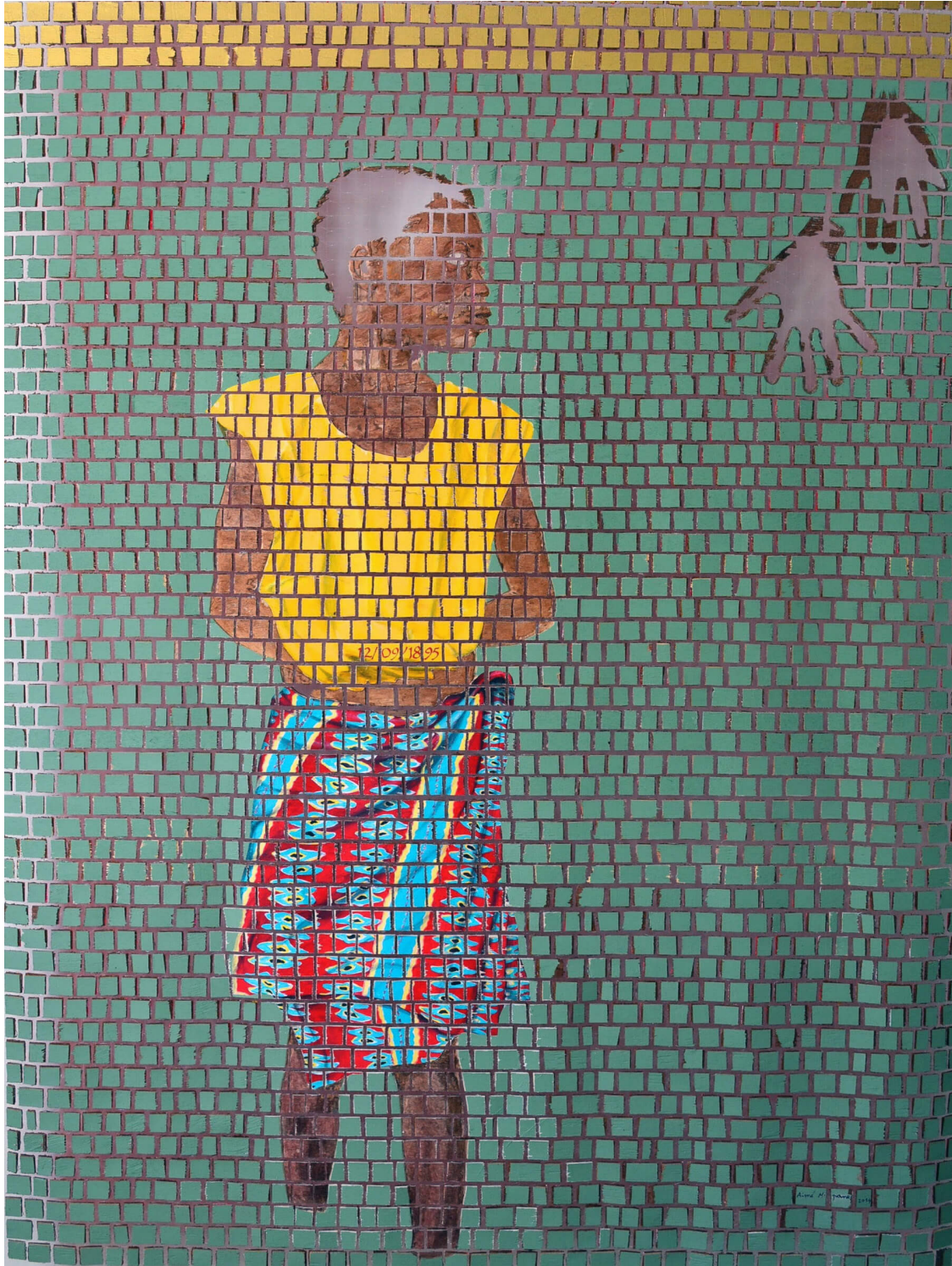




FILHOS DE IMPÉRIO E PÓS-MEMÓRIAS EUROPEIAS  
CHILDREN OF EMPIRES AND EUROPEAN POSTMEMORIES  
ENFANTS D'EMPIRES ET POSTMÉMOIRES EUROPÉENNES

Saturday, 25 July 2020



*La ramasseuse des mains coupés* | 2014 | Aimé Mpane Enkobo (courtesy of the artist)



## WORKS OF ART AND THE CONDITION OF POST-MEMORY: SOME ATTRIBUTES (2)

António Pinto Ribeiro

In the first article of this series on “Works of art and the condition of post-memory”, I referred, among other things, to the fact that a number of artists of African heritage living in Europe have a prominent position in European contemporary art. The work of these second and third-generation descendants of African migrants stands out not only for its artistic quality, but thanks to a set of formal, thematic and aesthetic characteristics which give them a unique identity in the contemporary art world. These artists incorporate many influences in their creative processes: cultural traditions from former colonies (rhythms, tapestry, sand painting, couscous sculpture and narrative forms like *griot* and *rai*), traces of alternative modernisms (Malian and Mozambican photography, Moroccan modernist painting, and more), the systematic deconstruction of iconography and public statuary in both European countries and former colonies, the rewriting and dismantling of universalist art history, the critique of Afro-pessimism, and the struggle against racism.

These artists’ works question both identity and culture. Underlying the whole creative process is an interrogative drive that is fundamentally based on constant research and reinvention. This is one of the most important identifying characteristics of works of post-memory. In addition to the transnational and transcontinental vocabulary which distinguishes and legitimates this work within the condition of post-memory, what other aspects, if any, can we identify?

Since the first exhibitions of African artists organized in European and North American museums and galleries, significant progress has been made towards artistic autonomy. The presentation and status of artists with African heritage (as well as artists from other former colonial and non-European territories) has improved. In this curatorial movement towards decolonization, the pioneering work of Jean-Hubert Martin and the 1989 *Magiciens de la Terre* Exhibition at the Georges Pompidou Centre in Paris was



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seminal. Though only half of the exhibition was of non-European artists, the exhibition was remarkable for doing away with the boundaries of prejudice and discrimination which separated European artists and artistic practices – seen as art and recognized in artistic terms – from non-European artists and artistic practices that until then were treated as populist and artisanal.

At that time, we were still only at the beginning of debates on post-colonialism. There was little in-depth reflection on the context in which artists of African heritage made their work. A generation later, we are witnessing theoretical, academic and literary work which approaches artists of African heritage as artists of post-memory. Their works have a place in the panorama of contemporary art. They stand out for expressing the continuities of a world made up of memories of divergent experiences. Though not lived in the first person, these memories continue to provide inspiration and offer new ways for artists to investigate the real and produce post-Imperial representations of the world.

Their artistic work develops through an unbounded and free appropriation of everything that could provide the material, direction, technique or technology for artistic production. They integrate large and small experiences from family traditions or groups with common ancestors. For example, the Belgian-Congolese artist Aimé Mpane, while using performance, installation, painting and sculpture, and referencing works from European art history, is also a highly skilled wood carver who makes use of the knowledge and practice learnt from his father, the Congolese sculptor Placide Mpane, during his childhood and adolescence in Kinshasa.

The consultation, research and use of private and public archives has become common practice in contemporary art. There are many reasons and strategies that lie behind this. For many artists - Katia Kameli, Kader Attia and Délio Jasse, among others -, archives underpin investigations which objectively and concretely interrogate the official narratives of colonization. Archives help these artists to expose the conflicts inherent in studies of memory and historical relations when they are written from the perspective of the colonizer. In their work, the recognition of previous generations' memories is a key constitutive material for both revising old narratives and creating new ones, based on the most diverse foundations, through objects, installations, films, painting and more.

Other historical protagonists appear out of this work of research and deconstruction. Just as galleries of ancient and modern art present us with endless collections of representations of power in the form of



portraits of powerful men and women, generals, writers and patrons, so these artists portray their own heroes, whether those of independence or contemporary everyday life. Francisco Vidal, for example, gives us portraits of heroes from Amílcar Cabral and Miriam Makeba to his own contemporaries, Dj Nervoso, Marfox, Nigga Fox, Dj Nídia and Dj Firmeza.

In fact, since the beginning of the 1990s, we have witnessed the solidification of a set of interventions around art and citizenship whose main driver is the decolonization of the arts. I have only touched on some elements of this in the examples given here. These approaches are currently represented by groups such as *Décoloniser les Arts* (1), which includes artist Kader Attia, whose particularly expressive body of work denounces the violence of former European empires and the trauma they created from the First World War to neo-colonial period. The themes which recur in his work are also addressed by artists including Sammy Baloji, Katia Kameli, Djamel Kokene, Adel Abdessemed and Pedro AH Paixão, alongside questions over Reparations for formerly colonized people and territories (2).

This is challenging work. It is committed to the present. It demands the courage to reveal alternative narratives and uncover facts and actors in both personal and group memories. It implies confronting, not always peacefully, the narratives of historians who radically disregard the subjectivities of memory. In combining rigorous research with material from subjective memories, these artists of post-memory put objects and themes to work. Their creative, effective and enlightening approach allows them to interrogate the whole universe of colonialism; its violence, trauma and emigration, and its global continuities today.

Nature was not spared the violence that accompanied the slave trade and the whole colonial experience. Nature was, and continues to be, exploited, expropriated and destroyed by the logics of colonialism, neo-colonialism and capitalism, to which it is only a resource to be fully exploited. These themes underpin the work of artists such as Ntjam Josèfa and Otobong Nkanga.

These artists circulate, therefore, in a plural field. They have access to subjects, techniques and forms drawn from globalized schools of artistic training and the Western art world. Out of these they develop their own creative processes, actively participating in the dynamics of contemporary art, and playing a central role in the decolonization of the arts.



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Translated by Archie Davies

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(1) Décoloniser les arts is a French association created in 2015 which, among other things, organized the publication of *Décolonisons les arts!* (Paris: Arche, 2018) under the direction of Leïla Cukierman, Gerty Dambury and Françoise Vergès.

(2) On this see also the broader argument set out by Ariella Azoulay in *Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism*, 2019.

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