

Bodies that matter

by *Tania Nasielski*

*History is the object of a construction
whose place is formed not in homogenous
and empty time, but in that which is ful-
filled by the here-and-now [Jetztzeit].¹*

Walter Benjamin

1915: first use of mustard gas in Ypres, Belgium, where many North African soldiers conscripted to the front were killed. These Algerian, Tunisian, Moroccan riflemen, and Zouaves from the French colonies and protectorates not involved in the conflict were coerced into taking part in the battles of the 1914-18 war, known as the First World War.

From this event and the lack of recognition for these fallen soldiers, Mehdi-Georges Lahlou weaves together the threads of a multi-faceted, multi-referenced project, working with archives and with the obliteration and reconstitution of memories, both collective and individual.

At the intersection of bodies and memories, of violence and the senses, of the self and the other, Extra takes us on a journey through time and the exhibition space.

Two video installations by Candice Breitz (1972, Johannesburg, lives and works in Berlin), engage in a dialogue with the works of Mehdi-Georges Lahlou (1983, Sables d'Olonne, France, lives and works in Brussels and Paris), whereby both artists explore—using their own backgrounds and corporealities—issues and narratives regarding

history, power, race and gender. Amongst others.

Welcomed in a space where Mehdi-Georges Lahlou's body (who is also a trained dancer) is immersed in different spices spread in the air he breathes, one is confronted with both the violence and the sensuousness provoked by SPICY (turmeric, cinnamon, ginger and henna). The ambiguity is palpable—do the spices caress or assault the flesh and the senses? Between resistance and discomfort, the figure of the artist is repeated in the space, diffused on four screens placed in a row and mirroring each other. The actual time of the action—inspired by the historical aggression with mustard gas—is stretched to last in fine seven minutes where we are immersed, as is the artist, in matter, in colour, in the passing of time.

In stark contrast, the following room is inhabited by bunker-like spaces reminiscent of wartime and the need for protection it brings. The surrounding walls, as the bunkers', are covered with tags of insults and discriminatory slurs, as part of an archive constituted as matter for an urban landscape. Misogyny, homophobia, racism and ostracisms serve as the basis for the graffiti found in many public spaces—before

¹ Walter Benjamin,
*Theses on the Philosophy
of History, in Illuminations,*
London: Pimlico, 1999

it is glossed over with fresh paint and vanishes from sight and from memory.

Here, amidst the verbal violence tagged on the outer walls, the areas into which we enter alternately invite us to explore a new installation, a new perception, and a new narrative.

A rhizomic constellation of closed and open spaces echoes the arborescent thinking of the artist and takes us into hybrid temporalities and different scales, enabling us to experience a wide array of emotions—questioning reality and simulacra, as well as acquired, learned and imposed historical truths, which must be challenged despite the pitfalls and taboos that might stand in the way. Is this not a matter of conciliating, or rather of making different and perhaps irreconcilable Weltanschauung coexist through art—for them to co-inhabit like archipelagos in the arena of a stage, of a narrative, or of the exhibition space?

After SPICY, which presents the artist's performative body coloured by the spice in which he is immersed, we now discover recumbent effigies. Under the black thickness of the charcoal, the bodies gradually appear as our gaze focuses upon them and the retinal persistence prevails.

Operating in layers, Mehdi-Georges Lahlou has reworked these archive images—dated 22 April 1915—that he selected for their suggestive and historical value. Indeed, there are only a few images of the North African who died at the front on that date, since history mostly remembers European casualties.

How is an archive built? Which images are singled out for posterity, for the survival of a (re)written history? By whom? For whom?

Of the confused memory - April 22, 1915 raises the issue of archiving and treating images of war, and hence of violence—from the aestheticization to the erasure and the re-appearance of the image.

In an adjacent antechamber, further

documentary research reveals that the use of mustard gas, which started in 1915, persisted in the context of the Rif war in northern Morocco. Having crossed the Mediterranean, the deadly gas claimed the lives of many Riffians between 1921 and 1926. Here, the archive is retrieved from the French National Audio-visual Institute and is supported by postcards and written and visual documents.

*In the dark of the projection space, the multiple faces of artist and performer Ghita Serraj tell us the stories of seven exotic plants selected for their geographical migrations and their medicinal virtues. In one installation, this herbarium brings together plants from many different countries, thus echoing the exoticisation and eroticisation of “non-white” women. Using her voice and her face, Ghita Serraj incarnates each plant, playing with poetic variations echoing the book *La colonisation du savoir* (the colonisation of knowledge).²*

*In the dual-channel video installation *Whiteface*, Candice Breitz—dressed in a white dress shirt, her eyes deadened by zombie-like contact lenses—interrogates through her own white face and body, with uncanny humour, the defensiveness of whiteness as the privileges that have been attached to the condition come under increasing scrutiny. The work is based on an archive of found footage collected by the artist over close to a decade.*

Breitz's appearance and voice morph from feminine to masculine, from a low to a high pitch, from one assertion to another, impersonating white politicians, TV presenters, YouTubers, and other protagonists embodying both extremist and everyday racism—bringing up such phenomena as “white privilege”, “white fragility”, “white rage” and “white guilt”.

Right now, white people are really frightened. What are you scared of? They're scared to death that they're going to lose their power in the future, and they are! (...)

² Samir Boumediene, *La colonisation du savoir. Une histoire des plantes médicinales du « Nouveau Monde » (1492-1750)*, Vaulx-en-Velin, Éditions des Mondes à faire, 2016

2010 was the first year in which more minority babies were born, than white babies...

Within 30 years, white people will be in the numerical minority...

This is what conservatives are really upset about!

They are fanatical about this, because they know their time is up...

Tick tock, tick tock...³

Born in South Africa during the era of apartheid, Candice Breitz lives and works in Berlin. She raises the question: "How can one meaningfully evoke the real and oppressive workings of white supremacy, while at the same time insisting on the constructed and contingent nature of all racial categories?"⁴

In her video installations, Whiteface and Extra (the latter lending its title to the exhibition), the artist uses, much like Mehdi-Georges Lahlou, her performative body as a raw material, as a mode of thinking and a mode of being.

"For someone who has become conscious of the Self and of their body, who has reached the dialectic of the Subject and the Object, the body is no longer the cause of the structure of consciousness, it has become the object of consciousness," writes Frantz Fanon.⁵

Perhaps the performing bodies of the artists – bodies that matter –⁶ perpetuate the expression of a collective memory which they embody, thereby operating a transformation, an anamnesis?

Along the archipelagic spaces, the visit continues in a corridor composed of wrought-iron screens, reminiscent of mashrabiya, and through which we see a series of images of a homophobic crime reconstituted from an archive. How does one deconstruct and reconstitute an image of violence?

Casablanca, 26 mars 2016 highlights the homophobic attack committed there and then.

The very faces of the victims are blurred to restore their right to anonymity. While the body of Mehdi-Georges Lahlou is visible and assumed in his videos, performances and sculptures, here, the deconstruction of the image and its distancing make the figures of the victims indistinguishable. Such victims can be judged guilty in a country where simply being seen as a single-sex couple is a punishable offense. The work allows them to no longer be singled out, as it returns their faces to oblivion.

The corridor of iron screens opens onto the view of an urban cityscape, which forms the backdrop to Candice Breitz's installation, Extra. We find ourselves in a domestic space, a set-like living room framed by a view of the Johannesburg skyline at sunset. A popular, long-running post-apartheid soap opera–titled Generations –is broadcast on the old-school television set that is embedded in the living room. From time to time, we catch a glimpse of a white 'extra' played by the artist herself, a mute presence that puzzlingly and absurdly intrudes within an otherwise exclusively black cast. Breitz has described her presence in Extra as an avatar for whiteness; as a dramatic device via which to explore the operations of whiteness. Her embodiment of white privilege in the work—as a self-absorbed figure demanding constant attention (despite her failure to meaningfully contribute to the unfolding plot)—offers a grammar via which to consider the unresolved role of white South Africans in the post-apartheid context.

Mehdi-Georges Lahlou's Birds of Paradise, Totem Pole respond to the installation Extra, as does La Conférence des palmiers, sculpturally standing against the backdrop of the South African skyline. The Birds of Paradise and La Conférence des palmiers both echo Farid Al-din Attar's medieval Persian poem entitled La Conférence des oiseaux.

The piled faces of Mehdi-Georges Lahlou with strelitzias springing up form a totem

³ In *Whiteface*, film and video installation, Candice Breitz, 2022.

⁴ Candice Breitz in the *Interview of Candice Breitz & Mehdi-Georges Lahlou*, CENTRALE, 2023.

⁵ Frantz Fanon in *Peau noire masques blancs*, 1952, quoting Merleau-Ponty in *Phénoménologie de la perception*, 1945.

⁶ Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter, On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"*, Abingdon, Routledge, 2011.

celebrating dignity and the freedom of movement. Otherwise known as a 'bird of paradise,' this striking flower (which is indigenous to South Africa) and the palm tree both evoke—as do migrating birds—displacement, imported exoticism, “extras” that become implanted in our countries over the years.

In these installations with multiple perspectives, the faces of both artists meet in the intersection between the end and the beginning of the promenade, in the space where visitors turn around to walk in the opposite direction through the space and time of the exhibition.

Playing with the apparition and the disappearance of images, of bodies, of collective and personal memories in their installations, sculptures, ceramics, drawings, videos, engravings and graffiti, Candice Breitz and Mehdi-Georges Lahlou weave multi-layered narratives which question rather than condemn, unveil rather than conceal, tackling sensitive issues rather than clichéd truths.

Time and space intermingle in the exhibition space, revealing the anachronisms dear to art philosopher Georges Didi-Huberman. Borrowing his words, we could say that here, the still and moving images reveal themselves “as the intense theatre of heterogeneous times that take shape together.”⁷

One of the palm trees, leaves at half-mast, responds to the recumbent victims of war or of (in)civil violence—reminding us of Francisco de Goya’s images and words in The Disasters of War:⁸

*Always this happens,
Bitter presence,
Difficult times ahead!
And there is no remedy.
Why is it so?
We cannot know why.
We cannot see this.
Barbarians!
Everything is askew,
I have seen it!
That too.
And also this.
Cruel misfortune!
What folly!
No need to shout,
This is the worst!
Truth is dead.
Will it resurrect?*

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She previously curated the exhibition *Plasticiciens en mouvement* at the Dakar Biennale. She holds a master’s degree in Curating from Goldsmiths College, University of London, and a DESU in European Cultural exchanges from the University of Paris 8. She is a member of the Board of the Réseau des Arts in Brussels, and of various jury’s and commissions in the arts.

⁷ Georges Didi-Huberman, *L’image survivante*, coll. Paradoxe, Paris, Les Éditions de Minuit, 2002.

⁸ Francisco de Goya in *The Disasters of War* (1810-1815) quoted by Georges Didi-Huberman in *Atlas ou le gai savoir inquiet*, coll. Paradoxe, Paris, Les Éditions de Minuit, 2011.