

Archives of the present – memory work in the making: ‘Transmission from the Liberated Zones’ (Filipa César, 2015)

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National libraries, museums, and archives are potential sites for knowledge production and shared memory work, but they tend also to be monuments of state power, of selection and exclusion. Film and moving images have always played a formative role in cultural commemoration, and the resistance of cinematic counter-memories has also famously illuminated the critical potential of montage as a historiographical tool. Along with reflections of the theory and practice of political art these thoughts on knowledge production, archive, and memory work resonate in the multi-year art project at Tensta Konsthall, a gallery located in the Northern suburbs of Stockholm. The Eros Effect: Art, Solidarity Movements and the Struggle for Social Justice consists of a series of workshops, exhibitions, and seminars. It opened in Fall 2015 with Filipa César’s gallery film *Transmission From the Liberated Zones* (2015), which is the primary subject of this review.

Tensta Art Gallery and The Eros Effect

The Eros Effect: Art, Solidarity Movements and the Struggle for Social Justice was initiated and planned by the curator Maria Lind. The project borrows its title from the researcher and activist George N. Katsiaficas’ essay by the same name from 1989.[1] According to the gallery website this project engages with a number of artists, activists, and scholars to reassess the notion of ‘solidarity’

and to explore what meanings are to be ascribed to it in the turbulent present of wars, migration, fascism, and fundamentalism. The Eros Effect

[...] acknowledges the emotional aspects of social movements. The concept thus aims to turn away from earlier theories that considered 'mass movements' as primitive and impulsive, as emotional outbursts, or as exclusively rational efforts in order to change the norms and institutions of a society. With his notion the Eros Effect, Katsiaficas suggests that social movements always constitute both and that the struggle for liberation is equally an 'erotic' act and a rational desire to break free from structural and psychological barriers. Franz Fanon made similar observations when he stated that resistance towards colonialism causes positive effects on the emotional life of individuals. [2]

Apparent in César's contribution to this project is a will to not only de-colonise history and to give voice to a conflicted past but also to make venues for shared memory work, venues that appear in the interstice between excavated and re-framed archival traces and the poetics of narrative imagination and cinematic time-images. This practice ties in to a longstanding documentary tradition of committed filmmaking (also experimental cinema), where identity work and emancipation, community building, and transcultural memory have always been key in the ideal overlap of theory and practice, of art and politics.[3]

Most of the artists represented in the Tensta exhibition series *The Eros Effect: Art, Solidarity Movements and the Struggle for Social Justice* exemplify artistic methods and expressions that tune with 'the archival impulse' as theorised by Hal Foster in 2004 to characterise a trend in contemporary art.[4] Among the speakers invited for the opening were: Kodwo Eshun, the British artist, curator, and author of 'The Militant Image: A Cine-Geography', giving a talk about the film *Handsworth Songs* (Black Audio Film Collective); Kristine Khor and Rasha Salti, independent scholars and curators based in Beirut, who presented a project on the 1978 International Art Exhibition for Palestine; and Natascha Sadr Haghighian (Berlin/Teheran), whose exhibition *Fuel to the Fire* about police brutality and uprisings in the Stockholm suburb Husby, not far from Tensta, who was also part of the gallery's Fall program.[5]

This typical archive fever is spurred by curators' and artists' conceptual interest in the production and re-production of cultural memory, on the constructed nature and implied political violence of national history, on the materiality of archival objects. When archive objects are enacted for the gallery space the tactile aspect of analogue images, films, and documents tends to

result in a fetishising of the object on display, which risks sometimes downplaying the importance of metadata. This is not the case in César's work, where strategies of cinematic enactment rather posit the material traces of historical events as documents and archival objects with which to propel memory work and personal recollection, the coexistence of the present and the past, and a collaborative effort to bridge between political struggle in the past and the challenges of resistance work today. Most important in relation to César's practice is the assumption of the enactment or performance as a political gesture, the agency of *giving a voice to* the material, to ignite and provide a critical culture of commemoration that reaches beyond the walls of the art gallery and across cultural boundaries and national contexts. In this respect the use of actors and the encouragement of personal recollection in *Transmission from the Liberated Zones* exemplify the function and performative gesture of the 'dissonant archive' in contemporary art.[6]



Fig. 1: *Transmission from the Liberated Zones*. Courtesy Tensta Konsthall and Emily Fahlén.

Filipa César is a Berlin-based, Portuguese artist whose practice has resulted in several installations and gallery films where the PAIGC liberation war in Guinea Bissau and Cap Verde has been a recurrent motif. Her films have also been included in the festival circuit, most recently the 2016 Berlinale and the Stockholm documentary film festival Tempo. For *Transmission from the Liberated Zones*, César found copies of a Swedish 16mm film in an overlooked archive in Guinea-Bissau. *Transmission from the Liberated Zones* was exhibited as a gallery film in a dark room arranged for a digital projection on a full

screen. During the following weeks of the exhibition the video was shown as a small installation, with a monitor and headphones in the open entrance hall.

From the liberated zones

'Between 1963 and 1974 the African Liberation Party PAIGC led an armed struggle against the Portuguese colonial power in Guinea-Bissau.' The film opens with these lines projected on the t-shirt of a young man, an army ID tag hanging from his neck. The framing of his torso enhances the contrast between the white t-shirt and his dark skin, as if corresponding to the power relations of the colonial war. The next shot reveals an empty stage with a microphone, and in the fond a screen with a doubled freeze frame in black and white: guerilla fighters in the jungle; men and women standing and sitting on the ground. There is also a person operating a 16mm camera. A black frame marks the beginning of the next scene. The same young man walks up in front of the screen, grabs the microphone, and proceeds to check the sound system. Addressing the camera and his imaginary audience, he announces: 'My smuggler says we should record this before my voice cracks.'

At this point the doubled image comes alive as a film sequence, including a frontal shot in full frame of the Swedish filmmaker Lennart Malmer. He gives a personal account of filmmaking and everyday life among the PAIGC in September 1973, during the final days of colonial war in Guinea-Bissau. The conventional, documentary 'talking head' has been re-worked into a distorted image. This exemplifies the aesthetics of resistance at work in César's gallery film: the artist positions herself from within a narrative that resists closure, as well as the authority usually ascribed to filmed testimony. Still, the first person accounts provided by the Swedish filmmakers testify to the professional, personal, and transnational relations that facilitated their representation of liberation and the end of the colonial war in Guinea-Bissau. Malmer is framed sharply by an illuminated square as he recalls the fond memory of his Éclair camera and the challenges of filming during full days of walking. The narrator of the film, the young man, gives a fragmentary account of his escape from a Portuguese orphanage. César is referred to as 'my smuggler, and the author of this film'. While performing, the actor's image multiplies into the depth of the screen, and at one point he states: 'Therefore, we established this low-fidelity feedback channel to merge these two dimensions.' The two

dimensions refer to the colonial past and the liberation, but also to the contemporary Portugal of César and the boy/actor/orphan.



Fig. 2: Lennart Malmer re-framed in *Transmission from the Liberated Zones*.
Courtesy Tensta Konsthall and Emily Fahlén.

Curators tend to introduce César as an installation artist who ‘works with the Portuguese colonial history’, but historical representation is not what this artist strives for, nor the ambition to reassess colonial history by means of an archival record subordinated to an enclosed narrative. *Transmission from the Liberated Zones* is part of a larger, counter-memory, post-colonial project, including archival work and public screenings in Guinea-Bissau. According to César, it all started with an invitation by the filmmakers Sana Na N’Hada, Suleimane Biai, and Flora Gomes in January 2011. They had located an overlooked archive of mostly decayed 16mm films, and it turned out to be material shot during and shortly after the liberation from the Portuguese in 1973. Together with her German team and the Berlin-based curator Tobias Hering, César initiated the mobile film project *From Boé to Berlin*. During the scope of a month ten people organised several public screenings throughout Guinea-Bissau, outdoor screenings, as well as events in schools and other public buildings.[7] *Luta ca caba inda* (The Struggle is not Over Yet) was the working title of the public screenings. The gallery film presents restored and digitised material from the Guinean archive, its enacted narrative spurred by this broader, collaborative effort of transcultural commemoration. As an artistic practice where activism and solidarity work in the present engages with the struggle of independence in the 1970s, César’s project makes for a very apt contribution to The Eros-Effect.

From Guinea-Bissau to Stockholm

In an interview with the curator Emily Fahlén, César draws on Walter Benjamin and Chris Marker to highlight her interest in the very mechanisms of historiography and the politics of public memory.[8] A critical, essayistic mode of address is also poignant in *Transmission from the Liberated Zones*, where César once more acknowledges the colonial past as a bracketed and conflicted issue of cultural memory in Portugal. 'Archive and documents are material of the present, not objects of the past', she argues, referring to *Conakry* (2012), a film made in one take, where she 'wanted to break the news about her archival findings in Guinea-Bissau (2011), and to put the archival material in imaginary dialogue with the radio voice of Diana McCarty'. Grada Kilomba also participated in the film, where they played out a fictive scene based on the material and in reference to actual events.[9]



Fig. 3: The tactile of documents in *Transmission from the Liberated Zones*.
Courtesy Tensta Konsthall and Emily Fahlén.

The interview with César expresses a strong belief in the agency of poetic enactment and the reflexive mode of the essay film to make the audience aware of the constructed nature of narration and the compelling trace-status of archival images. Still, *Transmission from the Liberated Zones* is also a narrative, based on re-framed archival images and enacted testimonies. It bridges suggestively between a historical referent and the imaginary realm of personal memory, idealised self-representation, and the Swedish subjects' identification with political struggle and liberation wars back in the 1970s. For this film César and her collaborators in Berlin restored some of the 16mm footage

shot during and from within the initial, utopian moment of victory and the symbolic ending of Portuguese power in Guinea-Bissau. A complex history collapses into the drama of a unique moment in 1973 when a team of Swedish filmmakers and representatives of the Swedish government and the UN played an important role for the PAIGC guerillas in witnessing and documenting their declaration of independence. Photographs of UN representative Folke Löfgren and the (for a Swedish audience) famous social democrat politician Birgitta Dahl, who were both independently and unofficially in Guinea-Bissau during the final weeks of the liberation war, are indeed spectacular traces to indicate a fragmentary record of the historically and politically significant Swedish-African relationship.

From Stockholm to Guinea-Bissa and back again: Narrative imagination and images of commemoration

César's video re-enactment brings attention to a unique episode in Swedish media history, where a small group of radical producers managed to make a room in public broadcasting culture for committed film narratives and studio programs in solidarity with liberation wars and faraway conflicts. Lennart Malmer and Ingela Romare's framing of the proclamation of independence in Guinea-Bissau, (filmed on the 24th of September in 1973 for the television production *En nations födelse*) suggests a compelling facet of Swedish-African relations, world politics, and public media that still calls for scholarly attention.[10]

César's strategy in *Transmission from the Liberated Zones* to include fragments of interviews with the four Swedish subjects makes room for details of personal recollection, as well as explanatory comments about the images on display. More important still is how César illuminates the role of filmmaking in relation to the proclamation of independence in 1973. Romare recalls how they 'had to go home very fast' to get the film out, that their film record was breaking news for the world. Malmer emphasises that their film was a success for the PAIGC and was eventually transmitted 'over 14 countries'. After having seen *Transmission from the Liberated Zones* I was urged to study *En nations födelse* in more detail (a poor digitised copy of the film can be accessed at the National Library in Stockholm). This time, I noticed a female photographer in a few of the scenes representing the proclamation meeting. In the credits of the film the mention of the PAIGC photographer 'Florentino Gomez'

makes me aware of Sana na N'Hada's footage in César's compilation. In the interview with Fahlén, César refers to the Bissau filmmakers of INCA, N'Hada, and Flora Gomes [sic!], and how in 1967 they were sent by the PAIGC to Cuba to be trained as filmmakers at Santiago Alvarez' institute ICAIC. *Transmissions from the Liberated Zones* refuses the authority of an enclosed narrative, but the dialogue it produces is a thought-provoking illustration of César's belief that 'archives are of the present', and *Luta ca caba inda*: 'The struggle is not over yet'.

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Notes

- [1] George N. Katsiaficas, 'The Eros Effect'. Paper prepared for presentation at the 1989 American Sociological Association National Meetings in San Francisco. <http://www.eroseffect.com/articles/eroseffectpaper.PDF>
- [2] Fahlén 2015, p. 81. http://www.tenstakonsthall.se/uploads/158-SV_TRANSMISSION.pdf
- [3] For a recent analysis of interrelations between documentary cinema, postcolonial theory, and cultural memory work, see Brünow 2015.
- [4] Foster 2004.
- [5] Natascha Sadr Haghighian, Fuel to the Fire, November 2016: <http://tenstakonsthall.se/?fuel-to-the-fire-with-natascha-sadr-haghighian>
- [6] Downey 2015.
- [7] Interview with Filipa César, op. cit, 8.
- [8] Fahlén 2015, p. 7.
- [9] Ibid.
- [10] Furhammer 2014, pp. 241-260.