

# Les Archives Suédoises: An Intercultural Collaboration Around a Colonial Pile of Glass-plate Negatives\*

Cecilia Järde mar

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## Abstract

This article will discuss the intercultural, collaborative art project Les Archives Suédoises, which brings a repressed part of colonial history into the open by re-contextualizing and reworking a hidden trove of historical glass-plate negatives photographed by Swedish missionaries in the Congo DR between 1890 - 1930. Through a practice of inter-cultural artistic interventions, the material remains of the missionary project are investigated and reformulated; questioning Sweden's colonial history, and simultaneously giving Congolese communities access to parts of their history lost in the process of colonization. The project explores the possibilities of intercultural artistic interventions – is it possible to redress and reformulate our difficult shared history through a shared practice? How can we bring the past into the present in ways that consider the different needs in the Congo and Sweden? Is it possible to find new ways of conceiving of the narrative potentials of the photographic archive – beyond digital repatriation projects that strip images of their context and echo the exclusionary mechanics of earlier versions of the archive?

**Keywords:** Art; Colonial archive; Counter memory; Intercultural collaborations; Photography.

**Cecilia Järde mar:** Konstfack University of Arts, Crafts and Design (Sweden)

✉ [cecilia.jarde mar@konstfack.se](mailto:cecilia.jarde mar@konstfack.se)

Cecilia Järde mar is a visual artist and Senior Lecturer in the Department of Fine Art

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artist Sammy Baloji used in his searing photo collages *The Album*, merging his own contemporary images of Katanga with historical photographs from the eastern Congo Free state by British missionary and anti-slavery campaigner Alice Seeley, the Swedish missionary photographs were not created with the aim of denouncing the atrocities inflicted by the Belgian colonial state. In fact, the church sent out camera equipment with their missionaries with the aim of increasing donations from their home parishes for the missionary activities, and selections of images were made into lantern lectures touring chapels, schools and community centers up until the early sixties. For many Swedes it was their first encounter with Africa, and the images thus had a profound influence on how Africa has been imagined in Sweden (Granquist 2001:114). At the same time, the touring lantern plate presentations brought about a longing for elsewhere in the Swedish viewers, often rooted in a reality defined by poverty. In the Congo, on the other hand, not many photographs from the historical period remain: the Belgian colonizers controlled the technology, and the tropical climate and political turbulence has destroyed much of what was left. The missionaries were also very much part of a process whereby they documented the existing culture in the places they settled, then set out to do their best to change or even destroy it (Granquist 2011:115). Postcolonial social scientist Boaventura de Sousa Santos terms this kind of destruction epistemicide: “the destruction of the knowledge and cultures of populations, of their memories and ancestral links and their manner of relating to others and to nature” (20016:22). We still retain the scattered material remains of this epistemicide in Sweden today. As an example, the Museums of World Culture in Stockholm and Gothenburg between them hold about 10 000 objects acquired from the Congo Free State (1885 -1908), most of them donated by Swedish missionaries in the Lower Congo. (Reinius 2009:77).

This history is not often discussed in Sweden today, and according to Gunlög Fur, “distancing themselves from European colonialism has allowed the Nordic countries to adopt an attitude of superiority that could well be regarded as its own form of colonialism – of knowing what is best for others.” (2016:12) We decided to make a piece that would remind visitors to the sculpture park of this history, so we visited the church archive, where we came across boxes and boxes of glass-plate negatives often donated by the families of the missionary-photographers and not opened since. In conversation with one of the archivists, we asked if there was any access to this material in the Lower Congo? No, the archivist said, we own their history. Yet the church, with ever-dwindling numbers in the congregation, lacked both the funds and the skills to do anything with the images. Andreas Huyssen speaks of “our complicity and responsibility to at least remember” (2018), and we felt compelled to find ways to carry this material inheritance, this archive-yet-to-be-made, and all the possible narratives contained within it, into the future and, crucially, to find a sustainable way to share it with its communities of origin.

Contacting the families<sup>2</sup> to gain permission to use the materials uncovered more glass plate negatives held in private storage, and we, as two independent artists, became both custodians and curators. But what could an unboxing of these images do today, considering the unequal conditions of their creation? We found Elisabeth Edwards comments about images “random inclusiveness” (2009:4) helpful, proposing that scenes in photographs can never be controlled to such a degree that other readings are not possible. The properties of the camera create a potentially democratic space, where images can be rediscovered and meaning rewritten, even in the cases where they were the result of unequal power relationships between photographer and subject. Therefore, despite the conditions under which the images were made, we wanted to offer them up for reinterpretation – and we were also interested in exploring how doing so as two artists, outside of an institutional framework could open up other kinds of possibilities compared to institutional repatriation projects – not only repatriating the images to the places where they were made, but also creating opportunities to critically reflect on this history in Sweden, beyond the common narrative of ‘the good Swede’. We selected around 300 glass plate negatives to digitize, both from the private archive of the family of Johan Hammar and from Svenska Missionskyrkan, in addition to a complete lantern plate lecture with images coloured and captioned by various Swedish missionaries.

I will now go on to discuss some of the work that came out the unboxing and unfolding.

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2. The individual missionary photographers retained copyright over the images. This means that according to Swedish law, image rights are retained by their heirs up until 70 years have passed after the demise of the photographer, when image rights pass into the public domain. For most of the materials we found, the families still retain rights, and therefore the question of using the images had to be negotiated. Within museums and institutions questions of ownership and source communities’ moral rights to colonial image materials have been widely discussed, but this is not reflected within the laws governing image rights yet.



Figure 2. Pulpet by Anna Ekman and Cecilia Järdegar, 2015, permanent sculpture, steel, plexiglass, duratrans from original glass plate negative, original photographer Josef Öhrneman, Persbo Studio Sculpture park. Photograph by Fredrik Strid

At Persbo Studio, a backlit transparency inset in a steel preachers pulpit articulates the difficult and multi-faceted relationship between the congregations in Sweden who funded the missionaries' activities overseas, and the people living within 'the missionary fields' in Lower Congo. A reverb from a meeting between a missionary and local men today resound within the linden tree arbor at Persbo Studio, and remind us of how individuals living far from Persbo were affected by the activities that once took place there. In order to view the image, depicting 10 Congolese men and boys standing in water looking back at the photographer with expressions ranging from pious to angry, visitors need to physically put themselves in the place of the missionary preacher, behind the pulpit as if about to start preaching.

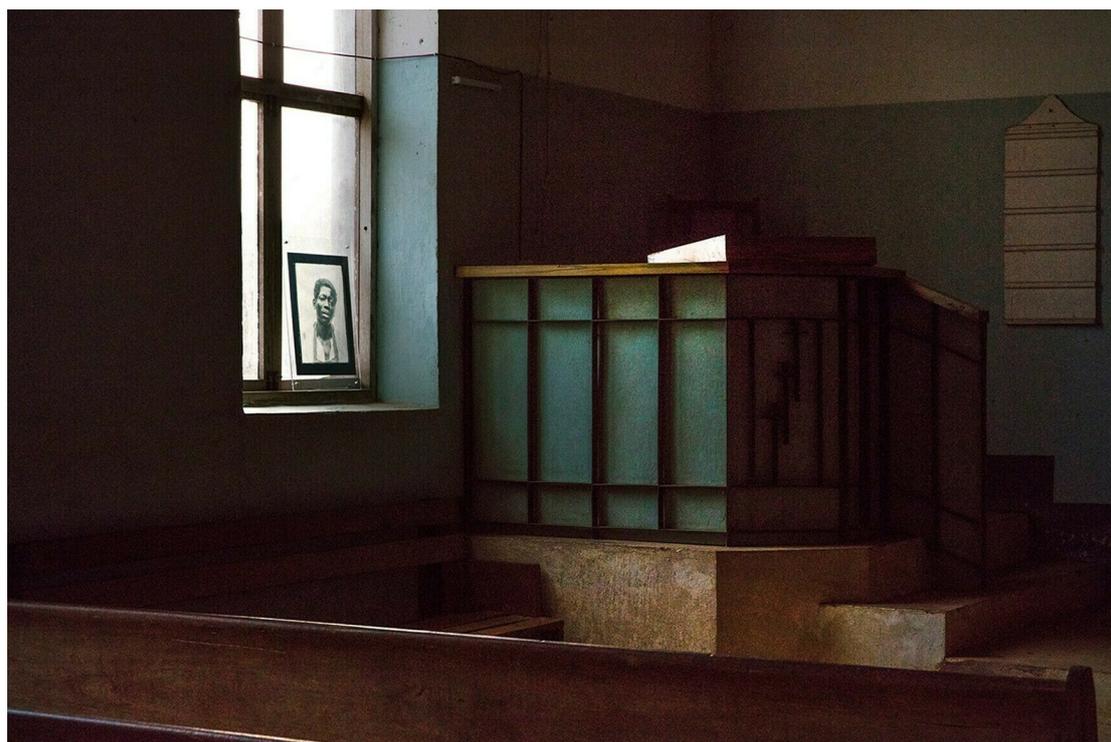


Figure 3. Porter, Kingoyi Church, Digital print from glass plate negative, Anna Ekman & Cecilia Järdeemar, 2016, original photograph by Josef Öhrneman

Repatriating the images to one of the villages of origin in the Lower Congo, we installed a series of images in the old chapel in Kingoyi missionary village in the Lower Congo, still in use today. The photographs depicted people and village life in this particular location. When we first arrived, the people we encountered expected us to arrive with photographs of the Swedish missionaries, but we choose not to include any such images of Swede's as we wanted the images to be useful in building historiographical agency and capacity in the present. We also brought a digital hard-drive with all the images that we had found relating to the village, which were shown as a slide show in the chapel. Village elders went through the images, explaining the content to the young people of the village and to us, identifying people and customs. In a much more tangible way than we could have imagined in Sweden, we experienced the value of and interest in the photographs. This is our history, one of the old men said of the images that had languished unseen in the archive for so long. However, as the source villages do not have access to electricity, and most are also outside the reach of mobile connections even in the case where solar power can be used to charge phones, we quickly saw the limits of an online repository for the materials. An archive hosted online would be inaccessible to the local population, instead of replicating what visual culture theorist Nicholas Mirzoeff argues defines colonial orders: "the right to look without being looked at." (2011:107)

In an attempt to create a temporary monument to the porters of Kingoyi we carried an image of the landscape and a group of porters, found in a box marked unusable, through Kingoyi. Local people joined us and helped



Figure 4. Monument to the Porters of Kingoyi, digital print from glass-plate negative on fabric. Anna Ekman & Cecilia Järdeemar 2016. Original photograph by unknown photographer

find what may be the location, but of course, we cannot be sure. Porters carried all the possessions and equipment, including the heavy glass-plate negatives, of the Swedish missionaries as they spread out north of the Congo river. The trek to Kingoyi from the nearest port took 3 weeks – the porters work was both heavy, dangerous and barely remunerated.

## 2 Re-viewing and re-making, in collaboration

Making use of De Sousa Santos' ideas around intercultural translations as a framework for how to construct intercultural collaborations, it was important to find collaborators who could meet the material from a Congolese perspective. After spending some time in Kinshasa meeting artists, we were very fortunate to encounter sculptor Freddy Tsimba, not only one of the most well-known contemporary Congolese artists working today, but also someone with a strong connection to the history of the Swedish missionaries in Lower Congo. Both his parents are Kikongo, from the village Isangila situated between the Swedish missionary stations Vivi and Kibunzi. Tsimba's late father received his schooling at Kibunzi Mission school during the 1930's, and stayed on to work as a local preacher before he left the church for a new life in Kinshasa. The photographic images thus evoke Tsimba's personal history and material and cultural heritage – rendering the importance of their re-emergence and re-contextualisation of great importance for him.

Together we have explored how to develop a working practice based on equal power-relationships and shared authority whilst acknowledging a past defined by dominance and subordination, investigating how we can make space for new forms of cultural encounters and intercultural translation in the process. By engaging in a dialogue “with one foot in one culture and the other in another,” De Sousa Santos (2016:192) we have attempted to bridge the gap between us without the assumption that we understand ourselves and the materials in the same way. The goal was not to find complete knowledge or understanding, but rather to let the unequal exchange of the past be transformed by a radical co-presence in the present. Investigating how we can use intercultural artistic interventions to redress and reformulate our difficult shared history, creating a space between our individual practices where the unknown could step in and generate new ways of thinking and

seeing, unfolding new possibilities within the materials. We were interested in exploring how collaborative artistic research can interact with decolonial processes by shifting the historiography away from a focus on the Swedish perspective, and instead making space for more complete versions that include a multiplicity of viewpoints and voices, embracing interpretations that have been ignored, forgotten or eliminated. "...the contact zones are frontier zones, borderlands, or no-man's-lands, where the peripheries or margins of knowledges and practices are the first to emerge..." De Sousa Santos (2016:355). We worked through the image materials together, sending things back and forth, and we also visited old people in Kinshasa with memories of the Swedish missionaries, and children of the missionary photographers in Sweden. Before the exhibitions we made, we worked alongside each other in a shared studio space, both in Stockholm and in Kinshasa, keeping the dialogue open at all points in the process. This way of collaborating made the curating of the exhibitions less a case of mine and Ekman's photographic work versus Tsimba's sculptures and drawings; instead we installed the work in dialogue, as one, coherent installation.

The title, *Les Archives Suédoises*, references how the Swedish missionary archive is commonly referred to in the Congo DR today. The language question is not uncomplicated however – using the language of the former colonial power in a postcolonial project is far from unproblematic, even though French remains the official language, alongside national languages Kikongo, Lingala, Swahili and Tshiluba.<sup>3</sup> We considered using both Kikongo (which is spoken in the source villages) and Lingala (The language of Tsimba, writer André Yoka Lye, who provided a text for the catalogue, and most of the art students we worked with in Kinshasa) for the exhibition title and publication. But after some discussions, the Congolese participants came to the conclusion that in this case, French would be the most inclusive language, and that using all three languages alongside Swedish would make the publication too cumbersome. Tsimba, however, most often uses titles in Lingala for his works, with translations into French.



*Dans le village de « KIMBUMBA » au bas Congo on trouve un chef pas comme le autre assis devant sa maison ou tout les villageois et ceux d'enfance viennent traiter leur problème. Très sage et très intelligent capable de bien diriger le village. Tout ce qu'il a porte a une signification très précise. Le chapeau sur sa tête et le collier au coup signe de leadership et de sagesse qu'un roi doit avoir. Le couteau a la main signe de justice et l'utilise pour trancher tout les problèmes de son village ; deux bracelets au mais signe l'unité qui doit faire Régner au sein du village. Bracelet à jambe droite signe d'appartenance à ses ancêtres qu'il présente. Tors nus signe de d'un vrais guerrier capable de diriger le village.*

*In the village of "KIMBUMBA" in Lower Congo there is a chief like no other, sitting in front of his house where all the villagers and the children come to treat their problem. Very wise and very intelligent, able to run the village, everything he is wearing has a very precise meaning. The hat on his head and the collar is the sign of leadership and wisdom that a king must have. The knife has the hand of justice and he uses it to solve all the problems of his village; the two bracelets signify the unit that must remain within the village. The right leg bracelet is a sign of belonging to his ancestors. The naked torso is a sign of a real warrior able to run the village.*

Lantern slide photograph. Photographer Unknown, Svenska Missionsförbundet  
Text by students from Institute National des Arts, Kinshasa, 2017

Figure 5. Skioptikon image, Svenska Missionskyrkan with new captions by students at Institute National des Arts, Kinshasa, 2017

3. Congo DR is a vast country consisting of many ethnic groups, where over 200 different languages are spoken. French is used for most official purposes.

We also held a series of workshops for photography and film students from the Institute National des Arts in Kinshasa based around the digitized lantern plate lecture, and together with their teachers they spent a term working with the materials. The students engaged performatively with the images creating a series of re-enactment photographs, and they also wrote new captions for a few of the images. The re-staging became a way for the students to enter into the historical images and both explore them and make them their own. We can't know, of course, if what the students wrote is historically correct or not, but from our point of view it is not important – what is interesting is the stories that emerge in the students writing, and how those stories work to rehabilitate the image and the persons depicted, from the often-denigrating original captions supplied by the missionaries.



Figure 6. The Opening, Anna Ekman & Cecilia Järdegar and Freddy Tsimba, Jönköpings Länsmuseum 2019. Original images by Josef Öhrenman, Johan Hammar and unknown photographers

### 3 The opening

The opening up of the missionary fields is taken as a starting point for the first of the collaborative exhibitions – the long trek on narrow caravan trails where the porters carried all the goods deemed necessary, sometimes perishing in the process. The Swedish missionaries used the same transport system as the colonial state, and one missionary described in his diary how walking along the caravan trail was like walking across a graveyard, there were so many human remains scattered along the way. In the installation *Kristi Kärlek tvingar oss*, (The love of God forces us, from a sign in Swedish we found at one of the old stations in Lower Congo) the viewer first encounters the lone woman in the landscape, and then she returns in fragments and retakes, finally surrounded by the other porters. The large photographic prints, printed on semi-translucent rice paper, are suspended from wooden handlebars as an echo of the porters' equipment.

The placement of the figures towards the lower part of the frame in the original image is inviting the spectators to look above their heads onto the landscape behind them. We subvert this by gradual enlargements, making the viewers look at, not past, the porters, transforming them from props within a staged visual narrative to the central subjects of the photograph. The woman returns again and again, first on her own, then surrounded

by the other porters. Tsimba's sculptures are to be found alongside the images; a cross made out of rusty mousetraps is leaning against the wall as if a porter has just left it there, and off to the side a foot made out of found bullet casings from the Lower Congo.



Figure 7. Man in Grass, Anna Ekman & Cecilia Järdegar, original image by unknown photographer, with Lokolo (leg) Freddy Tsimba. Centre for Photography, Stockholm, 2017

A single leg, a cut off limb meets a man standing behind high grass, watching. Muscles and torn flesh made out of rusting steel bear witness to how bodies have been transformed into tools. The discarded body part remains as a fragment, a reference to the forced labor and mutilations of the colonial era. Tsimba's sculptures are all turned into fragments in the exhibition, not showing a complete body but rather the cold and rusty fragmented remains of the colonial project. At the end, a pile of small skulls are installed on a pile of Congolese dirt, reminding us of the fact that not only humans were deeply affected by the colonial project – Tsimba says that each time a tree in the forest is cut down, a thousand monkeys die.

The meeting between the fragile ephemeral photographic works and fragments of Tsimba's rusting sculptures create a space where the meaning of the archival images can be opened up as a site of negotiation and multiple perspectives. Tsimba and myself held a series of workshops for school children and youth in the exhibition space, inviting them to write questions and reflections anonymously on pieces of paper, which we then discussed together in the group. In this way, young people in Stockholm were able to confront a part of our history that is not taught in school in a way that included both Swedish and Congolese perspectives, and also inscribe their reactions to the material in parallel with the students from the Institute National des Arts in Kinshasa.

For another exhibition, the original negatives, flat and fixed, were reimagined as a forest of thin, gray enlarged fragments depicting faces and body parts, an archive of gestures and glances, where the viewer is able to pass through the images encountering constantly shifting viewpoints and perspectives. Making the viewers physically enter into the installation and move through the exhibition space, meeting the photographed faces, creates a three-dimensionality that breaks up the images, engendering an embodied encounter with the archive. Using cutting and cropping also draws attention to the photographer's act of choosing and composing the scenes in front of his camera. The missionaries intentionally inscribed their own presence in the images in order to stress their importance and imply a mastery of the situations with which they were faced. Our



Figure 8. Companions de voyage by Freddy Tsimba, Kalmar Konstmuseum 2019



Figure 9. Fragments, Anna Ekman & Cecilia Järdeemar, Jönköpings Länsmuseum 2017. Original images by Johan Hammar, Josef Öhrneman, Karl Edvard Laman and unknown photographers

work redirects the focus away from the missionaries, and let individual subjectivities reappear, considering Emmanuel Levinas and his writings about the meeting of two faces as site of nakedness, defencelessness. But in this facing the other can also make demands – his presence makes a summons, requesting a response; in this way implicating the contemporary viewer (Levinas 1969:127).

An aside is that one of the visitors recognized his grandfather's hands across the forehead of the man visible to the left of the installation view. He contacted us to say he was sure it was his grandfather, something that worked as a reminder of how fraught this common history still is.



Figure 10. Man in grass installed on Rue Buburu, Matonge, Kinshasa, 2017. Original image by unknown photographer

The complete works were also exhibited at the Musée D'Art Contemporain in Kinshasa in the summer of 2017, and at Kalmar Konstmuseum in the summer of 2019, and a book, *The Opening*, was published by Sailor Press in 2019. In the book we chose to include the full negatives that had been used in the re-framed work as a separate section, accessible only after turning the book around and physically tearing the pages open. In the cases where the glass-plate negatives had been stored in original envelopes with the photographer's notes, the envelopes were reproduced on the facing page alongside the negatives. In this way the viewers are able to form their own opinion of the source materials, and make their own re-interpretations. This is indicative of how we constituted the project; as a series of encounters, each unfolding different possibilities held within the archive. Moving the images through our hands, Tsimbas hands, before the community in Kingoyi or the children of the missionaries in Sweden, each time finding something pointing in a new direction.

We have attempted to transform the unequal exchange of the past by a radical co-presence in the present, and in the process explored how artists can intervene in processes of trauma, memory and historiography. Letting artistic research interact with decolonial processes, we have made space for communities to respond to the archival materials and formulate other writings of history that incorporate multiple viewpoints.

Difficult questions during the process were: how do we create a foundation for decolonial relationships within the project, when Ekman and myself, as the Swedish partners, control the funds? Are we not dominating the encounter yet again? Other questions that were not solved are related to finding an appropriate place for the new digital archive, in a country with few functioning institutions, and when creating an online repository will



Figure 11. Fragments installed at the Musée D'art Contemporain, Kinshasa, 2017. Original photographs by Johan Hammar, Josef Öhrneman, Karl Edvard Laman and unknown photographers

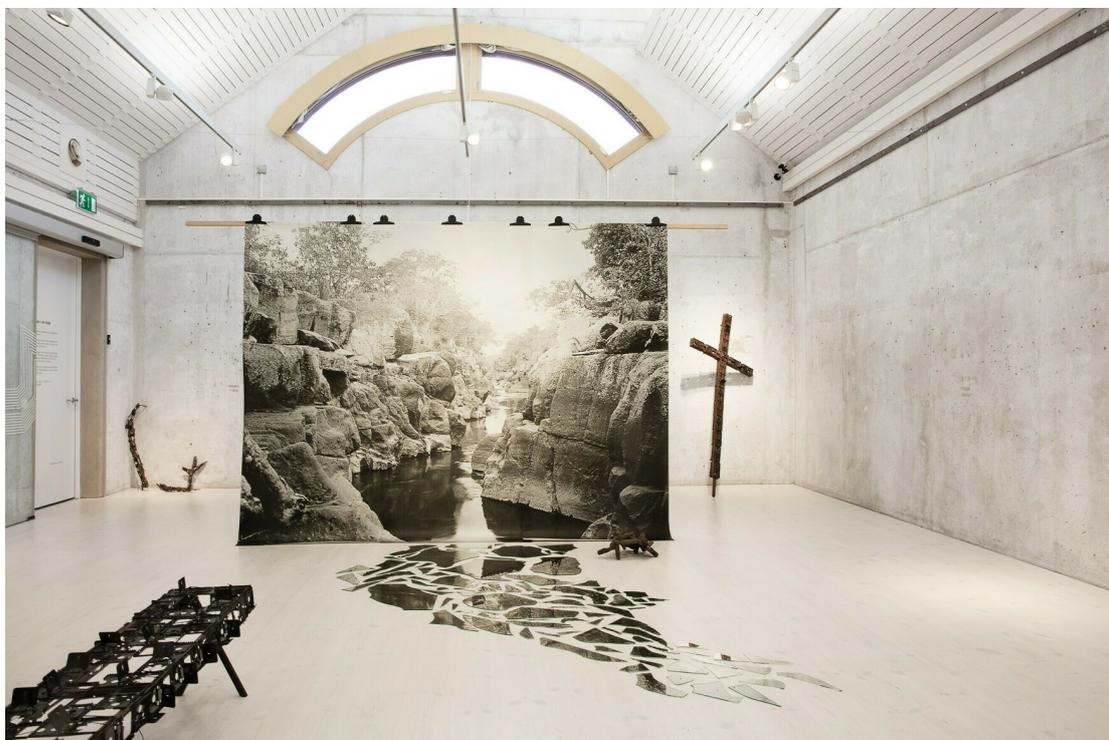


Figure 12. Sculptures Chappelle and Reveil, Sommeil by Freddy Tsimba, Photographic installation Rupture Silencieux by Anna Ekman & Cecilia Järdeemar, Jönköpings Länsmuseum 2019. Original image by Johan Hammar

only reinforce the original injustice, keeping it out of reach from the communities of origin who most often lack internet access, yet making it accessible to many others.

The exhibitions we held in Kingoyi and Kinshasa were for a limited period only. We donated both the photographic prints and hard drives containing some 200 negative plates to the host institutions afterwards, but in discussions with them we came to realize that it was problematic to expect either of these severely underfunded institutions to give the wider community access. Making the images available requires both staff and equipment. At the same time, there was a tremendous interest in the source materials, both in the source communities and in Kinshasa.

So, in order to try to solve some of the unresolved issues, Freddy Tsimba, André Yoka Lye and myself decided to create a new collaborative project. The complete materials from the Swedish Missionary archive have now been deposited at the Ethnographic Museum in Stockholm, but most of the negative glass plates that were not digitized in the earlier project remain uncatalogued. The aim of the new project is to create a physical, mobile, battery-powered counter-archive object, that we will distribute in Manyanga, Lower Congo, and at a number of Congolese universities and institutions. The archive object will also be exhibited in community centers and at the Musée National in Kinshasa, and the Ethnographic Museum in Stockholm. In addition to the extended collection of source materials, the counter-archive will include also include new Congolese iterations, re-creations and stories, collected on trips to the source communities and in Kinshasa. The now-aged children of the missionaries – mostly born in the Congo and who grew up in what some of them call “the shadow of the calling”<sup>4</sup> – will also be invited to share their interpretations and memories. The project is funded by the Swedish Research Council and will run between 2020-2022.<sup>5</sup> Much undigitized material remains in the archives – hundreds of negative plates but also undigitized film rushes and diary notes from Congolese congregation members written at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The project will open up new avenues of communication between the source communities, the National Museum in Kinshasa and the Ethnographic Museum in Stockholm, which we hope will lead a permanent agreement in terms of how this material will be shared and distributed in the future, beyond the archive-object.

In common with the earlier project, we situate the work as postcolonial memory practice, alongside artist such as Sammy Baloji, Theaster Gates, Santu Mofokeng and Filipa César, using different archival practices to reanimate eradicated histories. But we are also interested in exploring how the domain can be broadened – how other artists, writers, students and diverse groups of people can be invited in and inscribe their own marks within the materials. Can we open up the archive for other’s reinterpretations this time, giving up our privileged position as artist-authors, and instead offer the work up to chaos, to a writing of history that we no longer control? Ariella Azoulay writes that “traces of the constituent violence in the archive can either be preserved untouched, preserving the law of the archive, or be reconfigured and reconceptualized through a new grid, whose consequences affect the way one is governed, as well as the ways one shares the world with others” (Azoulay 2012). In the new project, we would like to explore if we can provide the starting point – the trunk – from which other interpretations and expressions can spread like rhizomes, creating the new grid Azoulay describes.

To return to the earlier, finished project, historian Darren Newbury suggests that “the difference between the historian and the curator is that, unlike the historian, the task is not so much to recount the event as to prolong it, to hold the photograph open to the present.”(2018:17) And this is something that we have tried to do, to rearticulate a selection of images again and again, change the form in which they appear in the world, in front of whom they appear, and see what happens in these encounters.

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4. Conversation with Rolf Öhrneman, 12 Dec 2018. Children of the early missionaries were often left behind in Sweden as infants. Svenska Missionskyrkan ran their own orphanage for the children of missionaries in Stockholm. Former students still meet up regularly today to share memories.

5. The funds are still coming from Sweden, which is problematic but at this time hard to avoid. We try to mitigate that by collaborative decision making around the budget, timeplan and outcomes.

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