



Guernica: Ariella Aïsha Azoulay: “It is not possible to decolonize the museum without decolonizing the world.”: Museum Ethics and Decolonization

Hannah Sammut

Ariella Aïsha Azoulay

- Ariella Azoulay (born 1962), Professor of Modern Culture and Media and the Department of Comparative Literature, Brown University.
- Her books include *Potential History – Unlearning Imperialism* (Verso, 2019); *Civil Imagination: The Political Ontology of Photography* (Verso, 2012); *The Civil Contract of Photography* (Zone Books, 2008); *Aïm Deüelle Lüsken and Horizontal Photography*, Leuven University Press and Cornell University Press, 2013; *From Palestine to Israel: A Photographic Record of Destruction and State Formation, 1947-1950*,
- Writes on themes of colonization, identity, and history
- “disavows her Israeli citizenship, calls for open borders and the fundamental right to migration”

Guernica Interview

- Introduction of her book, *Potential History*
- Imperialism: a policy of extending a country's power and influence through diplomacy or military force. (Oxford)
- Criticizes experts who “discover” new knowledge
- We should rethink artifacts of history and the institutions that house them in non-imperial terms
 - Photographs, timelines, archives, museums, academic writing, etc.

Photographs

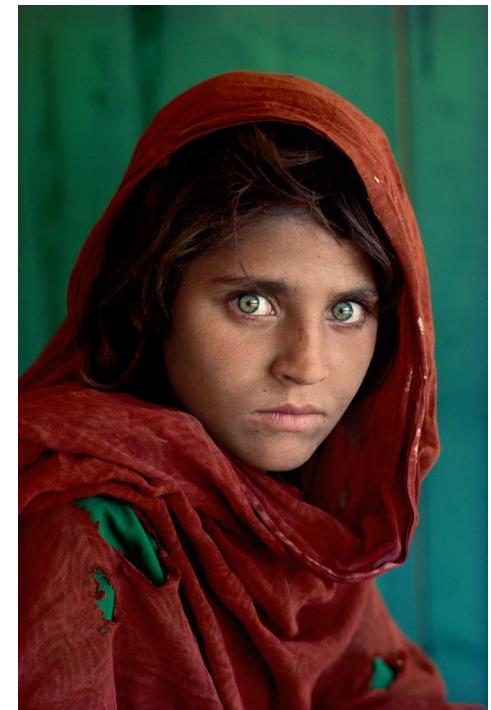
- Photographs exploit the photographed as commodified subjects
- Should not serve as the only marker of a complex interaction
- “This teaches us imperial notions of time and separates shared encounters into the property of an individual”
- Rejects the centrality of the camera, calls it “infrastructure of extractions”
- Dismisses heavy reliance on photographs as objective truth of a historical event
- **Is there truly a central, neutral, camera-holder?**

Profiting on the commodification of photographs



Migrant Mother, Dorothea Lange, 1936

Afghan Girl, Steve
McCurry, 1984



Untaken photographs and victimization

- Aushay presents the untaken photograph which serves as a tool to undermine the authority of the timeline and the archive by representing events that have happened but have not been recorded.
- Draws from the mass rape of German women by Allied forces during WWII, a under-recorded event but told by millions of women
- Connects this to more contemporary events as well, including the mass rape and violence committed against Palestinians by Israeli armed forces
- **Should documents be needed to prove a large scale campaign of violence?**

Critique of academia on historical events

- Outsiders from a community don't have the right to see everything
- "different communities can restore the limits they impose on this imperial right, without aspiring to come up with some universal ethics of the gaze."
- Criticizes academia's tendency to apply credibility to events only if they have been studied by institutions
- **Why must events only be “true” if they have been disseminated and exploited by “experts” in the academic community?**

Azoulay's *The Captive Photograph*

- Photograph of Renty
- “If photographs were produced through force and in service of a regime of violence, then their future should not be determined without hearing the victims and offering reparative justice to them, their heirs, or survivors of that regime.”
- **Who has the right to own these images? To view them?**
- Violence of “academia” in Louis Agassiz’s commission of the photographs in the name of eugenics
- **How else can academia be violent?**



Expropriation of cultural objects

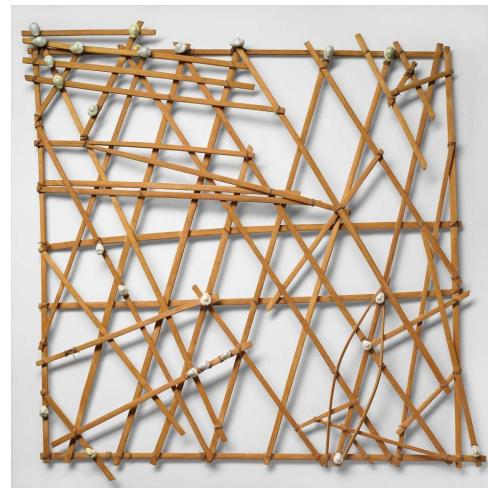
- Expropriation: the action of dispossessing someone of property. (Oxford)
 - action by the state or an authority of taking property from its owner for public use or benefit.
- Inherent imperialism in the ability to easily access objects stolen from communities
- There is violence in the act of museums extracting objects and viewing them out of the context in which they were a part of
 - “This object, like millions of others, was part of the fabric of life, not part of the monoculture we now call ‘museum.’”
 - “What does it mean to be an art historian who publishes research in state publications when the objects you study are stolen and the people to whom they belong are under occupation? It means that you have free access to everything expropriated from these people and the imperial right to see everything.”

Royal Museum of Central Africa in Tervuren, Belgium

- Stolen Congo object from genocide, left arm broken by those who didn't want to disclose meaning and power of the object
- No context to broken arm, no caption beside it in museum
- Plunder of objects also includes the violence of naturalization
 - Objects extracted by the museum so that museum-goers can look at objects detached from the cultural context in which they belong



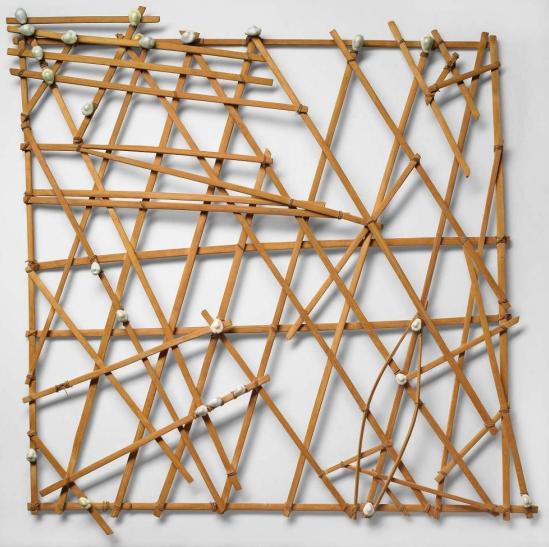
MFA



- Marshall Islands *rebbelib*
- Navigational chart used sticks, twine, and cowrie shells to map the sea currents
- Limited (if any) context on these vital tools and the intricacies of how they work
- 1961 Governor Carlton Skinner and Solange Skinner received this chart as an official present from the government of the Marshall Islands, then under U.S. **administration** as the easternmost part of the United Nations Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands.

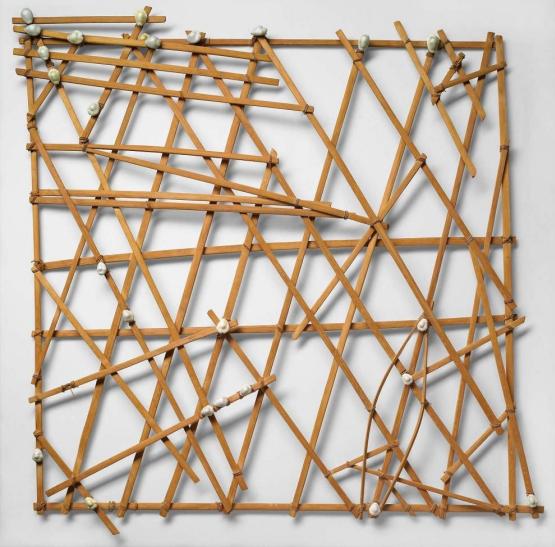
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 - Note the lack of context on colonization, genocide, and destruction of Marshall Islanders and their homes
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- 1946-1965: US capture islands from Japanese, force out inhabitants of Bikini and Enewetak Atoll for nuclear weapons testing
- 1954: Bravo, the most powerful hydrogen bomb ever tested by the US, is detonated on Bikini Atoll.
- **Between 1946 and 1958, the United States conducted 67 nuclear tests in the Marshall Islands.**
- 1970s: islanders told it is safe to return to Bikini but suffer from severe radiation levels and are forced out again
- 2001: Nuclear Claims Tribunal determines damages to be paid to Bikinians. There is not enough cash to honour the award and it is left to the Bikinians to petition the US for more money.



MFA, Commemorative head of a king (Oba), late 16th century

- Offers no explanation on the significance of this object and how it functioned in communities
- Obas when they assume the throne first commemorate their fathers with a portrait cast in bronze and placed on an altar at the palace.
- Represents the ongoing influence of past kings in the affairs of their descendants.
- Refer to the special role of the head in directing not only the body but also a person's success in life.
- Welfare of the entire kingdom depends upon the king's head, which is itself the object of worship.

MFA STATEMENT: "Although the early provenance of this object is not recorded, it is likely that British forces looted it from the Royal Palace in Benin City in 1897. At that time troops occupied the city and seized approximately 4,000 works of art; these objects then made their way to European collectors, dealers, and museums. It is also possible that it left Benin City at a later date or by other means that have not been documented."



The Raid on Benin, 1897

- British "punitive expedition" to capture Benin.
- The palace was burned and looted in February 1897, and the oba (king) was exiled.
- The British confiscated all of the royal treasures to break the power of the monarchy
- Some given to individual officers but most taken to auction in London
- The looted objects eventually made their way into museum and private collections around the world.
- Nigerian scholars, museum professionals, and the royal court of Benin continue to advocate for the return of objects

“It is not possible to decolonize the museum without decolonizing the world”

- However, Azoulay argues that decolonization efforts can't be limited to objects museums, and archives
- Those who have been expropriated from should lead the process in decolonization
- Calls for the “opening of imperial borders” and “letting people rebuild their worlds in proximity to their objects”
- Correlation between migration of people and movements and the right to live near cultural objects that have been stolen
- Pithy “objects might constitute the very “documentation” the countries hosting those museums demand of migrants.”
- Irony of people of color targeted and unwelcomed in museums, despite the fact that their objects are the ones museums are profiting on the display of
- MFA racial profiling

Extraction of knowledge from Informants

- Violent extraction of knowledge from “informants”
- The “collector” is an actor in plunder
- “Experts” learn about objects through the communities in which they are from
- Informants historically exploited, carried these objects to ports to be shipped to primarily white audiences
- Informants play vital role in curation and academia of such objects, though often without credit or choice

Extraction of knowledge and artifact: Egyptian “partage”

- Originates from French word “partager,” which means “to share”
- System to divide ownership of excavated artifacts during early 20th century in the Middle East by foreign-led teams, often under pressures by governments
- Egyptian archaeologist and former Antiquities Minister Dr. Zahi Hawass’ campaign to repatriate ancient Egyptian artifacts including:
 - Rosetta Stone at the British Museum; a famous bust of Nefertiti (1345 BCE) located in Berlin’s Neues Museum; the Dendera zodiac sculpture (ca. 50 BCE) in the Louvre Museum; a statue of Hemiunu (Old Kingdom) at the Roemer and Pelizaeus Museum in Hildesheim, Germany; and a bust of Prince Ankhhaf (ca. 2520-2494 BCE) located in the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston.
- Met returns 19 artifacts taken from King Tut’s tomb in 2011



British archaeologist Howard Carter in 1922

Rewriting curatorial ethics?

- Many museums include supplemental texts that explain that the works displayed were acquired through colonial practices
- New ethics models suggest a dynamic approach to the display of objects
- “Cultural democracy”
- Importance of context when displaying works
- Need for greater transparency in the acquisition of objects
- Proactive, not reactive model to address problematic histories and ownership

Questions for discussion

- Is there truly a central, neutral, camera-holder?
- Should documents be needed to prove a large scale campaign of violence?
- Who has the right to own images? To view them?
- How should we rethink our reliance on photographs as primary sources?
- How should we interpret history if we don't rely as heavily on photographs?
- How else can academia be violent?
- What ethical code should institutions adapt when displaying cultural works?
- Can objects be displayed in an ethical way? How?