

## The Black Atlantic Enters the Thinking Space between the Pages: Three Books by Bundit Phunsombatlert, Atta Kwami, and Gilles Elie dit Cosaque

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### Introduction

*The medium is the message.*  
Marshall McLuhan

An artist's choice to present their work in the form of a book immediately puts it into a form that implicitly and explicitly admits a whole series of levels of meaning and forms of encounter. The book not only refers to the functions and design characteristics of European book culture.<sup>1</sup> The book form also implies that the viewer is actively involved in the reception of the work in certain ways – for example, through the invitation to leaf through it and read. The impact of reception in the following up of pages due to the book form happens in parallel and before and after the viewing of individual pages and their graphic message. The composition in book form thus is an amalgamation, an additive procedure that plays with impressions of script, text, images, ordering of information and the implication of the viewer/reader who chooses how to travel through the book. The selection of the book form as artistic surface implies more: As a cultural object with multitudinous facets of use, function, haptic and visual effects and elements, the choice of a bookish form creates a multifaceted art work.

By analyzing three artists' books, we will show how artistic engagement with the book thematizes the culture of memory and the construction of history. The examples in question will explore the very different ways artists choose to use the dimensions of the book for the effects of their works. First, the *Sunny Gardens in Blue* by the media artist Bundith Phunsombatlert creates a cyanotype book around a project of documenting and archiving emigration experiences of Caribbean-born seniors in Brooklyn. Phunsombatlert plays with artistic references to the first historical photo-book that Anna Atkins created in 1834. Second, the *Grace Kwami Sculpture*, a book whose title places it somewhere between a book and a sculpture, is an exploration by the Ghanaian artist Atta Kwami of the work of his mother, Grace Kwami. He memorializes her with his art book, but his choice of format also inscribes her in a canon shaped by the authority of the book. Like the moment of archiving that Phunsombatlert takes up with his collection of biographical narratives, the artwork here also becomes a part of book-shaped historiography, thus revealing different dimensions

<sup>1</sup> This reference to European book culture is due to the choice of these three examples. Artist books are a global artistic medium reflecting the diverse book cultures and traditions centred or not around the written word. See for only some examples: Wasserman 2007; Hubert/Hubert 1999; Pinther/Wolf 2020; <https://library.si.edu/exhibition/artists-books-and-africa/unique-visions> (last accessed: September 29, 2022). For some aspects of the dimensions of meaning inscribed in the book in European book culture see for example: Kiening 2008.

of remembering and the preservation of memory. Third, Gilles Elie dit Cosaque works in *Lambeaux* on an infinite journal intime, where each newly created page is an extension and continuity of those already created and those yet to be produced. The pages that the artist prepares for each new collage – in the same dimension and the juxtaposition of writing, collage of photographs, magazine clippings and other graphic and visual elements – make *Lambeaux* an imaginary book or notebook that never existed as such but presents itself as a (infinitely unfinished) unitary object in the effect of the individual pages. In this case, the format of the pages and the title as a diary makes clear the relationship of the pages to each other, and again uses the idea of turning the page to facilitate contemplation beyond the current exhibition and towards future pages.

The reading of these art works cannot be simplistic, as these three examples will show: the artists reflect on different elements of the *thinking space* (Aby Warburg's "Denkraum") produced by the book, elements which are as numerous as book cultures in time and geography, as multifarious as interactions with books and writing. This paper will only take up some of these elements to elaborate the contours of the interplay between book culture, memory, art, and the memory of, and history writing in, the Black Atlantic.

## In Dialogue with Historical Models: Bundith Phunsombatlert

Creating a book does not just mean binding pages together. The individual book forms a container of ideas, scientific argumentations, notes, personal memories, and imaginations. Books in general contain a multitude of histories forming a connected textual space through allusions and intertextual references, or simply by the local connection of numerous books in a collection or library.<sup>2</sup> Every new book is connected to this existing and ever-growing book space – it is enriched by stylistic or textual relations to other books and can use the references for its own effect on the reader or viewer who reacts to the different references according to his own knowledge.

In his book project *Sunny Gardens in Blue* (fig. 1), the Thai-born artist Bundith Phunsombatlert explicitly invokes a dialogue with a historical publication. He takes up the visual characteristics of Anna Atkins's *Photographs of British Algae: Cyanotype Impressions* (fig. 2)<sup>3</sup> to create a dialogue across time. As he writes, "by pairing the immigrants' stories with images of plants that are significant to their personal histories, I have added a human immigration element that was absent in Atkins's original work."<sup>4</sup> In opening up this relation between his work and *British Algae*, he refers to the achievements of this historical model, the first

2 The library and book collection as an artistic, but also space of, memory constitutes the subject of the work *Library of Exile* by Edmund de Waal. In his collection of books by authors who were forced into exile in their lives – from antiquity to the present time – he creates a literary space ("a working library") connected by the shared and yet diverse experiences of the authors. The visitors are invited to sit down and read and leave their own traces in the *exlibris* of the books so that a space of multiple times – or outside time is developing. The collection is completed with the inscription of destroyed libraries on the porcelain surface of the outer walls of the library space. See De Waal 2020).

3 One of thirteen exemplars that Schaaf named is in the Museum of Natural History in London. See: [https://nhm.primo.exlibrisgroup.com/view/BookReaderViewer/44NHM\\_INST/12190875980002081#](https://nhm.primo.exlibrisgroup.com/view/BookReaderViewer/44NHM_INST/12190875980002081#) (last accessed: March 5, 2022)

4 <https://bundithphunsombatlert.com/work/sunny-garden-in-blue> (last accessed: March 1, 2022)

book that worked with photographic illustrations. The book stood out at the time not only by virtue of the extraordinary photographic nature of the pictures in this botanical publication, but also because it was the result of a woman's work in a mainly masculine discourse. Even if Phunsombatlert claims that his unique contribution to the historical model was the content of his interviews with senior residents of Brooklyn, a closer examination of the context of both works, the ongoing project *Sunny Gardens* and the first book including photographs, created in 1843, reveals further discursive levels of this dialogue.



Fig. 1 Bundith Phunsombatlert, *Sunny Garden in Blue: Stories from the Caribbean to Brooklyn*, Ongoing project, Archival digital and cyanotype versions, Book version: 14 1/4 x 20 inches (each page). Copyright: Bundith Phunsombatlert, image courtesy of Wave Hill, photo by Stefan Hagen

Fig. 2 Cover Anna Atkins, *British Algae*. From The New York Public Library<sup>5</sup>

One parallel between the work of Atkins and the artist's book is their positioning "at the borderline": while Atkins, as a woman in a patriarchal world, interrogates the problem of "positivist classification" (Armstrong 1998: 187) from the margins with her illustrations and adaptation of the cyanotype, Phunsombatlert uses this technique to inscribe a subject that is equally at the margins of official historiography into cultural memory through documentation. In

doing so, Atkins moves with botany into a field that, in her time, did not count as high science, but was instead considered "a pastime 'of the gentler sex and high estate,' little more than a 'pretty lady-like amusement'" (Armstrong 1998: 187).

5 <https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/510d47d9-4b43-c3d9-e040-e00a18064a99>, (last accessed: 19.09.2022)

### Anna Atkins's *British Algae*

The work of Anna Atkins emerged in the context of the broad enthusiasm for natural history in Great Britain in the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Schaaf 2018). John George Children, Anna Atkins's father, was a recognized scientist and active member of the Royal Society (Schaaf 2018: 41). His daughter knew her father's scientific colleagues well and took part – as much as was possible in this time – in some of the scientific culture, for example in chemical experimentation (Schaaf 2018: 44). She also assisted her father in illustrating his translation of Jean-Baptiste Lamarck's *Genera of Shells* in 1833 (Schaaf 2018: 49). In the field of scientific illustration, the preoccupation with photography was both a technical and conceptual turning point. Working from an understanding of nature as a field of knowledge to be collected and organized in an intelligible structure, illustrations in the methodological publications were understood as references to the natural order. The artist's interpretation inherent in the act of drawing was a moment of subjective transformation. The idea of creating illustrations that would exclude this human factor were crucial to this notion of science. Atkins used the technique of cyanotypes at a very early stage of its development: only a few days after John Herschel, a family friend, communicated the functioning process to her father, she started the production of her systematic reproduction of *British algae* (fig 3).



Fig. 3 Anna Atkins, *Photographs of British Algae: Cyanotype Impressions*, Part I, *Polysiphonia violacea*, 1843, Cyanotype on paper, ca. 27 x 21 cm. From The New York Public Library<sup>6</sup>

She sought to produce “impressions of the plants themselves” (Armstrong 1998: 187), thereby creating authenticity. In the resulting book, the succession of illustrations, monochromatic negatives on which the plants appear in white as they were less exposed to the sun (Sachsse 2021: 23), generates a systematic and ordered archive.

The representations of the plants reveal individual and collective features at the same time. While each imprint is individual, each plate becomes representative for its specimen as part of a methodical collection. It is precisely this play with individuality and collective representation that Phunsombattler deploys in *Sunny Gardens*, although in a quite different historical context.

<sup>6</sup> (<https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/510d47d9-4b43-c3d9-e040-e00a18064a99>, last accessed: 19.09.2022)

## Absences in the archive, presences in the artistic process

The ongoing book project *Sunny Garden in Blue: Stories From The Caribbean To Brooklyn* was and is part of a three-part exploration of moments of immigration and migration, to which the artist also refers to as "History in Blue".<sup>7</sup> In the porcelain assemblages entitled *Returning Dialogue: Fragments of Blue and White Porcelain*, he explores colonial pasts and intercultural connections between art production, especially porcelain, and colonial trade routes in the form of plates composed of shards of different origins and with localizable and datable decoration. In the spacious installation *Crossing the Border: Beneath the Blue Sky*, he negotiates the nation as an abstract quantity by translating the suspended flags of the world into shades of blue, questioning recognizability and proxy roles through minimal intervention. While recognizability remains in some cases, the identifying color characteristics of numerous flags disappear.

Only *Sunny Garden in Blue* will be discussed here, as it is the only work for which the artist chose the book form. The project is conducted as a participative archival work recollecting and illustrating immigration stories of retired residents of Brownsville in the south of Brooklyn, New York.<sup>8</sup> The artist collected personal stories and documented and re-narrated these memories in his own voice in the text of the art book. Phunsombatlert presents drawn portraits of the various participants, and tells their stories as they were told to him, beginning with their Caribbean experiences and their paths to the USA (fig. 4).



Fig. 4 *Sunny Garden in Blue: Stories from the Caribbean to Brooklyn, Jose A Felix Story* (page 1), Ongoing project, Archival digital and cyanotype versions, Book version: 14 1/4 x 20 inches (each page). Copyright: Bundith Phunsombatlert

All portraits start on the verso with the name on a plain page. On the recto follows the main text, often accompanied by a portrait drawn by the

artist in blue lines on white. The Caribbean origin of the interviewee is illustrated by a drawn outline of the island, with the places named in the text labelled in handwritten indications. Plants and fruits are shown as photographic reproductions in white on blue, thus reproducing the color effect of cyanotypes. These organic objects are linked to the lives of the interviewees by means of personal memories:

<sup>7</sup> See <https://bundithphunsombatlert.com/> (last accessed: October 2, 2022).

<sup>8</sup> The project was completed by means of different activities: The artist created the portraits of the interviewees, they created cyanotype images of flowers and plants, and they printed cyanotype style motifs on fabric. The results of their works were presented in at least two exhibitions in 2018 (*Sunny Garden in Blue, Artworks from Rosetta Gaston Neighborhood Senior Center*, May 14, 2018, artist reception on June 15, 2018. Participating artists: Rebecca Abrams, Kenneth Beckles, José A. Felix, Julia Fraser, Vere Gibbs, Ketty Greene, Magdalen Jobity, Carmen Mendez, Aida Ramos, Lorna Thomas, Norma Tudor, Francis Bates).

His [Jose A. Felix] memories about Puerto Rico are all about nature - the coconut trees and rocky mountains; the wide open ocean that meets the sky; and nights made bright by the moon and the endless numbers of stars.<sup>9</sup>

The visual effect of this *mise en page* only uses the main color blue and the representation of plats as references to Atkins's book.<sup>10</sup> Contrary to Atkins, Phunsombatlert concentrates on human beings and their stories. By collecting them, the artist gives a material form to ephemeral biographies that are often only recounted in an oral tradition. This process extends "the temporal and spatial range of human communication" (Foote 1990: 379), especially in Western cultures. Choosing the form of "Lives" for the telling of the different stories also associates his book with numerous "Vitae" or lives of illustrious people, a literary genre known since antiquity and very important for a wider knowledge of individual historical personalities, for example in art history.<sup>11</sup> In this way, it is not only relieved of the transience of speech; it also enters into relation with other written memories, official archives, history books, novels, etc., which form the written basis of Western European culture. But integrating these testimonies into the written archive contains another aspect: as the archive nourishes the collective memory of a society, the integration of new archival material also changes this memory. In the artistic appropriation of the archival act, "the archive, although historically embedded, is not about the past but about the future of the past and is a vital source for inquiry as well as a subject of inquiry that can inspire new ways of envisioning and living in the world" (Carbone 2020: 258).

By taking advantage of the flexible nature of the archive, its mutability, and the continuous process of forming cultural memory, the artist perpetuates history through the production of artistic documentation. In his artistic act, he transfers fleeting, orally transmitted memory into the material form of a book. In this way, he not only makes these voices part of written history, but through the artistic scope of his activity, which through its exhibition and resonance as a "work of art" has a different effect than a historical publication, he also points out this flaw in the established historiography: "He questions absences, exposes missing or silenced voices, [and] addresses gaps in institutional archives and collective history - bringing attention to the fragmentary and incomplete nature of archives" (Carbone 2020: 260). While other artists render these blind spots of historiography visible through fictional archives (Carbone 2020: 260), Phunsombatlert makes himself a witness to the narrative and documents it in book form. By recording the memories of Caribbean immigrants underrepresented in other historical archives, Phunsombatlert integrates them into the canonical form of historical and cultural documentation.

Another important aspect of this dialogue between books is the nexus between the Atkin's book and botanical history: Phunsombatlert's exchange with the Brooklyn seniors develops in the context of a practical workshop. It is centered around the handling of flowers and plants "to create personal cyanotype gardens", as the artist writes in his description of the project.<sup>12</sup> The participants are combining and installing their chosen plants and they create their own cyanotypes. They are

9 Biography of Jose A. Felix.

10 The technical re-enactment of the cyanotype was indeed part of the artistic project, but is not integrated in the book directly.

11 Important examples of this genre are Vasari, Boccaccio, Vespasiano da Bisticci and many more taking example on the genre of the lives of emperors from Antiquity. The traditions of orally collected life stories could not be investigated here. This could be an important question to query the role of the European book traditions here.

12 <https://bundithphunsombatlert.com/work/sunny-garden-in-blue>. Last accessed on March 1, 2022.

not only re-enacting the initial act of Anna Atkins, but the creative handling of the plants, the cyanotype images and blueprint fabrics connects the nature of plants, their touch, smell, visual remembrance and effect on the memory of the individuals to the documentation in the book. The technical procedure to obtain a cyanotype is allusive in yet another way: The photographically captured object must have been brought into direct contact with the imaging surface. The image is thus not seen through the technical eye of the camera, but is cast onto the surface of the image as a direct imprint. In addition, the image is captured by direct sunlight; the sun, significant to Caribbean stories, plays a crucial role in the creation of the image. By citing this special technique in the visual effect, the artist also conveys the immediacy of the plants; their presence is implied in the moment of the book's creation (fig 5).<sup>13</sup>

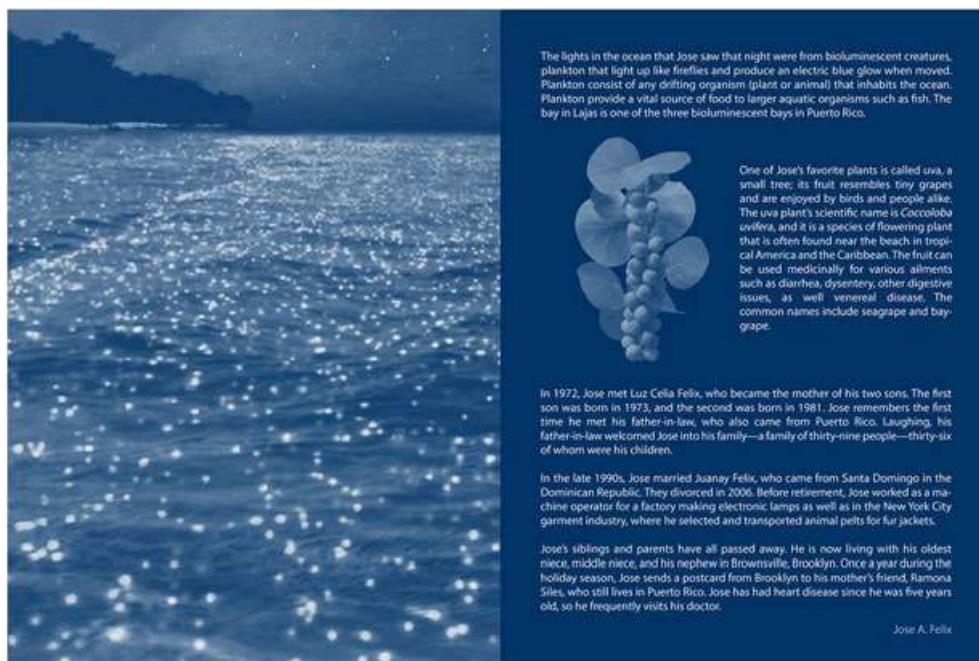


Fig. 5 Bundith Phunsombatlert, *Sunny Garden in Blue: Stories from the Caribbean to Brooklyn, Jose A Felix Story* (page 2), Ongoing project, Archival digital and cyanotype versions, Book version: 14 1/4 x 20 inches (each page). Copyright: Bundith Phunsombatlert

The workshop created new memories that enrich the book with the souvenirs of smell and haptic sensations. The juxtaposition of the stories, the portraits, and the plant depictions expand the effect because, in addition to the narrative, the person telling the story also becomes present in his or her portrait. The plants appeal to further senses of the reader/viewer in their scent, their feel, their use. The historical dimension Anna Atkins's project leads to the role that plants and gardens played in Caribbean culture. While Atkins's project was inscribed in the European context of scientific endeavour to document and order natural knowledge, this same expertise was of primary interest in colonial expansion in the Caribbean. Phunsombatlert opens a field of tension that interleaves pre-modern and modern knowledge production through the personal histories and the Caribbean flora.

<sup>13</sup> The book is not executed in cyanotype, even though Phunsombatlert made cyanotypes with the participants in his workshop.

## Natural histories of the Caribbean

Illustrated natural histories representing the flora of the islands are part of the visual culture the colonists developed on their encounter of the Caribbean since the earliest days.<sup>14</sup> The description of discoveries was not only a narrative of heroic adventure. The natural resources made accessible by the colonial expansion constituted an object of economic ambitions among Europeans. At the same time, Caribbean flora became subjects of the same triangular movements as colonists and African people, who were enslaved and brought on the islands: While they carried with them plants from Africa, the settlers imported plants such as sugar cane and indigo to instrumentalize the highly fertile soils for their profit (Chakrabarti 2010: 143). For Europeans, "plants were a resource, while for the slaves these were entwined in their daily lives in complex ways" (Chakrabarti 2010: 144). The seemingly objective collection of knowledge in floral illustrations is in this context part of the colonial conquest of the Caribbean on the one hand, and the empowerment of a Caribbean cultural identity on the other:

The plantation system had thereby shaped the social realities of the practice of medicine in Jamaica. It had two orientations; while the British were involved in exploring and exploiting the botanical potentials of the island, the slaves in their daily lives, as well as through their own intellectual traditions, were creating new meanings of its natural world, finding new modes of survival and cure and in the process establishing their new life in these islands (Chakrabarti 2010: 149).

This empowerment develops based on the role botanical knowledge plays for the enslaved people: *Jardins de case*, small gardens for the plantation of fruit and small vegetables, and bigger gardens (*jardins vivriers*) for sweet potatoes, ignams and other basics for personal use of the enslaved, were part of the plantation organization since its beginning. (Benoît 2000: chap. III, 95-128) Benoît shows that even before the beginning of colonization, there was a culture of kitchen gardens that both the original Taino and Carib populations used and that connected the enslaved people to the nature in which they now lived (Benoît 2000: chap. III, 95-128), providing an anchor for the culture of plants, languages, and rituals (Chakrabarti 2010: 149). Victor Schoelcher, in his account of the lives of enslaved people (1842), documents their relationship with various plants, the garden and the use of plants represented a space of development for cultural identity and freedom (Benoît 2000: chap. X, § 15). Born from the question of who will supply the food for the enslaved people and in what form, self-sufficiency based on gardens created a "beginning of liberty to which they became accustomed."<sup>15</sup> Thus, while the garden was a (small) space of homecoming and freedom, the individual plants served a purpose beyond that of simple sustenance; rather, it is in the *jardins de case* that a variety of therapeutic and "magical" plants are found, plants that can be beneficial or maleficent (Benoît 2000: chap. IV, § 14).

In the exchange with the indigenous people, botany became a field of creolization. The resulting knowledge and traditions of use represented a clearly "creolized" culture – in the people who brought and passed on knowledge, the plants introduced and found, their use in the treatment of known and novel diseases, and the maintenance and development of food traditions – that emerged from the cultural complexity that resulted from colonization, displacement, the plantation system, and the slave system (Chakrabarti 2010: 150). Victor Schoelcher points to the garden as a source of empowerment, as indicated by the title of his ninth chapter, "Poison is for the slave what the whip is for the master, a moral strength" (Schoelcher 1842).

<sup>14</sup> See Lozère 2020. See also: Delbourgo 2017: 37.

<sup>15</sup> Lavollée 1841, in Benoît 2000: chap. III, § 21).



The idea of objectivity implicit in the cyanotype illustrations of Anna Atkins, in their pursuit of scientific knowledge collection, are mirrored in Phunsombatlert's work by the individualization through the biographies and personal memories. Using the Caribbean flora as anchors of these memories points to the darker side of botanical knowledge collection in the colonial context. At the same time, it opens the field of thinking about Caribbean flora and its role for the people as a space of identity creation.

In his adaptation of the botanical theme of *British Algae* in his *Sunny Gardens*, the artist is not only expanding Atkins's photographic collection to include the motif of immigration. By linking Caribbean microhistory and botany (or plant-inspired memory), he also forms a thinking space in which European knowledge production and post-colonial memory culture respond to one another. Through its dialogue with a historical model, the artist's book becomes an object that is both archive and presence, documentation and rewriting, an object that is as much about the sun and the sea as it is about touching and feeling plants - in memory and artistic practice.

## From Feeling to Touching, from Telling to Showing: Atta Kwami

The *Grace Kwami Sculpture* (fig. 6), an artist book created in 1993 by the Ghanaian artist Atta Kwami, can also be read as an archival work used to integrate new histories – the history of the artistic work of Grace Kwami, a Ghanaian sculptor of the first generation of artistic education in Ghana – into the written documentation of art history. But Atta Kwami, an artist, art historian and son of Grace Kwami, created an object that reaches out more actively to the haptic worlds of its audience.



Fig. 6 Atta Kwami, *Grace Kwami Sculpture*, London / Ghana, 1993, Edition: 6/32, photo-lithography, etching, screen printing, and color Xeroxes on Somerset Satin 300 g/m<sup>2</sup> paper, 7,5 x 27 x 37,5 cm. Copyright Smithsonian Libraries, National Museum of African Art

The book contains 48 unnumbered, folded pages. It is generally presented in a standing position with the unfolded leporello-like pages forming an eight-legged spider.

This presentation shows the playful relation between the title and the presentation of the book: The title *Grace Kwami Sculpture* refers both to Grace Kwami's sculptures as well as the book's quality as a sculpture.<sup>16</sup>

With this book, Atta Kwami explores the artistic activity of his mother, Grace Salome Kwami (1923-2006). She graduated in 1953 from Kumasi College of Arts (later Kumasi College of Technology), where artistic training in pottery and terracotta were part of the artist and teacher education, along with weaving and textile arts (Kwami 2013: 73). Grace Kwami belonged to the first generation of internationally active Ghanaian artists, as Atta Kwami recounts from his own childhood memories, in which his mother's artistic work and life were closely linked (Kwami 2013: 27-28). She worked mainly in terracotta, but also made drawings and paintings.

## Artist and art historian

*Grace Kwami Sculpture* aims to contribute to our appreciation and knowledge of Ghanaian art (Kwami: Preface). Atta Kwami has here a dual role. For in addition to his artistic activities, he is also an art historical author, as is evident in his publications. In the preface to *Grace Kwami Sculpture*, he describes his intention to expand knowledge of Ghanaian art with this work, thereby clearly placing the work in the genre of art historiography.

Whereas Phunsombatlert documented oral narratives in his work and placed drawings and photographs illustratively alongside text, Atta Kwami uses the interplay of text and image in a different way. He draws on an archive produced over a decade, comprised of photographs of his mother working, but also drawings from her hand. Even if the artist had the concept of the book in his head and collected the photographs on purpose, they had an independent and documentary existence before becoming part of the book's composition. However, the act of transferring the photographs into the form of a book re-contextualizes them, and their message assumes sharper contours that correspond to the book's message. While they may have represented snapshots within the photographic traces of Grace Kwami's life, they now become windows into a narrative given by the frame of the book.<sup>17</sup> They no longer speak for themselves or exist in the context of a loose collection of images that can be viewed unordered and individually. They are arranged in the space of the book and given headings and contributing texts to follow Atta Kwami's direction. The latter inserts the portraits and views of the work into a sequence that acts simultaneously as a miniature exhibition and art historical source for the artist's work.<sup>18</sup>

## The Making of the Book, The Making of Art and Knowledge

Alongside this transfer, Atta Kwami puts a clear focus on the making and the artistic process. He again introduces this in his preface by pointing out the different techni-

16 Atta Kwami created this long-prepared project as a fellow of the Royal College of Art in London in 1992-93 and printed 32 copies (plus 4 exemplars for the artist). It was shown for the first time at the Artist's Book Fair in London in May 1993. Six of 32 copies are held at the Smithsonian: Record <P>Grace Kwami Sculpture</P> | Collections Search Center, Smithsonian Institution (si.edu)

17 See <https://www.prm.ox.ac.uk/event/andrea-stultiens-the-kaddu-wasswa-archive> (last accessed: July 18, 2022) and also: [http://africultures.com/the-kaddu-wasswa-archive-entre-recit-personnel-et-memoire-collective-11421/?utm\\_source=newsletter&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_campaign=520](http://africultures.com/the-kaddu-wasswa-archive-entre-recit-personnel-et-memoire-collective-11421/?utm_source=newsletter&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=520) (last accessed: July 18, 2022)

18 In her observation of *The Kaddu Wasswa Archive* (2010) realized by the photographers Andrea Stultiens, Arthur C. Kisitu and Kaddu Wasswa, Érika Nimis points out the importance of the visible hands holding and possibly scrolling through the book-form archive. In her analysis they are less the trace of the handling and thus a way of reading the archive and more a means of representing the onlooker – in this case the photographer herself. See Nimis 2014: 560.

ques used in the making of the book.<sup>19</sup> He also shows this in the book itself: the four large sheets of paper are folded and not cut open at the top, which grants the leporello-like book more stability. The edges are left uneven, which means that here you can see the moment of making the book – the materiality of the surface is not relegated behind the finished object, but becomes part of the artistic effect and leaves a reminder of the process.<sup>20</sup> The making of the book continues to be tangible in the binding too: A coarse twine was pulled through two holes reinforced with metal edges, making the object a book (fig. 7). The twine is visible on the spine of the book. When closed, the book is transported in a box covered with artisanal paper, designed with a sun or even spider-shaped form.



Fig. 7 Grace Kwami sculpture detail. Copyright: Photo Niklas Wolf/ book: Smithsonian Libraries, National Museum of African Art

But the making is also an important part of the insight into his mother's work. Kwami uses the possibility of the photographic imagery in combination with the page order to create an increasing closeness (fig. 8, left) – while the first page shows Grace Kwami at work, the onlooker sees her from the side, her hands in a precise movement, her gaze concentrated on her craft, the next pages with four photos zooms into a working scene (fig. 8, center). Here her hands are shown in the manipulation of the terracotta, documenting not only her gestures, but also her handling of the material. The last picture in this sequence shows the small terracotta head *en face*. Here the objects take the main role, returning the onlooker's gaze (fig. 8, right). The modelling instruments in the foreground, the stabilizing stick in the head and the hands on the left side are again pointing to the unfinished process.

19 "The images presented here form an array of different printmaking processes: - etching, screen printing, lithography, computer printmaking as well as colour xeroxes" (Kwami: Preface).

20 With his wife, artist Pamela Clarkson, he created a workshop of paper production in Ayeduase in Ghana. He used Somerset Satin 300 g/m<sup>2</sup> paper for the printing of the book in London (<https://library.si.edu/exhibition/artists-books-and-africa/grace-kwami-sculpture-full>); (last accessed October 2, 2022). Kwami's paper-producing activity in Ghana illustrates his interest in this material aspect of his work and needs therefore to be considered here. See Hark 2020.



Fig. 8 Atta Kwami, *Grace Kwami Sculpture*, 1993, book page Copyright: Smithsonian Libraries, National Museum of African Art



Fig. 8a Atta Kwami, *Grace Kwami Sculpture*, 1993. Copyright: Smithsonian Libraries, National Museum of African Art

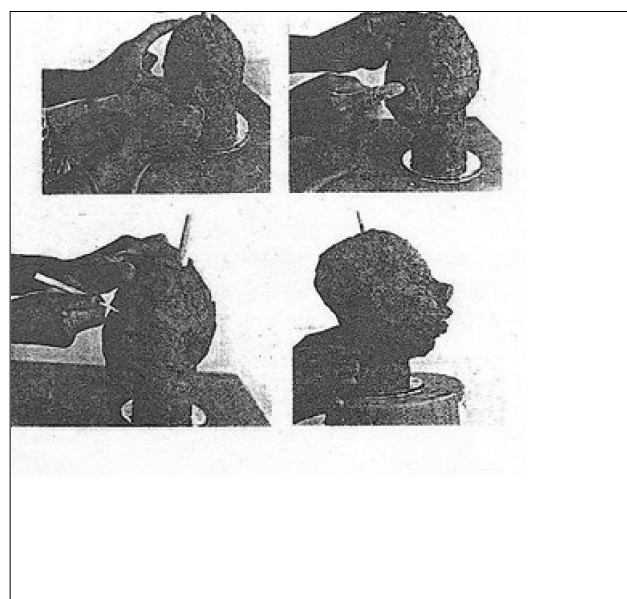


Fig. 8b Atta Kwami, *Grace Kwami Sculpture*, 1993. Copyright: Smithsonian Libraries, National Museum of African Art

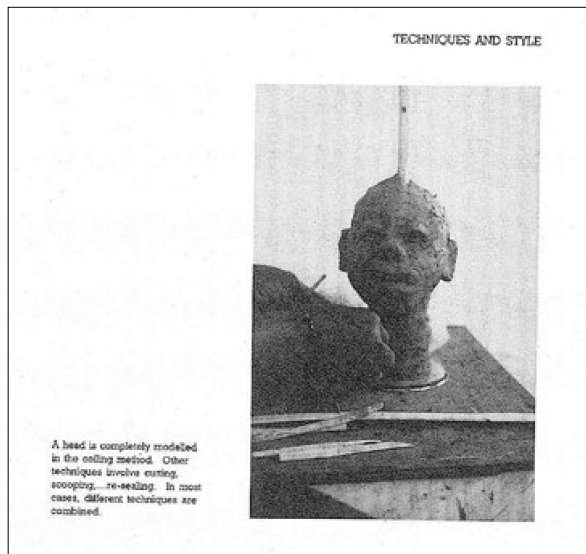


Fig. 8c Atta Kwami, *Grace Kwami Sculpture*, 1993, book page Copyright: Smithsonian Libraries, National Museum of African Art

Even on pages showing pictures in a gallery arrangement (fig. 9), he reintroduces the materiality of the work in textual form, citing his mother: "Clay is the most common art material. G.S.K".

Fig. 9 Atta Kwami, *Grace Kwami Sculpture*, 1993, detail. Copyright: Smithsonian Libraries, National Museum of African Art



Elsewhere, Atta Kwami also makes concise use of the possibilities of the juxtaposition of seeing and reading by drawing attention to certain details through the text: "A head is completely modelled in the coiling method. Other techniques involve cutting, scooping ... re-sealing. In most cases, different techniques are combined" (Atta Kwami, Preface). Also in this short text, the viewer is involved in the practice of artistic work through the captured moment. The description does not focus on material or interpretation, but specifies the seen moment, the work in the material, through further details. The photographic image here is used to "faire voir" – the image functions "as a shown seeing" (Dobbe 2010: 160). The use of the book with its possibilities of continuous telling using the page sequence creates a complex space that makes the onlooker discover different strands of the narrative at a time. The common presentation of text and image in dialogue is especially tangible on the page showing a sculpted vase (fig. 10): "Do her vessels not represent personalities?"

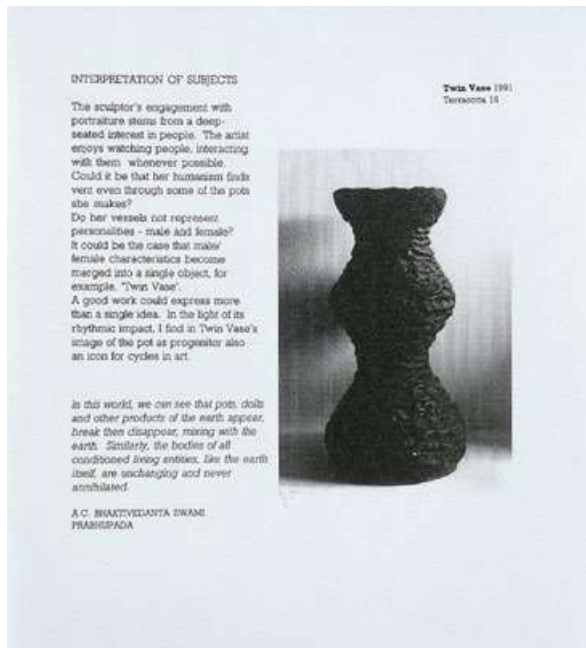


Fig. 10 Atta Kwami, *Grace Kwami Sculpture*, 1993, detail. Copyright: Smithsonian Libraries, National Museum of African Art

Again, the observer is invited to come nearer, to approach a direct dialogue with the object – which could be an individual personality – as insinuated in the text. Using the surface of a book page, the artist creates a confrontation of the observer with his mother and her work in different approaches displaying on the different pages.

Arranging them in the three-dimensional form of a leporello unfolding in spiderlike arms, makes them even more communicative, as they are not only combined in the follow-up of their pages, but also facing each other in the standing position. The arachnoid form, as Atta Kwami points out in the preface, refers to the symbolic form of Ananse, a traditional and religiously important spider. Ananse represents a mediator between the world of the gods and that of the human, a deity “existing halfway between the earth and the sky and had the power to restructure both the world of the divine and the human” (Zobel Marshall: 31-32). As a trickster figure, Ananse “controls the fundamentals of civilisation, wisdom (knowledge) and stories (history)” (Zobel Marshall: 32) in the tales told by the Asante. Kwami here uses the form of the art book for a figuration of the art of storytelling and creativity (Pinther/Wolf 2020: 3), as well as a personification of history writing. The spider form also makes the object oscillate between different formats, a sculpture in space and a book at the same time. In the form of a standing exhibition (Pinther/ Wolf 2020: 3) it playfully contradicts its book format: Scrolling through the pages is not possible any longer. Now it is the onlooker who needs to move around the book.

Through the tangible materiality, the visible craft of the artwork and the focus on the making within the book, the maker of the book becomes thus even more present in the finished work – standing in dialogue with and testifying to the life of Grace Kwami. The book format creates different levels of communication. It tells (in text) and shows (in image), but it also pushes viewers to active contemplation through movement, making them move around the object. Atta Kwame uses the possibilities of storytelling implicit in the bookish form and at the same time contradicts its natural

way of interacting with the reader – sitting and strolling through the pages of the book. He creates an order in the following of his pages – and again contradicts it in the leporello form, which creates more possible combinations of pages to be seen next to each other.

This creative use of the characteristics of the books is part of the last work presented here too, *the journal intime* Lambeaux.

## Endless Diary, Endless Stories: Gilles Elie dit Cosaque

In his serial work *Lambeaux*, the video and graphic artist Gilles Elie dit Cosaque (\*1968) has been creating multimedia collages on double pages designed like pages from writing notebooks since 2009. The different rulings, the constant size (33×22 cm) and the visible traces of staple binding refer to the staged origin of the surface the artist uses here, namely notebooks or school books. However, he prepares the pages by hand, giving them the appearance of a prefabricated frame to integrate the associations bound to them in the reading of his work. As soon as this reference is understood, he breaks with it by presenting the double pages side by side in frames. He usually puts together about 16 pages for an exhibition (fig. 11), making them, as he himself states, readable as one coherent narrative.<sup>21</sup>



Fig. 11 Gilles Elie dit Cosaque, *Lambeaux*, ongoing project since 2009, 12 pages of an exhibition, multiple materials on paper, 33×22 cm. Copyright: Gilles Elie dit Cosaque

This narrative is not linear *per se*; it develops in each collage and in the interplay of the different frames. The story told thus assumes an endlessly evolving and endlessly adaptable character to the reader/observer. Using diverse materials to create the diary pages, Cosaque creates an impression of spontaneity. Cosaque inte-

<sup>21</sup> <https://www.ouest-france.fr/bretagne/groix-56590/gilles-elie-dit-cosaque-s-expose-sous-un-autre-jour-5207838> (last accessed: January 15, 2022)

grates the material diversity of the elements into his collages in such a way that they are reminiscent of ethnographic notes and collections, compilations of specimens and rapid noting of observations. At the same time, different temporal levels emerge, which become evident in the artist's drawing and painting gestures and the age and nature of the various pasted objects: writing, print, and photographs gather the most diverse moments. While already mentioned in the integration of collected photographs in the work of Atta Kwami, Cosaque goes further in his re-contextualization of photographs, printed pictures, journal articles and other material. In his compositions, the materials at hand are over-written, questioned, and subject to skepticism.

The anatomical view of a human body (fig. 12) has been made unrecognizable as a person by a red color line over the eyes, presenting a de-individualization of the model, which is already abstracted in the biological representation. In contrast, however, the woman, dressed only in a skirt and a headscarf, remains visible in all her individuality. It functions as a mirror - or is it the inside view that is the mirror?

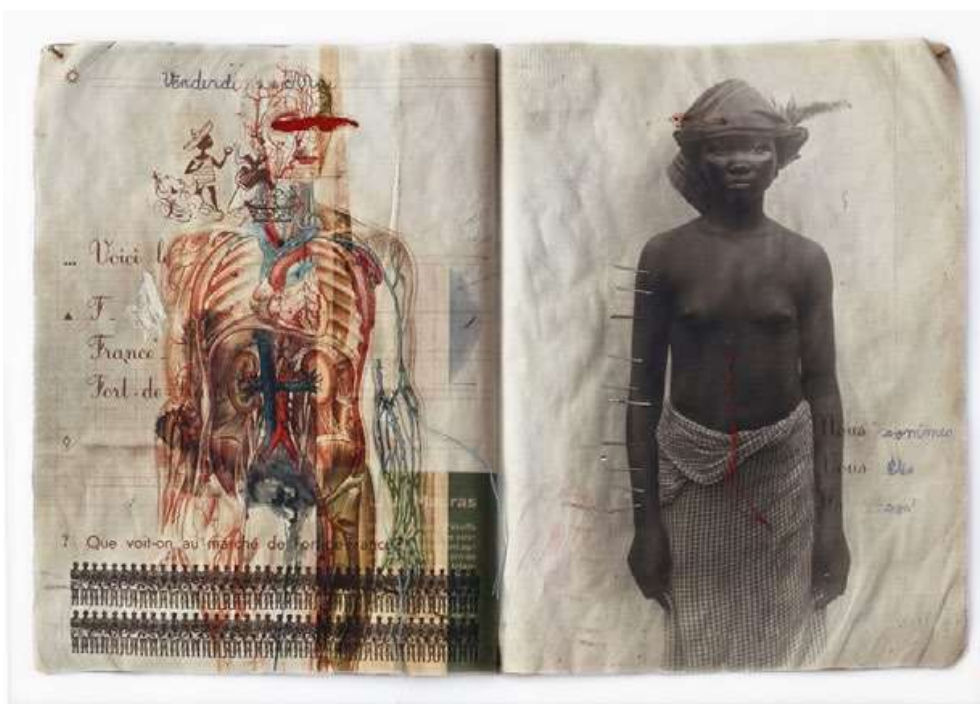


Fig. 12 Gilles Elie dit Cosaque, *Lambeaux*, ongoing project since 2009, multiple materials on paper, 33x22 cm. Copyright: Gilles Elie dit Cosaque

Conjugation exercises that overlap their image relate the representation to pupils/writers: "Nous sommes / Vous êtes / Ils sont". The alternation between pre-printed school writing and child-like handwriting creates a reminder of centralized schooling and education (by the French state, which centrally directs education), and the student's voice adapting to these specifications, yet making statements about his own, or a group's, communal existence: "We are / You are / They are". The photographic image, staging neutrality and scientific observation in the motionless posture (the only exception are the hands which are hold in a slight movement: her right hand seem to stroke the folds of fabric of the skirt, holding it, but almost without movement), is re-contextualized by



metal staples. These seem to clip the figure to the page and into the notebook. They hold the young woman's arm with metallic brutality. Red thread is used to embroider the reflection of the pelvic artery into the page, making the inside visible from the outside. This reinforces the impression of mirroring and twisting that occurs between the anatomical view and the photograph. The person becomes the object of the gaze, the anatomical diagram into whose interior we look becomes the individual protected by covered eyes. Different levels of the story are also connected by the further details of the collage: The date in a child's handwriting with a spelling mistake ("Venderdi 29 May") gives the page a moment in time; it records it not as an abstract but as a concrete moment. The small caricature shows a market scene and a black figure with short trousers, striped armless shirt and wide straw hat, offering one of the fruits lying next to him to a lady depicted with light skin in a long, flared dress with overdress and *coiffe* on her head. Here, too, the juxtaposition of script, different fonts signaling different themes, sources, contexts, and images plays an important role.

Next to the anatomical representation one reads "... Voici le .../ F.../ France.../ Fort-de-France". Other lines are left blank, probably to give space for writing exercises. Identified by a question mark as another type of task, one reads below, "Que voit-on au marché de Fort-de-France?" ["What do we see at the market in Fort-de-France?"]. The answer is given in a detail from the iconic picture *Description of a Slave Ship* from 1789 (Finley 2018).<sup>22</sup> The change of media, from writing to image, however, leaves this answer suspended - a visual figure of thought in response to a school question to be written down. The change from writing to image answers a concrete question, formulated in writing, with the associations the image evokes, thus becoming multifaceted and always depending on the individual reading of the reader/viewer.

The superimposition and juxtaposition of the anatomical drawing and an excerpt from the icon of the representation of the slave trade with answers to these school questions, the alternation between pictures and text and a writing style that points to a child behind the ductus, all creates a complex *thinking space*. Allusions and references in combination with the characteristics of an individual and private encounter with a personal diary bring together an artwork that is personal and shared within the French Caribbean people at the same time. The recognition of school practices that were (and are) shared by generations of young Caribbeans and the pictorial allusions to a common past create a terrain of understanding that might be at the heart of the concept of creolisation.

This concept is characterized by its endlessly unfinished quality – it evolves continuously with its people and their lives. The openness of Cosaque's artwork seems to integrate the foundations of this concept in a work that is endlessly individual – because it integrates the individual readings of each observer/reader without giving concrete answers – and at the same time representative of several shared experiences, memories, and – in consequence of this shared nature – cultural memory of the French (if not more globally) Caribbean. The viewer becomes part of the artistic process by completing the reading of these "images de pensées" [thinking images]. The "immédiateté visuelle" makes the

<sup>22</sup> During the research for this article I could not find a final answer to the question of whether there was a specialized market for enslaved people in Fort de France. Jessica Pierre-Louis follows the traces of a marketplace in St. Pierre, the former capital of Martinique. Her research seems to indicate that the concrete locations of specialized markets are rare. See: "Le 'Marché aux esclaves' du Mouillage à Saint-Pierre de la Martinique. – Tan Listwa" (Last accessed : July 26, 2022)

surface of the page a field of thinking (Caraës/ Marchand-Zanartu: 7) and a vibrant example of the crossroads between créolisation and créolité – between the ever-shifting process of cultural becoming and the creation of Caribbean identity<sup>23</sup> (Febel 2013: 163). Especially the continued work of Cosaque and his open collages represent Glissant's concept: "Creolisation is the unpredictable" (Glissant 1996: 89; Febel 2013: 164).

Lambeaux therefore goes far beyond the imagination of a creolized *journal intime* – instead, Cosaque's work materializes the "new form of historiography described by Glissant for the undocumentable history of colonial experience", which should be a "polyphonic historiography" (Febel 2013: 176). To do this, Cosaque finds a particularly apt artistic form in his works, which creates precisely this polyphony through its reference to the cultural significance of the book and the notebook, a reference to the blind spots of written history, and through the juxtaposition of image and writing, historical material and seemingly individual "memorabilia", such as photographs or excerpts from notebooks. Through the use of such media, the reconstruction or reorganization of memory is here captured pictorially. The "unfinished nature" of his work thematizes the process of creolization as well as a multiplicity of memories<sup>24</sup> in which images and memories are shared and connect people, but do not write a linear and finished common history. Taking up the role of a storyteller – *le conteur* – Cosaque becomes at the same time a "warrior of the imaginary" – a "warrior of the imagination"<sup>25</sup> – and an artistic historian, sharing these characteristics with some other important creative personalities of Martinique: from Césaire to Glissant to Chamoiseau to Raphael Confiant, whose works repeatedly link historiography and literature, imagination and reflection, political and cultural philosophical thought, and a shared past in the narrative documentation of memory.<sup>26</sup>

Cosaque materializes memories and at the same time tells endless stories – using the traces of the past. Overwriting institutional documents, he interrogates canonical historiography – a printed and thus visible and disseminated form of normative knowledge production. His collages alienate, expand, contradict and place this historiography in new contexts. It is both the textual and pictorial side by side that are at work here. The artistic act in which the artist collects and assembles the materials is an active moment of dealing with memory and historiography. Sharing the definition of history (*histoire*) and memory (*mémoire*) that makes a distinction between the written and the oral, canon and individual memory, the artist here demonstrates processes of remembering (because the materials record moments in the past, stand for moments in which the artist has collected the image/cut-out etc and the associations he brings into connection with the contemplation and use of the same) and historiography, or imaging, outside the canonized writing of history. However, his collages do not represent a completely detached narrative either; they use set pieces and fragments that are part of the French-influenced historiography and construction.

23 "Creolization is therefore understood today more generally as a concept of cultural contact, encounter, intermingling, or mutual transformation of different cultures, which has a close proximity to the more identitarian concept of créolité" (Febel 2013 : 163).

24 "For the Caribbean, the challenge of ensuring the existence of a collective memory touches on the central questions of self-positioning: writing Caribbean history means, above all, imagining this history, or rather histories in the plural" (Ueckmann/ Febel 2017: 13).

25 "[Guerrier de l'imaginaire] I think that Patrick Chamoiseau is himself a 'Warrior of the Imagination' and that his writing practice is in keeping with the healing performances of the ancient storytellers of his country. He taps into a magic, operates a transmutation" (Chantal Thomas, "Préface", in: Chamoiseau 2016: II).

26 Concerning Chamoiseau Ledent writes: "Yet his vision of the Caribbean writer as a storyteller who uses diversity and creativity as paradoxically peaceful weapons against the destructiveness of globalization and standardization applies to the region as a whole, regardless of linguistic boundaries" (Ledent 2008: 454).

## Conclusion: *Façonner l'histoire* – Re-writing the Future

*Façonner l'histoire* –Shaping History– evokes the two main aspects of this analysis. The idea of “shaping” includes the artistic moment of creation, and it also suggests the flexibility of the material and the supple nature of the outcome. It is crucial to keep in mind that history is malleable. History is a construct, an edifice, built up on historical facts. But history draws on innumerable facts, and history writing can only refer to a selective part of the past; it can only be a shadow, an echo of historical reality. The facts upon which history writing relies are – especially in western cultures – written sources. These sources contain large lacunae and often document the perspective of the “conquerors”, and it is this perspective that shaped the canonized historical narrative, meaning that which is written, printed, published, taught etc. The questioning of these narratives is not new, and ongoing research is both pointing out blind spots and integrating new perspectives.<sup>27</sup>

Artworks participate in the redressing of incomplete history telling by granting these long-forgotten stories a special visibility. In the field of art and the archive (Enwezor; Callahan), the artist book is a very special form of presenting historical re-writing to an audience. The analysis of the three artist books created in the context of the Black Atlantic in this paper shows a very large field of possibilities of using the artist book as a “a zone of activity” (Drucker 1995: 2). Nevertheless, in using the form of a book as the container of their creations, these artists instrumentalize the format in their *mise-en-scène*: They complicate the expectations associated with canonized history writing – and re-writing – regarding the usability of books and the general habitus that is inscribed in information in books. Their uses of the past, of historical pictures, their re-use of text and cut-out articles, or visual references to historical models re-contextualizes these materials and subjects and creates something new that nevertheless still remains a reflection of the past. In his text “The Role of the Writer in a New Nation”, Chinua Achebe articulated his task as helping his “society regain self-confidence and put away the complexes of the years of denigration and self-abasement.” One way of restoring this lost dignity, for Achebe, was to look at his community’s history, for, he wrote, echoing Aimé Césaire, “the short cut to the future is via the past.”<sup>28</sup> In this context, the form of the book becomes more than a creative genre: its role in the preservation and also official establishment of historiography is used by the artists to fix little-known, unseen memories threatened by oblivion and to inscribe them in a cultural memory based on written culture (according to European intellectual traditions).<sup>29</sup> While the works presented here each represent individual works, they have an on the collective memory. At this point, the question becomes how media inscribe themselves into cultural memory, how they reveal and make visible individual or collective positions, and thus serve as a transformational surface between the individual and the collective.

27 To name just one example, see Zinnenburg Carroll 2014.

28 Cited from Ledent 2008: 453.

29 The role of written culture is a Western idea. While the artists presented in this essay inscribe an alternative, hitherto less visible knowledge into a medium of Western culture, others prefer strategies that show the relevance of other forms of history in oral or even artistic form. See Zinnenburg Carroll, 2014.

According to Maurice Halbwachs, collective memory is based on “stabilité and durée”, which is why he assumes (on the basis of Eurocentric studies) memory to be written and fixed (Ueckmann/ Febel 2017: 9). Marc Bloch remarked that a good deal of collective memory is made up of *mémoire communicative*, a set of stories, oral traditions, additions, individual memories, etc. shared by individuals within social groups like villages, ethnic groups, social classes, religious and families (Cueille 2015: 1-2). Only a few elements of this memory enter Historiography, the history found in textbooks. Through reproduction and dissemination it constructs historical consciousness, where the voice of the individual recedes behind a shared history. This leads to the underrepresentation of memories that have not been recorded in written form, detached from the narrative of the individual. It is precisely at this point that the artist's book can be relevant as an interface, insofar it assumes its functions as an archive. The artist is fighting against the automatisms of “remembrance and oblivion”, frequently dominated by other forces (Ueckmann/ Febel 2017: 13). It is not merely a matter of questioning these mechanisms, but of instrumentalizing their possibilities in other directions. The artist book cannot compete with other printed sources because of its very reduced circulation, but it cites them and, moreover, compensates for this deficiency through its power as a work of art. Its reception is not based on reproduction and mass circulation, but on the effect of the individual object, which challenges higher concentration, a deeper look.

The connection between book and memory is not only created by its use as a surface of documentation. It also relies on the intimacy of the touch and one-to-one study of the book pages by the reader, producing the privacy and individuality of memory. In practice, books can be closed and so be a hidden treasure and vessel of their contents. The book is thus a medium with multiple reading directions, enclosing already in its format several levels of reading traditions and cultural references.

The artist books that were presented here are re-writing history, documenting and re-ordering memories, re-creating an order that was invisible or intangible. Their form is the aesthetic, cultural, historical and material frame in which the artist inscribes them. At the same time it is exactly this frame that both artists relativize, deconstruct and expand in their artistic practice: By presenting a continuous “diary” page by page in compositions of individual frames, Gilles Elie dit Cosaque creates superimposed and interposed frames, the notebook, the image frame and the totality of his collages already finished and those still to come. Phunsombatlert refers to a historical model in his archival work on Caribbean memories, and shows at the same time the hidden layers of historical knowledge production. Atta Kwami's artist's book is an art history book, a tribute in text and image to his mother – and a sculpture at the same time.

These observations can only be a first glance – the potentials of shaping history are as multiple as the forms the artist books are taking, enriching the book culture in its polyphonic and ever shifting narrative.

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