

archival material to explore the life and poetry of Langston Hughes, the Harlem Renaissance of the 1930s and black gay male sexuality. With voice-overs by Stuart Hall and Toni Morrison and a fabulous score that unfurls like smoke in conjunction with stark lighting contrasts, reminiscent of black-and-white analogue photography, the film is a celebration of Harlem's cultural richness and, what at the time was considered a double suppression, homosexuality in black communities.

Wordy speeches incorporated into musically dynamic soundscapes also occurs in the three-screen *Lina Bo Bardi - A Marvellous Entanglement*, 2019, in which the titular Italian modernist architect's younger and older selves are played by Brazilian actors Fernanda Montenegro and Fernanda Torres. Bo Bardi's philosophical musings intermittently punctuate the wonderfully dynamic image-scapes of seven of her Brasil-based buildings, including the Museum of Modern Art of Bahia, in which a riotous contemporary dance performance takes precedence. The combination of all these elements, however, did not endear me to Bo Bardi as a subject, whose ideas about the non-linearity of time, oft cited in the film, are not as non-western and radical as she deems them to be. As a self-identified queer, black, artist/filmmaker, Julien's work is not and should not be pigeon-holed, but for me, this survey shows that his best work comes out of specific trajectories and locations of black history and related funding channels. For example, the critical value of Julien's 'political lyricism' comes to the fore in the ten-screen *Lessons of the Hour*, 2019, originally commissioned by the University of Rochester's Memorial Art Gallery. The ten differently sized screens, hung in a salon-like row, narrate an imaginary re-enactment of abolitionist and writer Frederick Douglass' two-year journey around the British Isles and Ireland in 1845 to campaign against slavery. Played by Ray Fearon, Douglass addresses an anti-slavery meeting in Edinburgh, his performance being derived from excerpts of his speeches 'Lessons of the Hour', 'What to the Slave is the 4th of July?' and 'Lecture on Pictures'. The images are sumptuous, the pacing slow and dreamy, but here Julien's characteristic use of archival documentary footage to disrupt the spectacular does not override trauma. At one point, the focus on 'Douglass' wandering through the Scottish landscape shifts to close-ups of yellow blossom and gnarled tree bark against blue skies. Just as one is thinking that these images are too close to a nature documentary, one screen switches to black-and-white archival footage of feet dangling from a height, the allusion to lynching connecting with earlier sounds of whips cracking over close-ups of lush cotton fields, while the protagonist's rousing assertion of photography as an empowering means of black-American self-representation is set in relation to his lash-scarred back.

One exits the exhibition from the room containing the two-screen *Vagabondia*, 2000. Filmed in the Sir John Soane's Museum, the mirrored dual screens show a female conservator wandering through the museum. The unsubtitled Creole voice-over, spoken by Julien's mother, expresses the woman's interior life, while a black male dancer in Regency costume signifies a return of the repressed in the colonial collection. The exhibition's bookending of *Vagabondia* and *Once Again...* tracks a non-linear return of some of Julien's concerns, including strong black female characters or seers which, in *Once Again...*, culminates in Alice Smith's

electrifying performance on the museum's grand staircase, her aria resounding above the hypnotic refrains of 'Blues for Langston' as lament, indictment and uplifting aspiration. While *Vagabondia* is set in a museum, *Once Again...* becomes its own micro-museum in the museum of Tate Britain and displays how the rag bag of the multiscreen format can be political and beautiful at one and the same time.

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Alfredo Jaar:

If It Concerns Us, It Concerns You

Goodman Gallery, London, 18 April to 24 May

50 Years Later

Cecilia Brunson Projects, London, 19 April to 4 June

Declaratory, vibrant, violent - media images have a way of offering the fleeting satisfaction of keeping us in the loop, and then the next story flashes in before we can ask any questions, but what happens when we fish the image out of the river, as it were, and frame it, even? This experiment has fascinated Alfredo Jaar (an honorary patron of *AM*) at least since his 1984 readymade, *BusinessWeek Magazine Cover, December 24*, which features in the Chilean artist's show at Goodman Gallery dedicated to his 'Press Works'. Filling most of the magazine's cover are the words, 'UNION CARBIDE FIGHTS FOR ITS LIFE'. A photograph of the corporation's chairman Warren Martin Anderson is below, designed to grab the attention concurrently with the text, whereas the woman with the bandaged eyes - a victim of a disastrous leakage at Union Carbide's pesticide plant in Bhopal, India - is relegated to the margin. Were we to pass this headline in a newsstand, or while scrolling on our phones, we may easily miss her.

Much of Jaar's work concerns what is sidelined or obscured. It engages us through absence, and it is our responsibility to read between the lines. In his now-iconic *Searching for Africa in LIFE*, 1996/2022, comprising 2,128 covers of the eponymous magazine from 1936 to 1996, a whole continent constitutes less than one per cent of 'life', represented by the occasional elephant and sublime tribesperson. *Welcome to the USA (TIME)*, 2018, shows two covers of *TIME* magazine (whose name, also all-caps, also assumes universality), with Donald Trump 'greeting' a young girl from Honduras, separated from her mother at the US-Mexico border. The original has the text, 'Welcome to America', which Jaar has altered in the adjacent version



Alfredo Jaar, *Buscando a Kissinger (Flag triptych postcards)*, 1983

to 'Welcome to the USA'. Jaar's correction highlights the obscurity of the other Americas in *TIME*'s headline, which itself amounts to an informational border wall. Conversely, sometimes an image is so often reproduced that we know what it looks like without seeing it, as in *What will they leave behind?*, 1985, in which the backs of Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher are instantly, uncannily recognisable.

At times, I was slow on the uptake, shamefully so when trying to parse the difference between America and the USA. But this delay, I like to think, is crucial to Jaar's critique, for it accentuates the seamless reciprocity between the media image and public consciousness while also implicating us, no matter whose side we say we're on. A black void at the end of *Searching for Africa in LIFE* reflects - or perhaps absorbs - the viewer, withholding the privilege of distance that critical art often affords. Similarly, in *West's authority in the world*, 2023, Jaar has printed a two-page spread from an article in the *Economist* on the war in Ukraine. On one page is a large photograph of a vast pile of used missiles, while on the other Jaar has cut out of the text a shape of the same dimensions to reveal a mirror beneath - his act enlists our authority to make sense of the scenario. Here, Jaar conflates the safety of distance with that of the explanatory text. Not only must we think independently, we must also acknowledge the effects of what we think and say.

A smaller exhibition at Cecilia Brunson Projects considers Jaar's engagement with the politics of Chile surrounding the coup that brought the dictator Augusto Pinochet to power 50 years ago. Jaar's 1981 *Public Interventions (Studies on Happiness: 1979-1981)* documents a stunt in which he inserted the text '¿Es usted feliz?' (Are you happy?) on signs and billboards; the seemingly innocuous - and yet politically fundamental - words dodged Pinochet's censorial radar. The prints take the form of blown-up negatives, resounding a dictum from Ansel Adams that Jaar has used on other occasions: 'You don't take a photograph, you make it.' Ever conscious of the politics of images, Jaar won't let us lose sight of the staged mediation of his textual performance. Much of this show pillories the US politician Henry Kissinger for the brutal, by many accounts criminal foreign policy he conducted, including the US's support for Pinochet's overthrow of Chile's socialist president Salvador Allende. He is called *Manhattan's Milosevic*, 2001, on a cover of the *Village Voice*. *Nothing of Very Great Consequence*, 2008, invites us to scrutinise a transcript of a telephone call between Kissinger and Richard Nixon. Here, it is ironically the privacy of the conversation that makes it elusive, as the interlocutors seem so complacently familiar with the matter that they omit the details. 'We didn't do it. I mean we helped them,' says Kissinger. Words signifying nothing - and everything.

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Grace Ndiritu Reimagines the FOMU Collection

FOMU, Antwerp, 17 February to 1 July

Grace Ndiritu: Healing the Museum

SMAK, Antwerp, 1 April to 10 September

Arriving at British-Kenyan artist Grace Ndiritu's exhibition 'Grace Ndiritu Reimagines the FOMU Collection' at the Fotomuseum in Antwerp, I'm asked by the museum's staff to remove my shoes and place them inside a cubby-hole below a long, narrow, dark wooden bench. With its sleek minimalist design, this beautifully hand-crafted piece of furniture forms part of a larger architectural transformation of the gallery, including white-carpeted floors, wooden benches and dividing screens that would not look out of place in the mid-century modern Californian home of US architects and designers Charles & Ray Eames. I'm also instructed on how to use the exhibition's audio guide that has been specially written and recorded by the artist, and which includes a series of guided meditations that encourage visitors to 'slow down and relax', setting the preconditions for 'keeping an open mind, making intuitive connections, and abandoning rational thought processes'.

Invited by FOMU to engage with what is, like many, a historically conservative collection of photography (museum staff confessed to me when they began working with Ndiritu they were shocked to discover how few works by women photographers and artists of colour are held in the collection), the artist set about selecting images and objects from the museum's archives based on her own research interests and aesthetic criteria. Ndiritu's reassuring voice guides the visitor through an idiosyncratic arrangement of photos without captions and absent of people; images grouped into colour-coded sections of the gallery under categories such as 'Travel, Sun, Plants, Objects' (lilac), 'Interiors, Landscapes, Exteriors, Crystals' (blue) and 'Abstract, Africa, Still Life, Animal, Colour, Textiles' (yellow). Ndiritu identifies the textile artist Anni Albers, the photographer Tina Modotti and the painter Georgia O'Keefe as the inspirational reference points for her reorganisation.

Ndiritu's efforts to 'reimagine' and 'reactivate' FOMU's collection forms part of her much larger project, 'Healing the Museum', which encompasses more than a decade of museum residencies, publications, films, textile work, performances, conference talks, social actions and policy interventions. 'Healing the Museum' is Ndiritu's particular response to the wider calls to rethink the contemporary museum in the light of its problematic histories of colonialism and racism. She says in a video interview on the FOMU website that 'in this day and age we talk about decolonising museums and therefore burning them down or throwing everything away'. Yet Ndiritu is committed to transforming rather than destroying the museum and her healing process involves a number of spiritual and communal approaches, from shamanic rituals to sharing practices and group meditations.

'Healing the Museum' is also the title of Ndiritu's large-scale mid-career retrospective that opened in April at another Flemish art institution, SMAK