Avant-Garde and Liberation

Avant-Garde and Liberation examines the significance of global modernism for contemporary art. The exhibition showcases works by twenty-four artists that respond to current threats such as racist violence, nationalist politics, and neocolonial economics and invoke some of the concepts and accomplishments of decolonial modernism. While the avant-garde debate is still mostly Eurocentric today, the artists in this exhibition make reference to avant-garde movements that formed in India, Africa, the Arab world, and the "Black Atlantic" as part of the anti-colonial and anti-racist movements that emerged in the twentieth century. Featuring a broad spectrum of artistic methods, media, and aesthetics, *Avant-Garde and Liberation* seeks to create a space in which to reflect upon radical artistic and intellectual ventures within the historical context of decolonization. The various works are connected by their interest in questions of temporality and the relationship between past, present, and a possible better future.

For Western avant-garde movements, the orientation towards the new had to do with a historical breaking with, and overcoming of, traditions. While decolonial avant-garde movements from the 1920s to the 1970s were concerned with renewal and liberation as well, their revolutionary impulse was also closely intertwined with the reconstruction of histories that colonial forms of knowledge had distorted and a restored connection with the cultural heritage of their forebears. As the artworks in this exhibition make clear, it is not enough to simply expand our conception of the avant-garde to encompass global modernism. What is required is a fundamental rethinking of what constitutes the "avant-garde" through a decolonial lens.

When we speak of liberation movements, then, we also include those that have not (yet) achieved their aims. The term does not apply merely to processes that have been successful: it encompasses the imagination of liberation—as political program or aesthetic articulation—just as much as it does the development of procedures for the realization of this anticipated freedom. It is precisely this that connects these movements to the critical art of today. The works present in *Avant-Garde and Liberation* are testament to how the spirit of the politically liberatory avant-gardes of the twentieth century remains relevant for a critical engagement with contemporary threats to freedom, social cohesion, and to life itself.

"My main point is that we must tap the well of our own collective imaginations, that we do what earlier generations have done: dream."
Robin D. G. Kelley, *Freedom Dreams*, 2002

Artistic references to decolonial modernism span from the early twentieth century through to the 1970s. The display on level 0 focuses on Arab and African experiences, including their diasporas. The artworks draw upon movements and artists such as Egyptian Surrealism, the modernist sculpture of Lebanese artist Saloua Raouda Choucair, and the militant African cinema of Sarah Maldoror. They evoke Afrofuturist literature and the internationalism of the women of the Négritude movement, Frantz Fanon's anticolonial psychiatric practices in Algeria, the architecture of African independence seen in cities such as Accra and Abidjan, the portrait photography of Seydou Keïta in Mali in the 1950s and pan-African platforms such as the Paris-based publisher Présence Africaine, which visitors will encounter several times throughout the exhibition.

The urgency of drawing on historical struggles and their artistic forms of expression is founded in phenomena such as the violence faced by asylum seekers and people of color in Europe and the United States, the militarization of European migration policies, the transgenerational nature of the trauma arising from colonial violence, and the ecological devastation of former colonies as a result of the West's exporting of hazardous waste. The artworks' political dimension is thus to be found less in their subject matter than in the subtle processes they develop in an effort to untangle the complex stratifications of the (seemingly) past and present. The works range from Iman Issa's abstract self-portraits and Leslie Hewitt's photographic, still-life-like layerings to Yto Barrada's use of Moroccan sweets and Serge Attukwei Clottey's utilization of a historically charged kind of duct tape as a painting material through to filmic re-stagings of a historic encounter in the work of patricia kaersenhout and Mathieu Kleyebe Abonnenc's search for traces of a lost masterwork of anti-colonial cinema.

Künstler*innen | Artists:
Mathieu Kleyebe Abonnenc, Omar Ba, Radcliffe Bailey, Yto Barrada, Mohamed Bourouissa, Diedrick Brackens, Serge Attukwei Clottey, william cordova, Atul Dodiya, Robert Gabris, Jojo Gronostay, Leslie Hewitt, Iman Issa, Janine Jembere, patricia kaersenhout, Belinda Kazeem-Kamiński, Zoe Leonard, Vincent Meessen, The Otolith Group, Fahamu Pecou, Cauleen Smith, Maud Sulter, Vivan Sundaram, Moffat Takadiwa

Kurator | Curator: Christian Kravagna
Co-Kurator | Co-Curator: Matthias Michalka
Ausstellungsmanagement | Exhibition Management: Claudia Dohr
Ausstellungsarchitektur | Exhibition Architecture: Wilfried Kühn, Wassily Walter
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features works by twenty-four artists that respond to current political threats to freedom, community, and life itself and invoke the accomplishments of decolonial modernism. They refer to avant-garde movements in India, Africa, and the "Black Atlantic" that formed as part of the anti-colonial and anti-racist movements that emerged in the twentieth century.

On level 2, which focuses on African diasporas in Europe and the United States as well as placing an additional emphasis on India, the artistic references to politically liberatory avant-garde movements range from the art of the Harlem Renaissance to James Baldwin's literature and activism and the revolutionary Third Cinema of Latin America. In works by william cordova, Janine Jembere, and Radcliffe Bailey, the references hark as far back as the early period of anti-colonial resistance in colonized South America and the Haitian Revolution around 1800. While Maud Sulter traces the histories of nineteenth-century Black women artists, Belinda Kazeem-Kamiński updates the liberatory motif of Augusto Boal's Theater of the Oppressed. Many of the pieces reveal the inseparability of artistic, musical, and activism-based manifestations of decolonial avant-garde movements: whether that be Mahalia Jackson's gospel music and the civil rights movement in Radcliffe Bailey's work; Faith Ringgold and Toni Morrison in Janine Jembere's photographs; Jimi Hendrix and the Black Panthers in william cordova's short films; the Black feminist Combahee River Collective and Alice Coltrane's spiritual jazz in Cauleen Smith's video installation; or hip-hop and the Black Lives Matter movement in the video art and drawings of Fahamu Pecou.

Vivan Sundaram and Atul Dodiya, meanwhile, respond to Hindu nationalists' hollowing out of secular Indian democracy and anti-Muslim violence through recourse to the painting and cosmopolitan educational projects of Rabindranath Tagore, the art produced by sculptor Ramkinkar Baij during the Indian independence movement, and Gandhi's art of non-violence. The Otolith Group also reflects on Tagore's "World University" and art school in Shantiniketan as a decolonial institution. All of the artists "actively seek out the experimental agency of the past and reactivate this agency for a more socially just future." (Saloni Mathur)

"Life does not contain the past tense."
James Baldwin, *Introduction to Exhibition of Beauford Delaney*, 1964

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examines the significance of decolonial modernism for contemporary art and its critical engagement with the current threats posed by racist violence, nationalist policies, and neocolonial economics. While the avant-garde debate is still mostly Eurocentric today, the artists in this exhibition make reference to avant-garde movements that formed in India, Africa, and the "Black Atlantic" as part of the anti-colonial and anti-racist movements that emerged in the twentieth century.

The works on Level 3 all display a particular sensitivity to seeing the body as a site of Black and queer experiences of discrimination and violence, but also as a medium of articulation and a language of identity. The simultaneously personal and political works by Fahamu Pecou, Diedrick Brackens, and Robert Gabris are shaped by reflections on racist stigmatization and gender-based stereotypes. They owe their motifs and aesthetic qualities to the processing and reworking of expressive forms of resistance such as hip-hop, the Négritude movement of the 1930s, and the Black Arts Movement of the late 1960s. They continue the tradition of the silhouette found in African American modernism and take up the techniques of weaving and storytelling of their ancestors in West Africa and the American South. They respond to a (visual) culture of violence with images of strength, beauty, and tenderness.

"The best art is political and you ought to be able to make it unquestionably political and irrevocably beautiful at the same time."
Toni Morrison, *Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation*, 1983