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**Mathieu K. Abonnenc**  
Presse

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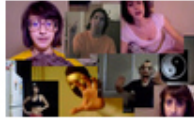


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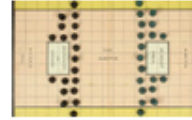
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## GALLERIES

### Two Very Different Artists Grapple with the Legacy of Colonialism

by Debra Lennard on [February 17, 2016](#)



Mathieu K. Abonnenc, "Forever Weak and Ungrateful (1)" (2015), heliogravure, wooden frame, glass, 13 x 20 inches (all images courtesy of Sargent's Daughters)

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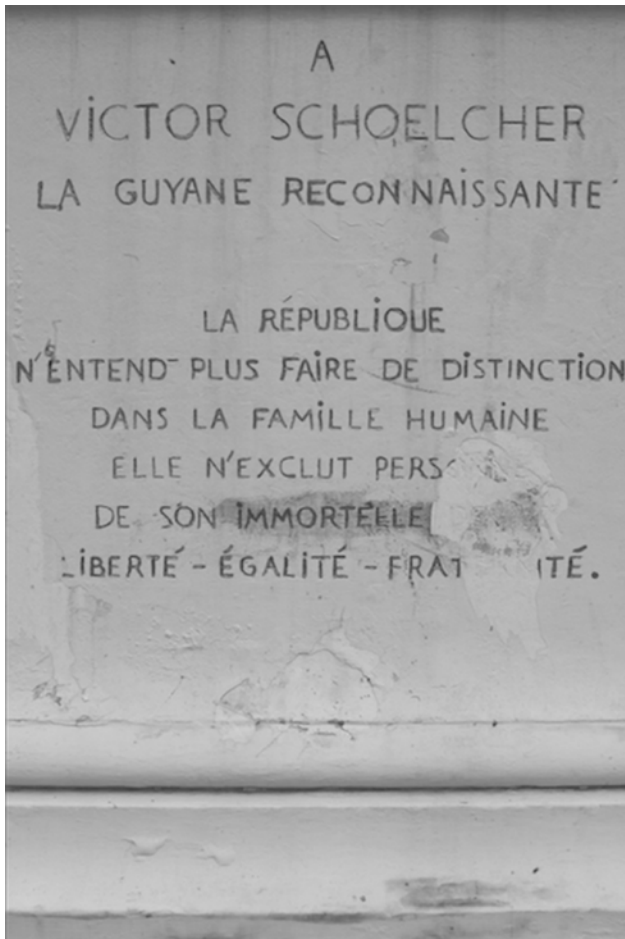
In the center of the main market square of Cayenne, French Guiana, there stands a lone bronze statue. "To Victor Schoelcher, the grateful Guiana" reads the French inscription on

## Most Popular

In the center of the main market square of Cayenne, French Guiana, there stands a lone bronze statue. "To Victor Schoelcher, the grateful Guiana" reads the French inscription on the stone plinth, commemorating the politician who was instrumental in abolishing slavery throughout the French colonies. Commissioned in 1986 from academician Louis-Ernest Barrias (for ideological context, see his full-breasted "Nature Unveiling Herself to Science," an Enlightenment wet-dream in sculpture form), today the bronze sculpture reads as a glaring study in imbalanced power relations. Assuming the role of patrician citizen, frock-coated Schoelcher takes a loin-clothed, unidentified slave by the shoulder with one arm; his other extends into the air, loftily gesturing the way to freedom. The chain from the slave's unlocked shackle hangs over the plinth.



Barrias's sculpture forms the subject of Mathieu K. Abonnenc's series of photogravure prints *Forever Weak and Ungrateful* (2015), which opens the modest but worthwhile [presentation of work](#) by Abonnenc and Ektor Garcia currently on view at Sargent's Daughters. This is the first New York exhibition for Paris-based Abonnenc, which seems belated, given the attention his cohesive body of work has been steadily accruing outside the United States. This show is also a first for the younger Garcia, a current Columbia MFA candidate, following his participation in last year's [inaugural presentation](#) at West Harlem project space The Can.



Mathieu K. Abonnenc, "Forever Weak and Ungrateful (10)" (2015), heliogravure, wooden frame, glass, 20 x 13 inches (click to enlarge)

Sargent's Daughters' rationale for exhibiting these artists together stems from the thematic affinities in their work: Abonnenc scrutinizes colonial histories and the lingering stains left behind; Garcia's work concerns the fraught relationship between Mexico and the United States, filtered through the subjective lens of his own upbringing in both countries.

The combination makes for a compelling if slightly uneven pairing. Abonnenc handles his comprehensively researched material with surgical precision, exercising careful control over what he presents to the viewer. This selective approach is strongly in evidence in *Forever Weak and Ungrateful*, which distills Barrias's monumental bronze into tightly cropped details, five of which are on view here. With the full picture obscured, the interaction between slave and politician becomes highly ambiguous: seen from behind, Schoelcher appears to be gazing at his interlocutor from beneath lasciviously heavy lids; a close-up on the slave's chest, hands clasped over heart in a pantomime gesture of gratitude, is made strange

by the appearance of Schoelcher's disembodied hand lying heavily on the slave's shoulder. Aptly, in the gallery's sequential hanging of the prints, the explanatory image of the removed shackle is kept until last. Turning Barrias's sculpture into a filmstrip, the print series anticipates Abonnenc's short film projected in the gallery's rear, "Secteur IX A" (2015), which opens with a cropped detail of a sculpture of Hercules outside the Musée de l'Homme in Paris. Like the prints, the film reflects on-point authorial control. Using footage from the artist's longer feature *Secteur IX B* (also 2015; not on show here), the film ostensibly follows a young anthropologist (played by Betty Tchomanga) working on a collection of objects brought back from the Dakar-Djibouti ethnographic expedition (1931–33), of which Abonnenc's grandfather — an entomologist and collector of objects from Gabon and French Guiana — was a contemporary. You would be hard-pressed to piece that together from the 8-minute short, though, since Abonnenc firmly insists on a defiant narrative opacity, for which he is indebted to postcolonial theorist Édouard Glissant. Various off-center and abstracted shots of a Bamana *boli* mock the measuring tapes that are held up to the camera; undoing time, a photograph of Dogon masks on display at the Musée du quai Branly is followed by a photograph of the masks back in situ, worn by Dogon men; in another shot, beetles that might have once been collected by the artist's grandfather swarm inside an archival box.



Mathieu K. Abonnenc, "Forever Weak and Ungrateful (11)" (2015), heliogravure, wooden frame, glass, 13 x 20 inches

Seen alongside this crisp montage of footage, Garcia's four sculptural assemblages appear a little less subtle, though they are intriguing in their own right. Made to a human scale using materials like lumber, steel, and brick, their various forms resemble grave markers and shop

mannequins, respectively. Garcia has selected his sculptural additions to these minimal structures judiciously, with each alluding to an aspect of Mexico's fettered relationship with the United States while amping up a seductive mix of textures. Clamped in a Craftsman bench vise, a crocheted doily evokes foreign demand for a "peasant" aesthetic; nearby, a Huarache sandal hangs from a hook dejectedly, as if aware that it now lends its name to a Nike sneaker.



Ektor Garcia, "Mariposa" (2015), deer antlers, fur, lace, ostrich egg, steel, wood, craftsman vice, nails, 58 x 21 x 28 inches (click to enlarge)

Given that this charged exchange of polemics unfolds on East Broadway, it's interesting that one of the exhibit's most powerful moments comes from an instance of narrative refusal, or insistence on interiority. The montage of footage that makes up "Secteur IX A" closes with an image of a foreshortened Tchomanga lying asleep, barefoot on a stretch of sand — presumably a beach, though the camera doesn't pull back to confirm or deny this. A striking and androgynous Ozymandias in reverse, she wakes up from her reverie, organizes her languid limbs, and without a word, walks off-camera.

[Mathieu K. Abonnenc and Ektor Garcia](#) continues at Sargent's Daughters (179 East Broadway) through February 21.

<http://hyperallergic.com/275057/two-very-different-artists-grapple-with-the-legacy-of-colonialism/>





MATHIEU K. ABONNENC

**Galerie Marcelle Alix**

Etre sujet face à l'Histoire : chacun des projets de Mathieu K. Abonnenc met en scène cette problématique, fouillant l'histoire du colonialisme à partir de sa propre biographie, de la maison familiale de Guyane à l'Afrique de ses ancêtres. En toile de fond, l'écrivain et ethnologue Michel Leiris, qui hante le film projeté à la galerie Marcelle Alix. Il tourne autour de l'histoire d'une jeune chercheuse qui se sent toujours « *ou trop loin, ou trop près* » de son objet d'étude, l'histoire de l'ethnographie française et de la mission Dakar-Djibouti. Soumise à ses hallucinations, frustrée de ne parler qu'à des objets morts, elle dit se sentir « *toujours au bord du monde* ». C'est de là, sans doute, que Mathieu K. Abonnenc nous écrit. ■ **EMMANUELLE LEQUEUX**

«Chimen Chyen», de Mathieu K. Abonnenc, galerie Marcelle Alix, 4, rue Jouye-Rouve, à Paris 20<sup>e</sup>. Jusqu'au 7 novembre.



**Sector IX B (Mathieu Kleyebe Abonnenc, France / Senegal)**



Or, *Taking Drugs to Make Artifacts to Take Drugs To*. This intellectually dense featurette by Senegalese artist Abonnenc could serve as more poetic, elliptical cousin to Marker and Resnais's *Statues Also Die*, or a companion piece to Duncan Campbell's recent exploration of that film, *It For Others*. But even though these films share some basic subject matter, Abonnenc's treatment is decidedly postmodern as well as being post-colonial, taking a key text from the margins of the Western tradition —Michel Leiris's *Phantom Africa*—and using it to speak back from the position of the "non-existent" Other.

The film follows the working process of a scholar (Betty Tchomanga) who is studying Leiris's work and researching at the IFAN Museum in Dakar. Leiris, a Surrealist anthropologist who favored open subjectivity and even recommended hallucinogenic drug use while in the field, draws Betty to the various African treasures in the collection, and we see her downing mysterious black pills at various points in her studies. (A black beetle lives in her pill case; it may be a component in Betty's psychedelic mix, but we don't know.) Abonnenc shows Betty having sensual experiences with various objects, feeling them erotically and, in a *coup de théâtre*, they feel her in return. This dark, almost Apichatpong-like junglescape of the mind is in dramatic contrast to the clean, antiseptic shelving and taxonomy of the museum. Eventually Betty finds she cannot sustain this demanding approach to anthropological exploration. But Abonnenc shows that, whatever colonialist overtones existed and remain in Leiris's system of compromised knowledge, an altered engagement of some sort is required in order to defeat the clinical entombment of the museum. These objects exhibit life, and to some form of life they must return.



# LE QUOTIDIEN *THE ART DAILY NEWS* DE L'ART

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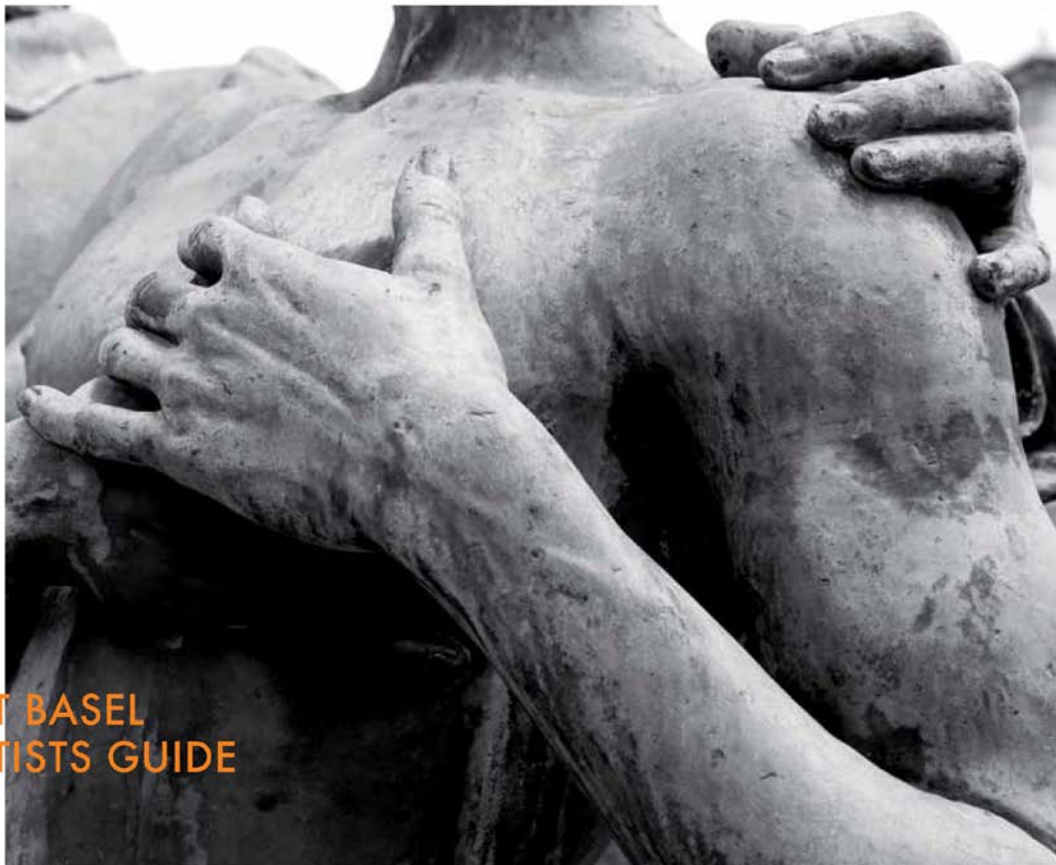
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By/Par Julie Portier

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# Mathieu Kleyebe Abonnenc



Mathieu K. Abonnenc, *Sans titre*  
(où que vous tourniez c'est la désolation, mais vous tournez pourtant), 2011,  
graphite on paper, 75 x 105 cm. Exhibition view "Orphelins de Fanon",  
La Ferme du Buisson, Noisiel, 2012. Courtesy Marcelle Alix, Paris.  
Photo: Aurélien Mole.

## Mathieu Kleyebe Abonnenc

1977 Born in French Guiana,  
France  
2010 Manifesta 8, Murcia,  
Spain  
2012 "To Whom who Keeps  
a Record", Serralves Foundation,  
Porto, Portugal  
2013 "Songs for a mad king",  
Kunsthalle Basel, Switzerland  
2015 56<sup>th</sup> Venice Biennale -  
International exhibition  
and Belgian Pavillion, Italy

Mathieu Kleyebe Abonnenc poursuit son enquête à travers les récits lacunaires et les objets manquants qui constituent l'histoire de la décolonisation, dont il relève les empreintes dans l'espace public et jusque dans l'environnement personnel. C'est par l'image en négatif qu'est figuré ce qu'il est difficile de voir, comme la nature ambiguë du geste de Victor Schœlcher montrant le chemin à l'esclave libéré dans la statue en bronze qui le représente, à Cayenne, où l'artiste a grandi. Le dernier projet de l'artiste, *Sector IXB Sleeping Sickness Prophylaxis*, expose la tentative de relier les histoires familiales aux documents incomplets relatifs à la mission ethnologique française Dakar-Djibouti de 1931 à 1933, qui devait permettre la constitution du fonds du musée de l'Homme à Paris. Habité tour à tour par la pensée de Frantz Fanon et le cinéma militant de Sarah Maldoror, la reconquête de l'histoire est ici guidée par les sentiments ambigus de Michel Leiris dans *Afrique fantôme* (1934). ●



Mathieu K. Abonnenc, *Forever Weak and Ungrateful(5)*, 2015, heliogravure,  
wood frame, glass, 33,3 x 50 cm (framed). Courtesy Marcelle Alix, Paris.

Mathieu Kleyebe Abonnenc pursues his inquiry by way of incomplete stories and missing objects, which constitute the history of decolonization, the traces of which he measures in public spaces and even in personal environments. Whatever is difficult to see is portrayed through the image in negative, like the ambiguous nature of Victor Schoelcher's gesture indicating the way to the freed slave in the bronze statue located in Cayenne where the artist grew up. The artist's latest project, *Sector IXB Sleeping Sickness Prophylaxis*, exposes the attempt to link family histories to incomplete documents relating to the French Dakar-Djibouti ethnological mission from 1931 to 1933, which would facilitate the establishment of the collection at the Musée de l'Homme in Paris. Engaged alternately by Frantz Fanon's thinking and Sarah Maldoror's militant cinema, the reconquest of history is guided here by the ambiguous sentiments of Michel Leiris in *Afrique fantôme* (1934). ●





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## Basel Statements: Mathieu K. Abonnenc Explores the French West Indies' Colonial Past

by Nadja Sayej

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Mathieu K. Abonnenc has a complicated relationship with his past. For his solo presentation in the [Statements section of Art Basel](#), which kicks off this week, Abonnenc, an artist born in French Guiana who now lives in Paris, digs into the history and effects of colonialism and its representations within society.

You might have seen Abonnenc's work in the [Belgian Pavilion](#) as part of Vincent Meessen's project at the Venice Biennale. His most recent works, such as *Forever Weak and Ungrateful* (2015) or *Forever, Without You* (2015) are based on a bronze statue in Cayenne, French Guiana, by [Louis Ernest Barrias](#), who has been likened to Rembrandt. The realist sculptor depicted [Victor Schœlcher](#), a French statesman and writer who worked to abolish slavery in French colonies. Sculptures of Schœlcher are all over the French West Indies, symbolizing freedom through portraiture and honoring the slavery abolition society Schœlcher founded in 1834.

Abonnenc waxes on the transcendental implications of this history—through Foucault, broken chains, power, history, and exploitation depicted through a prism of symbolist sublimation. He connects the dots between videos, photos, drawings, and archival material drawn mostly from his grandfather's collection. Before installing at Basel, Abonnenc took some time to answer a few questions for ArtSlant.



Mathieu K. Abonnenc, *Forever Weak and Ungrateful (6 & 24)*, 2015, heliogravure, wooden frame, glass

**Nadja Sayej:** In the past, you've used history in your work (especially in *Forever Weak and Ungrateful*). Where does that influence come from?

**Mathieu K. Abonnenc:** I'm glad that you mentioned this work, because the project I'll show in Basel is the end of this series. The work itself is a group of [photogravures](#) of a public sculpture that shows two men caught in strange moment. You'll have to decipher by yourself the dynamic of this moment. The ones in Basel are less elusive than the previous one, but they work as a whole. I have tried to create a connection with some other works that twist even more the content of the series. I'll say that I am more shaped by history than influenced by it, so it's not really history in itself, but more the effects it carries. The effects that persist in ourselves.

**NS:** Is it better to challenge history or preserve it?

**MKA:** It's a never-ending process that goes from one point to the other.



Mathieu K. Abonnenc, *Forever Weak and Ungrateful (2 & 5)*, 2015, heliogravure, wooden frame, glass

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**NS: You had access to a collection from Émile Abonnenc (a family member?) of African masks. Are they all from Gabon? Why did you decide to use these?**

**MKA:** This collection was gathered by my grandfather, when he was in Gabon as a health officer in the 1930s. He gathered these objects as a hobby, but he used scientific tools to name and classify them. He was a contemporary of the famous Dakar-Djibouti mission, the first major French anthropological mission that constituted the objects collection that are now in the Quai Branly Museum in Paris. To work with this collection was a way to connect a real private process





to a more collective one, all this in a colonial context. A way to locate the exercise of power and domination within myself.

**NS: What else are you working on at the moment?**

**MKA:** A project I have worked on for years is *French-Guyana*, about an old goldwasher village, up the Maroni River called Wacapou. It's close to Brazil and Suriname. My mother had a cabin there, and I used to go there as a child. But as the gold went scarce, the villagers abandoned the village. It's now just forest with the ruins of the village. I am working on a new film there.



Mathieu K.  
Abonnenc, *Secteur IX B*, 2015, Film  
HD, 16:9, 42mn.  
Coproduction  
Centre Pompidou  
Metz, CAC  
Brétigny. En  
partenariat avec le  
Muséum national  
d'histoire naturelle  
(site du Jardin des  
Plantes et Musée  
de l'Homme), le  
Musée du quai  
Branly, et l'IFAN  
Dakar; Courtesy et  
coproduction de la  
galerie Marcelle  
Alix, Paris;  
Production red  
shoes/SOME  
SHOES



—Nadja Sayej

(Image at top: Mathieu K. Abonnenc, *Forever Weak and Ungrateful (11)*, 2015, heliogravure, wooden frame, glass. All images: Courtesy Marcelle Alix, Paris)

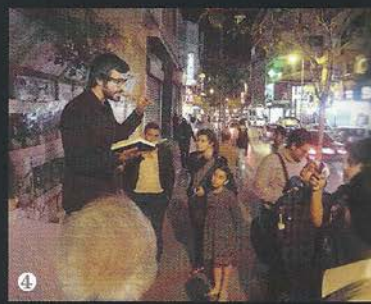




ÉVÉNEMENT / BIENNALE DE VENISE

## L'EXPOSITION INTERNATIONALE Le futur, ici et maintenant

CONÇUE PAR OKWUI ENWEZOR, ELLE RÉUNIT 136 ARTISTES DE 53 PAYS, AUTOUR DE GRANDES FIGURES DE L'ENGAGEMENT, D'OCCIDENT ET D'AILLEURS.



Ce sera la biennale de «tous les futurs du monde», prophétise-t-il. Et l'on peut compter sur Okwui Enwezor pour faire de la cité lagunaire une plate-forme idéale où penser demain : le commissaire de la 56<sup>e</sup> édition de la biennale de Venise a assez souvent montré sa capacité à lier l'histoire, le fait social et les interrogations sur le temps présent, en les articulant avec les productions artistiques. Sa Documenta de Kassel, en 2002, réveillait les consciences d'un milieu endormi, en y faisant s'engouffrer le monde. Depuis, jamais cet intellectuel américano-nigérian n'a abandonné son combat. On attend donc beaucoup de lui. Et notamment du changement, dans la façon de se confronter au brouhaha de la planète. S'il n'en

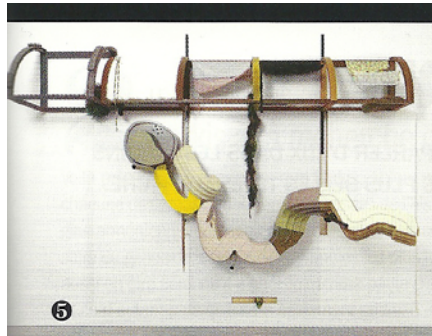
fallait qu'un symbole ? La présence, affirmée comme jamais, du continent africain au sein de la double exposition qu'il organise, à l'Arsenale et au pavillon international où bat le cœur des Giardini : ils sont pas moins de 35, à représenter l'Afrique d'Est en Ouest, et surtout une esthétique en plein chambardement ; au total, les 136 artistes invités représentent pas moins de 53 pays, périphériques pour beaucoup.

### DES PERFORMANCES, DU LIVE, DE L'ACTIVISME

Enwezor place son travail de commissaire sous la tutelle de Walter Benjamin (1892-1940), grand penseur de l'histoire et de ses temps tragiques. Et s'interroge sur le «modèle» biennale de Venise : un outil conçu à l'apogée de la moder-

néité industrielle, alors que la carte du monde se construisait sous la forme d'empires dominants et de colonies soumises. Ce qui a provoqué les bouleversements que l'on sait. Dès lors, s'interroge Enwezor, «comment saisir l'inquiétude de notre temps, l'examiner, la rendre compréhensible, l'articuler?» Génocides, chaos environnemental, modernité digitale : l'art, selon Enwezor, ne peut et ne doit échapper à son temps. «Comment les artistes, penseurs, écrivains, compositeurs, chorégraphes, chanteurs et musiciens, à travers leurs images, objets, mots, mouvement, actions, chansons et sons peuvent-ils aider le public à donner un sens aux bouleversements actuels?», s'interroge-t-il. Pour y répondre, des figures aussi variées que





1. BRUCE NAUMAN *Life, Death, Love, Hate, Pleasure, Pain*  
1983, néon, diam. 180 cm.

2. CHANTAL AKERMAN *Now*  
2015, installation vidéo [extrait].

3. JEREMY DELLER *English Magic*  
2013, installation, pavillon britannique de la 55<sup>e</sup> biennale de Venise.

4. SAÂDANE AFIF *The Speaker's Corner of Hamra Street, Beirut*  
2011, performance [ici Nasri Sayegh].

5. HELEN MARTEN *Guild of Pharmacists*  
2014, technique mixte, 292,4 x 372 x 108,5 cm.

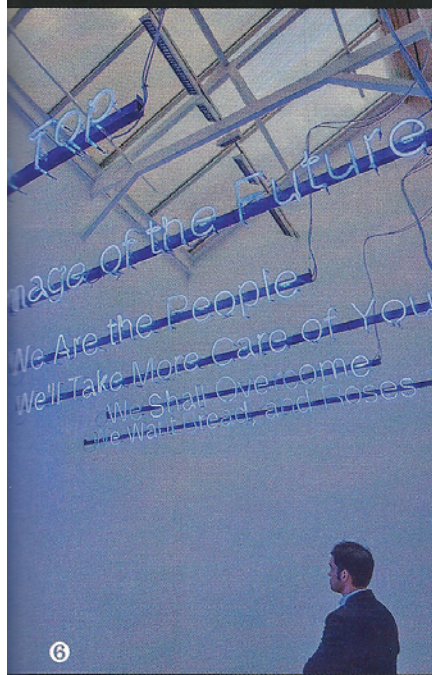
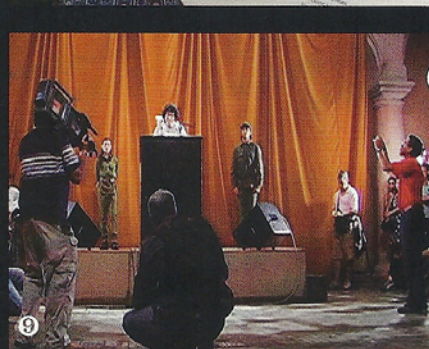
6. MAJA BAJEVIC *We Are the Last Ones of Yesterday,  
but the First Ones of Tomorrow*  
2014, vue de l'exposition à la galerie Michel Rein, Paris.

7. FARHAD MOSHIRI *Kiosk de curiosité*  
2013, installation, vue de l'exposition «Love Me Love Me Not»  
à la 55<sup>e</sup> biennale de Venise.

8. SAÂDANE AFIF *L'S Bells - The Busker of the Gray Line*  
2012, performance au MINI Goethe Institut Curatorial Residencies  
Ludlow 38 à New York.

9. TANIA BRUGUERA *El Susurro de Tatlin #6 - Havana Version*  
2009, vidéo 16:9, 40' 30".

10. MATHIEU KLEYEBE ABONNENC *Secteur IX B*  
2015, film HD, 16:9, 35".



l'immense documentariste Chantal Ackerman, la Bosnienne Maja Bajevic, la Cubaine Tania Bruguera, la Géorgienne Théa Djordjadze, le Suisse Thomas Hirschhorn ou encore l'Américaine Taryn Simon. Et le fil de la question suffit à rappeler combien Venise 2015 sera à mille lieues d'un accrochage conventionnel alternant peinture, sculpture et vidéo. Mais se rêve traversée de fulgurances et de pensées, en donnant une importance majeure à la performance, aux interventions live de longue durée et à toutes sortes d'activismes, au cœur du pavillon central des Giardini qui se fera «arena». Bref, elle se veut «épique». Alors que le duo d'origine libanaise Khalil Joreige & Joana Hadjithomas donneront à lire, cent soixante dix-sept jours durant, une

de leurs paraboles sur leur pays, on entendra également chaque jour *Das Kapital* de Marx égrené à haute voix, comme un oratorio, ainsi que toutes les digressions qu'il a engendrées. Le Britannique Jeremy Deller ou les Français Mathieu K. Abonnenc et Saâdane Afif feront aussi partie de ce passionnant programme live (parmi les Français qu'on est heureux de retrouver là, mentionnons aussi Boris Achour, Philippe Parreno et Lili Reynaud Dewar). Tandis que les Giardini, avec leurs pavillons nationaux datant d'une autre ère, se feront allégorie des désordres de la planète, leur pavillon central ainsi que l'Arsenale accueilleront une série d'éclairages historiques, comme autant de micro-expositions dédiées à des figures de l'en-

gagement : Sergueï Eisenstein, Walker Evans, Harun Farocki, Chris Marker... Histoire de remettre en perspective leurs contemporains Marlene Dumas, Tetsuya Ishida ou Isa Genzken. Mais aussi des figures moins repérées, comme le collectif nigérian The Invisible Borders, qui explore à travers photos et vidéos la notion de frontière et son impact considérable sur l'histoire du continent africain, ou cet autre collectif, syrien – Abounaddara –, qui tente de mettre en place un cinéma documentaire d'urgence. Ou comment penser les futurs du monde, à partir de l'aujourd'hui. E. L.

«56<sup>e</sup> biennale de Venise - Tous les futurs du monde»  
du 9 mai au 22 novembre · dans les Giardini, à l'Arsenale  
et un peu partout dans la ville · [www.labiennale.org](http://www.labiennale.org)





## Mathieu Kleyebe Abonnenc

'Inheritance is never a given, it is always a task' – so wrote Jacques Derrida in *Specters of Marx* (1993), a line that Mathieu Kleyebe Abonnenc once cited in an interview, adding, 'It is this *task* that preoccupies me'. That the past might leave a responsibility or task for the present is felt in much of the polyphonic practice of the artist (French Guiana). As a result, his engravings, slideshows, lectures, sculptures and films often find their centre in those moments when historical truth, lapses in memory and the contestatory power of politically or culturally loaded images are in question.

With Abonnenc acting as a historian as much as an artist, his production often emerges from and is shaped by elaborate archival research, enquiries into modernity's postcolonial legacies and the reevaluation of forgotten, politically engaged figures. But while the histories of colonisation or decolonisation and the militancy they inspired recur as subjects in Abonnenc's work, the undermining of his role as auteur (in order to better circulate the work of *others*) is an equally insistent red thread in his oeuvre. Indeed Abonnenc's output is often made in relation to the specific legacy of others (whether Guadeloupean pioneer of militant cinema Sarah Maldoror, theoretician of

decolonisation Frantz Fanon, African-American composer Julius Eastman or the Havana-based, leftist revolutionary journal *Tricontinental*).

His is an exploration of once politically potent acts – whether Maldoror's filming of *Des Fusils pour Banta* (*Guns for Banta*, 1970), a never-released film about the revolutionary struggle in Guinea and Cape Verde against colonial rule, or *Tricontinental's* transmission of images and information meant to represent and further the lusophone struggle for independence – which Abonnenc features in works that pay homage to the past as much as they reactivate for the present. Such works bear the imprints of a methodology and aesthetic sense that is Abonnenc's own, which can be as hesitant and questioning as it is critical and violent in its implications. Importantly, they also announce that in an artworld that often promotes either the apathetic consumption of spectacular goods or the celebration of radical chic, Abonnenc's complex interventions are neither.

Perhaps the best example of this is a recent project in which the artist dares to tackle politically compromised histories and create wilfully ambivalent objects that result, like his revisitation of Paolo Cavara, Franco Prosperi and Gualtiero Jacopetti's

selected by Elena Filipovic

controversial film *Mondo Cane* (*A Dog's World*, 1962), which is thought to have instigated as much as documented the colonial atrocities that it captured on celluloid. That film inspired one of Abonnenc's own, *An Italian Film (Africa Addio)* (2012), and its related objects, *Untitled (Bodies in a Pile)* (2012), for which he turned to a typical colonial act of appropriation, melting down a form of early-twentieth-century currency from the copper-lined region of Katanga in the Democratic Republic of Congo. The artist used precisely this metal, so imbricated in the West's interest in the Congo, to make a series of thin bars of copper, minimalist in form and roughly replicating human height – the 'bodies' of the title. Abonnenc's gesture, echoing the acts of Belgian colonialists when they discovered large stocks of such Katanga artefacts, inescapably asks if the offensiveness of the artist's act as a repetition of past acts could be expressed in the mute facticity of the resulting, almost elegant objects. In other words, can *things* speak of the violent processes (historical, political, conceptual) that rendered them possible? These, like so much of Abonnenc's work, thus take as their 'task' the attempt to render unspeakable histories that are glaringly palpable in our present. *EF*



from left:  
*An Italian Film (Africa Addio)*  
Première Partie: Cuivre, 2012, HD  
video, colour, sound, 26 min.  
Courtesy the artist, Pavilion, Leeds,  
and École des Beaux-Arts de Nantes

*Untitled (Bodies in a Pile)*, 2012  
(installation view, Rennes Biennial),  
copper rods made from smelting  
10 early-twentieth-century crosses  
from Katanga, 190 x 2 x 2 cm each





MOUSSE 36 ~ Mathieu Kleyebe Abonnenc

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PARIS

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## REVISITING MILITANT CINEMA

BY ANNA COLIN

Mathieu Kleyebe Abonnenc's kaleidoscopic career as an artist, researcher, exhibition manager and movie programmer has led him to investigate relatively unknown aspects of colonial and post-colonial history. The theme of absence, and the obsession and representation of violence are all questioned in the artist's work, which uses a process of extraction and excavation to bring personalities and cultural materials relegated to oblivion back into the realm of popular history.



This page - *An Italian film (Africa Addio)*, 2012.  
Courtesy: Galerie Marcelle Alix, Paris

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PARIS ~ Mathieu Kleyebe Abonnenc

Often with the assistance of experts in other disciplines, through the creation of drawings, sculptures, films and textual slides, Mathieu Kleyebe Abonnenc's artistic practice consists in particular of a reflection on the role of images in conveying post-colonial thought.

The artist also investigates this in a new work that takes inspiration from *Africa Addio* (1966), a film by Gualtiero Jacopetti and Franco Proserpi which records the birth of what the directors referred to as the "new Africa". Branded as neo-colonialist and fascist by the film directors Octavio Getino and Fernando Solanas in their famous manifesto *Towards a Third Cinema* (1969), the film paints a horrifying picture of an Africa attempting to reinvent itself after the departure—premature in the view of Jacopetti and Proserpi—of the colonial powers.

**anna colin** *Could you explain what is behind An Italian Film (Africa Addio)? How did it come about and what are its ramifications?*

**mathieu kleyebe abonnenc** I'd say that it all started out from the text by Getino and Solanas, which prompted me to find out about the film. The further I went, the more I found how its creation had been dogged by a whole series of problems. I dwelt in particular on one of these, because it pointed to many of my own anxieties. While working on *Africa Addio*, Jacopetti and his troupe found themselves in Boené, in the Katanga region, where they were following a group of mercenaries intent on recapturing the town from the rebels. This was in October 1964. Just as the mercenaries are about to execute three rebels, Jacopetti asks them to hold their fire so that he can frame the scene better, and show it to its best advantage. When the framing is right, he gives the go-ahead and films the execution. When the film came out, it caused an uproar and Jacopetti was accused of war crimes.

*An Italian Film (Africa Addio)* is conceived of as a four-part project. The first part, the only one completed so far, was made in Yorkshire, in Sheffield, after I was invited there by the Pavilion in Leeds. Yorkshire was one of the most important counties in England for the metalworking industry and it is also one that has been subject to violent de-industrialisation. When they invited me, I immediately found myself with this film in mind: I decided to show the action of the Belgian entrepreneurs who, when they arrived in Congo in the late nineteenth century, destroyed and melted down the copper crosses from Katanga. These were historic artefacts that were used as currency. During their colonisation of Congo, the Belgians systematically shipped these crosses back to their homeland, where they were melted down and sold for their copper. I wanted to take the risk of destroying historic artefacts in an attempt to investigate this process of expropriation and theft.

The theme of each part of the tetralogy is based on events and moments like these. The second part, for example, will be examining the meetings between Jacopetti and the judge at the trial, which lasted a year. The third part, on the other hand, will look at the riot caused by the screening of *Africa Addio* in Berlin, in 1966. It was then that, partly as a consequence of the event, that the internationalist Left really came to being in Germany. What I'm interested in, in this case, is the fact that a film as problematic as *Africa Addio* should have had consequences that Getino and Solanas would have hoped for from a Third Cinema movie—in other words, a performative effect.

**ac** *So each part has an underlying thread, which starts from Addio Africa and analyses its strategies and repercussions, placing them in the context of the social changes brought about by colonisation and capitalism. Is there any particular underlying thread, whether formal or conceptual, that will join up all the various elements in the tetralogy?*

**mka** Yes, this is exactly it. But I view *An Italian Film (Africa Addio)* as a whole that will in actual fact translate a memory into an action—by this I mean the expropriation and melting down of the crosses. I would like all four parts to revolve around this action—which I find extremely violent and which has a number of links to the history of capitalism in Europe—and to its connections with the exploitation of resources in Africa.

**ac** *To come back to the details of An Italian Film (Africa Addio) – Part I: Copper, could you tell me something about the script—its composition and sources—and about the images?*

**mka** I turned to a number of sources when writing my text. One of these, in particular, is a text by the ethnopsychiatrist Olivier Douville, who studies the issues involved in names: what it means to have one and the use of tattoo in order not to forget it, or to be identified among other bodies. Another source I used is a monographic work by the Mining Union of Upper Katanga, which remained under the control of the Belgians until the early 1960s. This book describes in meticulous detail the extraction of copper before the advent of the Belgians. It's a company document but it also contains many spectres. Even though it includes a number of stories, there is just one visual source in the film. On the screen we see workers, in a crafts foundry in Sheffield, cutting and melting down the crosses in a rather detached manner, and preparing the

moulds for the bars of copper that are the end product of this transformation. These bars are later shown alongside the film, or independently, as was the case at the Prix Ricard.

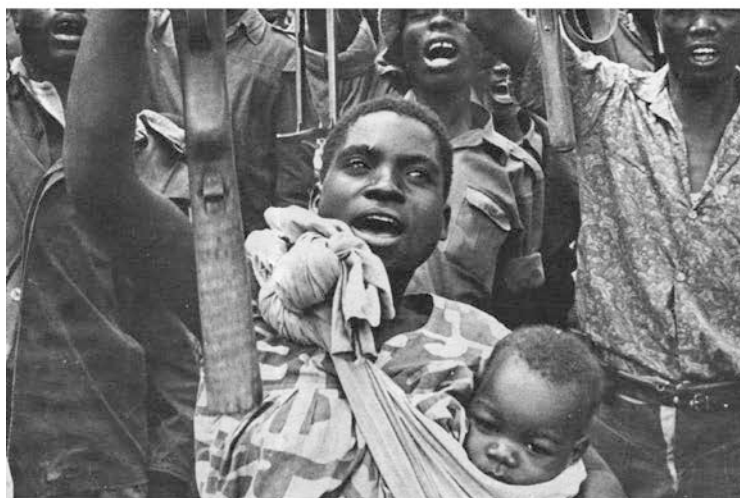
**ac** *Quite apart from the symbolism of this act of destruction and transformation, which gives the film its very clear but also very hard-hitting character, we also find a comment on the condition of crafts work today in a city affected by de-industrialisation. What can you tell me about the place that the present day has in your project?*

**mka** When Gill Park, the director of Pavilion, invited me, we went and had a look at some disused factories in Leeds. The idea was to make the film, against the backdrop of a de-industrialised Europe, about objects of great historic value that can be found on e-Bay auctions, retracing all their ebbs and flows. It was a way of trying to link the history of colonisation to that of European capitalism. Except that here we came to the end of the track. Then we decided to show *Part 1: Copper* in a space used as a showroom for a nail foundry. In this facility you can see portraits of historic figures of the Industrial Revolution in England (entrepreneurs, inventors and theoreticians): I considered it important to see the work, and the workers in this setting, dominated by these important figures of the capitalist economy and, by extension, of the British Empire. A different sort of opportunity came with the presentation of the film at the Biennale in Rennes, in a labyrinth-like architecture that took from the project created by the architect Xavier Wrona for my *Orphans of Fanon* exhibition at the Ferme du Buisson in 2011. It created an interesting effect, especially because there are a number of shots in the film that recall galleries, dead spaces and spaces of liberation. This architecture was conceived partly as a prison space with views over the void.

**ac** *I see two important developments in your project with and about the filmmaker Sarah Maldoror: a shift away from the object of study and the elimination of any recourse to archive images. Could you go back over these projects, particularly to the Foreword to Guns for Banta slide projection of 2010, and talk about the significance of the images in them?*

**mka** *Foreword to Guns for Banta* arose out of a series of meetings with the film director Sarah Maldoror, who had worked on the liberation movements in Portuguese-speaking Africa in the 1960s and '70s. During our conversations, there was always this blind spot, which was *Guns for Banta*, a part-fiction film that Sarah had shot in Guinea-Bissau in 1970. Focusing on the involvement of women and children in the liberation struggle, the film was produced by the Algerian army but, after an ideological disagreement about the editing, it was lost or possibly even destroyed. Sarah very generously gave me access to her archives, where I discovered a series of slides by Suzanne Lipinska, a dear friend of hers who, in those days, made reportages for *Africasia* magazine and who had created a photographic record of the creation of the film. I suggested to Sarah that I make a foreword for this absent film based on these pictures. *Foreword to Guns for Banta* (2010) is a slideshow with three off-screen voices of women who interpret the roles of the activist, of the photographer and of the director. The screenplay is based on the meetings I recorded with Sarah, as well as on the notes she made at the time of shooting; its main theme is the interrelationship and the functions of the three characters in the revolutionary action.

*An Italian Film (Africa Addio)* is another way for me to engage with militant cinema. Working on the film by Gualtiero Jacopetti and Franco Proserpi means working in a way that is diametrically opposed to what we see in Sarah Maldoror's movies. The images we see in the latter reflect a process of emancipation and aim to overthrow the Africa stereotype, while those of Jacopetti and Proserpi reproduce the alienation and Conrad-style myth of Africa as a place of shadows. Working on *Africa Addio* after working on Sarah Maldoror's work means talking of the present from a point of balance between these two very different approaches.







Poster of the movie Africa Addio (Farewell Africa) by Gualtiero Jacopetti and Franco Prospero, 1966

Opposite - Foreword to Guns for Banta, 2011. Courtesy: Galerie Marcelle Alix, Paris

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## Revisiting Militant Cinema

di Anna Colin

**Attraverso un multiforme percorso che comprende le attività di artista, ricercatore, commissario di esposizione e programmatore di film, Mathieu Kleyebe Abonnenc si occupa di studiare aree poco esplorate della storia coloniale e post. Il tema dell'assenza, l'ossessione e la rappresentazione della violenza sono temi interrogati dal lavoro dell'artista, che procede per estrazione e scavo, puntando al reintegro nella storia collettiva di personalità e materiali culturali passati sotto silenzio.**

Avvalendosi spesso della collaborazione di soggetti appartenenti ad altri ambiti disciplinari e optando per la produzione di disegni, sculture, film e diapositive testuali, la pratica di Mathieu Kleyebe Abonnenc si articola più in particolare in una riflessione sul ruolo delle immagini nella trasmissione del pensiero post-coloniale.

L'artista sviluppa questa indagine anche in un nuovo lavoro che assume come punto di partenza *Africa Addio* (1966), un film realizzato da Gualtiero Jacopetti e Franco Proserpi per documentare la nascita di quella che gli autori definiscono la "nuova Africa". Bollato come filo-colonialista e fascista dai registi Octavio Getino e Fernando Solanas, nel loro famoso manifesto "Verso un Terzo Cinema" (1969), il film propone la visione orripilante di un'Africa che tenta di reinventarsi dopo la partenza, prematura per Jacopetti e Proserpi, dei colonizzatori.

**Anna Colin:** Potresti spiegare il contesto del progetto *An Italian Film (Africa Addio)*? Come è iniziato e quali sono le sue ramificazioni?

**Mathieu Kleyebe Abonnenc:** Direi che all'inizio di tutto c'è il testo di Getino e Solanas che mi spinge a intraprendere una ricerca sul film. Poi scopro, man mano, una quantità di storie molto problematiche che ne hanno caratterizzato la realizzazione. Mi sono soffermato in particolare su una di queste, perché identificava molte delle mie inquietudini. Durante la lavorazione di *Africa Addio*, Jacopetti e la sua troupe si trovano a Boendé, nella regione del Katanga, dove seguono un gruppo di mercenari impegnati a riprendere la città in mano ai ribelli. Siamo nell'ottobre del 1964. Quando i mercenari stanno per giustiziare tre ribelli, Jacopetti chiede loro di fermarsi prima di fare fuoco per consentirgli di inquadrare meglio la scena, per riprenderla al meglio. Quando l'inquadratura è pronta, dà il via e filma l'esecuzione. Quando il film è uscito, scoppia lo scandalo e Jacopetti è messo sotto accusa per crimini di guerra.

*An Italian Film (Africa Addio)* è concepito come progetto in quattro parti. La prima parte, l'unica al momento prodotta, è stata realizzata nello Yorkshire, per la precisione a Sheffield, a seguito di un invito rivolto da Pavilion di Leeds. La zona dello Yorkshire è stata una delle regioni più importanti per l'industria metallurgica inglese. Ed è anche una regione che ha subito una de-industrializzazione violenta. Quando mi hanno invitato, mi sono trovato subito con il film in testa: ho pensato di riproporre l'azione degli imprenditori belga al loro arrivo in Congo, alla fine del Diciannovesimo secolo, vale a dire la distruzione e la fusione di manufatti storici, le croci in rame provenienti dal Katanga che servivano da moneta di scambio. Durante la colonizzazione del Congo, i belgi inviavano sistematicamente queste croci in patria perché fossero fuse e quindi commercializzare il rame così ottenuto. Ho voluto assumermi il rischio di distruggere dei reperti storici per tentare d'indagare questi processi di appropriazione e di esproprio.

È da avvenimenti e momenti come questo che scaturirà il tema di ciascuna parte della quadrilogia. Ad esempio, la seconda parte si soffermerà sugli incontri tra Jacopetti e il giudice in occasione del processo che durò un anno. La terza parte, invece, tornerà sui disordini scoppiati in occasione della proiezione di *Africa Addio* a Berlino, nel 1966. È in quel momento, e come conseguenza più o meno diretta di quell'avvenimento, che si è davvero costituita la sinistra internazionalista tedesca. Ciò che m'interessa, in questo caso, è il fatto che un film così problematico come *Africa Addio* abbia portato alle conseguenze che Getino e Solanas avrebbero auspicato a partire da un film del Terzo Cinema, e cioè un effetto performativo.

**AC:** Quindi ogni parte sceglie un filo conduttore che parte da *Africa Addio* per indagarne le strategie e le ripercussioni e collocarle nel contesto delle trasformazioni sociali generate dalla

colonizzazione e dal capitalismo. C'è un filo conduttore in particolare (formale o concettuale) che legherà i diversi elementi della quadrilogia?

**MKA:** Sì, è proprio questo. Ma io concepisco il progetto *An Italian Film (Africa Addio)* come un tutto che, di fatto, tradurrà una memoria in un gesto, vale a dire l'asportazione e la fusione delle croci. Vorrei che tutte le parti si articolassero intorno a questo gesto – che trovo estremamente violento e che ha anche diversi legami con la storia del capitalismo in Europa – e alle sue connessioni con lo sfruttamento delle risorse del continente africano.

**AC:** Per tornare ai dettagli di *An Italian Film (Africa Addio) – Part 1: Copper*, mi puoi parlare della sceneggiatura – composizione e fonti – e dell'immagine?

**MKA:** Per scrivere il testo mi sono servito di fonti diverse; una di queste, in particolare, è un testo dell'etnopsichiatra Olivier Douville che si occupa della questione del nome – cosa significa averne uno e l'uso del tatuaggio per non dimenticarlo o per farsi identificare tra gli altri corpi. Un'altra fonte che ho utilizzato è una monografia dell'Unione Mineraria dell'Alto Katanga rimasta sotto il controllo dei belgi fino ai primi anni '60. Questo libro descrive con dovizia di particolari l'estrazione del rame all'epoca in cui i belgi non c'erano; è un documento aziendale ma contiene anche molti fantasmi. Mentre sono diversi i racconti che si sviluppano, la fonte visiva che appare nel film è una soltanto. Sullo schermo si vedono gli operai di una fonderia artigianale a Sheffield che tagliano e fondono le croci con atteggiamento distaccato e preparano gli stampi delle barre di rame che sono il risultato di questa trasformazione. Queste barre sono successivamente esposte in parallelo al film, o in modo indipendente, come è stato al Prix Ricard.

**AC:** Al di là del simbolismo di questo gesto di distruzione e trasformazione che conferisce al film un carattere molto chiaro e anche molto duro, emerge anche un commento sulla condizione del lavoro artigianale oggi in una città soggetta alla deindustrializzazione. Cosa mi dici del posto che questo presente occupa nel tuo progetto?

**MKA:** Quando Gill Park, la direttrice del Pavilion, mi ha invitato, abbiamo fatto un giro delle fabbriche dismesse di Leeds. L'idea era di fare il film sullo sfondo di un'Europa de-industrializzata e su oggetti di grande valore storico reperibili nelle aste di ebay, ripercorrendo tutti i loro flussi. Era un modo per cercare di collegare la storia della colonizzazione a quella del capitalismo europeo. Salvo che qui siamo alla fine della corsa. Poi abbiamo deciso di presentare *Part 1: Copper* in uno spazio utilizzato come showroom di una fonderia di chiodi. Al suo interno erano visibili ritratti di figure storiche della rivoluzione industriale inglese (imprenditori, inventori e teorici): era importante per me che si vedesse il lavoro, i lavoratori in quel contesto, sovrastati da questi protagonisti dell'economia capitalista e, per estensione, dell'impero britannico. Un'occasione di tipo diverso è stata la presentazione del film alla Biennale di Rennes in un'architettura labirintica che riprendeva il progetto realizzato dall'architetto Xavier Wrona per la mia personale *Orphans of Fanon* alla Ferme du Buisson nel 2011. Si è creato un effetto interessante, soprattutto perché nel film ci sono diversi passaggi che rievocano le gallerie, gli spazi morti e gli spazi di liberazione. Questa architettura era concepita in parte come spazio carcerario con vedute sul vuoto.

**AC:** Rispetto al tuo progetto con e sulla cineasta Sarah Maldoror, vedo due evoluzioni importanti: un allontanamento dall'oggetto della ricerca e la scomparsa del ricorso alle immagini d'archivio. Potresti tornare su questo progetto, in modo specifico sulla diaproiezione *Foreword to Guns for Banta* (2010), e parlare del significato delle immagini che ne facevano parte?

**MKA:** *Foreword to Guns for Banta* è nato da una serie di incontri con la regista Sarah Maldoror, che aveva lavorato nel contesto dei movimenti di liberazione nell'Africa lusofona degli anni '60 e '70. Nelle nostre conversazioni, c'era sempre questo punto cieco che è *Guns for Banta*, un film in parte di finzione che Sarah aveva girato nel 1970, nella Guinea Bissau, a proposito del coinvolgimento delle donne

e dei bambini nella lotta di liberazione. Il film era stato prodotto dall'esercito algerino e, in seguito a un disaccordo ideologico sul montaggio, era andato perduto o forse addirittura distrutto. Grazie alla generosità di Sarah ho potuto accedere ai suoi archivi dove ho scoperto una serie di diapositive di Suzanne Lipinska, una sua cara amica che all'epoca realizzava reportage per la rivista *Africasia* e aveva documentato fotograficamente la realizzazione del film. Ho proposto a Sarah di fare una prefazione a questo film assente a partire proprio da quelle immagini. *Foreword to Guns for Banta* (2010) è una diaproiezione con tre voci fuori campo di donne che interpretano i ruoli della militante, della fotografa e della regista. La sceneggiatura è costruita intorno agli incontri che ho registrato con Sarah, oltre che ai suoi appunti risalenti all'epoca della realizzazione; il tema, nello specifico, è l'interrelazione e le funzioni dei tre personaggi nell'azione rivoluzionaria.

*An Italian Film (Africa Addio)* è per me un altro modo di occuparmi del cinema militante. Lavorare sul film di Gualtiero Jacopetti e Franco Proserpi significa lavorare in modo opposto a quello di Sarah Maldoror. Le immagini di quest'ultima si collocano in una logica di emancipazione e puntano a sovvertire lo stereotipo africano, mentre quelle di Jacopetti e Proserpi riproducono l'alienazione e il mito conradiano dell'Africa come serbatoio di tenebre. Lavorare su *Africa Addio*, dopo aver lavorato sull'opera di Sarah Maldoror, significa cercare di parlare del presente trovando un punto d'equilibrio tra questi approcci così diversi.





Top - "Orphans of Fanon", exhibition view, La Ferme du Buisson, Noisiel, 2012. Courtesy: La Ferme du Buisson, Noisiel

Bottom - "Foreword to Guns for Banta", exhibition view, Gasworks, London, 2011. Courtesy: Gasworks, London



# Architectures de l'absence

**Mathieu Kleyebe Abonnenc** a conçu sa dernière exposition, *Orphelins de Fanon*, comme une œuvre totale. A travers un parcours en histoire coloniale et post-coloniale s'y dessinent des absences, des espaces troués, balafrés. Cartographie d'une remémoration et d'une fondation difficile...

Né en 1977 et originaire de la Guyane Française, **Mathieu Kleyebe Abonnenc** vit et travaille à Paris. Ses expositions personnelles récentes incluent *Orphelins de Fanon* présentée à La Ferme du Buisson (2011-2012); *A Minor Sense of Didacticism*, galerie Marcelle Alix, Paris (2011); *Foreword to Guns for Banta*, Gasworks, Londres (2011). Expositions collectives récentes : *Living document/Naked Reality, Toward an Archival Cinema*, ICA, university of Pennsylvania (2012); *¿Tierra de Nadie?* Centro Cultural Montehermoso (2011); *Manifesta 8*, Murcia (2010). Il est représenté par la galerie Marcelle Alix, Paris.

A travers une démarche multiforme qui comprend les activités d'artiste, de chercheur, de commissaire d'exposition et de programmeur de films, Mathieu Kleyebe Abonnenc s'attache à explorer les zones négligées par l'histoire coloniale et post-coloniale. L'absence, la hantise et la représentation de la violence sont autant de thèmes abordés dans le travail de l'artiste d'origine guyanaise qui procède par extraction

et excavation et œuvre à la réinscription, dans l'histoire collective, de personnalités et de matériaux culturels passés sous silence.

**« Le corps du père est corps en peine, en attente d'être remembré. »** (Bell Hooks)

Engageant souvent la collaboration d'acteurs issus de divers champs disciplinaires et incorporant la production de dessins, de films, de diaporamas et de dispositifs discursifs, la pratique de Mathieu Kleyebe Abonnenc se définit plus particulièrement en fonction d'une interrogation, d'un tissage d'affiliations et d'une réflexion sur le rôle des images dans la formation des identités.

La récente exposition personnelle de Mathieu Kleyebe Abonnenc, *Orphelins de Fanon* à La Ferme du Buisson, à Noisiel, était l'occasion de s'immerger dans les préoccupations qui habitent l'œuvre de l'artiste depuis près

de cinq ans. Comme le notait Mathieu Kleyebe Abonnenc lors des tables rondes dédiées à la pensée du psychiatre et philosophe martiniquais Frantz Fanon et organisées dans le cadre de son exposition, *Orphelins de Fanon* est un projet « avec, autour, mais surtout sans la figure de Fanon ». Interrogeant l'héritage et l'actualité de l'œuvre de Fanon, militant et théoricien de la décolonisation (voir pages 97-99), l'exposition-parcours proposait une relecture possible des écrits du psychiatre et plus particulièrement des *Damnés de la terre* (1961). Face au titre de l'exposition qui érige Fanon en père, une première entrée dans cette hypothèse est suggérée par la philosophe et militante américaine Bell Hooks, souvent citée par Mathieu Kleyebe Abonnenc : « *Récemment, en relisant Les Damnés de la terre, [...] je compris pour la première fois l'idée de Fanon en quoi le corps du père était un corps en peine, un corps en attente d'oubli, un corps impatient d'être remembré et rappelé au souvenir (re-membered).* »<sup>10</sup> Résonnant avec les mots de Bell Hooks, la question du corps, de sa contrainte et de sa circulation dans l'espace colonial a servi de point de départ à la conceptualisation spatiale des *Orphelins de Fanon*. Pour la première

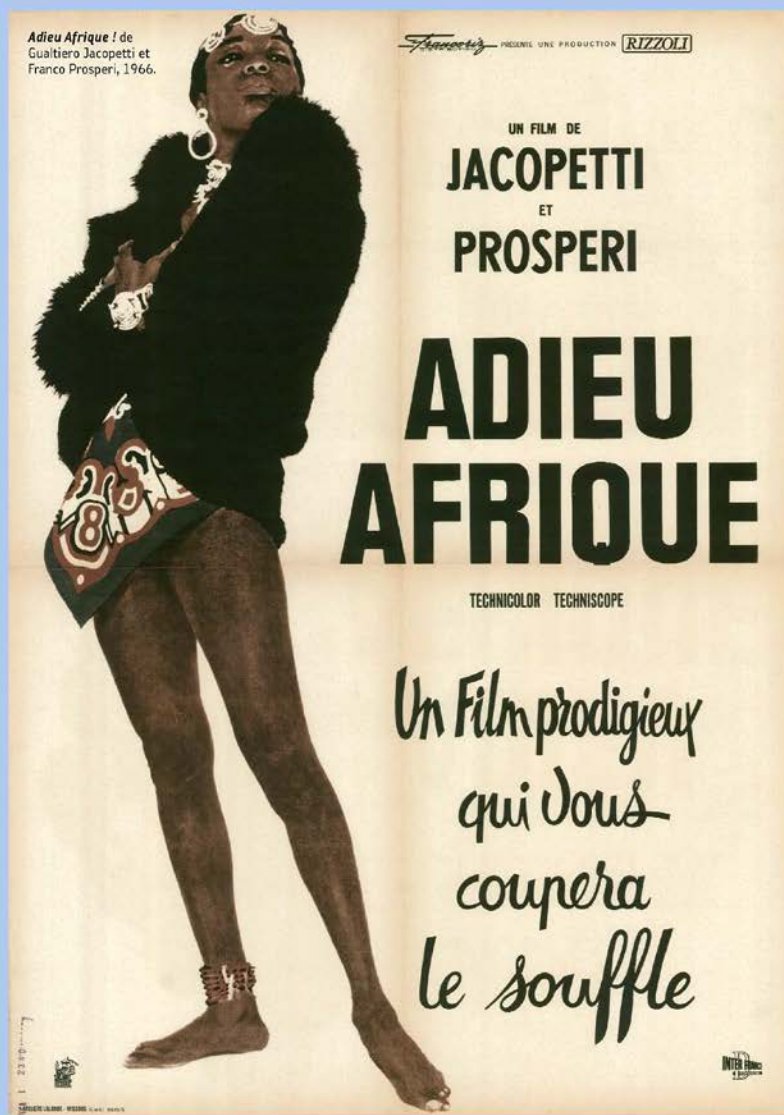




fois, Mathieu Kleyebe Abonnenc a fait appel à un architecte. Xavier Wrona, fondateur de l'agence d'architecture Est-ce ainsi, mobilisée autour d'exigences « *philosophico-politico-poétiques* »<sup>(2)</sup>. L'architecte construit souvent sa collaboration avec son commanditaire autour de textes et, dans le cas des *Orphelins de Fanon*, ce sont des fragments extraits du premier chapitre des *Damnés de la terre* intitulé « De la Violence » qui ont inspiré sa proposition.

Fanon y décrit, entre autres, la ville sous domination coloniale comme une ville de séparation entre colon et colonisé obéissant à un « *principe d'exclusion réciproque* »<sup>(3)</sup>. À partir de cette lecture, Xavier Wrona a proposé d'appliquer ce que la législation française, en relation avec l'architecture, définit comme un espace dit « sécurisé ». Le résultat était un dispositif labyrinthique qui s'insérait dans l'espace de La Ferme du Buisson comme une

architecture asynchrone et contraignante, mais malgré tout, ludique, dans sa conception de la circulation. Limités à deux unités de passage, ces corridors évocateurs d'une architecture carcérale laissaient entrevoir des espaces vides dont certains restaient inaccessibles. Les zones évidées de l'exposition convoquaient l'absence et le trauma, en même temps qu'elles suggéraient leur occupation potentielle par d'autres formes, d'autres corps, d'autres voix, tels des espaces de libération.



**« Des expériences refoulées existent relayées par d'autres figures entre la vie et la mort. »** (Kobena Mercer)

La série de dessins *Paysages de traite* (2004-2007) et la trilogie vidéo *D'ici* (2003-2006), deux travaux antérieurs de Mathieu Kleyebe Abonnenc qui se penchent sur l'iconographie de la traite négrière et de la colonisation, portaient déjà la marque de l'absence. Dans son texte *What is Afro-Gothic?*, la critique culturelle Kobena Mercer écrit : « *Quand des expériences douloureuses demeurent indigérées et psychologiquement refoulées, elles existent comme un "objet interne étranger" relayées par [...] le fantôme et d'autres figures immatérielles suspendues entre la vie et la mort.* »<sup>(4)</sup> S'inscrivant dans la lignée de *Paysages de traite* et présentée dans l'exposition *Orphelins de Fanon*, la série de dessins *Sans-titre (où que vous tourniez c'est désolation, mais vous tournez pourtant)* (2011) participe de cette pratique de la métonymie décrite par Kobena Mercer. Dans ses dessins qui s'inspirent des gravures coloniales d'Edouard Riou, dépeignant le plateau des Guyanes, l'artiste n'a conservé que les paysages. Des « réserves » blanches remplacent les représentations des peuples autochtones, fantasmant ainsi le corps du colonisé. À l'instar des cavités blanches « libératoires » de l'architecture d'Est-ce ainsi, l'espace dématérialisé fonctionne comme un lieu de projection à investir. *Le Passage du Milieu*





Vue de l'exposition  
*Orphelins de Fanon*,  
Centre d'art contemporain  
La Ferme du Buisson,  
Noisiel, 2011/12. Photo :  
Aurélien Mole. Courtesy  
Marcelle Aix.

(2006), second film de la trilogie *D'ici*, construit à partir d'extraits de films de fiction hollywoodiens, s'intéresse, lui, à l'espace qui marqua le voyage forcé des peuples africains vers ledit « Nouveau Monde ». A la fois science-fictionnel et anxieux, un territoire abstrait constitué d'images sous-marines, terrestres et célestes, accompagnées par une musique *drone*, se substitue à l'imagerie explicite des figures de l'esclave et du négrier. Les motifs de l'absence et de la disparition étaient encore le leitmotiv d'un projet réalisé par Mathieu Kleyebe Abonnenc autour de l'œuvre de Sarah Maldoror, réalisatrice française d'origine guadeloupéenne. D'une conversation menée pendant plusieurs années avec Sarah Maldoror sur sa trajectoire de « *capteuse* » et « *faiseuse* » d'images dans le contexte des mouvements de libération en Afrique lusophone dans les années 1960 et 1970, est née une série d'œuvres et d'actions visant à réintroduire ses films longtemps

laissés pour compte. Mathieu Kleyebe Abonnenc s'est notamment penché sur le film absent *Des fusils pour Banta* (1970). Tourné en République de Guinée et prenant la forme d'une fiction documentaire, ce film retraçait la vie et la mort prématurée d'Awa, une paysanne engagée dans le Parti africain pour l'indépendance de la Guinée et du Cap-Vert (PAIGC). S'il avait subsisté, *Des fusils pour Banta* aurait été l'un des rares films à témoigner de l'implication des femmes dans les guerres de libération. Recevant des financements de l'armée algérienne qui espérait le transformer en outil de propagande, le film fut confisqué à Sarah Maldoror qui revendiquait le droit d'en contrôler le montage. *Des Fusils pour Banta*, seules restent des photos du tournage prises par Suzanne Lipinska, amie de la réalisatrice, ainsi que les mémoires fragmentées de Sarah Maldoror collectées par Mathieu Kleyebe Abonnenc au fil de leurs entretiens. C'est à partir de ces mêmes reliquats que l'artiste

a développé, entre autres propositions artistiques, un diaporama conçu comme la préface du film manquant. Construit autour de ces entretiens, du script du film et de notes écrites lors de son tournage, un texte restitué par trois voix *off* féminines anime une succession d'images projetées dans un effet de fondu enchaîné. Ces voix retracent l'histoire de la conception des *Fusils pour Banta* et la recherche entreprise par l'artiste autour de ce film, projetant, par là même, la pensée de l'héroïne Awa dans une réflexion rétrospective sur la conscientisation des populations rurales à l'approche de la guerre de libération. En explorant les rôles entremêlés du militant et du capteur d'images révolutionnaires, *Préface à Des fusils pour Banta* (2011), tout comme le film original, corrobore l'idée d'Amilcar Cabral, fondateur du PAIGC, selon laquelle la libération doit se concevoir comme un acte culturel. L'artiste interroge ainsi le rôle des images dans la transmission



de la pensée post-coloniale, tout en nous rappelant la nécessité de questionner leur autorité, leur origine et le contexte de leur reproduction. En effet, le diaporama qui défile sous nos yeux appartient à un registre iconographique qui se retrouve sur d'autres supports antérieurs ou postérieurs à *Des fusils pour Banta*. De même, les clichés de Luis Cabral – futur chef de l'Etat bissau-guinéen et demi-frère d'Amilcar – réalisés par Lipinska ressemblent, à peu de chose près, à ceux qui figurent dans *Sans Soleil* de Chris Marker. Si Sarah Maldoror et Chris Marker ont fait route commune et capturé les mêmes instants de la lutte de libération – Marker, cependant, ne diffusera ces images qu'en 1983, soit neuf ans après la reconnaissance de l'indépendance de la Guinée-Bissau – d'autres photographes étaient déjà passés par là pour produire des images destinées à être publiées dans des journaux comme *Africasia*, *Afrique Asie Révolution Africaine* et d'autres de même nature. « *Que se passe-t-il quand on substitue les images d'une fiction mise en scène par celles, historiques, qui les ont inspirées ?* », demande l'une des voix *off*. Si cette question reste sans réponse, la proposition qu'elle contient est mise en œuvre dans le diaporama. En s'essayant à une reconstitution des scènes des *Fusils pour Banta*, l'artiste s'est servi d'images émanant en grande partie des archives éparées de Sarah Maldoror, ainsi que des journaux déjà cités. Cependant, l'effort de reconstitution narrative des *Fusils pour Banta* se heurte parfois à un manque de représentation, que l'usage d'images historiques jamais ne compense. Face à l'absence d'images, un écran noir s'offre à notre regard. La voix *off* ne tente pas de spéculer sur le récit sans le support d'images car, selon ses mots, « *c'est là que commencerait le marché de dupe, ce que Serge Daney nomme avec dégoût le marché des images de substitution. C'est-à-dire mettre une image pour une autre, à la place d'une autre.* » Cette substitution pourrait déjà avoir commencé avec l'usage de clichés historiques mais, comme le rappelle l'artiste, Serge Daney se réfère à la mise en scène des abominations de la guerre, aux images d'enfants mourant de faim qui ont inondé les télévisions d'Occident dans les années 1980. En optant pour un écran inert, *Préface à Des fusils pour Banta* se refuse à ce jeu de médiation de la violence qui n'aurait pour fin que de mettre l'horreur à distance et propose à la place une exploration discursive

du pouvoir, de l'authenticité et de l'ubiquité des images.

Les complexités contenues dans la documentation de la révolution et dans la représentation de la violence, questions chères à Susan Sontag, continuent d'être explorées par l'artiste dans un nouveau travail autour d'*Adieu Afrique!* (1966). Ce film controversé, réalisé par Gualtiero Jacopetti et Franco Prosperi, documente la naissance de ce qu'ils appellent la « *nouvelle Afrique* ».

## L'artiste rappelle la nécessité de questionner l'origine, l'autorité et le contexte des images.

Dénoncé comme pro-colonial et fasciste par les réalisateurs Octavio Getino et Fernando Solanas dans leur texte iconique *Vers un troisième cinéma* (1969), le film offre une vision d'horreur, celle d'une Afrique en train de se remettre sur pied, après le départ des colonisateurs, jugé trop « *prématuré* » par Gualtiero Jacopetti et Franco Prosperi. Du génocide de la population arabe du Zanzibar aux massacres d'animaux perpétrés dans les réserves pour subvenir aux besoins alimentaires des populations, les réalisateurs sont les témoins d'un bain de sang généralisé. La violence rendue photogénique par leur talent cinématographique a fait l'objet d'une autre accusation, celle d'avoir collaboré avec des mercenaires portugais, sud-africains et français pour obtenir de meilleures prises de vues de la tuerie des rebelles de la ville de Bøende au Congo. Reprenant les minutes du procès pour crime de guerre intenté contre les cinéastes, l'artiste entreprend de mettre en scène le procès et les témoignages rapportés sur les conditions de sa production. Questionner l'idéologie sous-tendue par Gualtiero Jacopetti quand il filme la violence et mettre en perspective les réactions que le film a suscitées depuis sa sortie, participent de la réflexion de Mathieu Kleyebe Abonnenc

sur l'image militante du passé : comment l'appréhender et la relire, et quel le statut lui conférer à une époque de renouveau révolutionnaire ? Si, comme le suggère l'artiste, les images de Gualtiero Jacopetti et Franco Prosperi sont le miroir pervers de celles fabriquées par Sarah Maldoror, elles restent, néanmoins, représentatives de la nécessité affirmée par Fanon – celle « *d'un affrontement décisif et meurtrier des deux protagonistes* » – le colonisé et le colonisateur –, pour que les « *derniers* » deviennent les « *premiers* ». Ainsi, bien plus qu'une exposition, *Orpheins de Fanon* pourrait être un projet à plus long terme d'exploration d'images et de formes qui ne cesseront pas d'être produites tant que perdurera l'oppression de peuples par d'autres – ardeur qui, l'Histoire et Virginia Woolf (*Trois Guinéennes*, 1938) nous l'ont appris, s'ancre dans la nature même de l'homme.

Anna Colin

1. Bell Hooks, *The Fact of Blackness : Frantz Fanon and Visual Representation*, Bay Press, 1996.
2. Xavier Wrona, « Est-ce ainsi que vivent les architectes ? », interview de l'architecte par *Cyberarchi* publiée le 8/4/2010.
3. Frantz Fanon, *Les Damnés de la terre*, Paris, La Découverte, 2002.
4. *Ibid.*
5. *Ibid.*

*Intense Proximité*, La Triennale, du 20 avril au 26 août au Palais de Tokyo, Paris.  
[www.latriennale.org/article/palais-de-tokyo](http://www.latriennale.org/article/palais-de-tokyo)

*To Whom Who Keeps The Record* (exposition personnelle), du 13 avril au 8 juillet à la Fondation Serralves, Porto (Portugal) et du 15 septembre au 9 décembre, à La Biennale de Rennes.





## Profile

### Mathieu Kleyebe Abonnenc

Kaelen Wilson-Goldie

It's hard to know who was the first to say: "Art is anything you can get away with," but chances are good it was Marshall McLuhan, not Andy Warhol. We live in curious times when both eloquent and abrasive arguments can be made to say whether mopping a palazzo floor with the diluted blood of a drug war (Teresa Margolles), cooking dinner for a crowd of strangers (Amal Kenawy), or flipping a light switch on and off 2,000 times to communicate with neighbors (CAMP) qualify as art or not. As the field of contemporary art grows ever more diffuse, the works that are the most fun and effective tend to be those that push hardest at the boundaries of what constitutes art at all. Once radical gestures, meanwhile, get a little dull when they gather consensus and are given a name. Research-based practice, for example, has become so establishment it even sounds boring.

For the artist Mathieu Kleyebe Abonnenc, however, research is far from solemn or dry. It is more like a torrent of associations and obsessions, a method of working that tumbles after captivating leads, loose threads, dead ends, and tunneling digressions. Abonnenc was born in French Guiana and raised in the capital Cayenne. He moved to France when he was fifteen, went to high school, and lived in Marseille for a while. These days, he is nominally based in Paris, though he spent the first few weeks of this year setting up a new studio in London, as an artist-in-residence at Gasworks.

Abonnenc's research sketches out a complex map running from France and Portugal to West Africa and the West Indies. As those trajectories pass through revolutionary movements, civil wars, and other intractable conflicts, they splinter off toward partisans in Cuba and Algeria, patrons in China and the former Soviet Union, and financial backers in the Gulf. Most of the works he has produced over the last eight years delve into the histories of colonization and decolonization. Each of them picks at the tangled relationship between a struggle for independence and the formation of identity, tests out the delicate balance between a desire for liberation and the longing for some sort of home (which invariably becomes a kind of trap), and digs into tender notions of desire and time.

Underlying these investigations is an inquisitive, childlike wonder, as Abonnenc falls headlong into fascinations with radical figures, revolutionary movements, and those moments in time, in a messed-up place, where something totally unbelievable suddenly seems possible. But he also pushes past the wild details and colorful characters to ask critical questions: Why do some of the most tortured episodes in history provoke some of the most mind-blowing works of art, film, literature, music, and graphic design? Do those works fictionalize history as it happens? When those works are revived, decades later, are they mistaken for real events? Which is more revealing, the glint of nostalgia that revolutionary relics produce or the experience of the search, measuring a distance that can never really be bridged?

At Gasworks, Abonnenc has filled his studio with stacks of *Tricontinental*, the Havana-based magazine of third-world liberation movements, known for its avant-garde art direction (see "Revolution By Design" in *Bidoun* #22); copies of the Algerian journal *Révolution Africaine* from 1963; issues of *Angola Bulletin*, published by the Netherlands Institute for Southern Africa; the first set of postcards printed in newly independent Guinea-Bissau; and piles of black-and-white photographs taken on the location of an ill-fated film. All of this material feeds into a work titled *Foreword to Guns for Banta*, which is Abonnenc's most ambitious project to date. As of late January, he was lost in the transcripts of Portuguese soldiers who fought colonial wars in Africa. "I spend days and days reading these testimonies," he said.

Over the course of a Skype conversation and a fitful exchange of emails, Abonnenc touched on Frantz Fanon, the poet Édouard Glissant, the literary movement Négritude (vexed, capacious, and much criticized), the left-wing publisher François Maspero, the filmmakers Chris Marker and Flora Gomes, and the brief history of a collectively produced genre of militant cinema. Talk to Abonnenc long enough and you start to see connections everywhere, like mesh over your eyes. It all sounds incredible — research as a real and active pleasure — and yet you wonder how he finds the time or focus to get anything done.

Between 2004 and 2007, Abonnenc retraced the expeditions of a doomed nineteenth-century explorer to produce a suite of dazzling, deceptively decorative wall-size drawings, *Paysages de Traite* (*Slave-Trade*





*Landscapes*), and a series of haunting photographs called *Terra Nullius*, meaning land belonging to no one according to Roman law. His starting point was a bound collection of *Le Tour du Monde*, a weekly travel journal launched in 1860 by Hachette in France. Famous explorers such as Richard Burton and Henry Morton Stanley were dispatched to the far corners of the globe and returned with tales of adventure in exotic, untouched lands.

A team of in-house engravers illustrated their stories for a public newly attuned to the aspirations of travel. The journal was wildly popular. None of the engravers had ever left France. Their illustrations were born of the imagination, and they were basically all the same, like Victorian wallpaper in varying patterns for Africa, Asia, and Latin America. Abonnenc found the issue on French Guiana, informed by the adventures of Jules Crevaux, a doctor who explored large swathes of the country's interior. Crevaux made four expeditions to French Guiana. On his third, he studied botanical specimens, which were illustrated in *Le Tour du Monde*. On his fourth, he was clubbed to death by a group of fishermen suspicious of his intentions.

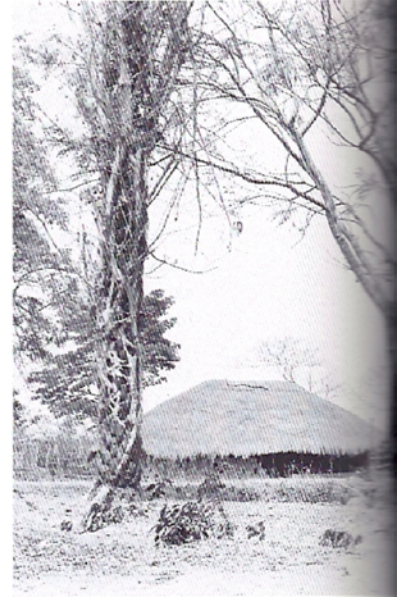
For the exhibition 'Watchmen, Liars, Dreamers,' installed in the Paris art space Le Plateau last fall, Abonnenc delved deep into the work of Julius Eastman, a largely forgotten American composer. Eastman gave minimalism a pop twist and wrote three notable pieces for multiple pianos in the late 1970s — *Evil Nigger*, *Crazy Nigger*, and *Gay Guerrilla* — before dropping out of the avant-garde music scene with a crack problem. He died in 1990 at the age of 49. In an obituary for the *Village Voice*, the critic Kyle Gann noted, with regret, that Eastman was brilliant, and that most of his scores were lost.

Abonnenc contacted the composer Mary Jane Leach, who spent seven years tracking down and compiling those scores, and invited her to give a lecture. The two then orchestrated a performance of the aforementioned pieces, along with *If You're So Smart*, *Why Aren't You Rich?* Eastman's music had never been performed in France. Abonnenc left two baby grand pianos in the venue for the duration of the show, and looped the recording of the concert.

For another, more low-key performance piece, Abonnenc periodically recasts a reproduction of a ring he inherited from his great-grandfather and lost. The silver piece is embellished with an ornate skull and engraved with the line "I will maintain through reason or strength," the motto of Counani, the Republic of Independent Guiana, which established itself for five short years, from 1886 to 1891, before it was re-appropriated by France and Brazil. Abonnenc has been researching this ring for ages, but he's gotten nowhere. He has no idea what it means, how his great-grandfather was involved in Counani, or whether the family lore that says he was a freemason is credible or not. True to his interest in copies and fakes, Abonnenc reproduces the ring over and over again, and gives it to other people to wear. Every time he recasts it, the legibility of the engraving fades.



Stills from the shoot of Sarah Maldoror's film *Guns for Bamba*, 1970. Courtesy Suzanne Lipinska



Two years ago, Abonnenc decided to look for the six reels of an unfinished film that went missing in 1971. At the time, he had no idea whether the reels still existed. To this day, he still doesn't know. The story he has pieced together so far is curiously inconsistent and maddeningly inconclusive, but somehow, the soft spots are also the most compelling.

The film was called *Guns for Banta*, directed by Sarah Maldoror. Born Sarah Ducados in France to a family from Guadeloupe, Maldoror moved in a circle of revolutionaries and was actively engaged in the armed struggle against colonial rule in Africa; her *nom de guerre* paid tribute to one of Surrealism's forebears, the darkly comic anti-hero of Lautréamont's poetic novel *Les Chants de Maldoror*. In 1970, Maldoror began shooting *Guns for Banta* on an island in the Bijagós archipelago, off the coast of Guinea-Bissau.

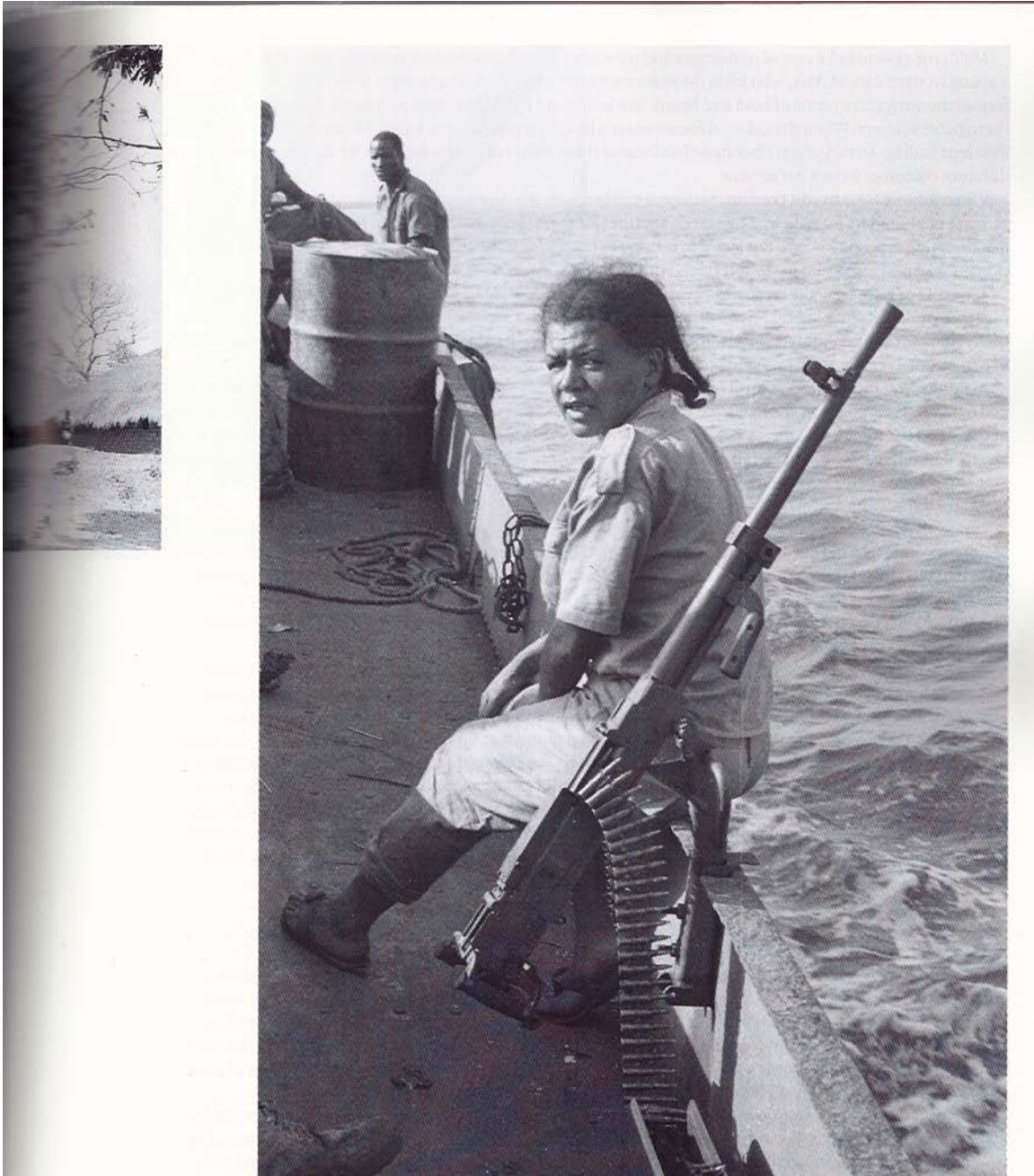
This was three years before Guinea-Bissau's independence from Portugal, in a time of conflagration and war. This was also three years before the assassination of Amílcar Cabral, who was amassing arms and consolidating power for the PAIGC, a revolutionary movement that sought to join Guinea-Bissau and Cape Verde in a federal, socialist state. Maldoror knew and greatly admired Cabral, who, in addition to establishing the PAIGC, had founded the MPLA, a like-minded revolutionary movement in Angola, with the poets Agostinho Neto and Mário de Andrade. Andrade, incidentally, was Maldoror's lover and husband.

Maldoror had made her first film, the 17-minute short *Monangambé*, the year before. Based on a short story by the dissident writer José Luandino Vieira, it captures the early days of the resistance movement in Angola in an allegorical tale about a woman visiting her husband in prison just before he is brutally beaten by the Portuguese police. With a loose, languid style and a soundtrack by the Art Ensemble of Chicago, *Monangambé* was shot in Algeria, and supported by the National Liberation Front (FLN) and the National Popular Army (ANP).

For Maldoror, Algeria was the mother of the world. She lived there with Andrade, and the cinémathèque in Algiers was their school. The director, Jean-Michel Arnold, initiated the first pan-African film festival in 1969, and invited filmmakers from all over the world to present and defend their work. "We trained and were trained through criticism," Maldoror told *Ecrans d'Afrique* in 1995.

As with *Monangambé*, the Algerian government financed *Guns for Banta*. This was relatively new. Algerian cinema had been synonymous with the revolutionary movement from the start. It developed through the mechanisms of the FLN, and almost all of the films produced in Algeria at the time dealt exclusively with the war of liberation. Maldoror had been the assistant director on Gillo Pontecorvo's landmark film *The Battle of Algiers*, so she had something going for her. But for the FLN to support films made in and about liberation movements in Portuguese-speaking colonies was something of a stretch. An Algerian technical crew joined Maldoror on location in Guinea-Bissau.









Maldoror assembled a cast of non-actors and guerrilla fighters, and worked from a spare script about a young woman named Awa, who joins the resistance after a party member arrives in her village and frames the struggle in terms of land and bread. She trains and fights and takes part in the ambush of 400 Portuguese soldiers. When the colonial forces enact a bloody reprisal, she is killed. Or maybe there was a different ending. In two years, Abonnenc has located three different scripts for *Guns for Banta*, each with a different outcome, so he's not so sure.

When it came time to edit the film, Maldoror clashed with the Algerian authorities (whether directly or through her handlers is unclear). She was doing *Guns for Banta* because she wanted to make the story of the liberation struggle known. But she also wanted to push a feminist point of view. "Wars only work when women take part," she said in the interview with *Ecrans d'Afrique*.

"The role of women in the struggle is evident in *Guns for Banta*," said Abonnenc. "Their political engagement was more obscure in Maldoror's other films, but here, they really come into the fight." Feminism was a tricky thing for the revolutionary movements of the 1960s and 70s, not only in the context of decolonization in Africa, but everywhere. Class split one way. Gender split another.

Maldoror wanted creative control over her film. The Algerian government wanted the propaganda tool it had paid for. For Maldoror, she had lived the revolution, she had seen women carrying bombs on their backs, and she had the right to tell their story. The Algerian police disagreed and seized the film. For a politically engaged filmmaker who considered Algeria the heart of the revolutionary struggle (a war for independence that had actually been won), and the creative hothouse for the region's cinema, this was a bruising betrayal. Maldoror left Algeria and stayed away for twenty years.

Ironically, that same year, *Monangambé* was selected for the Directors' Fortnight at Cannes. Soon after, Maldoror completed her second feature, *Sambizanga*, this time with funding from France. *Sambizanga* turned out to be Maldoror's masterpiece. It won the Carthage film festival's Grand Prize in 1972, and went into wide release in 1973. The *New York Times* hailed it as "a very fine film" and "a revolutionary picture." The *Village Voice* praised Maldoror's visual eloquence and capacity for capturing nuance. The critics anticipated great things to come.

Maldoror continued working — she has made nearly twenty films to this day, most of them documentaries about figures such as Aimé Césaire, Léon Damas, and Louis Aragon — but *Sambizanga* was her peak. Her career has been beset by irksome squabbles over who has the right to speak for authentic African cinema (the argument being that a French-Guadeloupean filmmaker does not) and the perception that audiences have tired of films positioning radical poets, painters, and playwrights in the middle of revolutionary politics, rather than to the side. Maldoror made three more films about Guinea-Bissau and Cape Verde, but none had the impact of *Monangambé* or *Sambizanga*, and who knows, really, what *Guns for Banta* might have been. A plan to make a documentary about Angela Davis fizzled. Maldoror hasn't done much since the 1990s. Her legacy as a militant filmmaker — mining the same terrain as Flora Gomes or, for a time, Chris Marker — has vanished.

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The backbone of Abonnenc's practice is an abiding obsession with the Martinican revolutionary Frantz Fanon. When he was seventeen, Abonnenc found a copy of Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* in his mother's library. He read the first chapter, "Concerning Violence," and the last chapter, "Colonial War and Mental Disorders," over and over again for a year. "I keep trying to understand Fanon's radicality," he said. "Glissant wrote that Fanon's was a difficult path to follow." When Abonnenc met Sarah Maldoror by chance in 2006, she reminded him of Fanon; he decided to follow her path instead.

Maldoror was giving a lecture in Paris on the poet Léon Damas. Abonnenc didn't know Maldoror but he was curious about Damas, because he was one of the three founders of Négritude and because he was, like Abonnenc, from French Guiana. After the talk Abonnenc introduced himself to Maldoror and asked if he could see her documentary on Damas. They met and discussed this and other works. Now they are, in a way, friends. They talk often and visit museums together. Abonnenc's *Foreword to Guns for Banta* is not only a complex study of Maldoror's work; it is also a sincere effort to bring her back into circulation and give her the recognition she deserves. This sets Abonnenc's current project apart.

Abonnenc has made a deal with Maldoror that if he finds the missing reels they will complete the film together. But Abonnenc knows he is chasing a movie that may turn out to be a myth. Though he has interviewed Maldoror for hours on end, the fact is that forty years have passed. She remembers some sequences from the film but not others. The most obvious thing for Abonnenc to do would be to go to Algeria at once and find out if the film exists. It says something about Abonnenc's project that he is wending his way around Maldoror's story slowly. Maybe he is gauging the distance; maybe he is building the fiction.



“For me as an artist, this is a very precise point,” he says. “All the people [Maldoror] met in Guinea-Bissau were liberation fighters, but the story of *Guns for Banta* is fictionalized. I really wanted her to tell me the story. Among filmmakers following the decolonization process in Africa, she’s unique. She was also the wife of Mário de Andrade, so in a way, she did this because she was in love. So the story is also about desire. But it took time. She’s reluctant to speak of certain moments that were tough. She’s been tricked many times. I am not working on dead pictures or past facts. I am working with someone who is alive, and my relationship with her is the core of the work.”

*Foreword to Guns for Banta* is an installation of accumulated archival materials arranged around a slide show of still photographs with a voice-over narration. The photographs, taken by war correspondents who were there when Maldoror was shooting her film, fill in for the missing reels, though gaps and holes remain. Some of images come from other sources. “This is a way we work now, in 2011. We have so many pictures; we just have to find the places to search, and to ask, what can we say about all these movements now?”

Abonnenc wrote the voice-over narration in three parts — the heroine of *Guns for Banta*, a filmmaker, and an artist. Read by three women, their lines intersect and overlap such that you repeatedly lose track of who’s speaking.

“It’s mixed up. You don’t really know who is talking. I wanted everything to blur. It’s not a testimony. *Foreword to Guns for Banta* is a way to produce a discourse,” said Abonnenc. Given the dire inheritance of so many liberation movements in Africa, as elsewhere, “What went wrong?” he asked. “This is a major question. There are so many things to connect, so many places and points of view. It’s incredible when you’re on this path.” But it must be tinged with a terrible sense of melancholy, too. All of the men who were in Maldoror’s orbit at the time of *Guns for Banta* are gone — Amílcar Cabral, Agostinho Neto, Mário de Andrade, all of them gone. The cause they fought for — hers as much as it was theirs — never really crystallized in the just or equitable society they were so committed to creating. Instead, revolutionary struggles gave rise to civil wars, appalling exploitation, and a politics of cynicism.

To meet Maldoror and sift through her memories is a rare occasion to revive the potential of that utopian moment as someone lived it. But there is also the risk that the moment itself will crumble as soon as it is exposed. “*Foreword to Guns for Banta* is a way of telling a story,” Abonnenc said. “It’s a way of saying: this exists, can we deal with it now?” If the aesthetic of Maldoror’s time privileged the image of the young heroic martyr dying for a revolution, the ethic of Abonnenc’s practice touches on the afterlife of that image — the militant who has lived long enough to look back and wonder why the first line of Fanon’s last chapter is still so apt: “But the war goes on.”





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## Mathieu Kleyebe Abonnenc

### Gasworks

The concept of 'strategic essentialism', a term coined (and since rejected) by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak to refer to a temporary strategy through which a minority group can present themselves, has been explored with varying degrees of success by a number of recent exhibitions and by a number of different artists. From Manifesta 8's investigation into the possibility of dialogue between Europe and the Maghreb region to Renzo Martens' pseudo-anthropological documentaries, the exploration of cultural representations of Africa become fraught when the map becomes mistaken for the territory. The supposedly temporary image or voice of the Other becomes a permanent identity and the 'strategic' prefix is erased to mere essentialism.

The product of a two-month residency, Mathieu Kleyebe Abonnenc's exhibition at Gasworks took as its starting point an unfinished film by French director Sarah Maldoror, *Des Fusils pour Banta* (Guns for Banta). Along the way he used this work to navigate post-colonial legacies and the enduring resonance of politically and culturally loaded imagery. Titled 'Foreword to Guns for Banta', the show continued Abonnenc's ongoing interest in Maldoror, who studied in Moscow under Soviet realist filmmakers during the early 1960s and went on to assist Gillo Pontecorvo on *The Battle of Algiers* (1966) – the young Paris-based artist showed Maldoror's first film, *Monangambée* (1969), at Manifesta 8 as part of his project *Tricontinental, A Graphic Survey* (2010). *Des Fusils pour Banta* was filmed over a three-month period on the Bijagós archipelago off the coast of Cape Verde in 1971. Maldoror had been commissioned by the Algerian government to chart the African Party for the Independence of Guinea and Cape Verde's (PAIGC) revolutionary struggle for independence against the Portuguese colonial power of the time. Following rebel fighters and working with untrained actors from a local village, Maldoror's intention was to focus on the women involved in the resistance: the film centres on Awa, a young woman who joins the PAIGC. Footage of women carrying guns and even bombs are interspersed with shots of their domestic chores. However, following a disagreement between Maldoror and the Algerian government as to who had control over the final edit, *Des Fusils pour Banta* was never finished.

Exploring the way in which politically fertile images can shed or retain their meaning decades afterwards, Abonnenc skillfully weaves his own research-based methodology into this story. His attempts to gain access to the original film rushes (purportedly still in the hands of the Algerian

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government) were unsuccessful, so he instead presented a slideshow of various production stills and images taken by war photographers who accompanied the film crew. A conversation between the artist, Maldoror and the Angolan writer Mario de Andrade, Maldoror's former partner, was played over the slideshow. They discuss *Des Fusils pour Banta* in much the same way as someone would describe a distant event from looking at a photo album – the director's account of the filming process is by her own admission unapologetically hazy and inconsistent. Publications – such as *Tricontinental*, a Havana-based magazine dedicated to the lusophone struggle for independence in Africa – and supporting documentation were also shown at Gasworks. Clearly illustrating the surprisingly global awareness of the PAIGC's struggle, Abonnenc suggests how a seemingly isolated event becomes coded as a globally linked political movement.

Maldoror describes how the filming process inadvertently abstracted the very real war situation into a neatly packaged narrative – for example, local resistance fighters were puzzled at having to repeat some takes up to ten times. She knew that to give voice to a subaltern (another disputed Spivak term) leads to a difficult engagement in an image system not of their control, likely to become fetishized, reappropriated or essentialized. Abonnenc's considered re-crafting of the shooting of the film as a story in itself shows his understanding of this too. Though the source material may still be contentious, it is thankfully not lost.

**Paul Teasdale**

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