Seeing from Secular Spaces

Ruba Katrib

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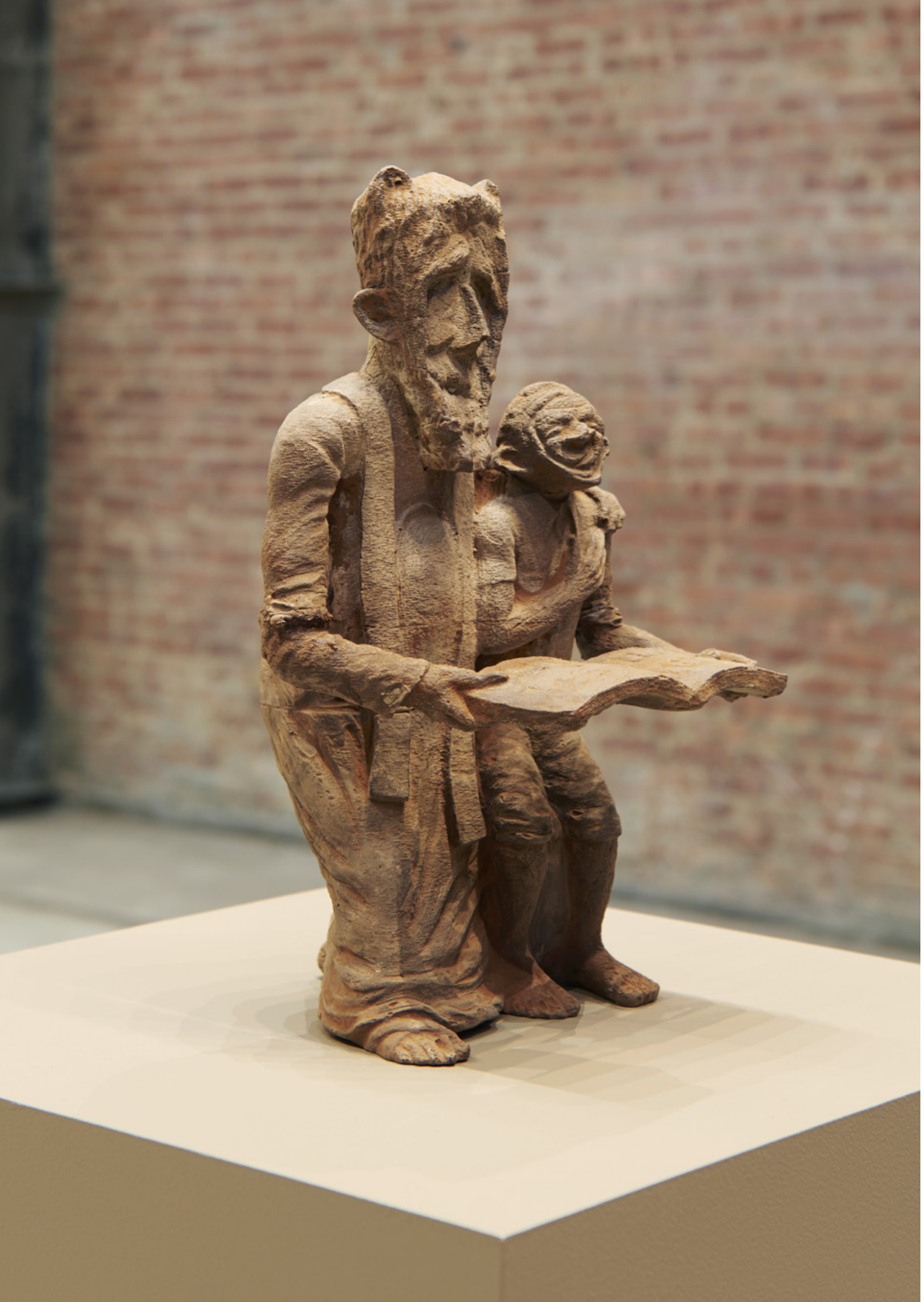
Abstract

What are some of the issues at play when minority religious perspectives are brought into the discourse of contemporary art? Following an exhibition of the Cercle d'Art des Travailleurs de Plantation Congolaise (CATPC) at SculptureCenter in New York City, several considerations around the presentation and representation of traditional spiritual beliefs and their hybrids are assessed. Questions around the decolonisation of the spiritual come to the fore: how are religions deemed primitive considered and accommodated within contemporary art discourse? From secular academic perspectives, it is important to leave space for traditional beliefs and their contemporary hybrids to emerge without over-determination. Reducing, misinterpreting, over-intellectualising, and fetishising minority religions within works of art can reproduce damaging colonial frameworks. How can contemporary art in the European and American contexts navigate the presentation of a more diverse range of artists so that they may retain respect for traditional spiritual belief systems, and allow audiences to grasp part of their meaning?



"How My Grandfather Survived", Cedrick Tamasala, 2015. Installation view, SculptureCenter, New York, 2017. Chocolate. 15 × 8.3 × 9.4 inches (38 × 21 × 24 cm). Courtesy the Cercle d'Art des Travailleurs de Plantation Congolaise; Galerie Fons Welters, Amsterdam; and KOW, Berlin. Photograph by Kyle Knodell.

A sculpture made by Congolese artist and plantation worker Cedrick Tamasala, *How my Grandfather Survived* (2015), features a wise man—as indicated by a long beard and cloak—standing next to a boy and showing him an open book, presumably a bible. There is a large phrase imprinted in the pages, "heureux les pauvres", referring to the biblical phrase, "blessed are the poor". The work evokes the story of Tamasala's grandfather, who was saved from poverty by a British missionary. It was included in a recent exhibition curated by myself at SculptureCenter in New York City, where artworks by Congolese plantation workers were on view, all of whom are members of the Cercle d'Art des Travailleurs de Plantation Congolaise (CATPC). The central aspect of the union's work as artists is sculptures fabricated from mud in the rural plantation town of Lusanga where they are based. After they are constructed, the sculptures are photographed in Lusanga so that molds can be 3D printed in Amsterdam. They are then cast in Belgian chocolate, a material reference to Congo's colonial history, as well as the cocoa beans and palm oil fruit that the workers gather for multi-national corporations for poverty wages. The sculptures, and more recently, drawings and video works made by the members of CATPC, circulate in exhibition venues and commercial art contexts throughout the Euro-American art world.

In the exhibition, most of the content of the artwork engaged with spiritual beliefs and activities, enmeshed with representations of multinational corporate systems. Within a mixed group of artworks depicting ritual and folk beliefs, Tamasala's sculpture offers one of the most direct critiques of Congolese colonial history in its depiction of Christian missionaries who were deployed by Belgium to convert the native population. The phrase "blessed are the poor"

is filled with tragic irony, as it is well documented that colonial era Christianity was imposed on the Congolese people to the detriment of existing religious practices and cultures; especially in regards the victims of forced labour, who were expected to give up any desire for wealth and power, abdicating many of their rights in the name of Christian religious piety. Now entrenched in the full-blown capitalist exploitation of the twenty-first century—of a different order than that experienced by his grandfather—Tamasala has joined a union of artists who are selling artworks within the commercial market, and the profits are reinvested in their activities in Lusanga. The money they may potentially earn from their artworks, some of which are made from the same raw material they gather for pennies, can bring substantial capital to their impoverished community. The members of CATPC—defined as agricultural workers who have also become artists—are aided in these efforts by European nationals, as well as by a few wealthier and educated Congolese citizens.[1]

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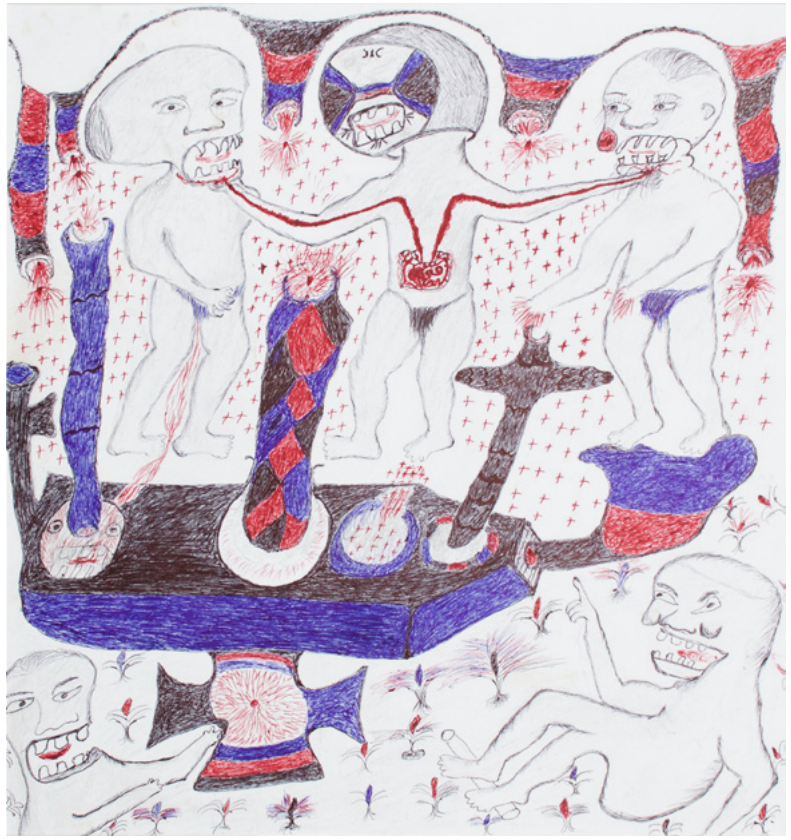
Plantation workers Djonga Bismar, Mathieu Kilapi Kasiama, Cedrick Tamasala, Mbuku Kimpala, Mananga Kibuila, Jérémie Mabiala, Emery Mohamba, and Thomas Leba come from three plantations in the south of the DRC. Together with ecologist Rene Ngongo and the Kinshasa-based artists Michel Ekeba, Eléonore Hellio, and Mega Mingiedi they form the organisation's leading personalities. Currently, the CATPC is actively recruiting new members. See http://www.humanactivities.org/en/catpc/ (Accessed 2017-07-26.)



"Si j'avais su", Daniel Mvuzi, 2016. Ink and graphite on paper. 12.2 × 13 inches (31 × 33 cm). Courtesy the Cercle d'Art des Travailleurs de Plantation Congolaise; Galerie Fons Welters, Amsterdam; and KOW, Berlin. Photograph by Ernst van Deursen.

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Mignolo, Walter D. *The Darker Side of Western Modernity. Global Futures, Decolonial Options*. Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press. 2011. p. 13.

The system of critique that the artists, their works, and the project organisers engage in is complex, fascinating, and has a tendency to overshadow the highly visible belief-oriented content of their works. However, the capacity to receive and engage with the spiritual aspects of these works in relation to their sociopolitical and economic entanglements is certainly possible within the sphere of contemporary art, although it is difficult to do so without creating an intellectual remove from the religious content. How can viewers outside of the artists' community ascertain and articulate the spiritual significance of the artworks to their makers, and its meaning within a local and international context? Further, the religious content within the artwork is tied to Western categories of "primitive" beliefs. Spiritual traditions in former colonies have often been systematically prohibited and viewed as anachronistic. The "progress" that imperial powers imposed was not only technological, but also cultural, including European religious views. The priest who helped Tamasala's grandfather also disabused him of what were perceived to be "primitive" religious views. Yet, aspects related to those beliefs are evident in the contemporary work of CATPC. How is this religious belief system received now?

As Walter Mignolo has discussed, the production of knowledge through a Western secular lens in many ways has had catastrophic global impacts—often replacing the power of religion in the West —and continues to reproduce colonial frameworks if not properly interrogated and revised. Historically, Mignolo explains, "as far as knowledge was conceived imperially as true knowledge, it became a commodity to be exported to those whose knowledge was deviant or non-modern according to Christian theology and, later on, secular philosophy and sciences."[2] Mignolo argues that the colonial era's theological approach towards dominance also underpins secular institutions. To interrogate these power structures, strategies towards decolonisation are required, which also extends into the spiritual. The colonisation of spiritual beliefs comprises a realm that must also be freed from a particular imperial and secular outlook, which poses challenges to academic perspectives and formations of rationality within contemporary art. As the field of contemporary art attempts to be more inclusive of non-Western and indigenous artists (made evident in two major exhibitions in 2017, documenta 14 and the Venice Biennale), it is imperative to address the modes of which the spiritual is comprised, practised, and orders

systems of knowledge that may seem contradictory to secular reason. Further, it is essential to examine tendencies to make "primitive" minor religions, and even major ones perceived as "foreign" to the West.

In the US, where the CATPC exhibition was on view, the content depicted was alien to most viewers; it was largely illegible. At first glance, there might be the inclination to fault the artists and the project for catering to Western and now well-rehearsed expectations of African art, either performing the essentialist or problematic. Indeed, the works come from the Pende region in Congo (the tribe that famously made the objects that influenced Western avant-garde artists in the early twentieth century). A hesitancy to trust the content presented as being original comes from training in the discourses of postcolonialism, which has helped create awareness around cultural exploitation, including that performed by the European avant-garde of the early twentieth century, who were inspired by ideas stolen from African art. While these considerations are appropriate, there is another facet to the works to take into account. Although objects of cultural identity were physically taken from the Pende region by colonising forces, and their activities around object making were forbidden, today it is possible to avoid inadvertently repeating these mistakes by intellectually and spiritually removing the authority CATPC has over their works in a well-intended attempt to repair past misdeeds. Contemporary iterations of complex belief systems that should not be quickly discounted are represented within the work. The artworks mean something specific to their authors, part of which plays to a Western art world, while another aspect does not. This more abstract removal of authority over cultural content continues the complexity of colonial plunder of objects and artefacts that Ariella Azoulay puts forward in a text tangentially related to the project of CATPC. She states that "... plunder cannot be studied as the mere appropriation of discrete objects; it must simultaneously be analyzed as the destruction of the politico-material world in which people had their distinct place, and their subsequent coercion into imperial formations."[3] How might the assumption that the artists of CATPC are accommodating Western desire—because they are overtly working with Westerners and critically circulating their works in the Euro-American art world—and thus lacking in legitimacy or authenticity as artists inadvertently reproduce colonial modes of cultural denial?

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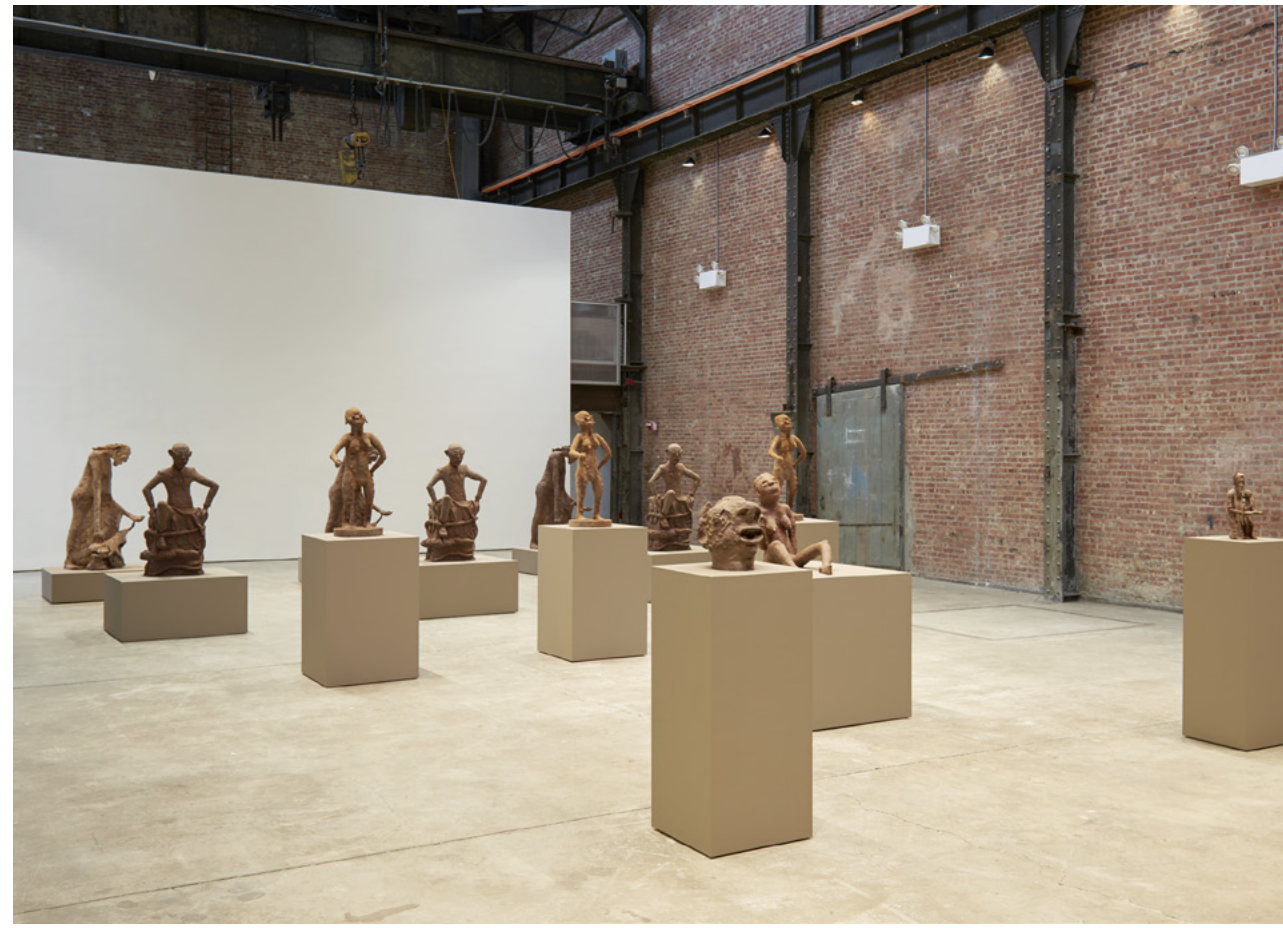
Ariella Azoulay, "Plunder, the Transcendental Condition of Modern Art and Community of Fabri". In Eva Barois de Caevel and Els Roelandt (eds.). *Cercle d'art des travailleures de plantation congolaise*. Berlin: Sternberg Press. 2017. p. 351.

Installation view, *Cercle d'Art des Travailleurs de Plantation Congolaise*, SculptureCenter, New York, 2017. Courtesy Courtesy the Cercle d'Art des Travailleurs de Plantation Congolaise and SculptureCenter. Photograph by Kyle Knodell.



Nonetheless, there is certainly room for doubt that the works by CATPC are "authentic" depictions of spiritual beliefs that belong to local culture—the depiction of a palm oil spirit in a sculpture, a religious leader performing a ceremony in a video, and in several drawings representing violent and transformative rituals, to name a few examples. Are these images of and related to true spiritual practices or are they meant to mimic a general idea of tribal depictions in art aimed at Westerners? Do they fulfil a "primitivist" fantasy of the West, or does the Western primitivist fantasy continue to undo their contemporary validity? Do they represent pre-colonial memories? Or are they truly hybrid perspectives, informed by traditional views, mixed with Christianity and

capitalist economic structures? The hybrid is the most likely, yet least legible or understandable in its seemingly contradictory formations.

For viewers of the exhibition in New York City, the exhibition generated a range of responses from excitement for its potential to change the lives of the artists to concern that it was perhaps too close to reinforcing the very systems of exploitation it critiques. However, the spiritual dimension of the works is rarely discussed; even as the primary subject matter of the works, it often becomes secondary to the initiative's conceptual intricacies. The religious content originating from the works may seem almost antithetical to the critique of the governmental and corporate exploitation of workers and the circulation of contemporary art that CATPC also engages in. That these worldviews come together under the rubric of the project is a compelling aspect, as the aesthetics of institutional critique and the spiritual are not often linked.

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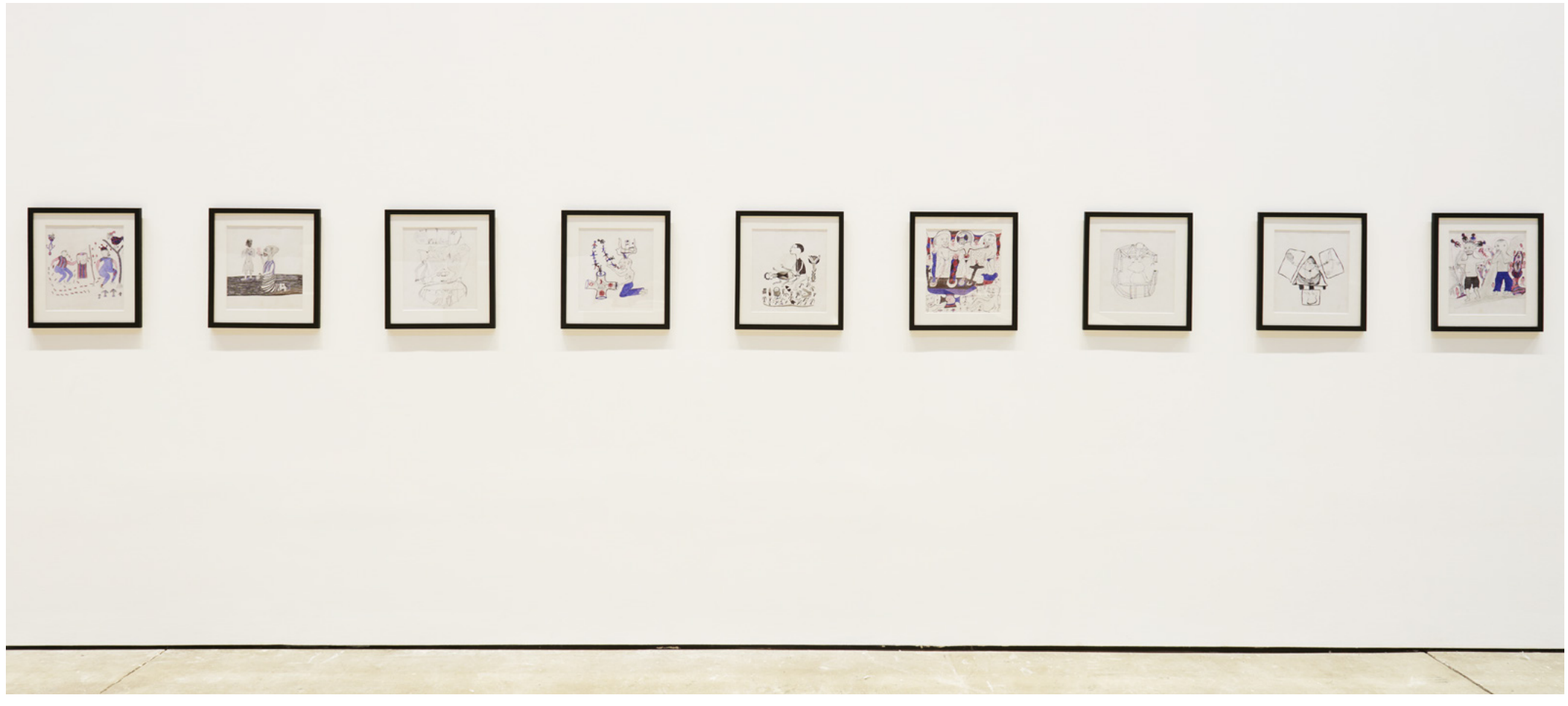
Okeke-Agulu, Chika. "Cercle d'Art des Travailleurs Congolaise". *Artforum*. May 2017; and Bishop, Claire. "Cercle d'Art des Travailleurs Congolaise". *Artforum*. May 2017. pp. 322-324

The disbelief experienced from Western academic art viewers in regards the source and meaning work upon encountering them in a secular context is part of an important critical reading, but it also creates a distancing effect to the religious aspects of the work. In two reviews of the exhibition in *Artforum*, writers Chika Okeke-Agulu and Claire Bishop both dismiss the quality of the works on view, and connect them to past instances of African artifacts made solely for Westerners.[4] It seems that they simply do not believe the artworks are sincere enough, skilful enough, or even critically aware enough to fulfil the operations they claim. The artists, however, have endowed their images and objects with power, knowing that they will circulate in places they are unable to go to themselves. Some of the artists engage in rituals around the objects and images they create as they make them. The figures and images represented originate from cosmologies, object histories, and experiences from



Installation view, *Cercle d'Art des Travailleurs de Plantation Congolaise*, Sculpture-Center, New York, 2017. Courtesy the Cercle d'Art des Travailleurs de Plantation Congolaise and Sculpture-Center. Photograph by Kyle Knodell.

daily life that are largely foreign and unknowable to those who encounter the works outside of the communities in which they were made. However, even taking all this into account, the CATCP members are perhaps still making naive art, but the content of the works is not as simply or easily comprehended as it might seem. Perhaps because the artists have entered into forms of institutional critique around their works and the systems in which it circulates, it is difficult to take the spiritual content at face value. When the content is ignored, it is almost as if the project is an empty frame, and it does not really matter what is inside. This is in part the fault of the directness of the framing, but also of the capacity of the viewers, other artists, critics, historians, curators, etc. Why do these aspects, criticality and sincere religious belief, seem at odds with contemporary art making?

The lack of attention to the works' image-based content within its reception within the Euro-American art world, and the main emphasis placed on the economic systems it engages with, is also in part tied to issues around the legibility of the religious aspects depicted in the work. This perhaps indicates a tendency towards overlooking the presence of the unfamiliar or unknowable, without the language, experience or references to engage with it. On the other hand, the discussion around the changing systems of oppression and exploitation that the artists have experienced, or the critique of contemporary art production and circulation that the project explores are more commonly employed within intellectualised art discourse. And after all, we are not exactly certain what religious activity is depicted, whether it is "authentic" or performed for our benefit. This uncertainty creates a gap in the reception of the work, highlighting that despite the evidence of religious content as part of the work, it is less easily discussed or described within the exhibition context.

While these works are intentionally shown within a Western art system, they also invoke traditions of art-making, community, and belief systems that have been appropriated and confiscated during colonial rule. They are intentionally re-invoked through this project, but they also reflect a changing culture of origin that is being consumed within the current art system—and may not behave according to expectation. As Azoulay writes briefly of this history:

> *The colonization of Africa, Asia, and the Americas facilitated the transformation of a different modality, under which objects were converted into raw materials for stocking the encyclopedic museums of the West, while the infrastructure for such practices—what permitted these objects to be performed, used, displayed, and shared in their own communities—was simultaneously destroyed.*[5]

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Azoulay, *op. cit.*, p. 348.

While pointing to religious objects and symbols and their impact on cultural formations, Azoulay speaks to historical acts of cultural seizure and their impact on communities. This discussion can be extended to the contemporary context, albeit under different conditions. While CATPC willingly show their works, and are in fact making them for the West, they are also endowing them with ritual content. It is too restrictive to only recognise the works as originating from another cultural and belief system. It is also imperative to recognise the limitations of a secular academic perspective critiquing this work. There is an aspect of these artworks that is closed off to the outsider, yet this aspect should not to be ignored or subjected to a solely Western secular scrutiny. The gaps between the construction of Western secular knowledge (as described by Mignolo) and other forms of knowledge must be acknowledged—and without falling into the impulse to transform what is unknown into something that can easily be understood or studied from a Western perspective. Perhaps letting the space exist between knowing and not-knowing may provide a means to avoid the unnecessary violence in resisting the factors and perspectives that permit these works from coming into being, versus fixating on the object of study and/or disregarding its undecipherable aspects.

What is the capacity of contemporary art institutions and discourses to engage with minority religions and practitioners—not as subjects to be studied and analysed, but as a valid way of perceiving the world? Undoubtedly, minority or other religious systems are often misunderstood, because they do not conform to the normative culture of the West. The 2017 Venice Biennale had a pavilion dedicated to the "Shaman", with a generic range of artworks depicting many, usually romanticised, ideas of a native spiritual leader. The interest espoused in this subject by the curator has become a re-inscribing of primitivist frames around an idea of "other" religious practices. These kinds

of broad generalisations are perhaps not the best way to represent a diverse, yet under-recognised, scope of living spiritual belief systems within an exhibition context. How can we avoid repeating these histories of colonialism towards other religions within the secularised field of the contemporary art world?

Within the CATPC exhibition, religion underpins the work and lives of the artists. It is a hybrid belief system, one that is unknown to me as the curator of the exhibition and to most of the viewers. I also did not fully recognise the dominance of the religious presence within the works until they were all on site and assembled together—in part because many of the drawings that contain a lot of this content were brand new, and also because the cumulative effect of this content was more evident within the exhibition space. While I cannot fully grasp the content (what exactly is being depicted, to whom, by whom, why, for what reason, etc.), I also cannot deny it. It is in the messages that the works convey; it is in the challenge experienced upon learning that the sculptures are intended as fetishes, endowed with intentions by the artists, and remembering to consider this and take it seriously when viewing the work, and not just as an amusing story to share with visitors. It is a balancing act, trying not to fall into the trap of either sterilising the spiritual dimension or exoticising it. It would be tragic to occlude the participation of artists who practice and come from other belief systems out of fear of misrepresentation, yet it is also not the place of the Westernised curator or academic to claim intimate knowledge of these perspectives. Between these approaches, there is room to explore methods for transmitting the spiritual content of the works without over-inscribing them. I admit that I did not do the best job of anticipating and elaborating on this work in terms of its spiritual aspects; however, I did not reject its presence. I would articulate this part of the project differently in the future, but I also recognise that this should not only be a curatorial concern, but one that extends to critics, historians, artists, and others who view and think about contemporary art.

Is there enough sensitivity and space within the contemporary art field to engage with the scope of beliefs and worldviews that secularism cannot encompass, even when our societies do not seem able to reconcile these differences? In contemporary art's supposed embrace of difference, particularly with indigenous artists and artists from religious countries and communities, what is the responsibility to seriously engage with the spiritual context? When minority religious positions are presented in the US, they are often done so in a negative context. The most obvious example would be the increasing fear and disdain for Islam, a major world religion that ironically has become more alien even as it becomes more familiar in the West, as it is often represented as primitive and regressive. Islam is often presented as being at odds with Western secular societies in mainstream news outlets (and as the most horrendous thing in the tabloid press). And these representations of Islam are mostly constructed from Christian majority perspectives, where actual first-hand experience of Islam is limited. Beyond the negative representations of "other" religious beliefs that clog media networks today, contemporary art is a field invested in representation, and that can consider what it means to think of religion, culture and images in a non-reductive way. Further, this is an urgent inquiry as artists come from cultures in which other religious and belief systems are dominant and are politically instituted; an aspect of the work that is often ignored.

Addressing the complexity of how images are read in regards to religious cultures, a specific concern for the field of visual art, anthropologist Saba Mahmood discusses the Danish cartoon controversy in which a newspaper depicted the prophet Mohammed. Perceived as blasphemous by Muslim communities, the claim to injury by the images made by Islamic leaders was also widely countered in Europe and put under secular scrutiny. Regarding the realm of representation, freedom of speech was invoked to reduce the claim of harm that the images of Mohammed caused Muslims. For others, it was further proof of irreconcilable differences, or seen as an irrelevant discussion—they were "just cartoons" and there are bigger things to worry about. In her text however, Mahmood complicates these reactions by expanding questions of representation via images into what she calls "attachment" and "cohabitation".[6] Her argument is a reminder that there are multiple modalities for relating to semiotic forms, and some that are completely ingrained into societies. She suggests that a comparison could be made between the "shock" proselytising

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Mahmood, Saba. "Religious Reason and Secular Affect". In *Is Critique Secular?: Blasphemy, Injury, and Free Speech*. New York, NY: Fordham University Press. 2013. p. 64.

missionaries experienced upon encountering "non-Christian natives who attributed divine agency to material signs", and the "bafflement many liberals and progressives express at the scope and depth of Muslim reaction over the cartoons today."[7] Her examples articulate the differences in linguistic and representational perspectives and conceptions of sacred signs and symbols.[8] But it also points to a tendency to regard a contemporary religion as incompatible with contemporary society.

Indicating a secular disconnect in understanding how Muslims could be hurt by mere representation, the misapprehension arises from different symbolic orders originating from religious outlooks. Mahmood points to the Protestant originations of the semiotic order, a la Ferdinand de Saussure, that dominates secular Western societies, to make the point that religious influences have very much contributed to a secular Western idea of language, meaning and objects.[9] The divide that arose out of the Danish cartoon controversy in the early 2000s, and has continued to come to attention through the *Charlie Hebdo* attacks just a couple of years ago, underlies a deeper confusion about the scope of difference when it comes to belief, representation and symbols, and reveals the normalising power of the secular state in matters of religion and culture. Violent reactions towards problematic imagery is abhorrent and completely unwarranted, but these acts of violence should not completely undermine what is at stake in the imagery, as well as the millions of otherwise peaceful yet still disturbed reactions to them. Attempts at expanding the scope of approaches to the offending material should not be jettisoned or closed off because of the tragic violence that ensued. As Mahmood states in reference to the inherent call for minority religious perspectives to conform, "the hope that a correct reading practice can yield compliant subjects crucially depends, in other words, upon a prior agreement about what religion *should* be in the modern world."[10] By suggesting that the Muslims who were offended did not perceive the images properly or progressively enough, it is thus suggested that they are backwards, primitive and unsophisticated compared to their secular Western counterparts. And if this is indeed the case, the colonial reach of Christianity is perpetuated into the present, and the modern project of secularism suffers for it.

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Ibid., p. 67.

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Ibid.

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In a discussion of Webb Keane, Mahmood indicates how Protestant Christianity not only contributed to the creation of the notion of modern religion, but also to current semiotic forms. She explains Keane's connection between Protestant Christianity and Ferdinand de Saussure's model of language, she writes: "One finds in Saussure, argues Keane, a preoccupation not entirely different from that which agitated Calvin and other Protestant reformers: how best to institute the distinction between the transcendent world of abstract concepts and ideas and the material reality of this world." Mahmood, *op. cit.*, pp. 65-66.

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Ibid., p. 69.

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Mignolo, *op. cit.*, p. 62.

Mahmood's arguments are provocative in that they reveal the normative effects of secularism on minority religious and cultural conceptions of images and objects. Within the realm of art, a field invested in images and objects, is it possible to reconcile a secular concept such as freedom of speech with a spiritual investment in an image or object? Mahmood's examples arise from negative reactions and conflicting semiotic frameworks. However, contemporary art is similarly entrenched in Saussurean formations. Contemporary art projects that include art and artists from minority religious practices indicate a desire to move away from limiting Western symbolic orders and explore those that come from other spiritual traditions. However, many of these projects shy away from exploring the continued existence of related spiritual practices and worldviews, instead turning to science, history, and/or anthropology. Intellectually and rationally engaged, Euro-American contemporary art is tied to Western philosophical traditions, which are themselves tied to historical Christian perspectives. Under these conditions, what is the capacity for comprehension of other conceptual systems, not only past, but present?

In Mignolo's argument for decolonising religion, he speaks to the dismissal of spirituality by "hardcore materialists". He claims that these dismissals by, "progressive secular intellectuals indirectly support capitalist's arguments for modernity and development".[11] The articulation of minority religious beliefs, those that have been subjected to colonial forces, and those that are outside the reach of Western secular familiarity, extends into cultural realms that deepen considerations of difference. The capacity of contemporary art to not only examine issues of globalisation, economics, and politics, but to consider religious perspective as essential to the construction of world views beyond Western secular discourse, is key to an expanded notion of identity formations. Further, it is paramount that Euro-American perspectives are interrogated in their assumed secular neutrality. Within exhibition contexts, the specifics of cultural spiritual dimensions and their complications should not be subsumed under more familiar frameworks of representation. This is the challenge.