

Past memories, future memories

The artists Amaia Molinet, Charmaine de Heij, Claudio Beorchia and Paul Nataraj created the *un-re-seen* exhibition following their artistic residency at the museum, as part of the project *Contested Desires. Constructive Dialogues* (CDCD)¹. The exhibition takes place in a former geology laboratory, the Pyrotechnics Laboratory.

The works presented - photography, video, and sound installation - reflect the artists' concern with the colonial legacy and its implications in contemporary society, within a contemporary artistic vision. In a path of convergence and aesthetical intersection, these four individual projects are constructed in search for attributes within their divergences and ambiguities, in a rhetoric of proximity. "They challenge our ethical apathy and moral indifference; but they also show, beyond reasonable doubt, that the idea of the pursuit of the good life and happiness as a self-referential theme, which each individual should pursue on their own, is ill-conceived; that the hope that a person can 'do it alone' is a fatal error that defies the very purpose of self-concern and self-care. We cannot approach this goal while distancing ourselves from the misfortunes of others."² In this poetic convergence, the four projects derive from a methodological appropriation and collective concern, without losing the individuality of each artistic work in capturing the self-development associated with contemporaneity. "Our time, the present, is not, in fact, only the most distant: it cannot in any case reach us."³ In the *un-re-seen* exhibition, multiple times coexist and spaces intersect to create narratives of substantial social awareness.

Amaia Molinet constructs a photographic installation for this exhibition, placed in the room's cabinet. Her artwork is part of a contemporary vision, a symbolic and metaphorical representational logic that reflects on the cultural significance of exotic birds that have learned to live freely in cities. The artist creates a metaphor about environmental mutations from a colonial context, focusing on the monk parakeet (*Myiopsitta monachus*), found in the Iberian Peninsula.

The displayed work positions itself between the representation of nature and aesthetics, in a pictorial appropriation as stripped-down language, on the edge of social critique. Quoting the

¹ CDCD (2024-2026) is an international arts and colonial heritage program, co-funded by the European Union, that gathers artists from different countries, through residencies, exhibitions, workshops, promoting the exchange of experiences and knowledge.

² Zygmunt Bauman, *Collateral Damage: Social Inequalities in a Global Age*.

³ Giorgio Agamben, *What is the Contemporary?*

artist, "this bird was introduced in Spain decades ago as an exotic pet, and nowadays it is considered an invasive species in capital cities such as Madrid and Barcelona, where they are being killed. A species that was brought from a colonized territory to its colonizer's land is spreading, as a matter of poetic justice."

The exhibition is completed by a letter sent to monk parakeets. This letter is written with an emotional naiveté between pragmatism and abstraction, in an analytical yet sensitive approach. It is in this balanced construction, in this interweaving, that sensitive and valuable knowledge is generated.

“(...) ye Birds,
That singing up to Heaven gate ascend,
Bear on your wings and in your notes his praise”⁴

Paul Nataraj presents *Good Hope Solidarity Score* sound installation, a 12-note score. The name refers to the cape in South Africa that the Portuguese navigator Bartolomeu Dias rounded in 1488, and that this artist works references through the maritime voyage to India by Vasco da Gama from 1497 to 1499. Quoting the artist, it is a journey that therefore had deep repercussions on the formation of the structures of our contemporary global relations, both historical and current and “it is a journey whose trace still resonates in our current destructive nationalisms.”

This work is based on possibilities, not instructions, and is open to all voices and sound forms. Its process seeks to undo the exclusionary restrictions of colonial thought. The piece places these diverse interpretations in dialogue with each other, as well as with the artist's own interpretation. It also includes other sounds and recordings inspired by his time in Lisbon and the museum's collections.

Paul Nataraj shares this score and, in an act of generosity, invites people to interpret it, to have their opinion, thus creating the possibility of generating a collective energy. "Modern art, challenging the 'classical' values of 'finished' and 'defined', proposes an undefined and multifaceted work, open, a true rose of possible results, governed and ruled by the laws that govern and rule the physical world in which we are embedded."⁵

⁴ John Milton, *Paradise Lost*,

⁵ Umberto Eco, *Opera Aperta*.

Charmaine de Heij presents a series of photographs of symbolic and poetic creation, yet one of great contrast to the ideal world, in a metaphor where the colour pink is dominant, indicating an irony that refers to the irreversibility of the reading of these artistic works. “As a sign of revolt, only a weightless and eccentric irony.”⁶ Charmaine de Heij works with museum collections, archives and historical imagery, challenging dominant visual narratives through strategies such as visual interventions, writing, and participation. In a narrative that demonstrates how colonial power persists in images, language, and institutional structures, she encourages viewers to ask themselves: “What has looking done?”

In the video ‘What would happen if WE STARED BACK?’, also on display, the artist confronts the continuous way in which “the Western and colonial gaze has framed, controlled, and objectified Black women bodies”.

Charmaine de Heij’s video serves as a starting point for the work and its ideas. Simultaneously, the visitors encounter images and texts and are invited to leave their reflections on how they would rewrite a museum label.

Charmaine de Heij, with a structured thought, materialized in these artistic works of strong social protest, reflects the profound scars of collective and individual identities in post-colonial societies, where, according to Bauman, “colonization has made Kant's premonitions to remain shelved. But it also made them seem, when the drawer was finally opened, like a prophecy of the apocalypse instead of the joyful utopia intended by the philosopher. Kant's vision now appears this way because, due to the deceptive abundance of 'no man's lands', nothing had to be done, and therefore nothing was done, during those two centuries to prepare humanity for the revelation of the ultimate fullness of the world.”⁷

⁶ Clarice Lispector, *The Stream of Life*.

⁷ Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Love - On the fragility of human bonds*.

Claudio Beorchia presents the photographic series *scales*, where he reflects on the role of scale bars in archaeological photography. "The geometer sees exactly the same thing in two similar figures drawn at different scales. Plans of houses at reduced scales do not imply any of the problems that derive from a philosophy of imagination. We don't even have to place ourselves on the general plane of representation, even though there is great interest in studying the phenomenology of similarity on that plane. Our study must be specified as surely stemming from the imagination."⁸

Claudio Beorchia problematizes the idea of removing the archaeological find from the images and leaving only the scale, as if the artifact had disappeared. Emptiness and silence are valued by the artist when creating his artistic object, differing from the real object in a metaphorical approach. It silences, but humanizes in an expanded art action, where the empty space from a documentary point of view prevails to give way to the creation of artistic and non-documentary photography.

Quoting the artist, "that is what I did in the two photographic series that I present in the exhibition", displayed in two plinths. "These are images from the collections of the National Museum of Natural History and Science, in Lisbon, and the Italian Institute for Africa and the Orient, in Rome. The images from Rome refer to the excavations in Cyrene, Libya, promoted by the Italian government during fascism."

This purpose of photographic narrative also seeks to promote, according to Claudio Beorchia, a reflection on the disrespectful and presumptuous relationships that we establish with cultural heritage from other times and other civilizations.

The four artists, Amaia Molinet, Charmaine de Heij, Claudio Beorchia, and Paul Nataraj present this collective exhibition with a critical, challenging, and poetic approach, yet also from a perspective of hope and belief in a more equitable future. "Hope is not the same as optimism. It is not the belief that something will work out, but the certainty that something has meaning, regardless of how it turns out."⁹ The creation and embodiment of these artistic works reveal research that can lead to other possibilities in artistic investigation and creation. The intersection point between Art and Science is the very theoretical and practical transformation of art. Through art, it is also possible to raise public awareness to social problems, in this case of colonial origin, standing between past and future memories.

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⁸ Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*.

⁹ Byung Chul Han, *The Tonality of Thought*.