

“Digging as if to find the source of all doubt”: *Memórias Íntimas Marcas*

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He who seeks to approach his own buried past must conduct himself like a man digging. Above all, he must not be afraid to return again and again to the same matter; to scatter it as one scatters earth, to turn it over as one turns over soil. For the “matter itself” is no more than the strata which yield their long-sought secrets only to the most meticulous investigation. That is to say, they yield those images that, severed from all earlier associations, reside as treasures in the sober rooms of our later insights—like torsos in a collector’s gallery.¹

Walter Benjamin here suggests memory and the genesis of collectively significant representations as a performative process.² According to Benjamin, he or she endeavouring to apprehend their own past should time and again return to the same constellation of events and circumstances. Benjamin refers to this constellation by the expression “Sachverhalt” translatable as “how circumstances relate to one another” or – in conflated form – a “situation”.³ By his or her gesture the digger re-actualizes the past situation for the present, introducing a mental representation of something that formerly lay beyond imagination. Absence of intelligibility of past events occurs amongst others in situations where particularly traumatising episodes have prevented a community from coming to grips with its past. The persons who have lived these experiences are at pains to coherently reconstitute what happened. However, in order for the community to heal it is unavoidable that these events become thinkable (Ott 2018) – our consciousness needs to be able to make a mental representation of what happened. “Bilder” (images), which in Benjamin’s writings refer to all representations (by words, written or spoken, by pictures, by visible or audible media), can function as carriers of memory in collective imagination.

One particularly complex and violent episode, the hostilities in Angola and enviroing the northern Namibian border between 1975 and 2002, involves several countries from the southern hemisphere. Work by artists from radically different backgrounds coincides around this conflict and its legacies. Amongst them I have singled out the threesome of artists who were part of the initial *Memórias Íntimas Marcas* project,⁴ and the duo Kutala Chopeto (Teresa Kutala Firmino and Helena Uambem-

1 Translation by Rodney Livingstone. Original German (“Ausgraben und Erinnern”, in *Denkbilder*, 1931-1933) reads: “Wer sich der eigenen verschütteten Vergangenheit zu nähern trachtet, muß sich verhalten, wie ein Mann, der gräbt. Vor allem darf er sich nicht scheuen, immer wieder auf einen und denselben Sachverhalt zurückzukommen – ihn auszustreuen wie man Erde austreut, ihn umzuwühlen, wie man Erdreich umwühlt. Denn »Sachverhalte« sind nicht mehr als Schichten, die erst der sorgsamsten Durchforschung das ausliefern, um dessentwillen sich die Grabung lohnt. Die Bilder nämlich, welche, losgebrochen aus allen früheren Zusammenhängen, als Kostbarkeiten in den nüchternen Gemächern unserer späteren Einsicht – wie Torsi in der Galerie des Sammlers – stehen.”

2 I was made aware of Benjamin’s text by a South African collective of artists, the Center for Historical Reenactments, Johannesburg.

3 In the English translations I am aware of the word “Sachverhalte” is translated as “matter” or “matter itself”, which does not transcribe this notion of “how things are related to each other”. Catherine Perret in her translation into French opts for “teneur chosale”.

4 *Intimate memories, intimate traces*. The artists are Fernando Alvim, Gavin Younge and Carlos Garaicoa.

be). I will relate each artist's work to that of the other, presenting it as the process of returning over and over again to the same sites, digging in so many different ways.

Given the extreme complexity of the historical and political background underpinning the Angolan independence war followed by a civil war, partially overlapping with what was referred to as the "border war" in South Africa, it seems near impossible to present a linear summary of the conflict. Following upon a long period of Angolan struggle for independence, Portugal ended colonial rule in Angola as a result of the overthrow of the Estado Novo dictatorship on the 25th of April 1975. At independence three Angolan liberation movements claimed right to govern the country.⁵ The conflict ensued in a civil war that lasted 1975–2002 and ended only with the assassination of Jonas Savimbi, the leader of UNITA, on 22 February 2002. MPLA, the soviet-backed liberation movement had assumed government in Angola at independence from Portugal. It was aided by Cuba who stayed in Angola with the aim of stabilizing the country. South Africa acted on the grounds of the 'total onslaught' rhetoric (Baines 2014), claiming that it needed to secure the northern border of Namibia against Soviet intrusions, against SWAPO⁶ refugees, and against ANC⁷ military camps in Angola. South Africa formed an alliance with UNITA lending military assistance. This alliance is backed by financial support from the United States also supplying weapons as part of the Cold War (Heißenbüttel 2014: 23) thus transforming what would have been a conflict between local Angolan groups into an East–West conflict fought on African soil. Due to this, the merciless circumstances of civil war deteriorated exponentially. Civilians, caught between the fighting fractions, had no choice but to attempt to be accepted by one adversary or the other in the hope of providing some security for their families Kutala Firmino 2017: 11-12). Not knowing who supported whom further led to social introversion Hayes 2001: 134). 9 September 1987 was the beginning of an offensive at Cuito Cuanavale that ended on 27 June 1988 with the withdrawal of South Africa from Angola (Kasrils 2008). This battle has become the symbolic turning point of the history of these countries. Nelson Mandela has significantly claimed Cuito Cuanavale as the decisive battle in the history of the liberation of Africa.⁸ Reading different accounts of the offensive told from different military persuasions reveals that interpretations diverge drastically, even today (Saunders 2014: 1363-68; Forrest 2022). One crucial detail is that the SADF⁹ could not afford human losses, because they would not have been able to explain them to South African citizens – officially South Africa was not in war.¹⁰ The South-African community still has much difficulty to come to terms with this breach of truth (Hayes, Liebenberg 2010: 9-10). On the other hand, while SADF intervention was limited to southern Angola, Umkhonto we Sizwe were

5 MPLA (Peoples Movement for the Liberation of Angola), FNLA (National Liberation Front of Angola) and UNITA (National Union for the Total Independence).

6 When Germany lost its African colonies as part of the peace accords at the end of WW1, the colony *Südwest Afrika* became mandate of what was then the South-African Union. From 1948 onwards the South African Republic imposed Apartheid Legislation in this territory treating it as a fifth province. South Africa did not cooperate with the demands of the United Nations for a plan of Namibian Independence, and on the contrary pursued members of SWAPO (South West African Peoples Organization). Namibia gained its independence on 21 March 1990.

7 African National Congress.

8 During an address held in Havana in 1991, Nelson Mandela highlighted the importance of Cuban commitment in the struggle for the liberation of Africa and the battle of Cuito Cuanavale as a "milestone in the history of the struggle for southern African liberation". The South African Parliamentary Millennium Project (PMP, launched in 2002) had planned commemorations for the 20th anniversary of the battle at Cuito Cuanavale to be held June 2007 - June 2008. These commemorations were destined to highlight the commitment to the values of internationalism and global solidarity with the fight for liberation of Africa, more specifically the commitment of Cuban soldiers. It also meant to raise awareness of the role played by Umkhonto we Sizwe (see below). Heindri A. Bailey, 2007.

9 South African Defence Force.

10 Clive Kellner (1998: 3) phrases it thus: "Cuito Cuanavale is the site of a battle that took place between South African, Cuban and Angolan forces, and more importantly, where South Africa lost. Which South Africans? And who were they fighting for?"

actively present in northern Angola.¹¹ Angolan refugees, thought to be either fleeing FNLA combatants or displaced civilians with no military background, had been integrated into the SADF as part of the 32 Battalion. This means that they fought for South Africa in their own country against their fellow nationals. Their reason for integrating the SADF was the relative security the army could provide for themselves and for their families, combined with the hope that they would be entitled to land ownership once the conflict would end. After the war their situation remained desperate and their struggle to establish a sense of belonging remained traumatic. As to Cuba due to changed relations with the Angolan government after the collapse of the Soviet Union and also due to its wish to show its autonomy from the Soviet Union¹² the Cuban cultural administration has since adopted an official explanation on the role Cuban military efforts played in Angola which does not leave much room to speak of individual trauma suffered in Angola (Hatzky 2012). For this reason, Cuban ex-soldiers carry the burden of silenced remembrance of unbearable violence.

In spite of official discourse, over time, little by little, attempts to tell the many-layered experiences of this conflict have started to accumulate. Amongst others, artists have taken up the painful challenge, approaching these conflicts and their legacy, relating their own lived experience of them to their art-making. Patricia Hayes explores how, on a technological level, image-making becomes part of the offensive via aerial photography or the gun-camera, how photography sometimes inadvertently generates violence, how it can aid the spy or the liberator. She studies how photographic equipment amounts to "technologies which act as a prosthetic relation with the human body" and can be used as a military tool or as a weapon of resistance (Hayes 2001: 134, 150). However, throughout, the war-situation is someone's personal story: images are gleaned from this chaos. The question how to respect the individual lives remains. Patricia Hayes has convincingly shown how the documentary image is paradoxical in this context: by showing victims it repeats the violence.¹³ The "truth" it supposedly represents is ambivalent. Consequently, the Angolan cascading conflicts add up to one collective "war of madness" for the photographer Joachim Schönfeld (Hayes 2001: 156).

As imagined by Walter Benjamin, artists have continued to return time and again to the places where this story unfolded and still grapple with their inability to represent this fraught history, be it only in the imagination of the ones concerned. Today, the question is as pertinent as ever before: how will it be treated in collective memory?

Digging I: *Memórias Íntimas Marcas*

A triad of notions (Memories, Intimacies, Traces)¹⁴ and a geographical triangle (Angola, Cuba, South Africa) structure one artistic project conceived in the early 1990's. Titled Me-

11 Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK) (Spear of the Nation) was the military wing of the African National Congress (ANC). The South African Parliamentary Millennium Project wished amongst others to draw attention to the active presence of Umkhonto we Sizwe in Angola, and therefore their contribution in the struggle for the liberation of Africa and the downfall of Apartheid despite the fact that they had not participated in military operations at Cuito Cuanavale.

12 For the complex political reasoning behind the asymmetry of this narrative, see Sujatha Fernandes 2006: 173-74.

13 This said, sometimes the work of the photographer allowed to establish the identity of victims or to re-claim nationality (Hayes, 2001: 23, 27, 153, 154).

14 Unless otherwise indicated, translations are mine. The project and the exhibitions and publications that result from it are referred to by this title, translated as "Memories, Intimacies, Traces" (intimate traces of memory or traces of intimate memories). "Íntimas" can also connote interiority. See Nadine Siegert, s.d., 176.

mórias Íntimas Marcas, it consists in collaborative work conducted at Cuito Cuanavale by three artists. Following an initial artistic action *in situ*, it gave rise to a series of exhibitions shown between 1997 and 2000. The added ambition of creating South-South ramifications through the arts Mosquera 2002: 166) resulted in the fact that in certain aspects this project was conducted in an institutional, ambassador-like mind-set.¹⁵ The organizational phases of the project are intertwined with that of international cultural agendas.

In 1994, to celebrate its newly won democracy, South Africa commences preparation of a Biennale to be held in Johannesburg in 1995. South Africa looks to its northern neighbours Angola, Mozambique, the Republic of the Congo (Congo-Brazzaville), and the Democratic Republic of Congo. The South-African artist Gavin Younge secures funding to conduct research in these countries.¹⁶ The Angolan Government contributes an exhibition for the Biennale, including amongst other artists Fernando Alvim.¹⁷ At this occasion Alvim and Younge meet and begin to consider the idea of a collaborative project. Alvim proposes going back to the site of the battle of Cuito Cuanavale as a joint venture between artists from the three countries involved (Alvim 2004: 50-53), an idea he has considered since 1992. He suggests Carlos Garaicoa as the Cuban representative. He also secures financial means from the Angolan private sector¹⁸ and obtains the patronage of Angolan military to assist in the logistics of the journey.

After the expedition to Cuito Cuanavale the exhibition is shown first in Luanda then at the Cape Town Castle of Good Hope.¹⁹ At this second opening the director of the collection, Paul Grobbelaar,²⁰ a retired Lieutenant-Colonel of the SADF, discloses that he was one of the commanders of the invasion of Angola. He talks of the frightening moment when he realized the senselessness of this action. After the Cape Town show, many artists come forward²¹ wishing to contribute to the project. The artists' lively reaction shows that this question is at the heart of their concerns. This is interpreted as a sign of the fact that there were very few platforms where concerns of the military after combat could find a voice.²²

Frictions between the official discourses accumulating around this large-scale project and the artistic implications centred on individuated memory-work become evident in the finer implications of the project. One sensitive detail is the fact that the civil war has not ended at the time of the project. The stay in Cuito Cuanavale takes place during a short-lived regional cessation of hostilities. In late January to early February 1997

15 The initial *Memórias Íntimas Marcas* project grew into much larger network. Fernando Alvim together with Clive Kellner and Hans Bogatzke constituted the C.CACSA in Johannesburg with a cultural peripheral "embassy" in Europe: Camouflage in Brussels. Several publications, international collections and large-scale exhibitions are linked to this network, amongst others *Marcas News* and *co@rtnews*.

16 Gavin Younge, email to the author, 11 April, 2016.

17 Johannesburg Biennale Catalogue 1995: 106.

18 Alvim, 2004: 50. At later stages the project received funding from UNESCO and the European Union. See Kellner, 1998: 7. On the importance of the official personalities that act as patrons for the project see Nadine Siegert, 174-175.

19 November 1997.

20 *Marcas News* 3rd edition, 25.

21 On the process of opening the exhibition to all who wish to contribute see Alvim, 2004: 52. New artists added at Electric Workshop in Johannesburg (*Marcas News* July 1998) included: Capela (Angola), Sandra Ceballos (Cuba), Moshakwa Langa (South Africa), Wayne Barker (SA), Colin Richards (SA), Lien Botha (SA); joining for the exhibition at the African Window Museum in Pretoria (June-July 1998): Thomas Bary (SA), Jan van der Merwe (SA); Lisbon (September 1998?): Raymond Smith, Willem Boshoff (SA), Kendell Geers (SA), Abrie Fourie (SA), Minnette Vári (SA); Antwerpen (MUHKA February to May 2000): Jan van der Merwe (SA), Kendell Geers (SA), Kay Hassan (SA), Abrie Fourie (SA), Minnette Vári (SA), Willem Boshoff (SA), Colin Richards (SA), Clive Kellner (SA), Carlos Garaicoa (Cuba), N'Dilo Mutima (Angola), Bili Bidjocka (Cameroun), Gast Bouchet (Luxemburg), Toma Muteba Luntumbue (Congo), Aimé Ntakiyica (Burundi), Fernando Alvim (Angola).

22 Kellner, personal communication to the author, 11 April, 2016.

– nine years after the battle, five years before the end of the civil war – the three artists (Alvim, Younge and Garaicoa) and a team of 15 spend 12 days in Cuito Cuanavale living in a ruined house.²³ The organization of this project necessitated considerable diplomatic ramifications on the part of the organizers. Notwithstanding the institutionalised character of this phase the prime interest of the project seems to lie in the precise actions each artist undertook during these twelve days and in the intimate character of their sojourn.²⁴ Out of these actions flow artworks that are central to later work of each artist. Each of them lived through the twelve days in a different way, retained memories, interiorized different minute details he encountered: moments of contact and the traces left behind. This memory-work conducted collectively *in situ* can be seen as a threefold process of individuation of a communally lived experience. Each "reads"²⁵ the traces the war left on the region in a personal way.

Emerging out of a Tunnel

During the preoperational phases of the project and also in later communication, Fernando Alvim²⁶ speaks much of healing. His artistic contribution consists in images filmed amongst others from a toy car steered for kilometres randomly through the bush. He further stages actions, ritual-like performances including assembled objects, for example the hybrid doll-figures he has a habit of using.²⁷ These figures travel through tunnels constructed by the artist. The re-appearance of the hybrid creatures after their underground passage is celebrated as a re-birth. Close-ups of the action are filmed underground (Alvim 2004: 51). As a material trace of the action, the artist gathers up the roots that would have witnessed this subterranean rite of passage at first hand.

Alvim's contribution to the *Memórias Íntimas Marcas* travelling exhibitions is an archive of found objects, a material archive of the intimate traces of the war: parts of soldier's uniforms, water girdles, used ammunition. According to Alvim autonomous meaning is created by the act of displacement these objects undergo. They are transported from the site of the battle to spaces where they once more confront society: as an artistic gesture this work hinges on the notion of removal, the etymological origin for all metaphors.²⁸ Alvim writes about amnesia, exorcism (Njami 2008: 42-49), a culture of war, symptoms of war and symptoms of culture, psycho-analysis of our existence, deformity,²⁹ ethno-psychiatry (Alvim 1998: 6; 2004: 53).

23 "Cuito was pretty amazing – completely shot up with bits of helicopter blades re-fashioned as garden walk ways. Ruined buildings everywhere. A detachment of the Angolan army was stationed there, but they kept to themselves. We all slept in a large house with a roof, but not much by way of ablution facilities, in fact we shared a toilet which did not have running water" (personal communication from Gavin Younge to the author, 11 April, 2016). See also Alvim, 2004: 51. On the traces of soviet presence in the region, see Sujatha Fernandes, 2006: 17.

24 Patricia Hayes (2001: 133) speaks of a "sense of intimacy about the causes and effects of violence".

25 In a telephone conversation with the author (13 June, 2015), Fernando Alvim suggests that their method consisted in "lire ce qu'il était possible d'appréhender" "reading that which it was possible to apprehend".

26 Part of the Angolan exhibition in Johannesburg 1995 curated by Andriano Mixinge (Johannesburg Biennale Catalogue, 1995: 106).

27 Alvim uses the doll-assemblages in the installations at the 1995 Biennale. See Siegert, 171-172.

28 Fernando Alvim refers to a journey to Havana just after the fortnight at Cuito Cuanavale in May 1997 - He speaks of soldiers who recognized the wooden poles as they had been soldiers in Cuito Cuanavale in 1987

29 "Deformity: All deformity is a sign of mystery, either malevolent or benevolent. As in the case of any anomaly, there is first something repulsive about it; but it is also a popular sign or place in which to conceal something very precious, something which requires effort in order to be accepted. This explains the respect, tempered by fear, felt by African societies towards the madman, the cripple and above all, the blind, who are deemed to see the other side of things. To be understood, the anomalous has to transcend the normal standards of judgement and, as a result, is able to lead us to deeper understanding of the mysteries of being, the mysteries of life. Deformity makes the victim a mediator - fearful or benign - between the known and the unknown, between the diurnal and the nocturnal, between this world and the other", Fernando Alvim, 1998: 5.

Indeed, within post-colonial theory *Memórias Íntimas Marcas* is most frequently mentioned within discussions on "Art and Trauma".³⁰ In art, these fields of interest are accompanied by research on the visual language of trauma and of the experience of loss. The question of the visual language of trauma is one of the main issues repeatedly raised within the problematics of representation. This question is carried by a line of thought that hinges on three consecutive arguments. In the context of art in the early 20th century, one possible point of departure for this field of enquiry is Aby Warburg's interest in the way that emotional content can be visualised within a work of art through a visual language that is shared over time and beyond geographical divides. He suggests the *Pathosformel* as a safe keeper of an archaic energy; these expressive gestures carry cultural memory over time. They can be considered to be those forms and those instances escaping precise memory – and it is precisely for this reason that they cannot be forgotten.³¹

The counter-argument, developed in the wake of the Second World War, is the ethical question of representation of violence or the suffering of others.³² Faced with the dilemma of a need for representation and concurrently its ethical impossibility several commentators suggest that through an active and personal confrontation with pain, an empathetic relationship with the onlooker might be achieved.³³ According to this theory the onlooker enters into a dialogue with the traumatic situation treated in the work of art. The possibility of active personal involvement however remains questionable – a representation cannot be considered to be a particularly apt vehicle, infallibly resulting in sincere empathy on behalf of the onlooker.³⁴

The visual material produced during *Memórias Íntimas Marcas* does not represent suffering, it does not communicate in pictures, even though there is a strong sense of visuality and of image genesis. The artists remember that evenings were spent looking through the filmed material of the day, the inhabitants of the village joined in.³⁵ However, the crucial work done during the project as a whole is the process-based approach, returning to the same set of circumstances again and again with ever new tools and means of apprehension: visual, but also aural or performative.

Passing by

Gavin Younge has brought a bicycle with him to Cuito Cunevale, which he rides³⁶ through the landscape that shows the many abandoned signs of the war: burnt-out

30 Brandstetter 2006: 122-155. Jill Bennett, 2005.

31 Nadine Siegert constitutes a bibliography reflecting the richness of the analytic texts written in this field (Unpublished manuscript, note 498, p.163).

32 Adorno, "Commitment", in Adorno 1962. More recently this argument has been extended upon by Susan Sontag, 2003, but also by Georges Didi-Huberman (1999), on the inherent cruelty in representation.

33 Jill Bennett, 2005.

34 Catherine Nichols, 2007: 217-226. See also Thierry de Duve (2008: 3-23) for one of the most polemical essays denouncing certain humanitarianism that this field of questions may be put to abuse within the art institution.

35 Alvim 2004 <http://www.bpb.de/internationales/afrika/afrika/59164/ausstellung-gleichzeitig-in-afrika?p=all>. The villagers becoming part of the project seems essential, Alvim remembers that the head of the village asked whether he could keep a doll that had been used in a performance, for it to bring good fortune to a house they were building in the village (Alvim, Hanussek Interview Springerin, 51). Gavin Younge remembers that the children of the village borrowed the bicycle he had brought (Personal communication 11 April 2016) See below for his use of the bird names contributed by the villagers. The film contains interviews with villagers, telling their personal experiences linked to the war (Nadine Siegert, 178-181).

36 He also uses other modes of transport, a truck for example.

tanks, shells of houses, helicopter blades (fig. 1),³⁷ scars and amputations visible on the bodies of the persons he encounters. He has secured a video camera to the carrier on the back of the bicycle. Later he uses this film footage, in combination with other images, to assemble a video to be shown in television monitors, as part of the installation titled *Forces Favorites*. Younge covers ten bicycle frames in vellum³⁸ and then assembles the ten post-office bicycles to be arranged in circular form. The title, *Forces Favorites*, is borrowed from a listener's choice programme, which, broadcast in South Africa during the "border war", gave family and friends living in South Africa the illusion that they could, by means of the songs they requested, share time with the conscripts. Letters by the soldiers, addressed to loved ones at home, were read by the presenter during the programme.



Fig. 1 Arrivals Hall, Cuito Cuanavale, and artist's bicycle brought from Cape Town. Photography by Gavin Younge, 1994. All rights reserved to the Publisher and Gavin Younge.

Apart from his bicycle Gavin Younge also brought his edition of *The Birds of Angola*, published in Lisbon shortly before Angolan independence.³⁹ Younge paints copies of the illustrations found in *The Birds of Angola* on floorboards and window frames in the abandoned house. As a result of the war all bird variety in the region is gone but the inhabitants of the village see the painted birds and pronounce their names. Younge inscribes phonological transcriptions of these almost lost bird names onto the panels, these are the titles for the paintings: "Sumbo", "Kawa-Na-Mbulu", "Onduva". Like the bicycle-frames, the fragments of wooden furniture are then covered in vellum; the translucent quality permits to make out the images of birds underneath the semi-opaque skin.⁴⁰ Gavin Younge's intervention is one of covering up, a sort of inverse archaeology. His gestures are those of someone dressing a wound in order for healing to be able to set in. Beyond this, his works hinge on the grounds of an ambivalent relationship with time and voice.

37 Gavin Younge, Personal communication to the author 11 April, 2016. See also Gavin Younge, 2007.

38 Gavin Younge (2010: 17) explains his use of vellum in artworks all through his career.

39 David Bunn in Gavin Younge, 2007: 32; Gavin Younge, email to the author, 11 April 2016.

40 Maud de la Forterie (2007: 17) has written about the use of vellum all along his career. Its metaphoric associations flow from the tanning process (depliant phase using lime) to the recuperative associations of (medical) stitching.

This relationship results out of the circumstance that, while international military interference had disinterested itself from the conflict, the civil war had not yet come to an end at the time of the project. This means that for the South African soldiers, those concerned by the listeners programme *Forces Favorites*, the war is in the past, but not for the inhabitants of the region. Yet, in both cases fluctuating memory is carried by voice. The time lag Younge has sensed here is one that is inherent in the nature of traces.

By a strange coincidence, simultaneously with the work *in situ* in Cuito Cuanavale another event takes place in the northern hemisphere: an exhibition organized at the Centre Pompidou in Paris, open from 19 February to 19 Mai 1997. The exhibition, based on research by Georges Didi-Huberman, is named "L'Empreinte"⁴¹ (translatable as "The Imprint" or "The Trace"). Didi-Huberman's research limits itself to images and objects, but his reasoning might have been applied to sound, the audial trace. From the outset he remarks on the banality of imprints or traces: "Partout des empreintes nous précèdent ou bien nous suivent" (Everywhere traces precede us or follow in our step). He thinks of the infinite forms under which traces may appear, and of the circumstances under which they are produced. Traces need to be accounted for as a tangible process, all the while they are a theoretical paradigm used in philosophy. They are relevant to prehistoric condition of image making and are equally specific of production methods in contemporary art, much used by Marcel Duchamp⁴² and a generation of conceptual artists inspired by his work. By this condition they are simultaneously relevant to two different time frames, a condition that encourages Didi-Huberman to refer to his "pensée de l'empreinte" as an "anachronistic point of view" which is needed when works of art have not yet come to be "legible" within history (Didi Huberman 2008: 12). Didi-Huberman attributes the same qualities to the "dialectical image" as defined by Benjamin. According to Didi-Huberman, Benjamin's is "an image where past and present face each other, transform each other mutually and criticize each other, a constellation which is a dialectical configuration of heterogeneous time" (Didi-Huberman 2008: 13). Playing simultaneously on two time-frames means paying attention to the long run at the same time as being watchful for the present moment; to demand of recent events that they open up onto things long gone by, to require of the past, commencing with prehistory, that it disclose something about what "now" means. This is the anachronistic nature of objects that have as yet gone unnoticed by art criticism; they are objects that have accumulated sediments of time (Didi-Huberman 2008: 23). History needs to be constructed within this incessant counter-motif of the anachronistic point of view. Fernando Alvim seems to express the same thought permitting a hint of "difumbe" (testimony): "Culture should be the alchemy of societies, the more contemporary we are, the more we have the means to go into the past".⁴³ Likewise and inversely Didi-Huberman points out that a trace is a present condition, visual and tactile, of a past that hasn't yet ceased to transform the substrate wherein it has left its mark. It is

41 The text published in the exhibition catalogue *L'Empreinte*, Paris : Centre Georges Pompidou, 1997, has been republished recently in Didi-Huberman, 2008.

42 Duchamp favoured techniques of making imprints our moulds because while this is a process, it is also a non-œuvre par excellence. See Didi-Huberman, 2018: 20.

43 Alvim telephone conversation with the author, 13 June 2015 (La culture devrait être l'alchimie des sociétés, plus on est contemporain, plus on obtient les moyens d'aller dans le passé).

Something speaking simultaneously of contact (a foot pressing into soil) and loss (the absence of this foot inside its trace). Something that is as eloquent about the contact of loss as it is about the loss of contact.⁴⁴

Gavin Younge's artistic interventions are carried by this ambivalent relationship to time. Even though he had set out to find physical traces of the war, both his projects in the final run concentrate on an auditory feature, on sound, or more precisely voices, carrying memory over time and space.⁴⁵ By the inhabitants' oral intervention (pronouncing the names), the birds' names are re-activated over time while the real birds have disappeared. The listener of the *Forces Favorites* programme established (imaginary) contact over a considerable geographical distance. In both cases Younge's work tells the making of traces and their loss in one single gesture, which might result in healing, translated by the gesture of covering, suturing.

The fact that memory is carried by sound in Younge's work allows for a cleavage between lived actions here and now and experience of actions nine years earlier or elsewhere, later. The vehicle for communicating this "decalage", (translatable as interval or discrepancy, as time lag or gap) can be sound or image, storytelling in writing or orally, object gathering and action, a detachment, which is equally brought about in Carlos Garaicoa's work.

Digging into

Carlos Garaicoa is known for his poetical social critique in the form of performance work.⁴⁶ He has developed a method which Gerardo Mosquera qualifies as a form of "artistic archaeology",⁴⁷ inspecting the overlapping historical époques as seen in buildings or in social phenomena. Cuban involvement in the war in Angola (or in Ethiopia for that matter) remained a difficult subject in Cuba⁴⁸ seeing that much hype was made around Cuban soldiers' heroism during the war effort, which did not leave much space to come to terms with the atrocities they had witnessed.⁴⁹ Artists have thus made it their duty to uncover what Piero Gleijeses refers to as a "culture of silence".⁵⁰ In Cuito Cuanavale Carlos Garaicoa spends seven days digging holes in the Cuito riverbank. He films his action and the results are shown in an installation with seven video screens,⁵¹ adopting a twice translated line by the Japanese poet Bashō Matsuo as a title: *In the summer grasses there is boredom now, glorious dreams of ancient warriors / En las hierbas del verano, Ahora se está aburrido. Gloriosos sueños de antiguos guerreros*. By choice of this title Garaicoa seems to express a

44 Didi-Huberman (2008: 18): "Quelque chose qui nous dit aussi bien le contact (le pied qui s'enfonce dans le sable) que la perte (l'absence du pied dans son empreinte). Quelque chose qui nous dit aussi bien le contact de la perte que la perte du contact".

45 The ways in which sonic reverberations are indeed physical traces are discussed in Neumark, 2017, and Gentric, 2019.

46 Johannesburg Biennale catalogue 1995: 130.

47 Mosquera, 2000: 1286-1291.

48 "Nobody in Cuba talks of war in Angola or Ethiopia. Censorship as much as auto-censure" writes Gerardo Mosquera (2000: 286). Or rather, the involvement in the war is taken care of by official propaganda rhetoric, "a language of victory and martyrdom", which does not allow for the narrative of personal experience of the conflict. "Aucun récit ne vient contrebalancer le discours officiel." (there is no narrative to counterbalance the official discourse). See also Fernandes, 2006: 173, 174.

49 The Parliamentary Millennium Project Proposal of 2007 uses the same type of discourse.

50 "Because the leaders said nothing, the Cuban volunteers who carried out the missions said nothing. The culture of silence enveloped the island" (Piero Gleijeses, 2013:395). Quoted in Fernandes 2006: 171.

51 Shown at Galeria Continua at Le Moulin Boissy le Chatel, Ile de France Festival "Sphères" 2009.

feeling of "having arrived too late" on the battlefield accompanied by a sense of helplessness and paralysis. The significations attributed to the artist's action waver between that of a gravedigger, a farmer, a labourer or an archaeologist.⁵² In a text written at Cuito Cuanavale Garaicoa, unaware of Benjamin's text on memory, speaks of his attempt to "interrogate the earth through performance".⁵³

To dig. Seven days to dig up answers. To dig up an answer. To dig in search of a convincing reason. My own archaeology. Imagination Grave. To dig, to dig, to dig... In me, in my friends, to excavate everything and everyone. Digging as if to find the source of all doubt. To face the incomprehensible. Dig, dig...

Not only a sense of paralysis and fatal belatedness accompanies this action: the forcefully repeated open but deadly silent secret is the fact that the region has not been cleared of landmines. The action of "interrogating the earth" thus carries an aspect of razor-sharp and vital danger. An explosive sense of "here-and-now-ness" is felt every time the spade is thrust into the earth.

Garaicoa produces a second artwork following the expedition to Cuito Cuanavale. Almost like a pendant to the artist's own action, it consists in four video-portraits of his friends, young Cubans having served in Angola: *Four interviews without*.⁵⁴ The ex-soldiers face the camera without speaking (Fernandes 2006: 173). The sound-track consists in a recorded conversation. Thus, their voices in dialogue with the artist can be heard: they speak disjointed sentences of war memories "... that it would be better not even...but most of us were too young... after all, what..."⁵⁵

The voices in Garaicoa's video do not coincide with the speechless portraits shown by the image; the radio-programme in Younge's work speaks of sound transmitted over a large distance in terms of time and space, the voices of the inhabitants pronounce names of birds that are no longer to be found in the region. A sort of "Nachklang" (echoing, reverberation, resonance) emerges from these multiple dialogues, but remains suspended, for now.

Un-hearing

Alvim's claim of a preoccupation with "healing" and catharsis come under pressure as soon as the first critiques of the exhibitions appear. While he claims that "the exhibition is more a dialogue between victims than between winners and losers" it needs to be pointed out that certain victims in this war are not heard.⁵⁶ The artists are representative of the geo-political situation on the one single criterion of nationality: one Cuban, one South-African and one Angolan. At this early stage it has

52 A text by Orlando Hernandez (written in La Havana, January 1998) accompanies Garaicoa's work: "There, outside a man is digging, silently turning the soil as a grave digger would (But have not all the dead people been buried? Or, what else could be buried in those graves? Waste, rubbish?) It could also be a farmer who is preparing the soil, to sow his seeds, to insert saplings (but what can be cultivated in this land buried by fire, drowned in blood, that would not later beget more blood, more violence? and who wants to dine on such a harvest? Surely it must be an explorer, an archaeologist (but what is he looking for? What is he looking for?). 7 days from sunrise every morning - so each hole is made inside himself for his spade to penetrate..." *Marcas News* 3rd edition: 5.

53 Carlos Garaicoa (1998), *Marcas News* 3rd edition, 5.

54 "Quatre Cubains (1997), *Cuatro entrevistas sin..*" (*Four interviews without*). See also Fernandes, 2006: 174, 175.

55 See also text by Orlando Hernández 2000: 10.

56 Rory Bester, 1998: 64-66. Bester later became part of the project, writing text for later issues of *co.@rnews*.

as yet proven impossible to take the very complex situation of the local population affected by the Angolan conflicts into account. *Memórias Íntimas Marcas* does not undertake an equitable assessment of all the participants in the war. The analytical texts accompanying the exhibition do not heed the fact the civil war had not ended, probably because the situation is not clear to anyone, even more so as in 1997 it is not possible to know that the civil war will draw on until 2002. It still remains that this detail considerably weakens the project's claim to being concerned with collective memory. To refer to the artistic interventions as though they were a work of collective remembrance would be over-precocious and would actually be an effacement of personal suffering because its inadvertent selective pertinence remained unavowed. Thus, *Memórias Íntimas Marcas* from the outset, in order to have any sense at all, needed to be followed up by more "diggers" returning here, trying to glean remembrance and representation from layers of trauma or forgetfulness.

In 2017 another project was conceived with this exact aim. The exhibition [*South-South*] *Let me begin again* involved 30 artists from southern America, the Caribbean and southern Africa exploring parallels between artists from the Global South. [*South-South*] confronted the complex notion of a connected "geopolitical South" through contemporary art and related to conflicts in general. The Angolan conflict featured amongst them.⁵⁷

In the works shown at [*South-South*] it is brought home forcefully that for some the war is far from over even long after the 2002 ceasefire. The families of the veterans of the 32 Battalion for example still grapple with an unresolved traumatic past. Amongst these veterans, the conscripted Angolan refugees were first settled in a military base in northern Namibia. At Namibian independence they were moved to Pomfret in northern South Africa, an arid region. Since then, the South African state has discontinued the municipal services for this town to persuade the inhabitants to leave. The community as a whole is haunted by the legacy of war, repeated displacement and their struggle to summon a sense of belonging. As a result of the un-resolved war trauma suffered by most of the men having fought in the Angolan conflicts, normalization of violence is paramount and abuse of women is prevalent in this community. Two artists born in Pomfret from families relocated here as a result of the Angolan conflicts have taken up the challenge to make the stories of this community heard.

Teresa Kutala Firmino and Helena Uambembe work as the collective Kutala Chopeto.⁵⁸ Their work materializes in the form of story-telling. Gleaning personal stories from interviews with fellow members of the community Kutala Chopeto re-write these personal stories into a performed narrative. The tales are often read as part of performed actions. Elements from the narrative feature as a material language accompanying the verbal account.⁵⁹

One such re-written and re-imagined narrative is titled *The Lizard*. A filmed version of a rehearsal of the performance shows Teresa Firmino and Helena Uambembe knee-

⁵⁷ *SOUTH-SOUTH: Let me begin again*, 2 February 2017. <https://www.goodman-gallery.com/exhibitions/cape-town-gallery-south-south-let-me-begin-again-2017>. The exhibition was shown 28 January - 04 March 2017 at the Goodman Gallery, Cape Town.

⁵⁸ Translatable as "To see beyond something soft".

⁵⁹ Firmino and Uambembe also work in video, painting, and found object installation.

ling on a surface covered in large sheets of white paper, at opposite ends, both facing the camera (fig. 2). Teresa Firmino moves backward while writing phrases from the narrative onto the paper she crouches on: "I am a lizard", "I am a mother", "I am a grand-mother", "She is my child", etc. Helena Uambembe moves forward in a similar crouched attitude placing alternately one ear or the forehead to the ground while her other ear points to the ceiling. The two artists then inverse roles, becoming alternately the listener or the writer, adding layer upon layer of writing or hearing: writing and over-writing or un-writing, hearing, over-hearing and un-hearing. The accompanying recital is written from the point of view of unexpected witnesses to scenes of personal distress: a lizard, a pot-plant and a shrub of a peanut plantation. The recital repeatedly refers to a character – human, animal or vegetal – holding an ear to the ground, crouching or slanting in order to hide. At one point a character is hidden in a ceiling thus holding the ear to the wooden casing she hides over, in order to overhear the conversation unfolding in the room underneath her. From the "more than human" point of view of a lizard, a pot-plant and a peanut plant Kutala Chopeto tell a story of repeated displacement and abuse.



Fig. 2 Teresa Firmino and Helena Uambembe, video of performance rehearsal: 2 minutes 50. Cinematographer Duško Marović; Effects & Editing: Kutala Chopeto, Sound: SoulFire Studio.

Teresa Firmino and Helena Uambembe chose the format of storytelling⁶⁰ as a means to avoid figurative representation.⁶¹ Firmino's Master dissertation unpacks this artistic practice for contemporary art. The thesis titled *Rewriting History*, Pomfret community stories evidences that narratives never exist in isolation. Each chapter begins with a story from the Pomfret community. By means of these narrative passages, Firmino's texts "navigate the different tools used to rewrite history" (Firmino 2017: 1).

"Storytelling grabs the imagination", she writes, "it gives the audience the freedom to interpret and re-imagine what so many have imagined", and later: "Rewriting history is an act of reimagining one's past in a world replete with pre-inscribed histories that have set themselves as truth" (Firmino 2017: 35-36). In Kutala Chopeto's work

60 Firmino, Telephone interview, 11 September 2019.

61 Firmino, *ibid.*, 11 September 2019.

the telling of the story is completed by re-enacting certain essential gestures, thus allowing bodily memory to take up the trace of an earlier lived experience (ibid.: 87).

Firmino and Uambembe are at considerable pains to create a respectful reception of the narratives they share and to cater for the sensitivities of the prospective viewer/listener.⁶² Within the performance it is made clear that the stories function as such, that they are an independent element, heard in a specific context, re-told here and now, potentially to be re-told in other contexts. For Firmino, reading is like research: each reading of the story is a new investigation into what happened, which part of lived experience can be remembered or shared and how to come to terms with this difficult past.⁶³ It is important that the viewer/listener is conscious that he/she is hearing a subjective account of the facts, re-told by the artists who themselves heard it from someone else. Their personal way of telling the story is important but on the other hand the artists are just the voices retelling the story (Firmino 2017: 35). Another detail the artists consider crucial, is the fact that both have a personal relationship with the person whose story is told. Having a shared spatial reference: Pomfret is the hometown of both the initial story-teller and of those who mediate it. Voice as safe-keeper of memory thus follows up on sonic traces passed on between individuals – returning time and again to the same set of circumstances, in order for collective imaginaries to become capable of apprehending the individually lived episodes.

Un-earthing

In her text on the photographic images of war in Angola and Northern Namibia, Patricia Hayes has questioned this set of circumstances thus: "What visibilities does violence create? What visibilities does violence destroy? What explanations for violence feature in the popular imaginary and on the ground?" (Hayes 2001: 157). This is complicated by the fact that "commemoration becomes increasingly centralised through a national elite in the state" with the result that, instead of furthering collective memory-work "a kind of collective post-colonial forgetfulness takes hold" (Hayes 2010: 11).

Indeed, seeing the almost ambassador-like rhetoric in the later phases of the *Memórias Íntimas Marcas* project (the travelling exhibition shown in Luanda, in Cape Town and in Antwerp) it becomes difficult not to lose sight of the first action that consisted in travelling through a war zone and makeshift living in ruins. It is however the furtiveness of the stay in Cuito Cuanavale that seems to contribute as an aesthetic category to the memory work debate. The unsolved intimate experiences are like the awareness of the presence of unexploded landmines in the soil of the riverbank. As long as the experience has not been allowed to enter dialogue with the present changed reality, the violence can't be laid to rest. This gesture is to be seen in the larger context of cultural memory⁶⁴ and thus needs to take the political into account (Bennett 2005). Negative memories or the absen-

⁶² When Teresa Firmino and Helena Uambembe told the story "The Lizard" at the University of the Witwatersrand, at the occasion of a presentation of Teresa Firmino's practical work, (March 2017), Firmino prepared a form to be filled in by the viewer, stipulating the conditions under which the narratives would be shared. The viewer had to act according to a precise protocol.

⁶³ Firmino, Telephone interview, 11 September 2019.

⁶⁴ Here meant as "Kulturelles Gedächtnis" in the sense used by Aleida and Jan Assmann.

ce of recollection result in an inability to describe experience. In order to create an opportunity to approach this missing link from within a cultural process, society needs to find ways of narrating memory and generating images and gestures as part of collective imaginary.

Once again: The voices in Garaicoa's video do not coincide with the speechless portraits shown by the image; the radio-programme in Younge's work speaks of sound transmitted over large distances in terms of time and space, the voices of the inhabitants pronounce names of birds that are no longer to be found in the region. Finally, one generation later, the call is taken up as Kutala Chopeto become the voice that retells personal stories. The artists have each returned time and again to the same set of circumstances, unavoidable if one is to unearth elements of initial comprehension from layers of forgetfulness. They each are, in his/her own way, "digging, digging as if to find the source of all doubt".

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