



Shula  
2014

PALIMPSEST LOBI KUNA DIORAMA

# THREE FILMS ON THE AFRICA MUSEUM

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Research project “Genealogy of Amnesia: Rethinking the Past for a New Future of Conviviality”, Institute for Fine Arts / Academy of Fine Arts Vienna

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[academia](#), [researchgate](#), [medusafilms](#), [google scholar](#)

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The Royal Museum for Central Africa, colloquially known as the Africa Museum, is an ethnography and natural history museum situated in Tervuren, Belgium. The museum, which also hosts a scientific institution, resulted from the Congo-section of the 1897 World Exhibition in Brussels, meant to showcase King Leopold II's Congo Free State. The museum was originally intended as a colonial museum. In December 2013, the museum closed for renovation work until reopening in December 2018.





# PALIMPSEST

*PALIMPSEST documents the facelift of the ROYAL MUSEUM OF CENTRAL AFRICA (RMCA) through different perspectives. The documentary shows the insanity of the its renovations and shows what it puts at stake: decolonization.*

*What obscures its total decolonization? The COMRAF -CONCERTATION COMMITTEE OF THE ROYAL MUSEUM OF CENTRAL AFRICA WITH AFRICAN ASSOCIATIONS- and the 6 members of its "permanent" monitoring committee echo the diaspora.*

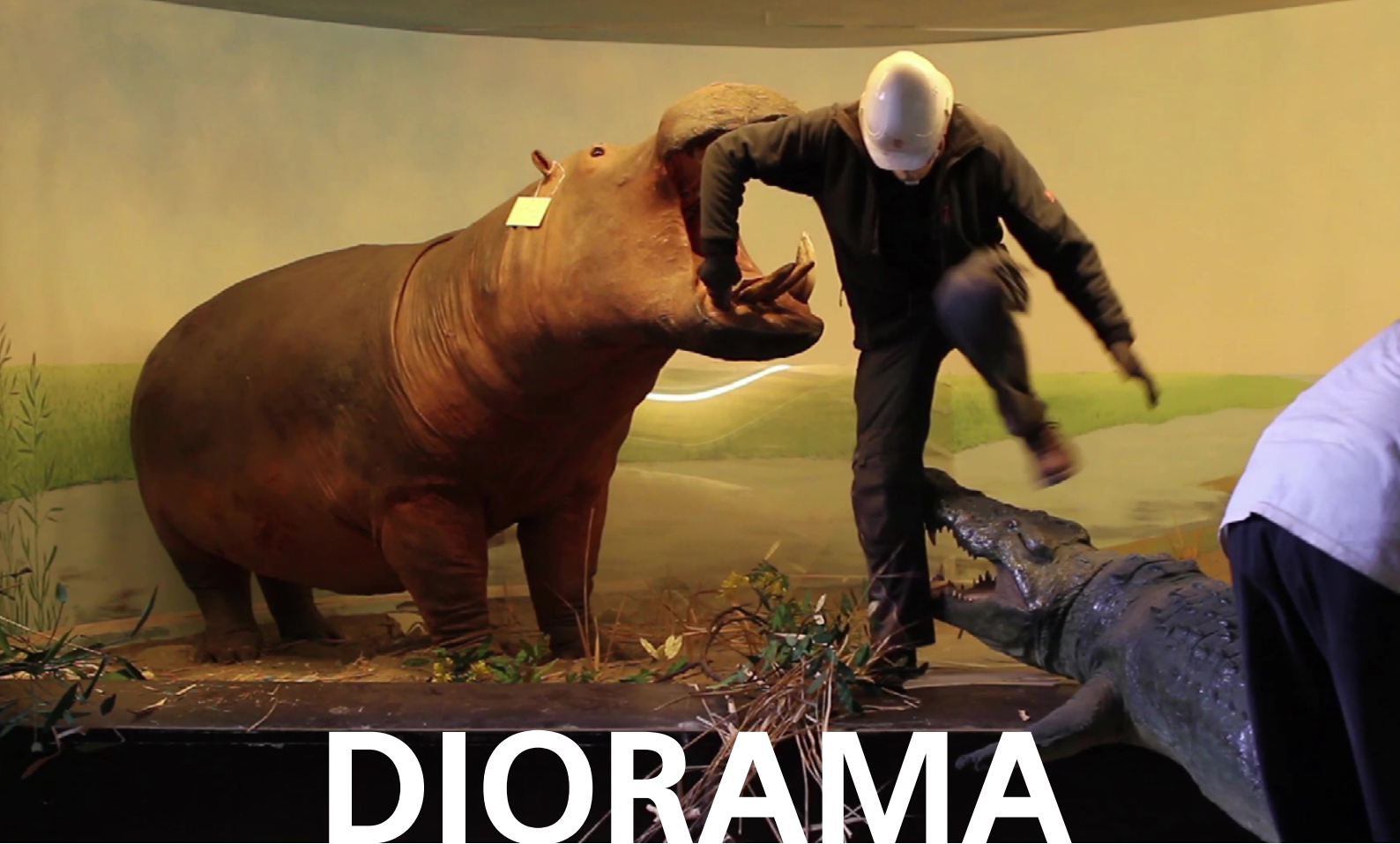
## Trailer

<https://vimeo.com/291927190>

*Palimpseste du Musée d'Afrique. Fragments d'une décolonisation boiteuse  
Cobra Films, Daniel De Valck  
Matthias De Groof, en collaboration avec Mona Mpembele  
Sebastien Demeffe, Matthias De Groof et Mona Mpembele  
Jean Bofane, COMRAF et les 6 membres du comité de suivi « permanent »*

*Matthias De Groof  
Sebastien Demeffe  
Ernst Reijseger  
VAF (Vlaams Audiovisueel Fonds)*

**Titre**  
**Production**  
**Réalisation**  
**Scénario**  
**Avec**  
**Image**  
**Montage**  
**Musique originale**  
**Avec le soutien du**



# DIORAMA

*When the staff of the Africa-Museum destroys the very dioramas they used to guard for decades, a colonial worldview is demolished.*

*What remains are dead animals staring at you amidst ecocide.*

**34'40"**

Matthias De Groof  
Matthias De Groof &  
Sebastien Demeffe

**Director  
Editors**



*"Diorama presents us with the documented deconstruction of a constructed habitat, a stage within a stage plays out before us in what appears to be an "Africa Museum" whose taxidermy exhibits are being dismantled.*

*A sombre, abject humour permeates through these scenes as we witness, quite literally, the dissemination of history. The uninterrupted quietness of these dioramas is suddenly yet casually disrupted by the inherently ironic (re)destruction of these animals, "habitats". We bear witness to fine examples of nature,s awe-inspiring animal kingdom reduced to utilitarian objects of burden - cajoled out of their static setting by a band of men, whose group dynamic suggests they are not accustomed to such an activity, if one could ever be." - Ash Kerr*

In the course of its renovations, Belgians colonial museum – or better: museum of colonialism ceases to exist. One of the pinnacles of this transformation is when the museum staff destroys the very dioramas they used to guard for decades. The violent destruction forms an allegory of museological and ecological relations. Not only the dioramas are demolished, but also a colonial worldview.

Diorama literally means *"through that which is seen"*. It is a window which wants to suggest life as truthful as possible through death, the sole thing it can resort to. Due to this, the diorama becomes a still life, a Vanitas. So still, that the sculptural becomes pictorial... until men enter the broken window and become part of the nature morte. Men animate death through caress and tear the animals loose from a morbid decorum that offered them verisimilitude of an obsolete landscape.





# LOBI KUNA

*The fiction film Lobi Kuna is told through the gaze of photographer Mekhar Kiyoso who is in the Africa Museum for a shoot. His gaze is soon unsettled as he views through his lens the macabre museum as a mausoleum of his cultural heritage. As he is being possessed by the artefacts, he remembers being alienated from them.*

*Lobi Kuna -which in Lingala means the day after tomorrow as well as the day before yesterday- tells the story of his appropriation of the past in order to project himself into a future, and this while the Royal Museum for Central Africa in Tervuren undergoes a metamorphosis through its renovations.*

## Fragment I

<https://vimeo.com/272194649>

## Fragment II

<https://vimeo.com/288015310>

***Lobi Kuna (avant-hier / après-demain)***

***Fiction – 45'35" – HD – couleur – stéréo - vo fr et lingala / st en et nl***

*Belgique / R.D.Congo*

*EN/FR/NL*

*Matthias De Groof*

*Mekhar Azari Kiyoso et Matthias De Groof*

*Hadewych Cocquyt (BSC), Sam Vanmaekelbergh,*

*Carlo Lechea, Kiripi Katembo Siku et Matthias De Groof*

*Pol Van Laer*

*Sébastien Demeffe / Kwinten Gernay*

*Mohamed Boujarra, Francis Mampuya, Bart Maris, Jean Katambayi Mukedi,*

*Mekhar Azari Kiyoso, Kjell Bracke*

*Cobra Films (Daniel De Valck & Anne Deligne)*

*Mutotu Films (Kiripi Katembo Siku) et l'atelier Graphoui*

*Avec le soutien de la VAF (Production, FilmLab)*

**Pays de production  
sous-titrage**

**Réalisation**

**Écriture**

**Image**

**Son**

**Montage**

**Avec**

**Production**

**Coproduction**

**Avec le soutien du**

Colonialism is "palimpsestuous": if one tries to erase it, it will appear after a while. In my opinion, there are a dozen or so interrelated ways in which colonialism emerges in this museum, despite the rhetoric of decolonization. Before listing them, there are some things to remember. First of all, the fact that certain ways in which colonialism reappear, escapes the decision-making power of the museum itself, but instead reveals societal and political priorities in Belgium. Secondly, that these reappearances are totally independent of the individual commitment of a number of people attached to the museum and, above all, that the anticolonial speeches in the new configuration of the museum do not (unfortunately) change the phenomenon of "palimpsests". Finally, that the institute is more than a museum. The institute's possible efforts, as an actor in civil society and supported by its various scientific disciplines, to put pressure on the government for various forms of reparation - including restitution - may be invisible in the exhibition, but are therefore not non-existent.

Here is my non-exhaustive list of the phenomenon of palimpsest:

- The building itself, its murals, racist statues and signs of power. These elements reproduce the history of domination despite the accompanying texts. On the other hand, the concept of "museum", as an institution rendering the past tangible and wanting to witness "progress", is itself indebted to the unilinear evolutionism that characterizes both colonialism and the Enlightenment;
- The relationship between the cost of restoring these colonial aesthetics and that of collaboration with the "Diaspora" (0.25% of the overall cost);
- On the epistemological level, the presentation of "Africa" as an object of study. The idea of representativeness and the desire to be a window on a continent are the basic epistemological principles of imperialist logic.
- The scenography continues the "chosification" and "domestication" - two basic principles of colonialism - in the form of masks exhibited behind showcases and stuffed animals;
- The colonial logics of collecting is somewhat pursued. Today it occurs with contemporary artifacts, which are as contemporary as the masks and sculptures were at the time of their "acquisition". As the Congolese artist Francis Mampuya says in the film *Lobi Kuna*: "the Congolese artist has two cemeteries, one is Benseke, the other is Tervuren. ... and it continues through contemporary art";
- The balance of power between the "6 members of the permanent monitoring committee" and the museum. Moreover, the way in which the contributions of this group of six (and then the collaboration with the "Diaspora") is presented, is not according to their expertise but in connection with their "African origin". This, in a way, reproduces a colonial dichotomy based on differences in skin pigmentation: in other words, more a reversal than a deconstruction;
- Eurocentrism in the text of the booklet published on the occasion of the opening of the Royal Museum of Central Africa on 8 December 2018, according to which a German ethnologist "mentioned for the first time the name of an African artist" and according to

which “Belgian Africanists finally lift the anonymity in which the African artists were immersed”;

– The sponsoring of the renovation. As Ludo De Witte noted, Umicore (the new name of the Union Minière) sponsored the renovations. "Since 1906, this company has been seizing resources from Congo directly and after independence through subcontractors. ... It is therefore not surprising that the exhibition barely addresses the social role of Umicore and other companies such as Texaf and Ackermans & Van Haaren ";

– The last palimpsest we distinguish is in the tendency to present all the above as a decolonization. Colonialism emerges in its opposite, especially if the museum defines decolonization as "a process" rather than a fundamental and often violent turnover. Thus, by eroding "decolonization" into P.R.-terminology, "decolonialism" colonizes.



A man with dark skin and dreadlocks is shown from the chest up, holding a large, dark wooden mask with a face. He is looking directly at the camera with a serious expression. The background is dark and out of focus.

# Lóbí

*Après-Demain  
Avant-Hier*

*Matthias  
De Groof  
& Mehkar  
Azari Kiyoso*

# Kúná

Cobra Films

Mutotu Films

Atelier Graphoui

flanders<sup>®</sup>



VAF  
FILM

Dr. Matthias De Groof has a strong interest in film, Congo and (post)colonialism. He has a Master's in *Philosophy* (HIW - KUL), *International Relations* (UCL) and *Cinema Studies* (UA). He studied *African Studies* at UMU (Uganda) and became a Fulbright and BAEF visiting scholar at NYU's Tisch School of the Arts. His PhD in *Cinema Studies* looked at African cinema. As a Postdoctoral Fellow of the Research Foundation - Flanders (FWO), he studied postcolonial film theory at the Antwerp University where he also taught *World Cinema*, *Aesthetics* and *Curating & Exhibiting*. His scholarly work has been published in Third Text and Columbia University Press amongst others. He is regularly asked to talk and write in non-academic contexts and to curate film programs. His own films have been presented *i.a.* at the IFFR, Media City, Cannes Pan-African Film Festival and the San Francisco Art Institute. Currently, he works at the *Collegium for Advanced Studies* in Helsinki. His book on Lumumba's Iconography (Leuven University Press) is about to be published.

Further reading:

De Groof, Matthias. "The Museum we Love to Hate", in *Repenser le Musée – Rethinking the Museum*, Kumbuka Zine Decoloniale, Bruxelles, 2018, pp 24-26

De Groof, Matthias, "Bienvenu au divertissement", in *Discours du Roi des Belges le 8 décembre 2018*, Laurent d'Ursel et Eddy Eketé Embesa (eds), Maelstöm Reevolution, Bruxelles, 2018, pp 38-39.

De Groof, Matthias. "Décolonialisme, ou les palimpsestes de l'AfricaMuseum", in *l'Art Même*, Chronique des Arts Plastiques de la Fédération Wallonie-Bruxelles, n° 77, 2019, p26-7