

## **Gallery for Contemporary Art E-WERK, Freiburg i.Br.**

### **Black Women, Art and Resistance**

Natasha A. Kelly, Millis Erwachen | Naomi Beukes-Meyer, The Centre

### **Laura Horelli, Changes in Direction**

Exhibition: Saturday 23rd February – Sunday 14th April 2019

**A topical subject:** at present, coming to terms with the colonial past is a much-discussed topic in Germany, and particularly in Freiburg. As one of the first municipalities in Germany, Freiburg has been exploring its colonial past with the recently published study Freiburg und der Kolonialismus (Freiburg and Colonialism).

The debate of whether to return skulls to the descendants of Herero and Nama peoples has brought the German colonial war in Namibia (1904-1908) sharply into focus. The restitution of museum artefacts is currently another part of the discussion on colonial history. Apart from the historical analysis and restitution issues, the current debate addresses much deeper questions of decolonisation: How can the hegemony of European perception and the historically-rooted interpretative power of Western culture, art and learning be addressed, deconstructed and overcome? This begs the question of how a post-racist and integrated society can be created.

**Exhibitions:** In both solo shows, Black women, art and resistance (Gallery I) and Changes in Direction (Galerie II), two artists examine colonial history each in their own way, exploring its legacy and topicality. In doing so, they address representation issues, identity politics and historiography.

### **Gallery 1**

#### **Black women, art and resistance**

Natasha A. Kelly, Millis Erwachen | Naomi Beukes-Meyer, The Centre

In her film *Milli's Awakening (1)*, **Natasha A. Kelly** creates the portraits of eight Black German women from different generations and retraces the rise of the Black women's movement from the 1960s onwards. Kelly's film contributes thus to the as yet little-documented history of Black women in Germany. The individual portraits describe the socio-political developments from a personal, self-determined Black perspective.

The portrayed women talk about their origins, lives and experiences of everyday racism in Germany. They have freed themselves from the objectification imposed on them by white, German mainstream society. Kelly shows Black women speaking with their own voice and leading their own self-determined lives. They are all actively involved in the art world and take part in cultural projects promoting equality for Black women. These eight voices are interwoven to form a rich fabric, evoking the tradition of quilting practised by African women.

Black women were predominantly portrayed as passive during colonial times. In their art work, painters such as Ernst Ludwig Kirchner represented Black women's bodies with their male eroticising and exoticising gaze. Rather than seeking to explore the individuality of their models, they simply turned them into objects of their desire.

In contrast to Kirchner's painting from 1911 entitled *Sleeping Milli*, Natasha A. Kelly has called her film *Milli's Awakening*. In her film, the eight Black women are artists themselves and are given the position to speak for themselves. Their artistic work has enabled them to overcome the colonialist stereotypes of the past and forge their own self-determined identity as Black women.

According to the poet, thinker and activist of the Black women's and lesbian movements in the US, Audre Lorde, language is not only a means to define oneself, but also a tool for constructing a collective identity: for creating a 'We'. In allusion to the afro-cultural and feminist tradition of quilting, each woman in Kelly's film has their own individual voice, but at the same time, each voice is also part of greater fabric. Quilting together was a social event for black women, whereby individual pre-cut patchwork pieces were assembled together to form a cover or a wall hanging. For Kelly, a quilt is a structured pattern that, among other things, shows how individuals can come together to form a collective.

In her poetic way, Kelly juxtaposes the normative culture of remembrance with parallel discourses, thereby creating a space for the long-neglected history of Black feminism in Germany. Her film therefore bears witness to the creativity and political power of Black activism.

**Naomi Beukes-Meyer, *The Centre* (2–3):** Naomi Beukes-Meyer is one of the Black women in Natasha A. Kelly's film, *Milli's Awakening*. She grew up in Namibia, studied acting and arrived in Germany in 1995 at the age of 29. She works as an actress and screenwriter, and teaches in a primary school in Berlin.

Beukes-Meyer's web series, *The Centre* (3), deals with the topic of violence experienced by African women in Namibia and Germany. She shows how Black women in Germany live their life by navigating between two cultures and are often exposed to two-pronged discrimination.

The exhibition shows an episode of her *The Centre* Series (2) alongside film stills of the latest episode, filmed in Namibia and produced by Namibian TV. Beukes-Meyer's *The Centre* series, is inspired by her own experience as a Black migrant in Germany. However, she also incorporates experiences from her childhood and student days in Namibia, which at the time was subject to the racist South African apartheid regime. Beukes-Meyer grew up as a reverend's daughter in Rehoboth, a small town in the 'Baster' area, which developed exclusively around the people of this so-called 'race'. Here, she essentially experienced the taboo surrounding sexual violence against women and girls. If a girl was raped and became pregnant, the girl was to blame. Nothing was done about the father of the child: rape was a taboo subject.

As a student in Namibia's capital, Windhoek, Beukes-Meyer experienced intersectional discrimination against blacks as well as discrimination against women. She wanted to work as an actress for the National Theatre but did not stand a chance as the stage was reserved for German performers and directors. Beukes-Meyer first worked as a coffee girl for the German performers and then behind the scenes in the theatre's cleaning service.

By telling her story in *Milli's Awakening* and through her artistic work, Beukes-Meyer wants to inspire all Black women, and more specifically Namibian women, to address taboo issues such as domestic violence, female sexuality and discrimination. She wants to encourage them to rise up, make their voices heard and fight for their needs and rights.

## Gallery 2

### Laura Horelli, Changes in Direction

In Gallery II, Laura Horelli presents under the title Changes in Direction two work complexes that show how colonial legacy was omnipresent during the Cold War and can still be felt today. In her Namibia Today group works (Galerie IIb / IIa), the artist uses the Namibia Today journal to look at the relationship between the former GDR and Namibia. This SWAPO (South West Africa People's Organisation) journal supporting the fight for Namibian independence was printed in the 1980s by the Fortschritt printing house at Erfurt, in the former GDR.

Namibia belonged to the German Empire colony of German South West Africa from 1884 to 1915. From 1915 onwards, the area was administered by South Africa under a League of Nations mandate. It was subject to the apartheid regime before finally gaining independence in 1990. The struggle for Namibian independence, which began in the 1960s and was driven by SWAPO, was influenced by the Cold War. Whereas the FRG sided with the South Africans, the GDR supported SWAPO and the fight for independence.

Horelli's new film, Uutisten aika (Newstime) (Gallery II c), discusses cultural difference, social exclusion, Namibia's struggle for independence and Finland's long-term ties with this South African country. The artist combines found footage from Finnish TV programs with the personal recollections of the famous Namibian writer Ellen Ndeshi Namhila. In the 1980s, Cassinga massacre survivor and SWAPO member Namhila came via a solidarity program to Tampere, the second largest city in Finland at that time, to study library science.

In both her videos, Namibia Today (6) and Uutisten aika (Newstime) (10), Horelli uses experimental documentary-type films to show history as a constellation of actors, memories, former backdrops and historical documents as opposed to a master narrative. Rather than adding a descriptive commentary to accompany what the camera shows, Horelli uses montage to create meaning instead. By compiling individual histories from contemporary witnesses and archive documents, she brings long-forgotten or overlooked micro-histories to the fore. As Maurice Halbwachs highlighted in his discussions on collective memory, the past is always confronted to meet the needs of the present. Horelli's works evoke the international solidarity movements that gained impetus in the second-half of the 20th century in the wake of decolonisation, thereby raising the question of how knowing about the history of these movements impacts our present and future.

**Galerie 2 b:** The artist displays a selection of Billboards she asked the Gera printing house to produce. This creates a material link between the past and present as Gera was successor to the Fortschritt printing house, where the Namibia Today journal was printed with the support of the GDR authorities. Horelli's Druckhaus Gera (1) poster series shows the buildings housing both printers in Erfurt, along with cover pages of the African National Congress' Sechaba publication and a cover page of the Zimbabwe Reviews. Like Namibia Today, these press organs used in the struggle for freedom from colonialism also had support from the GDR and were printed in East Germany.

The images of the posters are interspersed by three Interviews (2) with contemporary Namibian witnesses who were involved in publishing the Namibia Today journal in the GDR. The display cases exhibit Namibia Today (10) weekly journals that were published by the SWAPO government after Namibia gained its independence. The billboard posters (3, 4) which were used to advertise Horelli's film – which is to be shown at Freiburg – at the Berlinale film Festival in Berlin are also on display.

**Galerie 2 a:** The central work from Laura Horelli's Namibia Today collection is the Namibia Today video installation in Gallery Ila. It is accompanied by three large billboard posters from the Namibia Today series (5) and a display case containing original copies of Namibia Today (11) dating from the 1980s.

The Namibia Today billboard posters (5) were created in 2017 for Kunst im Untergrund (Art on the Underground), an exhibition commissioned by the Neue Gesellschaft für Bildende Kunst (New Society for Contemporary Art) in Berlin. Gallery Ila features three of Horelli's posters that were hung at the Schillingstraße underground station near Alexanderplatz in Berlin, a historically significant location. At the time of the GDR, Alexanderplatz was the setting for several solidarity movement events, including for Namibia. Today, line U5 runs through to Hellersdorf and its pre-fabricated high rises, where racism is rife.

For her billboard posters, Horelli collected cover pages of Namibia Today journals from the 1980s and other material from places such as the Federal archives in Berlin. The image-text collages illustrate the contribution of the GDR to producing the Namibia Today journal and the humanitarian, diplomatic and military support given to the Namibian liberation movement. Poster 5a, for example, shows a printing quality assessment meeting at the Fortschritt printing house in Erfurt alongside a group of PLAN fighters. In Poster 5b a picture of the Namibian Foreign Affairs Secretary, Peter Mueshange, and the Soviet Permanent Representative to the UN is juxtaposed with two photos of the Namibian Embassy in the Pankow district in former East Berlin. Poster 5c documents the training of Namibians in the GDR and an East German Solidarity Committee report in the Neues Deutschland newspaper.

In the Namibia Today video (6), seven contemporary witnesses are filmed, waiting at Schillingstraße underground station in former East Berlin. Horelli's billboard posters hang on the orange-tiled walls of the station as part of the Kunst im Untergrund exhibition. The camera moves slowly back and forth between the surroundings and the witnesses. It repeatedly lingers on the billboards, with long takes and close-ups, so we can read the text. It then moves along the wall and gives an overall view of the setting. The posters lined up along the wall look like secret codes for the passage of time or the course of history.

The camera cautiously approaches the witnesses from afar. Through inner monologues, these contemporary witnesses talk about their experiences of the Namibian struggle for independence, their activities in Berlin concerning the Namibia Today journal, or their ancestors Namibia.

**Galerie 2 c:** In her new work, Uutisten aika (Newstime) (12), Horelli returns to the 1980s, when the Namibian fight for independence was entering its last phase. The resolution ratified by the UN Security Council in 1978 requested the immediate withdrawal of South African troops and that free elections be held. South Africa, supported by the FRG, among others, delayed the implementation of the resolution by using negotiation ploys and laying down conditions that they knew SWAPO would not accept. The Nordic countries, Eastern Bloc states, Soviet Union, Cuba, China and North Korea stayed loyal to SWAPO. The anti-apartheid movement was also active in several Western countries. In November 1989, the elections for a constituent assembly finally took place and Namibia became independent in March 1990.

Ellen Ndeshi Namhila is established by her voice on the soundtrack of Horelli's video. We hear Namhila pointedly and meaningfully read key extracts from her autobiography, The Price of Freedom, about her time in Finland.

She describes the effect Finland had on her and the differences she found concerning family, the role of women and the support provided by society between Namibia and Finland. She describes among other things her experience as a single mother, the problems she had christening her daughter in a Finnish church, or her difficulties in adapting to the Finnish attitude to time-keeping. She describes how she tried to find her own identity within a foreign Finnish society, and the prejudice she experienced as a social welfare recipient. Given that there was not much going on at the Viittakivi International Centre in Hauho, the first place Namhila stayed in Finland, she and her fellow students often watched Finnish TV, especially news programs.

In *Uutisten aika* (Newstime), the artist assembles images from news material and documentaries about everyday life in Finland from 1980s TV programs. As we listen to Namhila's voice-over describing her experience as a foreigner, we see images of the perfect world within a homogeneous all-white society inhabited by nuclear families. In an allusion to Martha Rosler's *Bringing the War Home* collages (1967-72), which brought the images of the Vietnam war into American homes, Horelli lets the conflict in Namibia become part of daily life in Finland. In the news material, we come across members of SWAPO studying in exile in Finland and continuing the fight for independence from abroad. Politicians, UN representatives or NGO members talk about the difficult negotiations between South Africa and SWAPO, the countless failed attempts at enforcing the UN resolution, and the conferences held in Finland.

Namhila's autobiography, *The Price of Freedom* (12), the Finnish translation as well as Horelli's *Script* (8) and *Dramatisation* (7) for *Uutisten aika* (Newstime) are exhibited in the display case in Gallery IIa.

Heidi Brunnschweiler, February 2019