

DIALOGUE

Becoming the Archive: A Dialogue with Euridice Kala

Euridice Kala¹ and Lucy Cotter²

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Dialogue between Euridice Kala and Lucy Cotter, exploring the potential of artistic research to form other archives.

Lucy Cotter: You are currently working on a long-term research-based project called *Sea (E) scapes* (2015–18), which you make manifest in an ongoing series of videos, performances, photographs and installations. One of your departure points was the São José Paquete-d'África, a slave ship that was travelling from Mozambique to Brazil in 1794 but crashed en route. I know that you are retracing this journey physically and both researching and creating work as part of that process. Can you say how you started with this way of working and why you took this particular departure point?

Euridice Kala: The São José Paquete-d'África was coming out of Mozambique en route to Brazil and I wanted to reclaim the particular East Oriental slave history it relates to, which is quite lost in contemporary culture. I was partly prompted to start the project because the ship's wreck had just been recovered in Cape Town and had been taken directly to the Smithsonian in Washington for the new Smithsonian African American experience, bypassing any kind of communication with cultural institutions in Mozambique. What I wanted to make visible with this project was not necessarily this specific slave history, but the ongoing re-routing of history and discourse that doesn't include certain spaces. Among other things, I find that there's a narrative of slave history focusing on the Atlantic Ocean that feeds into particular countries and places—South Africa, Nigeria, Ghana and other Anglophone African countries—which is being made visible, but often at the cost of the visibility of a much larger history.

Around the same time I was also setting up Pan!c, an experimental platform that interconnected spaces across Africa, creating a sharing of ideas and people across the continent.¹ It had a mainframe based in Africa so that people could share resources and create knowledge without a second or third party element. This included not using Europe's resources, hence we had a mission of being low budget or no-budget because cultural creation on the continent has very little allocated budget. So the idea was to work within the means and the social structure of the continent. Pan!c has since been taken over and run by two organisations, but it influenced my methodologies in *Sea (E) scapes* and it continues to inform the way that I move along with certain ideas.

LC: Clearly the two projects overlap in their concern with reclaiming knowledge. With *Sea (E) scapes* you now physically re-trace the journey of the São José Paquete-d'África with your own body to gather that knowledge. Somewhere in your texts about the project you say, "I am the archive". Do you state that to identify yourself as part of that slave history and if so, how does that affect the way in which you embody those spaces or work with that history in the various locations?

EK: At the outset of the project I decided to go to all the places that the ship passed through or had a connection with. I started in Lisbon where the ship originally came from and spent three months there. Like

¹ PAN!C (Pan African Network of Independent Contemporaneity) is a platform for independent contemporary art spaces on the African Continent, currently run by VANSAs and centre d'Art Picha. See www.panicplatform.net.

any researcher, I felt obliged to go to the museums and official archives to try to find some sort of factual history on the ship and the related history. I quickly became quite frustrated because all of the historic material was approached very much from the Portuguese perspective. The language also felt rather heavy and patriarchal. I didn't identify or empathise at all with the written accounts. So I decided that by going through this journey I was going to become the archive. I was going to collect information from the perspective of what interests me and not necessarily because of its relevance to any particular historical or contemporary discourse. I became this other power that was going to foreground whatever I wanted and however I wanted to portray it, regardless of how it has been established in existing archives. So that's the core of the project, to become this archive that follows the route.

LC: Did you continue to undertake "formal research" as such from this perspective as you continued your journey in Cape Town and Ilha de Mozambique?

EK: Yes, in Cape Town I went to the Slave Lodge museum, to the District Six Museum and to all the related institutions. The presence of Mozambicans that were passing through to go to Brazil for example, is not felt today in any shape or form in contemporary South African society. It's very much been washed, but you can find traces of it. There is a kind of semblance of these people who arrived and populated the Cape, and who brought Islam with them as well in the museums, but they do not seem to appear Cape Town's wider cultural landscape. I found that quite hard; it felt a bit like cultural genocide. If you look at Mozambicans who went to Brazil, you will find that there is still music, religion and some sort of presence there today. It's hard to believe that kind of presence cannot be felt in Cape Town after 150 years of slave trading and so many slaves staying to work there following a decree that if the Portuguese wanted to take slaves through Cape Town, they would have to bring people to work in the plantations in the Cape.

LC: Was this the departure point for the performance you did in Cape Town as part of the 2017 edition of the *Infecting the City* festival? It seemed to point to Cape Town's entanglement in the imaginary geographies around colonialism and slave trading.

EK: The Cape Town performance was really about mapping. I had been making geodesic maps earlier in the *Sea (E) scapes* project trying to create a parallel narrative to what forms geodesic studies today. I had become interested in this idea of triangulation, of calculating distance between spaces, between Point A and Point B, to communicate power holding, earlier in the research process, thanks to an 18th-century book I found in an archive in Portugal that had geodesic calculations of all the Altramar provinces. To really do those calculations you'd have to be outside of the Earth. It was interesting to try and rethink them today, to retriangulate the routes, considering the real distance between Paris and Cape Town or Ilha de Mozambique and Lisbon. In the 17th and 18th centuries it took a full year for these ships to reach from Point A and Point B, routes that today take a couple of hours. During the performance I drew maps and wrote a number of statements on a black wall that we created in the public square in front of the Municipal Theatre. I physically enclosed the wall quite quickly in white plastic after drawing up the statements, so that as much as they were there, they were not necessarily visible. My intention was to create a point of interest for the object itself, for this missing narrative.

I had also done research in Ilha de Mozambique where the ship was coming from on the way to Brazil, to Maranhão. Ilha de Mozambique is a very strange space because it has all of these intact historical buildings and memorabilia, like the first church built in Africa by the Portuguese, yet it's hard to identify this history. It's physically present but still absent somehow. So I was dealing with that too and relating it to the missing part in the Cape, because these people are not there in the Cape, they don't exist today. The Cape is very much black and white and coloured but it misses this conversation culturally as well. At the same time it's present there too because if you go to the museums you will see tourists coming in to learn about this history. It's a bit disjointed. I lived in South Africa for 10 years, in Johannesburg, and the Cape Town performance was partly about establishing the relationship between these two spaces, but through trying to create a mapping.

LC: You did another large research project *Will See You in December... Tomorrow* (2015) while you lived in Johannesburg, which looked at your own moving to South Africa and addressed the relatively invisible presence of migrant workers from Mozambique in South Africa today. That was a time in which there were a lot of violent attacks on Mozambican migrants. Did the title of that project also refer to that anxiety about returning home safe?

EK: Yes, “December” refers to the time of the holidays when migrants go back, but the “tomorrow” refers to migrants who cross for the day to do many things. It’s still the same country; it’s not so far. So it eludes to both distance and time. I was interested in labour as a consequence of migration and the other way around. In that project I met with many Mozambicans downtown who were informal workers and very invisible socially. They don’t exist in the South African definition of work or workers so that work was primarily about visibility. I thought it would be interesting to see this through someone else’s eyes so I commissioned a series of photos of women, mostly informal hairdressers. I do that a lot in my projects—creating labour, recreating labour to look through labour at the history of humanity and the world. Going through very personal narratives to move forward. I also did a performance, *Ironing History Out... What do Mozambicans do in South Africa?* (2015), in Mozambique, in spaces of departure and arrival from Maputo city centre during this period in which many Mozambicans had just fled another xenophobic wave of attacks in South Africa. It was really a way of prompting conversation and people responded to the question with a lot of discontentment.

LC: You were also using Facebook as a site of research for *Will See You in December... Tomorrow*. Was that a strategy for finding alternative spaces to hold particular histories and current lived experiences? Or was it just a way to generate conversation with more people?

EK: Facebook is interesting. I was always unhappy with my personal use of Facebook, the fact that I created content all the time, even just by saying that I was tired. I wanted to see if I could use Facebook differently, to use it as an archive. This was also the beginning of establishing myself as the archive. I thought to put all of the information I gathered on Facebook, creating a space where anyone could pick up this content and use it. It was about challenging spaces of power. Clearly Facebook has a lot of power. You create content and you never know how it’s being used and people make money out of your content. It’s not a book, but it is a space, a visual book that can be used to challenge norms of behaviour, of power. I don’t use Facebook any more, but I can always go there and find that material, which is interesting. It’s also dealing with contemporary spaces of archive.

LC: You’ve been documenting the entire research journey for *Sea (E) scapes* using Polaroids and writing, which is a very material process in comparison. Do you see those images as potentially works in their own right or forming a research archive? How do you bring these different aspects of the project together to find a language for the work?

EK: I generally work with video, performance and photography, which I was initially trained in. I wanted to use Polaroid photography in *Sea (E) scapes* as a concrete response, the most immediate way to create an object. I wanted to make some sort of archive that has its own language. I have also written short texts on the Polaroids, often about contemporary space, related to the location in which the image is taken. In Lisbon, for example, there are widows permanently wearing black, old women who come from the generation who lost men in the colonies through war for Portugal. So the writings from there are a reflection on these bodies I see that remind me of this history. After seeing a very interesting video work by Renée Green, while researching in Portugal, I also started to see the potential of using these Polaroids, not only as objects, but also as material that could be abstracted and approached in a non-realist way. This project works with a missing history, but I’m also creating a kind of parallel to this missing history. It’s not about doing an academic research or staying with the “facts”. The first video draft I have made—it’s not a finished work—has a specific feeling, a texture that has to do with this history. The Polaroids communicate something a bit more abstract. They don’t become very strong objects but they almost create a sound through their texture. This sharing of sound interests me for some reason.

LC: In your writings on the project, you mentioned thinking about what the slaves would see out the window. I read elsewhere that there were 500 slaves shackled underneath the hull of the ship, which was windowless. You mentioned getting into the imaginary of hearing the sound of the sea and it not being visible. I saw in the way you used the Polaroids that you zoom in and open up this imaginary space but you keep hearing the sea sound and it’s completely monotonous. Nothing happens but time is passing somehow.

EK: Absolutely, that’s very recurrent in how I am thinking about that experience because it’s really about filling in those missing pieces. For me, it’s quite an imaginary space. Even though there is a ship and there is a history around it, I still feel that it’s a kind of imaginary that we’re making as we go along. I wanted to fill in this gap of having to imagine what it would have been like for me to be on that ship. Not only through the

heaviness of slave trade history but also through the prism of other nuances that are not being attended to. I have also thought a lot about another slave ship called the *Meermin*, a Dutch East India Company ship that was bringing slaves from Madagascar to Cape Town, including a king from Madagascar, whom they had stolen. This king or chief had diplomatic and military knowledge, which he used to organize a mutiny on board. Although the ship was later recaptured by the Dutch, the slaves took it over and held the captain captive for three weeks. But having no experience of sailing to Cape Town, they didn't know where they were going. I found it quite interesting that the slaves reverted the roles of power and the victim. But I was also interested in this nuance of being able to see, but not know, and sound is very important because it gives you some sort of direction. You're still on the sea, you're still in the middle, you're still in between. I'm interested in the sound that reflects the in-between. You've left but you haven't arrived. You're still in between something. This sound represents this nowhere. It's also comforting somehow because it's not telling you whether you have arrived to your demise or not.

LC: This approach of entering the imaginary of what it is to be a slave on a ship and the kind of attitude that you're taking with it, which is not necessarily heavy, but very personal, seems to me to be a way of reclaiming subjectivity. These people were treated as objects, literally as cargo, and even within history they are kind of objects of history. You're not so much reclaiming their history as circumventing that act of revisionism and going straight for "This is a person." In a way you're creating a one-on-one relationship by saying: "I am the archive and you are also the archive."

EK: Absolutely, and at the same time I don't want to create power struggles. I'm not necessarily interested in gaining some sort of leverage by taking it from someone else. I'm interested in creating subjectivity, in creating a slave character who is more dynamic, who has more agency. I think that dynamism is often missing in how black characters are being portrayed. People are striving and making efforts to change that, especially in popular culture, in the U.S. and the U.K. You can see that for example in a TV show like *Chewing Gum*, which is about a young woman living in a public housing estate. The show is trying to develop and create a dynamism around being black in that sort of environment. People are doing interesting things in other areas of culture, but in contemporary visual arts I feel there's still quite some negligence when it comes to portraying black characters. Black people are very much present in relation to specific narratives, but they don't have any kind of parallels, there's no way of imagining those narratives otherwise except through pain, victimhood and so on. Of course those aspects are very real and important to portray, but there is more there and I'm interested in this other dimension, this "more" that I can see. I ask myself how I can make it of interest to be represented in contemporary discourse and history.

LC: This also makes me think about an earlier video work, *Unlike Other Santas...* (2013), which deconstructs the various elements that make up the character of this Dutch blackface tradition of Zwarte Piet ("Black Peter"), the "helper" to Saint Nicholas who gives children in the Netherlands presents in December. You allowed someone to cut off your hair and paint your face black in an almost ritualistic process, becoming a kind of warrior figure that transforms into full blackface. Does this relate to the notion of being the archive? I find it interesting that you again approach a kind of violence, a symbolic violence, through a silent work. The intensity of watching your face reminded me of watching Andy Warhol's *Screen Tests*. Although you do not physically react to what is happening as such, basically as a viewer you're watching the vulnerability on a person's face. What were you trying to achieve with that gesture?

EK: I was going through a difficult personal moment at that time which gave me the sensation of struggling to regain some kind of power. I came to the conclusion that I shouldn't struggle to gain or lose power but look at that process of gaining and losing. Through this character of Zwarte Piet, who is victimized historically and in contemporary culture—he speaks bad Dutch; he is a mockery of black identity. I wanted to understand *through the process*—because this character is predominantly performed by white people, not black people—how this black body could have other narratives. My main intention was to observe the position I was inhabiting as I was going through it, having to deal with it, but not struggling against it. I'm not only taking up the position of the victim, but I also have some power in deciding to go through this process and to observe it. What does that mean? The in-betweenness of it all, the humanity of it. I wanted it not to be *about* it but to *be* it.

LC: When I was watching your hair being cut off piece-by-piece and your head being shaved, it reminded me of the public shaving of women's hair at the end of the Second World War. It seemed to also touch on

womanhood and what it means to be a woman. I don't know if you also intended to address womanhood specifically in that work or not. I know you identify as a feminist.

EK: Yes, I absolutely did. At that moment in my life I also wanted to lose my own womanhood, to become this other possibility, so it was definitely about that as well. To be able to perform my life, to continue with the action which is the performance of life without having to rely on my womanhood. Hair does that; it is intimately connected to the performance of womanhood. Feminism is very complex for me. I do identify as a feminist but I make sure that it's always very localized, very particular to me, to where I'm from, to the women I come from and what they define as a feminist act. The loss of hair is generally a feminist act, but it certainly means that where I come from. It means that you are not relying on your beauty to deal with life. It goes hand in hand with the question of beauty and what it can get you.

LC: There's a further video work, *Measuring Blackness and a Guide to Other Industries* (2016), which seems to extend that reflection of self and objecthood out towards a wider history. I found it very striking that it's a black-and-white video, it's silent and it's very understated. Yet what the video conveys is very violent in my experience of it. It's almost like a silent conversation with this objecthood of blackness during the colonial trading period.

EK: I am addressing violence in that work, while focusing my line of thought on the Industrial Revolution. I am interested in the industriousness of it and the necessity for many other industries outside of Europe to exist alongside it to keep it going. How bodily those industries were elsewhere, next to how industrialisation was undertaken in Europe. In the video I am weighing up different materials associated with the Industrial Revolution. The white wedding dress probably stands out as an exception relative to the other materials like salt, ivory and cotton, but I found it interesting as a symbol of a moment in history when the English became structurally so strong. Queen Victoria's white wedding dress became known and spread across Europe and then Africa as this symbol of unity, of purity, and ultimately a display of Western ideals and desires, through photography, through the image. I saw this as a human history story. It wasn't necessarily about blackness or whiteness. I think that during the 18th and 19th centuries many white people were suffering in comparable ways to black people. Children were working as slaves in Europe. But there was nevertheless a different relationship to labour in Africa, an imposed relationship to labour. It wasn't about working to eat; it was a third party relationship, working to feed some other industry. There is a white body that forces some sort of industry or industriousness on the African body. I have just started another project that looks at this relationship to labour in Mozambique specifically, following the postcolonial fall of industry in Mozambique.

LC: Will your new project also reread the relationship between the colonial period and the present largely through labour, also in relation to contemporary migration? I know that there was also a Civil War in Mozambique after the independence in 1975, which partly revolved around the question of whether the nation may become a Communist or Marxist space. So I imagine that the idea of work has remained highly contested.

EK: Yes, that conflict, which started two years after independence, went on until 1992. Samora Machel, the first president of the republic, advocated very strongly for labour practice, wanting to reconstruct the country using Mozambican labour. With my newest project, which has the working title *Scores of Labour*, I will be working primarily with a Protestant choral group in Mozambique and having this conversation about post-colonial, post-industrial Mozambique. I am interested in how Protestants accept the relationship between labour and work; they have a lack of guilt around money and power relative to Catholics. I'm going to be sharing information with the choir members around industry in Mozambique, reflecting on their relationship with work. The idea is to create new work around these conversations. I want to create a musical score that they will be performing and record that into a short film. That will be the main piece for the exhibition, which is going to be shown in Mozambique and then in Portugal, hopefully.

LC: It surprised me to learn that Mozambique became independent as late as 1975. So I guess the people in this choir have a very immediate relationship with that legacy. What age are they?

EK: They are all different ages. There are people who were born before Mozambique was free and people who are as young as nineteen, who have no notion of this and no understanding of dealing with labour and power. This is also because labour is still very much mediated by anyone who has power who comes to Mozambique and implements some sort of industry, be it China, Portugal or Brazil. It's still not a self initi-

ated venture and that interests me because we are still dealing with the emotional level of how we relate to labour. What it means to work. Why do we work? My own interest is also based on the question of whether artists work. Do I work? Am I working at this moment? I have a certain frustration around art and the industry of art, the idea that art can become an industrious space. But that's a parallel conversation.

Euridice Kala (Maputo, 1987) is an artist currently based in Paris. She was trained as a photographer at the Market Photo Workshop, Johannesburg. Recent and upcoming performance and exhibition venues include Camões- Centro Cultural Português, Maputo (2018), *Co-habitar*, Casa da America Latina, Lisbon (2017), *Infecting the City* festival, Cape Town (2017) and *Mistake! Mistake! said the rooster... and stepped down from the duck*, Lumiar Cité, Lisbon (2017). Her work has previously been shown at, among others, 12th Dak'Art Biennial, Senegal (2016); 3rd Casablanca Biennial (2016), SMAC Gallery, Stellenbosch, South Africa (2016), MUSART, Maputo & Ansteys Building, Johannesburg (2015); *Framer Framed*, Amsterdam, Netherlands (2014); Fondation Blachère Art Centre, Apt, France (2014) and Bonendale, Douala, Cameroon (2014). Kala has been awarded several residencies, most recently at the Centro Cultural Português Maputo (2016) and at Hangar, Lisbon (2016). She was a founding member of PAN!C, a platform for independent contemporary art spaces on the African Continent.

Lucy Cotter is an independent writer and curator whose practice explores contemporary art's relationship with aesthetics, politics and the unknown. She was curator of the Dutch pavilion of the 57th Venice Biennale 2017, presenting *Cinema Olanda* with artist Wendelien van Oldenborgh. www.lucycotter.org/.

Competing Interests

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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