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# Queering and decolonising the museum: ‘In the Presence of Absence’ exhibition at the Stedelijk Museum

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[journals.sagepub.com/home/mss](https://journals.sagepub.com/home/mss)**Ana Dragojlovic**

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**Abstract**

This review engages with the recent ‘In the Presence of Absence’ exhibition (2020–2021), which was held at the Stedelijk Museum of Modern Art (Amsterdam, the Netherlands). By focusing on three artistic interventions included in the exhibition (Werker Collective’s ‘A Gestural History of the Young Worker’, Farida Sedoc’s ‘The Future Ain’t What it Used to Be’, and Jennifer Tee’s ‘Tampan Ship of Souls #2’ and ‘Tampan the Collected Bodies’), we aim to highlight ways of creatively queering and decolonizing artistic practices and spaces, including museums and conventional memory narratives.

**Keywords**

absence, decolonising, museums, queering

In the midst of the initial year of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Stedelijk Museum of Modern Art in Amsterdam, the Netherlands opened the exhibition ‘In the Presence of Absence’ (5 September 2020 to 31 January 2021),<sup>1</sup> titled after the last book written by the late Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish (2011). Darwish’s poetry, inspired by obliterated Palestinian histories, mobilises metaphors of life and death to recount the coexistence of absence and presence in both collective memory and historical writing. As such, it served as an apt frame for this ambitious exhibition that intended to make visible stories that have been hidden or ignored, endeavouring to present ‘a selection of (counter) narratives that challenge fixed ideas about our society and question how history is written’.<sup>2</sup> Curated by Fadwa Naamna (freelance curator) and Britte Sloothaak (Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam), this interdisciplinary exhibition presented critical art and design projects that included

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work from 23 artists and artist collectives and was presented in 14 rooms in the Stedelijk Museum. Curators' personal histories informed their interest in narratives that have been obliterated from Euro-American institutional documentation processes. Fadwa Naamna's approach is informed by storytelling and archiving common among Palestinian cultural practitioners, with a particular dedication to recording and documenting marginalised and eradicated aspects of Palestinian history.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, Britte Sloothaak's curatorial practice is inspired by her Indonesian and European background (Indo-European), and the fact that the history of Dutch colonialism in Indonesia has predominantly been documented from a Dutch colonial perspective. Yet, it is not only the one-sidedness of the colonial approach to documentation that is silencing the history of Dutch colonialism in the Dutch East Indies but also, as Sloothaak stresses, the Indo community's inclination to conceal complex narratives that link them to the colonial history.<sup>4</sup>

In this way, Naamna and Sloothaak's commitment to decolonising and de-centralising museums informed each step in their curatorial process. The exhibition was assembled through an open call rather than a conventional acquisition approach, which allowed the curators to learn about artists and designers with whom they were not previously familiar. The designers' and artists' regional and transnational backgrounds and routes of mobility played an important role in the jury-led art selection process. The selected public and activist art and design projects were then arranged into thematic clusters: (1) Personal and Collective Knowledge; (2) Taking Space, Taking Place; and (3) Transhistories and Translocal Exchange.<sup>5</sup> These thematics were then represented in a way so as to create rhizomic and conversational experiences for visitors. This allowed the curators to design 'the exhibition as a place for (knowledge- and thought-) exchange', redirecting it from conventional museum representational practices.<sup>6</sup>

Naamna and Sloothaak's efforts to de-centralise and decolonialize museum representation and to offer (counter)narratives often absent from public debates, has been firmly situated within written critical thought produced by artists, curators, academics, historians, and philosophers that engage with topics such as cultural memory, archival methods of collection, selection, and categorization, and storytelling. Consisting of 30 references, this reading list is an integral part of the exhibition, consisting of texts ranging from classics, such as Walter Benjamin (1999), Hannah Arendt (1959), Edward Said (2000), and Judith Butler (2004), to more recent interventions by Nigerian writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (2009) that emphasise dangers of forming 'a single story' and consequences of such reductionism, to several texts that engage with power or archival silences (Carter, 2006), gender and cultural analytics (Mandel, 2019), and colonialism, racism and white innocence in the present (Wekker, 2016). Specific attention is given to decolonial scholar Ariella Aïsha Azoulay (2019) who as a political theorist, curator, and filmmaker, persuasively argues, 'that the institutions that make our world, from archives and museums to ideas of sovereignty and human rights to history itself, are all dependent on imperial modes of thinking', stressing an urgent need for 'unlearning imperialism'.

We would now like to turn to a brief engagement with three of the interventions included in Naamna and Sloothaak's 'In the Presence of Absence' that highlight ways of creatively queering and decolonising artistic spaces and practices. In line with this Special Issue's focus on practices and theorizations of queering memory, these works individually – along with the exhibition more generally – open up potentialities for what we see as a complex matrix of feminist-queer-decolonial pedagogies that are both queering and decolonising conventional memory narratives. In addition, the supplemental roundtable discussions and the extensive reading list mentioned above further aid in the unlearning/learning process. In this way, they endeavour to decenter which memories come to count or matter while engaging in the strategic work of building alternative narratives to entrenched Euro-American ontologies and epistemologies (see also Dragojlovic & Quinan, this issue).

## Werker collective's *A Gestural History of the Young Worker*<sup>7</sup>

Werker Collective was founded in 2009 by Marc Roig Blesa and Rogier Delfos in Amsterdam. It operates as an open platform for addressing topics like neoliberalism, patriarchy, and other dominant power structures. Werker Collective has been exhibited at Foam in Amsterdam, and The Showroom and Tate Modern in London. Their project aims to contribute to an emancipatory politics that sees the labour movement as inextricable from queer and feminist movements in a sort of 'utopian synthesis of work and desire', as they call it. Inspired by the Worker Photography Movement of the 1920s, 'Werker 2—A Gestural History of the Young Worker' (2019) is interested in uncovering connections between labour and photographic representations in the past and in the present. It takes as its departure point the representation of the working body in the former Soviet Union, where workers were depicted with strong, athletic bodies, and resolute expressions on their faces. Werker Collective worked with a LGBTQI+ activist and curator to take a critical look at the visualisation and presentation of the body of the labourer and explores themes related to memory, gender, class, and queerness. The installation also interrogates the normative visualisation and glorification of the worker's body, and the associated oppression of non-normative bodies. The exhibition combines imagery from Soviet magazines, propaganda, and archives, along with documents from the Werker Archief in Amsterdam. The installation is presented in red light, which is a simultaneous reference to gay cruising clubs and to photographic darkrooms in which analog film is developed. They call the installation 'an attempt to (re)construct histories of the oppressed, the silenced, and the outcast'. One of the primary techniques that they use is montage, which functions as a method of both queering memory and remembering otherwise. They write that montage allows for cutting off documents from their original context, thereby opening up "space for seeking justice to a past that was repressed. Disconnected and reassembled [. . .] these reworked documents not only reveal hidden histories but also shed light on possible futures." They go on to comment on the temporal aspects of this artistic endeavor: "A futurity that is lurking in this selection of documents is not a blueprint of a new society. It reveals the mere possibility of it, as an ephemeral hint towards solidarity between all bodies in pain, their shared desire for bodily mutuality, and their collective struggle, and that of work as a creative, fulfilling, and cumulative process."<sup>8</sup>

## Farida Sedoc's *The Future Ain't What it Used to Be*<sup>9</sup>

Farida Sedoc, a visual artist based in Amsterdam uses diverse mediums to produce multi-layered narratives in order to represent complex entanglements between cultural heritage and histories of contentious economic structures. In her installation, *The Future Ain't What it Used to Be*, Sedoc focuses on the Dutch colonial textile trade with Indonesia and West Africa, demonstrating how this complicated trade history can shed light not only on the interrelated nature of colonialism and globalisation but can also redirect attention to the marginalisation of women in the context of both historical and contemporary textile trade practices. Based on her research into the history of female entrepreneurship, Sedoc intertwines and juxtaposes textile patterns and iconic images in order to highlight the gendered aspects and how women have been makers, traders, and wearers of the fabrics inscribed with particular local meanings. Here, Sedoc highlights how the roots of textile objects relate to the legacies of Black music and literature. She demonstrates how when printed collectively, the fabrics hold the potential to stand as archives of memories that represent the local contexts from which they came as well as the worldwide connections in which they are now embedded. Urging a de-centering of memory about the Dutch transatlantic textile trade with Indonesia and West Africa, Sedoc insists on the importance of remembering this history differently, which means foregrounding the central role African women played in the trade.

## Jennifer Tee's *Tampam Ship of Souls #2* and *Tampam the Collected Bodies*

The complexities of colonial migration and trade that have been marginalised in conventional museum presentation practices are also engaged by Jennifer Tee in her *Tampam Ship of Souls #2* and *Tampam the Collected Bodies*. These two works are part of her ongoing work on tampam tulip project, which consists of tulip petal collages.<sup>10</sup> The patterns in Tee's collages refer to Indonesian tampam and *palepai* textiles from the Lampung region of South Sumatra. *Palepai* textiles are often referred to as 'ship clothes', as their designs feature ship motifs together with images of humans and animals decorated by ornaments. Traditionally used during life cycle ceremonies, in Tee's iteration these collages are decorated with tulip petals, which are commonly regarded as a Dutch icon. In this juxtaposition, Tee references her Dutch, Indonesian, and Chinese heritage, representing her father who as a Dutch-Chinese-Indonesian man repatriated to the Netherlands following the decolonisation of Indonesia in the 1950s, and her grandfather, who as an exporter of tulip bulbs, frequently sailed to the United States. While referencing her family history, Tee's collages draw attention to the contested histories of mobility of objects and of peoples, including how they resonate with the contemporary complexities of migration.

Through 'In the Presence of Absence', Naamna and Sloothaak showcase varied and multiple ways of dismantling the foundations of Euro-American ways-of-knowing. The exhibition's focus on de-centering and decolonising their representation is driven by wide-ranging demands and initiatives for museums to take public art more seriously, and to engage with social issues, rather than to be predominantly driven by the market economy (Sullivan and Middleton, 2020).<sup>11</sup> Taking a multilayered approach consisting of an unconventional art selection process, their exhibition design facilitates knowledge exchange and offers new models for visual, performative, and immersive modes of engagement. Together, this exhibition both theoretically and practically applies an approach that queers and decolonises the curatorial process and the museum itself.

### Notes

1. <https://www.stedelijk.nl/en/events/presence-absence-2>
2. <https://www.stedelijk.nl/en/events/presence-absence-2>
3. <https://www.stedelijk.nl/en/digdeeper/curatorial-converstaion>
4. <https://www.stedelijk.nl/en/digdeeper/curatorial-converstaion>; On how Indo-European artist address concealed family histories, see also Dragojlovic (2018).
5. The exhibition was accompanied by a roundtable discussion on the three themes. For more, see Episode #1 Personal and Collective Knowledge ([https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T7JoA\\_g01WY](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T7JoA_g01WY)), Episode #2 Taking Space, Taking Place (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E53JV0tfvYo>), and Episode #3 Transhistories and Translocal Exchange (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DGqIWtkJv7g&list=PLGKMqvtYsgVnDuzViTpdxt07ZU4R9D4XO&index=9>).
6. <https://www.stedelijk.nl/en/digdeeper/curatorial-converstaion>
7. <https://www.stedelijk.nl/en/digdeeper/werker-collective>
8. <https://www.stedelijk.nl/en/digdeeper/werker-collective>
9. <https://www.stedelijk.nl/en/digdeeper/farida-sedoc>
10. <https://www.teetete.nl/work/tampam>
11. <https://www.stedelijk.nl/en/exhibitions/In-the-Presence-of-Absence-2>; see also Steinbock et al. (2020); Sullivan and Middleton (2020); Levin (2020).

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### Author biographies

Ana Dragojlovic is Associate Professor in Gender Studies at the University of Melbourne. She works at the intersection of feminist, queer, postcolonial and affect theory, and has investigated the intersection of gender and mobility regimes – both historical and contemporary – with a particular focus on how the structural inequalities of gender, race, class, ethnicity, and nationality affect the transformation of family and gender relations, forms of care, labour, and subjectivities. Her most recent work in medical humanities draws on feminist, affect and post-humanist theories, as well as critical trauma studies, to investigate the intergenerational effects of gendered violence. She is the author of *Beyond Bali: Subaltern Citizens and Post-Colonial Intimacy* (Amsterdam University Press 2016), co-author of *Bodies and Suffering: Emotions and Relations of Care* (Routledge, 2018, with Alex Broom), and co-editor of *Gender, Violence, Power: Indonesia Across Time and Space* (Routledge, 2020, with Kate McGregor and Hannah Loney).

CL Quinan is Lecturer in Gender Studies in the School of Culture and Communication at the University of Melbourne. Their expertise lies in the fields of queer theory, trans studies, postcolonial studies, and feminist/queer pedagogy, with a particular focus on examining how anxieties around nationality and racial difference come to be transposed onto queer, trans, and gender-diverse bodies and subjectivities. Quinan is the author of the monograph *Hybrid Anxieties: Queering the French-Algerian War and its Postcolonial Legacies* (University of Nebraska Press, 2020) and co-editor of the volume *Homonationalism, Femonationalism, Ablenationalism: Critical Pedagogies Contextualised* (Routledge, 2022). Their current research intervenes in discussions around recognition, documentation, and mobility for trans and non-binary individuals.