

AMSTERDAM

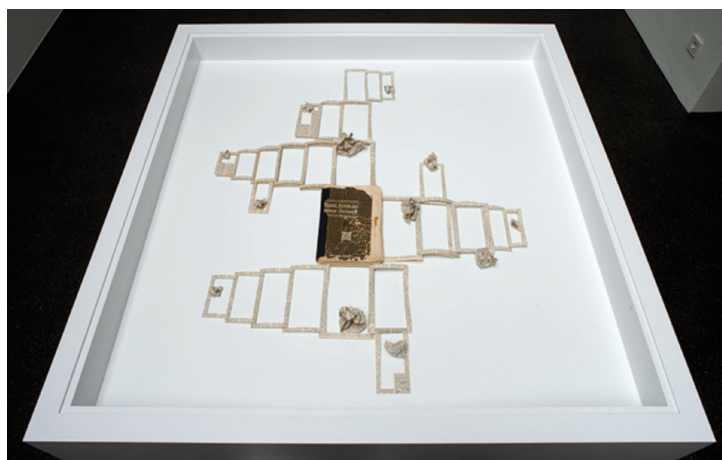
PROJECT 1975: MORE THAN POST-COLONIALISM

Alexander Ferrando

Project '1975' is a two-year program organized by Stedelijk Museum Bureau Amsterdam (SMBA) curators Jelle Bouwhuis and Kerstin Winking that examines contemporary art and colonialism. The project was launched in December 2010 with a group exhibition at SMBA.

ALEXANDER FERRANDO: Related to Project '1975' is a research project you began in 2009 entitled "Africa Reflected," which to paraphrase, looked at representations of Africa with the aim to find alternatives to largely stereotypical media representations of Africa and Africans. Could you give a bit more information about that research as it relates to your new project?

Jelle Bouwhuis and Kerstin Winking: During 2008 we prepared a Renzo Martens exhibition with his video installation *Episode III Enjoy Poverty* (2008) at SMBA. Martens was in the process of editing material he shot in the Democratic Republic of Congo and asked us for feedback. *Episode III Enjoy Poverty* is a film about Martens teaching a group of Congolese photographers to record the misery around them. Martens' position is that, instead of European and American photographers and agencies, Congolese people themselves should financially profit from photographs of their miserable situation. The images he presented to us were disturbing and we had heated discussions about them. After the presentation of the work in 2008 we were left with a lot of questions regarding the image of Africa in Europe. Consequently, "Africa Reflected" was conceived of as a research project based on reading, writing and discussing experts' views on that image. The popular image of Africa presented in European exhibitions developed concurrently with modern European imperialist endeavors in the late 19th century. That was the time when African art was categorized as ethnographic and presented in spectacular temporary exhibitions or in pseudo-scientific museum displays. Today, 19th-century methods of displaying African



CARLOS GARAICOA, *La Razón*, 2010. Book, hand cut paper, perspex, wood. 6 x 87 x 107 cm. Courtesy Stedelijk Museum Bureau, Amsterdam.

art are still perceptible in many ethnographic museums whose Africa departments are often very dark, spectacularly spot-lit and based on a view of Africa in stark contrast to how contemporary artists' perceive the continent. As a consequence of this division, art by artists with African backgrounds is not very present in European art institutions. Our visits to some West-African institutions and the discussions with artists, curators and other intellectuals made clear that they are concerned with issues and themes relevant and interesting to the contemporary art world. Project '1975' takes our findings and SMBA's extended network as a point of departure. In this framework we will organize exhibitions in and outside the SMBA, lectures, artists talks and other events. In that sense the Project is a more public continuation of "Africa Reflected," though it is broader and not restricted to African issues. The program is planned to be a project in progress.

AF: What is the significance of 1975 in relation to globalization and colonialism?

JB/KW: The good thing about this title is that it leads to the discussions we want to have. Is it a year or something else? If a year, what happened then and how does it relate to '1975'? One answer is that in 1975 Suriname became in-

dependently from the Netherlands and finally, though relatively late and after finishing its colonial projects in Indonesia (1949) and New Guinea (1963), entered its own post-colonial era. Talking about the Dutch post-colonial era is complicated not only because a few islands in the Caribbean continue to have close governmental ties with Holland but also because it is not always clear what relationships the Netherlands still have with former colonies. Moreover, the globalized economy is characterized by interdependencies that in many ways can be termed colonial. That is where Africa enters our Dutch picture again: contemporary globalization. Processes of globalization are complicated and difficult to grasp but that does not hinder artists from engaging in them through their work.

AF: As European curators dealing with 'Africa' it can be argued that there is something inherently problematic, or post-colonial about your project...

JB/KW: We really don't want to suggest that we can deal with 'Africa' or show what 'African Art' is — we'd rather leave that to people like Okwui Enwezor and Chika Okeke-Agulu. We are no experts but we want to focus on the manifold viewpoints of transnational issues from the perspective of SMBA. We don't need 'African Art' for that matter, but to us ignoring art and artists that might be related to that term just doesn't make sense anymore. Amsterdam has been involved in global processes for a long time. The Netherlands have had economic relations with African people and countries for ages. Instead of uncritically celebrating this involvement we would like to provide a platform for cultural producers to shed light on underexposed issues. The program does not focus on post-colonial theory, it is much broader than that. Exhibition practices based on post-colonial theory always come across as belated, as if they have to compensate for something ignored in the past. Post-colonial theory is not the only theoretical framework through which art from Africa should be analyzed. We would like to communicate as many possible views and provide diverse perspectives on the work of artists and experts. In that sense, SMBA enters the global era consciously in regards to the ambiguity of its endeavor that both promotes transnational cultural exchange and looks critically at it.