fear. The global north is haunted by what it has done to the Earth. This incipient anthropocene demands a response. Photographic artists such as Ingrid Pollard and Monica de Miranda work through ideas of cultural location, time, land-memory, and diaspora. Ghosts don't hurt those that listen to their stories. They only frighten those who continue to deny histories and tragic pasts. Across her works,



Pollard constantly agitates the bedrock of history. Her camera digs, excavates and exposes the overlooked terrains of our psyches. Pollard understands that images, time, and space are not fixed, and that the whole universe is enveloped in a reassuring deep blackness. Monica de Miranda also works through the layers of colonial history. What de Miranda shares with Pollard is a sense of joining land with thoughts of liberation and reconciliation. They both work in the deep recesses of time, across the geology of our being and embrace the cosmos as road map to freedom.

Defiant eyes gaze into archives differently. They generate new conversations, produce counterintelligences, rail against the nostalgic imperial ways of seeing and of representing Otherness. They build new archives and create new forms of knowledge. Defiant eyes heal institutional wounds; they bring the discarded figures of our time back to life. W.E.B. Du Bois understood the urgency and the need to curate and make new images of Black subjects. His 1900 Paris World's Fair exhibition remains one of the most important interventions in race and visual culture of the modern period. Santu Mofokeng well understood how crucial it is to treasure and care for the discard ones in a culture. His research-based work on the history of the Black subject in South African photography entitled the *The Black Photo Album / Look at Me 1890/1950* is culturally and politically part of a visual lineage that shares a space with DuBois's Parisian interventions. They are decades apart in time, but spiritually joined. They make visible the complexity and richness of Black lives lived in front of the camera. Dubois, one may claim, laid the foundation stone of photography's House of Other. These curatorial/collected works push back against the tide of violence that Carrie Mae Weems so brilliant identified in her work entitled From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried. Weems's intervention undeniably does what she intended; it gives voice to those stripped bare and silenced by photography. But, importantly, this work grows in meaning the images become interventionist, not just in cultural terms, but in legal terms. They begin to aid new dialogues concerning the use and ownership of degrading images. The Zealy daguerreotypes which she reworked in 1995 have become a precedent in which other artists such as Sasha Huber and Jeannette Ehlers, both artists based in Northern Europe, could build on, work through, and, in doing so, develop further decolonial methodologies that re-dress the long-standing historical injustices and forms of cultural erasure that attend the representation of the Black subject in western visual culture. This is taxing, hurtful, but necessary work. Its impact is expressed eloquently by the Black British photographer Vanley Burke speaking as a guest on BBC Radio 4's program Desert Island Discs—one of Britain's most loved radio shows with nearly 3 million listeners weekly—of his love for Nina Simone's cover of the song "I Wish I knew How It Would feel to Be Free". In introducing the recording, Burke, now in his 70s, movingly describes the record as catalytic in his thoughts, wondering about "what is it to be free, and what is it to spend a whole day without thinking about race. What it must be like to spend a few hours without thinking about it? What would life really be like? If that is freedom? How would it be? I would really love to experience that." Burke, consciously or unconsciously, summons back into the cultural arena the brilliance of Fanon's work foregrounding the psychiatric care that needs to be undertaken when we address liberating Black minds from what Walter Mignolo refers to as the "colonial matrix of power." Vanely Burke takes on the burden not simply of representation, but of responsibility. He shares this sense of



responsibility with a growing global community of Black consciousness photographers, past and present that includes James Van Der Zee, Dawoud Bey, Rosana Paulino, Aida Muluneh, Rahima Gambo, Aida Silvestri, and Poloumi Basu, who work collectively across oceans and time. This expanding community of photographers and artists work can perhaps be described as The Passion. In the space of The Passion love reigns supreme, and photography can only have one purpose: to bridge the gaps in our understanding of each other, to transcend the cultural barriers that destroy Black dreams.

In thinking about the work of Zora J. Murff, especially his recent book, published in 2022 by Aperture, entitled True Colors (or, Affirmations in a Crisis) I wonder whether there's a kind of new revolutionary term that we might be able to embrace which works to get past the problem of race and state violence. Murff has been consumed by The Passion. In spending time with Murff's projects, it seems to me he is addressing the issue of race and state violence through eyes that shout, "This space of race is not my problem, but you, western cultures makes it so!" His subjects are warm, vulnerable, hard, and also resistant. His use of images found and made offer a melancholic weight that fuels resistance. Murff's Passion is not always a euphoric; it also contains rage and anger. In Murff's work on race, even the spaces between Black lives are shown to be policed. Even the quiet moments of people's thoughts and the intimate offerings to his camera seem to be policed. The success of Murff's work lies in the fact that it brings to the surface the tension of what lies beneath. He works the blues of the matter. If Murff's work were recast as sound, the overriding tone you would hear would be the melancholic notes of Louis Armstrong's trumpet working a way through the Fats Waller song "Black and Blue" from 1929. What Murff also articulates is that the price of transgression, wanting to leave the state of race, is costly; we know running does not work. In viewing Murff's work, the gooseflesh sensation I experience echoes what happens to me when I walk through spaces of immigration and boarder control. I become hypersensitive to the level of scrutiny I am under, and the lack of power I hold at that conjuncture.

Artists such Zora J. Murff bringing these sensitivities, feelings, and experiences to the fore means that we can also begin to think about the possibilities of solace and joy as bases for making images concerning Black life, as we continuously work towards encounters with The Passion.

Mark Sealy, March 2023.