INSIDE BURGER COLLECTION

Preceding Backwards: Forensic Interventions as Artistic Practice

DIGGING FOR REDEMPTION

NADIA KAABI-LINKE AND TIMO KAABI-LINKE

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Sometimes an artistic idea is born out of a gesture that can be as simple as a child's manipulation of objects or digging in the earth. However, there is something that artists don't have in common with children: artlessness. Like any adult, artists are not innocent—the games they play follow certain intentions and interests; they apply techniques and strategies to attain their goals. An artistic gesture, if carefully and subversively applied to the right context, can alter common opinion and reshape our perspectives on history. Thus an aesthetic practice can have political meanings, albeit very different from political actions. Here we touch upon the great opposition of the adult game. Art seems to be a beautiful lie, since it employs fiction to tell the truth, whereas politics—if motivated by sound morality—applies the truth to tell stories that justify political actions. Where these two extremes get too close together we find either propaganda (if we look at the political outcomes), or pedagogy (if we look at the artistic intentions). In this working report on the preparations for an exhibition at the Mosaic Rooms in London, we want to focus on a gesture that underlies three artistic inventions—a gesture as simple as a child digging in the dirt and exploring the earth.

The Future Rewound and The Cabinet of Souls, 2014

*The exhibit consists of two parts, which are reflected in the title "The Future Rewound and the Cabinet of Souls." Both themes are site-specifically related to the history of the building Tower House, which during the late Victorian period was the home of the Hungarian musician, dancer and impresario Imre Kiralfy (1845–1919). He became the general director for London Exhibitions Limited at the Earls Court Exhibition Centre, and under his guidance, the Centre changed its program from national spectacles to colonial exhibits. The works presented in the exhibition encourage a new look at the history of this building while applying the premise of its contemporaneity. What once had been and left traces are now reactivated: elements that might influence the present moment. The works of "The Future Rewound" section (***No** *[2012],* **Modulor II** *[2014],* **A Colour of Time** *[Tower House, London, 2014],* **Perspectives [Bank Junction, London]** *[2014] and* **All Along the Watchtower** *[2012]) deal mainly with themes that determine the relationship between an individual, the small world that every subject is able to perceive and understand, and the abstract systems of order and control that give shape to modern societies and manage the coexistence of about seven billion human beings through coordinated conflicts and crises. "The Cabinet of Souls" instead emphasizes elements that modern societies appear unable to see or to control. The works within this section (***Faces** *[2014],* **Tunisian Americans** *(2012) and* **Impunities-London Originals** *[2012]) are like traces and evidences of a force from the past (Orson Welles) that could permanently alter the structures of power.*

– "The Future Rewound" and "The Cabinet of Souls"
October 10–November 29, 2014, The Mosaic Rooms, London

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THE TOWER HOUSE

The Mosaic Rooms is located in Tower House in West Kensington, a building that lies at the busy junction of Cromwell Road and Earls Court Road and quite close to the Earls Court Exhibition Centre that originally opened in 1887. Before we started to think about the exhibition, we studied the floor plans and browsed images of the venues. We came to realize that compared to other exhibition spaces, the so-called Grand Room on the ground-floor level looked rather like a former living room that was refurbished into a gallery space. It has a huge French door on the west side, and a niche indicating a former fireplace on the east side. The walls and ceilings are still decorated with opulent stucco and the large northern wall is intersected by three French windows. It was evident that this space, now used primarily as a temporal dwelling for artworks, had once been a residential property. For whom? Rachael Jarvis, head curator of the Mosaic Rooms, collected as many archival materials as possible to gather more information about the history of the building. In the archives at the Museum of London, we found very old photographs of the building's Victorian interiors dating back to the late 19th century. Ornate schemes including figures and foliate patterns and a wide collection of colonial objects suggest wealth. This "Grand Room" was the retreat where Imre Kiralfy discovered his inspiration (fig. 1). Six years before he moved into Tower House, where he lived from 1896 until his death in 1919, Kiralfy had been invited to London to raise the spectacle *Venice in London* at Olympia. At this time the Earls Court Exhibition Centre was running an annual sequence of nationally themed shows—each year representing a different country—until a significant event took place at Earls Court. "Imre Kiralfy, Harold Hartley and Paul Cremieu-Javal came together to form the nucleus of London Exhibitions Limited, with Kiralfy becoming the General Director." From this moment onward, this annual series of exhibitions was dropped and the Earls Court brought the attractions of the colonial empire to the London public. The success of the first of such colonial exhibitions allowed Kiralfy to occupy the luxurious mansion near the Exhibition Centre and design it to his liking.

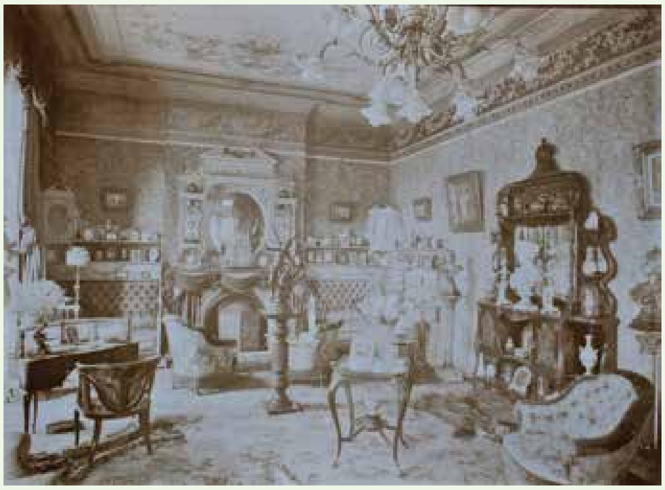


Fig. 1 – Grand Room of the Tower House, London, c. 1900, archival photograph. Courtesy the Museum of London, London.

KIRALFY'S GOLD

We decided to intensify our research through on-site investigations. We peeled off some paint from the ceiling to find out whether the original decorations still remained under the newer layers of white emulsion. An examination of the ceiling bed at different places brought us to the conclusion that the original plaster had been removed and replaced by a modern pink-colored plaster. But after further testing, we found gold on the moldings in the center of the ceiling (fig. 2). A cross-section scan confirmed our assumptions: what we had found was Kiralfy's gold, which had been mined in the colonies of the British Empire. The image of the scan shows the surface of gold leaf, onto which layers of white emulsion, cream oil paint and off-white distemper would later be applied (figs. 3 & 4). These findings convinced us to go on and peel off the paint from the ornamental structure in the center of the ceiling.

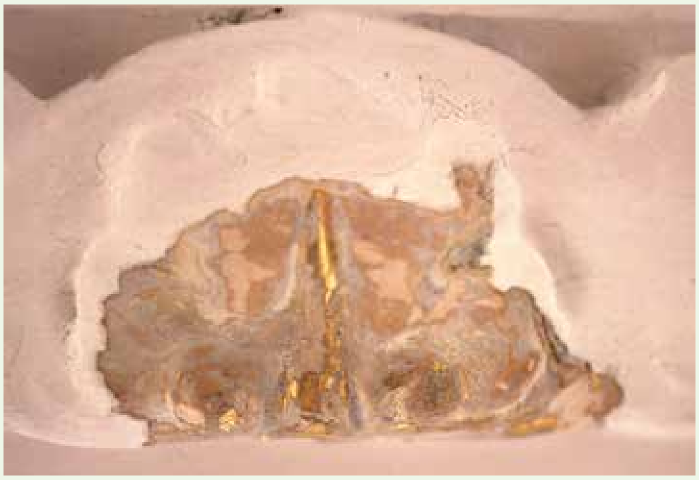


Fig. 2 – Exposed gold on the moldings in the Grand Room, Tower House, London, 2014. Photo and courtesy Timo Kaabi-Linke

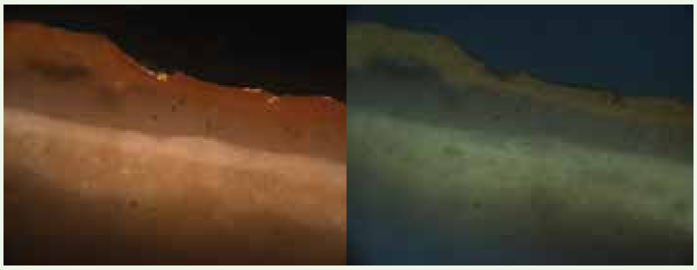


Fig. 3/4 – (Left) Cross-section scan of gold on the moldings. (Right) Ultraviolet scan. Copyright Helen Hughes: Historic Interiors Research & Conservation, London.

A Colour of Time (Tower House, London), 2014

The work is part of the "Future Rewound" section and consists of an intervention in the Grand Room, the main exhibition venue of the Mosaic Rooms, and a painting that resulted from the intervention. The painting is made with pieces of paint that were peeled off from stucco on the ceiling. According to archival photographs of the building's interior during the Victorian period, the molding had comprised the mounting of a luster. It was originally decorated with oil paint and gold leaf. First we revealed the gilded moldings to uncover remains of the obvious wealth of the former tenants, then we collected the scraped-off pieces of emulsion paint and distemper to *pulverise it into a pigment-like powder. Before the AM Qattan Foundation refurbished Tower House, it had been home for the London Academy of Music and Dramatic Arts. During World War II, it was the address of an army officers' club. During these times the original ceiling had been removed and replaced by a new pink-colored plaster ceiling, yet the molding area remained intact. From time to time it was repainted with white emulsion. These newer layers will provide the material for a site-specific color of time.*

– A Colour of Time*, 2014*
Pigments on canvas

The starting point of our work is often a certain material and Kiralfy's gold was definitely a good enough starting point. The material was also closely related to the gesture of digging; we wondered how far or how deep this gesture would get us into the histories of the Earls Court Exhibition Centre, London and the British Empire.

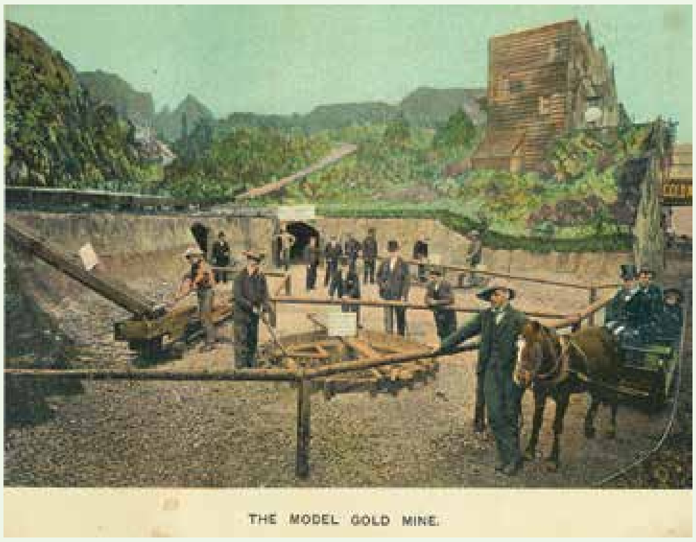


Fig. 6 – The Model Gold Mine. Courtesy Bill Tonkin and Exhibition Study Group.

THE GILDED TRUTH

In 1899, the Earls Court Exhibition Centre hosted a colonial exhibition titled "Greater Britain Exhibition" (fig. 5). It was the fourth colonial exhibition with Kiralfy functioning as general. The main exhibit of the show was the *Mining Section* (fig. 6), organized with the help of Cecil J. Rhodes, managing director of the Chartered Company and former prime minister of Cape Colony in South Africa at the time. The principal attraction of the exhibition was *Kaffir Kraal* on the east side of the Queens Court, a compound of mud huts (fig. 7) with wild animals and 174 South Africans who were transported to London by the South African entrepreneur Frank E. Fillis. Further attractions included famous war scenes depicted on *Feszty's Panorama* and equestrian spectacles performed daily in the Empress Theatre, which was billed as "Savage South Africa: A Vivid, Realistic and Picturesque Representation of Life in the Wilds of Africa" (fig. 8).

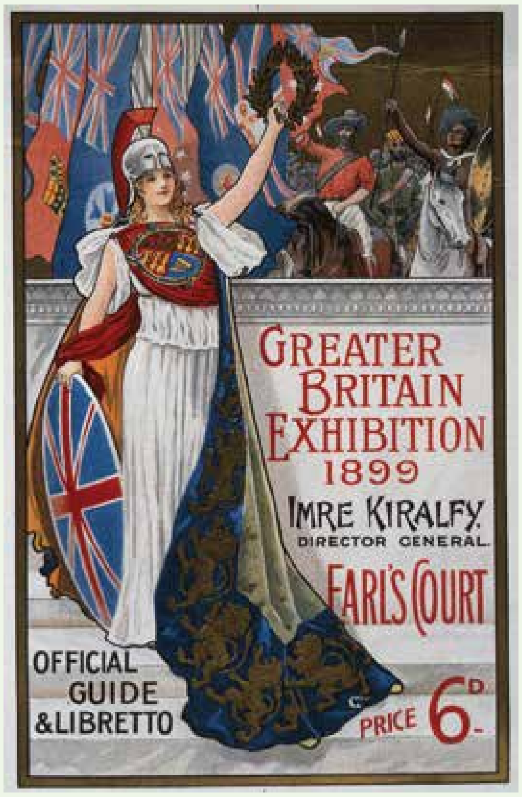

GREATER BRITAIN EXHIBITION 1899
IMRE KIRALFY. DIRECTOR GENERAL.
EARL'S COURT
OFFICIAL GUIDE &LIBRETTO
PRICE 6D.

Fig. 5 – Official guide of "Greater Britain Exhibition" at Earls Court, London, 1899. Copyright The National Archives, Surrey.

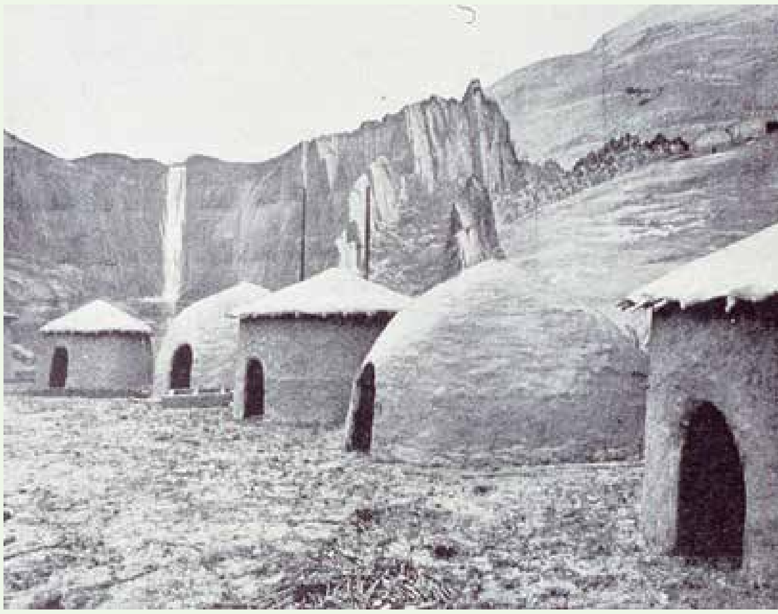
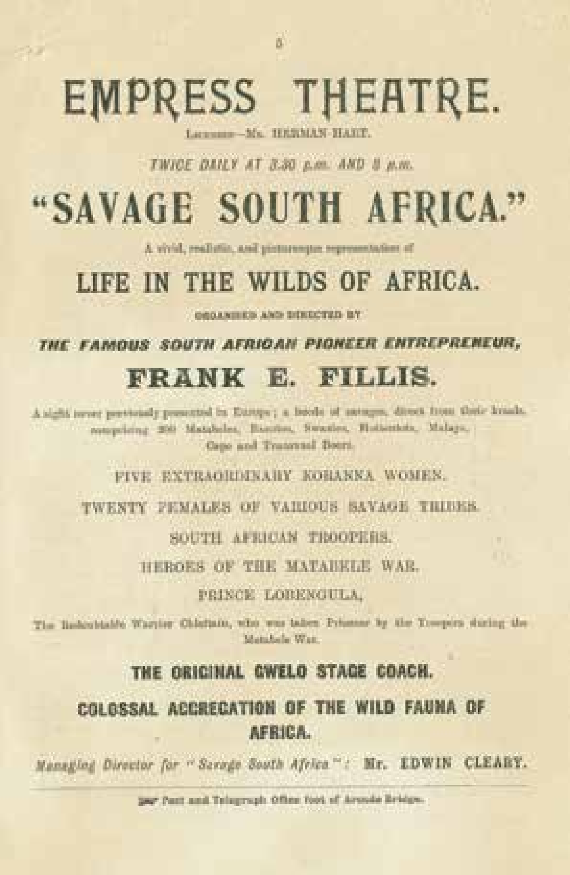


Fig. 7 – The compound of mud huts near Queens Court, London. Courtesy Ben Shephard.

In 35 huts were housed the 174 men, women and children "comprising the coloured portion of this strange community—the first band of primitive savages ever landed in Europe," explained the guidebook to the exhibition. Each of the four tribes—Zulu, Basuto, Mtabele and Swazi—was accommodated in separate quarters, where they were supposed to "live and occupy themselves just as they do in the Bush, or on the veldt of their own native wilds" (Greater Britain Exhibition 1899, 28). The compound was entirely made up to be the main attraction on the amusement side of the "Greater Britain Exhibition." "Cranes stalk majestically around and about the huts, giant tortoises bask in the sunshine or wander, apparently, aimlessly about the village." A panorama in the background showed a scene on the borders of Zululand.

The stagings at the Empress Theatre seemed to follow one purpose: to present to the London public the very definition of savagery that was allegedly to be found in the veldts of South Africa. An autobiographical booklet by Fillis about this "Savage South Africa" opens with a historical



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EMPRESS THEATRE.

Lessee—Mr. HERMAN HART.

TWICE DAILY AT 3.30 p.m. AND 8 p.m.

"SAVAGE SOUTH AFRICA."

A vivid, realistic, and picturesque representation of

LIFE IN THE WILDS OF AFRICA.

ORGANISED AND DIRECTED BY

THE FAMOUS SOUTH AFRICAN PIONEER ENTREPRENEUR,

FRANK E. FILLIS.

A sight never previously presented in Europe; a horde of savages, direct from their kraals, comprising 200 Matabeles, Basutos, Swazies, Hottentots, Malays, Cape and Transvaal Boers.

FIVE EXTRAORDINARY KORANNA WOMEN.

TWENTY FEMALES OF VARIOUS SAVAGE TRIBES.

SOUTH AFRICAN TROOPERS.

HEROES OF THE MATABELE WAR.

PRINCE LOBENGULA,

The Indomitable Warrior Chieftain, who was taken Prisoner by the Troopers during the Matabele War.

THE ORIGINAL GWELO STAGE COACH.

COLOSSAL AGGREGATION OF THE WILD FAUNA OF AFRICA.

Managing Director for "Savage South Africa": Mr. EDWIN CLEARY.

☞ Post and Telegraph Office foot of [illegible] Bridge.

Fig. 8 – "Savage South Africa" announcement. Daily program. Copyright The National Archives, Surrey.

sketch about South Africa, stating that "Memphis, Carthage, Alexandria and Cairo, at different periods, were world-cities: yet the vast interior and the whole coast line . . . remained in savagery and darkness as black as its people" (Fillis, 3). Thus the South Africans were represented as Matabele warriors, "a fierce and undaunted race which, at one time, caused the British Government much grave anxiety" (Greater Britain Exhibition 1899, 37). They were all equipped with shields and spears (assegais)—lethal weapons used in the Anglo-Zulu War (1879) against the imperial forces and their machine guns.

The illustrations of the spectacle in the exhibition guide and Fillis's booklet follow the same line representing the heroism of single members of British forces who, after a hard struggle and many sacrifices, finally installed imperial law in "Savage South Africa." Either one or two brave colonial troopers were depicted in desperate situations fighting to the last bullet against a wild bunch of Zulu warriors, singing "God Save the Queen" until they died under a rain of assegais. On other pages, "packs" of half-naked South Africans with martial feather decorations and grim looks—always as a collective—were shown. Single characters, heroism and individual braveness were exclusive to English actors, whereas the South Africans appear as a wild horde.

A closer look at the archival photographs led us to doubt these representations. Tendencies toward defamation of South Africans and the establishment of mythical narratives of the Empire were too obvious. A close-up of the faces of the young men from the Cape confirmed our doubts: the misery and the resignation in their eyes suggest that they were aware of being extras in a blockbuster minstrel show. Deported to London, they were exploited to play the exotic savage who was the necessary requisite in a staging planned to reinforce "the pride of ordinary Britons in the variety and might of the Empire" (Ward and Moberly 1999).

Harold Hartley, one of Kiralfy's partners, recalls that various colonial governments that had taken part in the exhibition were very satisfied with its outcomes (Hartley 1939, 103). He adds that although "there were many important exhibits from South Africa . . . the Colonial government did not take part officially," but he failed to question why. In fact, the management of the "Greater Britain Exhibition" had to overcome many obstacles before the show could finally open. The colonial government in South Africa objected to the *Kaffir Kraal* project, arguing that it was not evident how the London public would have been given a chance to learn more about the native cultures. "Savage South Africa" was also rejected in London, where the Colonial Secretary was urged to take action and reveal who was behind the show (Shephard 2003, 73). Criticism on the representation of native tribes came mainly from several colonial newspapers. But for Hartley the representation was authentic. The guests were accommodated in a way that "repeated as nearly as possible the conditions under which they lived in their native country" (Hartley 1939, 104).

Many years later appeared a photograph taken in the compound of "Savage South Africa" that shows a congregation of fully dressed South Africans sitting around an English priest and listening to his prayers. According to Ward and Moberly, it was unlikely that these kinds of photos were shown to the London public, since "they wanted to see real wild Africans, not brothers in Christ" (1999).

"Savage South Africa" may have been the largest event that brought South Africans to London, but it was neither the first one nor the last. Saartjie Baartman, "the Hottentot Venus," had caused great excitement when she was exhibited in a freak show at Piccadilly Circus in 1810. She was shown like a wild beast, put in a cage that was raised a few feet above the floor. Then she was ordered to move forward and backward like a bear on a chain. A group of humanitarians, disgusted with this display, challenged the promoter in court. But, according to historian Ben Shephard, when interrogated in Dutch, Saartjie insisted she was not under restraint and even declared that she had negotiated a 50 percent share of all profits (2003, 59). What she did was not so different from what performance artists—thinking of Oleg Kulik's man-dog performance—do today.

Closer to the date of the "Greater Britain Exhibition," a South African choir had toured Britain in order to raise funds for a Christian school project in their home country. They performed even for Queen Victoria and had great success. Due to their religious affiliation, they even qualified for a series of 30 individual stereoscopic portraits that must have been quite expensive at the time.

South Africa was not as savage and fierce as the Fillis spectacle suggested. Many of the imported "savages" gave interviews to journalists from different European newspapers and they did this not exclusively in English but also in Afrikaans, Dutch and German. Some of them appeared to the journalists to be of "refined manners" with "dignified and elegant language skills." The deeper we dug into the historical context of the colonial show, the more we found that the representation of South Africans at the Empress Theatre and *Kaffir Kraal* was a propaganda spectacle for the purpose of triggering racism and cutting off the individuality and personality of the African guests.

Faces, 2014

The history of portraiture has been a history of political and religious leaders, successful entrepreneurs and nobles. First with the invention and broad distribution of photographic techniques, the portrait became available to ordinary people. At the end of the 19th century, the high price of developing a plate rendered single-sitter portraits inaccessible. It became the custom to have family portraits taken instead, which would later allow one to reproduce single portraits from the very same plate. The traditional family portrait is not so much different from the group portraits from the "Savage South Africans" actors. We have found two original photographs in an archive in Durban and one duplicate copy of an original antiquarian print in London. We reproduced digital scans from these source materials (fig. 9) and treated them in the same way that a negative plate of a family portrait would have been used around 1900. We focused on each face and reproduced it as a single portrait (fig. 10). We realized that the old-fashioned oval shape was more than just a format that framed the human face. It also allows one to hide the surroundings and background of the image—maybe a reason why the oval shape was so popular for small portraitures.

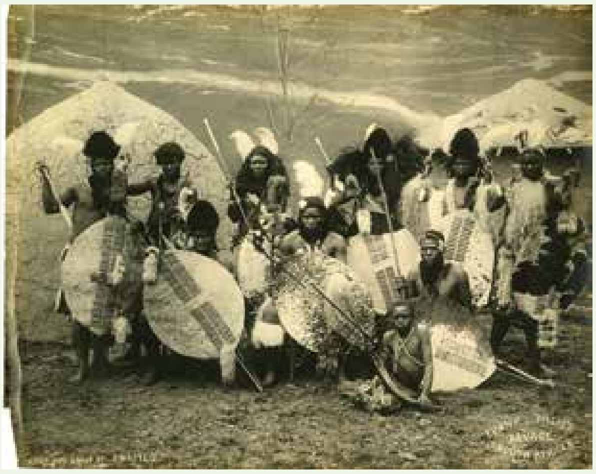

Fig. 9 – Chief and a group of Swazies. Part of a series of archival photographs, 1899. Copyright Killie Campbell Collections, University of KwaZulu - Natal, Durban.

The work on the three source images was a repetitive and mechanical procedure, but the simple gesture behind these routines was to unwrap the remembrance of the South Africans who were stranded in London at the Empire's narratives and—at least in a symbolic way—to redeem the extinction of their individuality.

– Faces*, 2014*

Series of portraits taken from archival prints dated 1899

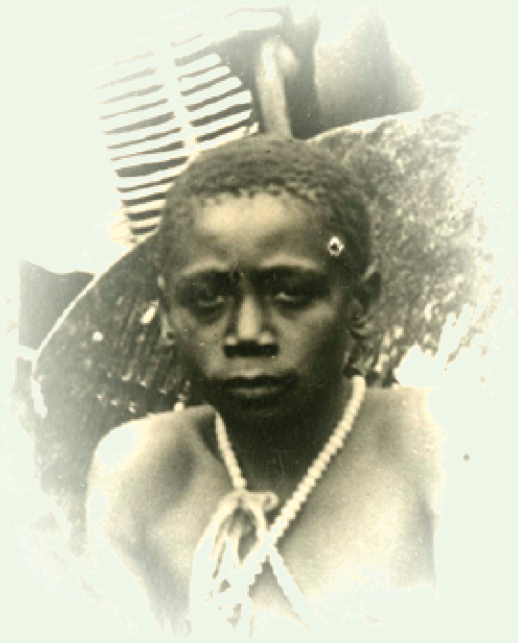

Fig. 10 – **NADIA KAABI-LINKE**, portraiture of a boy taken from archival photograph of a chief and a group of Swazies. Courtesy the artist.

According to Hartley—if his brain did not dupe him this time again—the *Kaffir Kraal* and the equestrian spectacles were brought to light with the assistance of Cecil Rhodes. As already mentioned, the "Savage South Africa" spectacle had some hurdles to cross, but ultimately Rhodes secured the project with his checkbook. Since the South African episode was not backed by the support of the Colonial Office, but only by sponsorships from the Chartered Company and the authorities of Rhodesia, one can assume that it was but one man who insisted that this play came to stage: Cecil "the Colossus" Rhodes.

Rhodes first journeyed to South Africa in 1871 and joined the rush to Kimberley shortly before it became a mining bonanza. According to Shephard, "diamonds [were] his making" (2003, 15). After 15 years as a "digger," he finally won a mine. By the end of the 1880s he had managed, "by extraordinary chicanery and wire-pulling," to bring the entire industry into a single company. He applied modern management techniques, invested in new machinery and fired most of the company's white labor; furthermore he erected a strictly protected labor camp in order to prevent theft. After several setbacks in the search of gold on British territories, and after a failed attempt to trigger a rebellion among the Boers in the Transvaal, his political career and reputation in England were in ruins. He then made plans to seize Zambezia, a vast territory between the Transvaal and Central Africa, which already attracted the interest of the Boers, the Germans and the Portuguese. But Rhodes's first step was the land of the Matabele and the Mashona.

The Matabele were a sub-tribe of the Zulu who came up in the 1830s and brought the Mashona people under control. Concession-hunters, missionaries and traders frequented the Matabele king Lobengula after decades of trying to extract mineral rights and land grants without success. Rhodes somehow managed, "with a deft combination of threats and the inducement of a thousand rifles" (Shephard 2003, 18), to extract permission to look for mineral wealth in the north of the Mashonaland. In 1890 he stretched this concession to the limit and sent a column of 186 pioneers equipped with machine guns and searchlights. The king was alarmed but did not dare intervene.

According to Shephard, Rhodes had only one interest in that region: gold. After the land of the Mashonas was found lacking in precious metal and minerals, he turned to the Matabeleland itself and pretended to defend the Mashona against their oppressors. Lobengula was provoked into a war that finally caused a revolt of both the Matabele and the placid, politically disunited Mashona who welcomed the British only two years ago. Casual murders among the white settlers occurred frequently until, in 1896, the Matabele were defeated with machine guns and dynamite. These actions did not help to reestablish Rhodes's reputation either among British colonial officers or in London. In the face of such setbacks, Rhodes found himself in need of counterpropaganda. After he met Frank E. Fillis, "the Barnum of the Black Continent," in his amphitheater in Johannesburg, he made plans for a campaign that he hoped would justify his actions and restore his reputation by displaying the savagery of South African people to a larger public.

Of course, it is horrifying that many white settlers—not only men but women and children too—were killed during the Matabele wars. But it's also not surprising that neither the Mashona nor the Matabele would give up their grounds without resistance. For the European immigrants, South Africa was just a place to make a new life. After all it would have been possible to leave and start again somewhere else. For the natives, however, this was a home to which they felt spiritually bound. A common structure of African mythology is one's connection to the soil, both a spatial and a temporal entity. Places also carry a temporal meaning, since they are connected with the lifetime of a people. In many African religions, people are not immediately dead after dying, they just change their mode of being. Instead of living they become the living-dead, which does not mean that they are gone. They remain among the living and they even take care of them for as long as the latter recall their names and share feelings for them. Later, after the last person who had a personal relation to the deceased dies, the living-dead go ahead and leave the world of the present existence (the Sasa) to enter the eternal horizon of the spirits and gods (the Zamani). Thus, being displaced from their soil by any reason—let it be digger's greed or warfare—would have meant to leave behind the deceased who were still part of their lives.

This kind of thinking is quite different from Western ideologies and traditions of remembrance. Near Carthage in Tunisia lies a huge American war cemetery. The place is organized in rectangles and is very well maintained. White tombstones stand in perfect order row by row, column by column. If known, the names of the 2,841 dead soldiers and civil forces are engraved on the stones, with each one's service number engraved on the stone's back.

The men came to North Africa during the so-called Tunisia Campaign that started in summer 1942 and ended in winter 1943, when the Allies fought the Axis powers, mainly the German Wehrmacht, on the Mediterranean and the hinterland of North Africa.

When we first saw the cemetery many years ago, we were asking ourselves "why here?," "what brought these soldiers to Africa?" and "why do they symbolically still occupy this ground long after they have died?" We realized that this was a general question that could be applied to any warfare in which soldiers are sent to another continent in order to defend their country's national borders. It is a difficult concept to comprehend, thus ideology must be the reason. This ideology differs drastically from the mythology of many African people. While they would fight for the right to stay where they are—because otherwise they would break the connection with their ancestors who have protected them—Europeans and Americans have long showed the tendency to occupy other places in order to fight and, of course, to die there. Today it is possible to travel around the globe and visit American, French and British war cemeteries on each of the six continents. This is the result of a mode of thought very different from native African mythologies and, we are sure, it must be quite hard to understand for a "savage" mind.

London, October 2014
Nadia Kaabi-Linke and Timo Kaabi-Linke

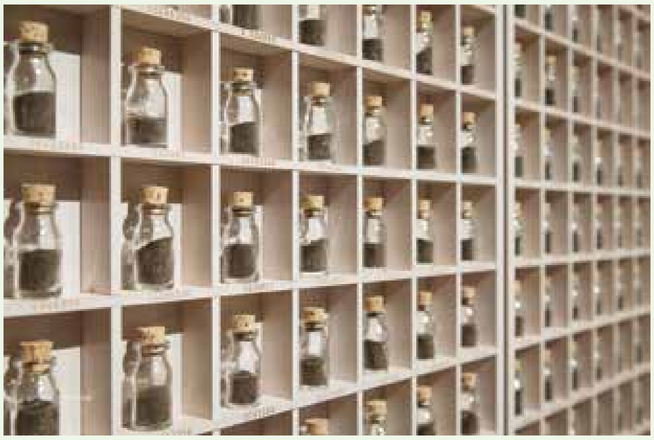

Fig. 11 – **NADIA KAABI-LINKE**, *Tunisian Americans* (detail), 2012, glass, cork, wood and soil, 145.6 x 135.6 x 5.2 cm. Photo by Paolo Costa. Courtesy the artist.

Tunisian Americans, 2012

Patriotism is a strange ideology. Not enough people raise the question of how it can motivate someone to defend his or her country's border within the border of another country and on a different continent. Nadia collected Tunisian soil at an American war cemetery near Tunis and placed it in small bottles that are used to sell kohl. Four hundred bottles are arranged in four type-cases, the shapes of which are derived from the sections on the memorial site. Each bottle corresponds to a number that is engraved on the bottom of a casket, to which the bottle belongs. The numbers are American service numbers of the soldiers and civilians who died in the Tunisia Campaign (fig. 11).

Following a German tradition, the type-case was used by children and housewives to bring order to their private collections of very small souvenirs and curiosities. After having gone obsolete with the invention of printing, these cases were supposed to be kinds of mini-memorials for every household. However, they turned out to be quite the opposite. Anything that once has been put into such cases escaped from the mind. Instead of displaying the little fetishes, the type-case rather helped one to forget them.

Why the bottles? We decided to use them because of the Oriental fairytale of "the genie in the bottle." However, in **Tunisian Americans** *it's not a ghost that is captured in the bottle, but the earth that becomes a symbol for the body of the dead soldier. 2,841 of these lost bodies decomposed in Tunisian soil.*

– Tunisian Americans, *2012*
Glass, cork, wood and soil
145.6 x 135.6 x 5.2 cm

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