



Belinda
Kazeem
-Kamiński

kunst
halle
wien





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Introduction

Kunsthalle Wien dedicates to Vienna-based artists* Ana Hoffner ex-Prvulovic* and Belinda Kazeem-Kamiński two solo shows, which take place simultaneously in the upper hall of Kunsthalle Wien Museumsquartier from October 22, 2021, to February 6, 2022.

Our invitation to Ana Hoffner ex-Prvulovic* and Belinda Kazeem-Kamiński follows Kunsthalle Wien's commitment to showing artists who question the legacies of imperialism, colonialism, and enslavement and whose practices politically reframe racism and heteronormativity as political tools that were historically developed (and are used still today) to subjugate and exploit certain territories and certain bodies.

While the two solo shows take place simultaneously in the upper hall, they are accessible through two different entrances and separated by a divider wall. The location, architecture, and dramaturgy were developed to place full attention on each artistic practice while still offering the audience the ability to cross between these two universes, enabling chosen moments of encounter.

The invitation to both artists* to have solo shows at Kunsthalle Wien dates back to 2019, and the exhibitions were originally planned for the spring of 2020. But during the Covid-19 pandemic, the exhibitions were twice postponed. On the one hand, this long preparation time has allowed for new developments; on the other hand, the artists* were forced to cope with an unpredictable rhythm and (constant) recalibrating of the project. The final exhibitions are the outcome of an intensive dialogue, ongoing self-reflection, and, in some cases, compromise. They include existing works reimagined and adapted for Kunsthalle Wien's exhibition space as well as new works produced for the occasion.

In her works, be they photographic series, films, or installations, Belinda Kazeem-Kamiński creates spaces for encounter, conversation, and sometimes confrontation between herself and the viewer, but first and foremost between herself and the people who populate her pieces, her memories, and her imagination: those who have been disappeared and who are gone, those who are here, and those who are to come. Intertwining critical Black feminist theory, conceptual visual strategies, and (science-)fictional narration, the artist explores diverse methods to communicate across time and



Belinda Kazeem-Kamiński, *Unearthing. In Conversation* (video still), 2017

space. While she critically investigates regimes of looking and decodes the racist cultural apparatus underlying the ongoing system of subjugation and exploitation of Black lives, she outreaches at the same time the violence contained in archives, in museums, and in books by opening pathways for exchanging, caring, and imagining. Belinda Kazeem-Kamiński's artworks always choose minimalism over opulence, dispersion over monumentality, evanescence over fixation, and openness over closure, and welcome blank spaces and voids. They are continuously in process, in self-reflection, "in the wake" (Christina Sharpe), seriously embracing their political task to set the conditions and to create spaces—real and imagined—for the processing of the past, invention of the future, and disintegration of the present as it is.

Ana Hoffner ex-Prvulovic's works take the shape of multimedia installations mixing film, photography, objects, and text. She* looks closely at the fabrication of history, memory, and subjectivity—insisting on the unconscious at work in these processes. Along which lines of domination and exclusion do these processes occur? Which stories and practices are swept away and erased? How

might we disarm the misogynist and racist prejudices embedded in (Western) official histories and representations? In the exhibition, the artist* (re)tells the stories of queerness as a survival strategy, of non-alignment as ethics (and not only as geopolitics), and of family as a space for chosen kinship. She* stages moments of subversion, crisis, and resistance, and in this way attempts to figure out how a contemporary subject can dig up and appropriate hidden histories in order to escape cultural, social, and psychological assignments. In a self-reflexive movement, the artist also questions the capacity of the art field itself to welcome, support, and stand for minoritarian alternatives and non-aligned thought, in an intensive investigation of the involvement of dirty capital in the financing of art institutions.

Being located in a country where (scientific) colonialism is rarely discussed, where "white innocence" (Gloria Wekker) is an unchallenged social paradigm, and where historical migration and cultural creolization are still disregarded in favor of a vision of a unique, sole anchorage in the West, we felt it was important to feature these two artists* who are both based in Vienna and work internationally. Each tirelessly investigates racist scopoc regimes and practices of Othering and deploys aesthetic strategies of resistance. At the same time, each artist* speaks from a differently situated perspective that hinges on dissimilar experiences, resulting in two distinct practices.

— Anne Faucheret
Curator





IN SEARCH OF RED, BLACK, AND GREEN, 2021

3 C-prints on Alu-Dibond, each 80 × 119.3 cm

The protagonist of the three-part photographic series *In Search of Red, Black, and Green* (2021) looks for something that is out of frame, beyond the viewer's gaze, concentrating on what lies ahead and is not visible to the audience. The three pictures depict the model in almost the same position, but with

different colored backgrounds: red, black, and green. This tripartite color combination could be read as a visual code, echoing the flags of some African nation-states established in the wake of decolonization. The three equal horizontal bands, going from top to bottom, of the same red, black, and green also constitute the tricolor



Belinda Kazeem-Kamiński, *In Search of Red, Black, and Green*, 2021

flag variously referred to as the Pan-African flag, the Black Liberation flag, and the African American flag—multiple names for one symbol of the liberation of Black people. The artist uses these three colors as coded and powerful reminders of the liberatory resistance struggles of the African diaspora, and for Black freedom in general, which is still “an unfinished project”,

as African American thinker and theorist Saidiya Hartman writes. In that sense, Belinda Kazeem-Kamiński's artwork underlines the urgent need to hold on to what drove and still drives emancipatory and liberatory Black projects: the insistence on imagining, practicing, thinking, and living toward what it would mean to be truly free.

TO LET THEM KNOW WHAT WE THINK ABOUT THEM,
from the project VOIDS, 2021

3 textile flags, each 120 × 90 cm. In collaboration with Baba Issaka

Voids (2017–2021) consists of several works, in a broad range of media, dedicated to the haunting memories of a group of West African performers who were brought to Vienna at the end of the nineteenth century. The project's visual and conceptual strategies aim at withstanding the temptation of “filling in the gaps” (Saidiya Hartman) of the archive or the dominant (national) narrative. Instead, it focuses on the “haunting” qualities of colonialism and negotiates ongoing pasts.

Yaarborley Domei, one of the West African performers brought to Europe in 1896–1897 to take part in exhibitions of indigenous African peoples, wrote a letter during her stay in Vienna's Prater. It was published in the newspaper *Wiener Caricaturen*. Yaarborley Domei emphasizes her intention to let the Viennese public know what she thinks about them, which is what this work's title is inspired by: a line in the letter that reads, “I am writing all of this to you, so that you tell the white people what I think about them.” The installation consists of three Asafo flags that Belinda Kazeem-Kamiński created together with renowned Ghana-based flag maker Baba Issaka, who takes up the tradition of creating commemorative and ceremonial textile flags. Asafos—translating to “the War People”, from *sa*, “war”, and *fo*, “people”—were traditional warrior organizations concerned with the defense and welfare of their communities. Each Asafo had its own name,

number, regalia, shrine, and flag and its members had precisely defined roles. Asafo flags were the symbols of the communities who held them, but also a visual metaphor of what bound their members together, be it a historic event, a foundational scene, or an aphorism.

The flags in the exhibition were created in that function: to commemorate the West African performers brought to Vienna, going beyond the representations found in the colonial archive. Belinda Kazeem-Kamiński has chosen three scenes to be translated into fabric: a portrait of a girl taken from what is thought to be a photograph taken by Peter Altenberg, a hand holding a Sankofa bird, and a hand holding a (golden) peanut. The peanut, a plant whose history intersects with the history of enslavement, also refers here to the Austrian word “Aschanti”, used to designate peanuts and originally being the German translation for “Asante”, meaning the people of the Asante Kingdom, in



Belinda Kazeem-Kamiński in collaboration with Baba Issaka,
To let them know what we think about them, 2021

the region where modern-day Ghana is located. The Sankofa bird is a foundational image in the African diaspora: as it walks into the future, sometimes carrying an egg in its beak, it looks

backward in order to not forget what has happened, to always keep in mind what has come before and to build a future.

See also the artwork descriptions for:
Yaarborley Domei's Brief [Yaarborley Domei's Letter], 2021, p. 42
The Letter, 2019, pp. 18–19

SCHEBESTAS SCHATTEN [SCHEBESTA'S SHADOW],
2017/2021

3 digital C-prints on paper, each 9 × 13 cm

In the work *Schebestas Schatten* [Schebesta's Shadow] (2017/2021), three black-and-white photographs in post-card format are each partially covered with a blue, yellow, or red color field and placed in a vitrine. What remains visible from the original photographs, in the uncovered parts, are some shadows cast on the surface of the photographed people's bodies and clothes, delineating the blurry contour of a double hat—actually two hats piled on top of one another.

The shadow seems to be the unintentional signature of the photos' author, Paul Schebesta (1887–1967). The archive of the Austrian National Library holds hundreds of photographs attributed to the Austro-Czech missionary, author, educator, and ethnographer, probably brought back from his travels to what is today known as the Democratic Republic of the Congo. The majority of them depict people he encountered, observed, and arranged in staged scenes, thereby presenting them as embodiments of "Otherness" and ultimately feeding the Western racist colonial narrative. Following these objectives, the pictures feature

the photographer himself only rarely. Paul Schebesta was likely conscious of the advantage of being absent, allowing him to act as a sort of invisible creator. But some photographs do feature him—or his shadow, at least. And these are the ones Belinda Kazeem-Kamiński chose to include in her work. In deciding to focus on a tiny but foundational detail—the shadows cast by the hat(s) and the body of the colonial photographer—the artist changes invisibility to visibility in both directions: the invisible author becomes visible, and the hypervisibilized and subjugated models receive protection through a temporary invisibility.

This work is a preliminary study for *Unearthing. In Conversation*, 2017. See the artwork description on pp. 38–41.



Belinda Kazeem-Kamiński, *Schebestas Schatten* [Schebesta's Shadow],
2017/2021

FLESHBACKS, from the project VOIDS, 2021

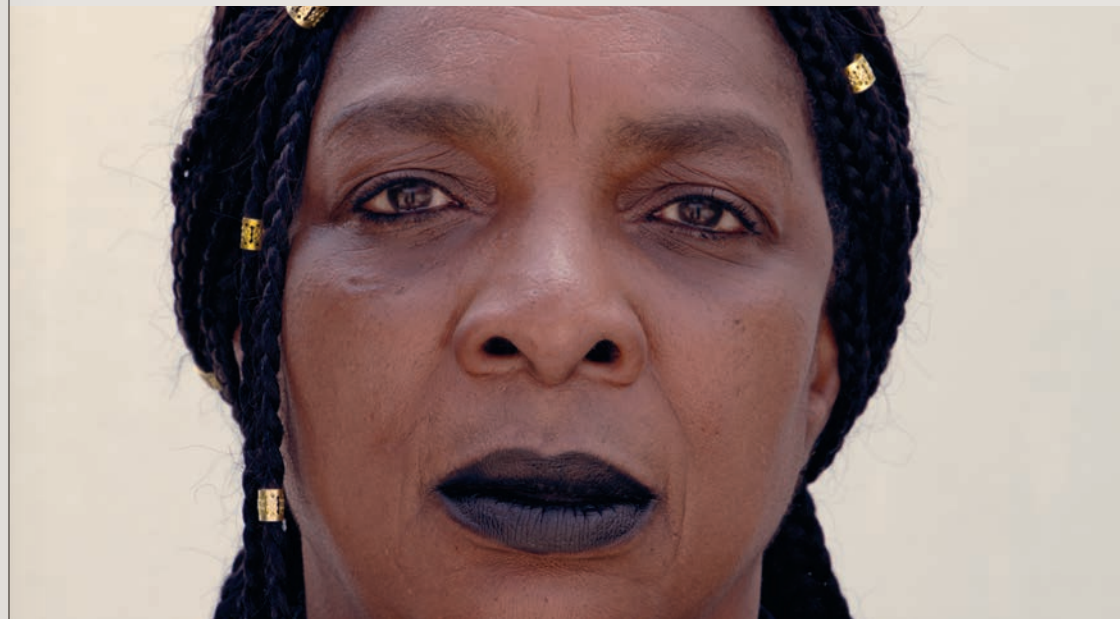
Three video projections, color and sound, 4:3, 6 min

Fleshbacks (2021) is a three-part annotation to *The Letter* (2019). The film's protagonists are filmed in various places in an urban setting. They are not the same performers as in *The Letter*, but they show a certain connection to them through the props they hold (a magnifying glass, museum-restorer tools) and the black coveralls they wear. As the work progresses, something starts shifting. They begin moving around the city—climbing stairs, running uphill and downhill, scaling ladders; they are all following an affect, what some might call a *calling*, leading them into a zone where the lines between Vienna and Accra, between the then and the now, as well as the here and there, become blurry and ultimately obsolete.

The title, *Fleshbacks*, is a word created by Belinda Kazeem-Kamiński that merges “flashback”, referring to a scene in a novel or film set in a time earlier than the main story, with “flesh”. The artist here takes up African American scholar Hortense Spillers’ distinction between “body” and “flesh”, where the “bodily” regime is granted only to liberated or free subject positions, who can control the way meaning is extracted and imposed on

them, and where “flesh” is used to designate Black bodies that, in the wake of enslavement and its “flesh-making” violence, can only be considered as body fragments or as a mass of flesh. Hortense Spillers writes: “Before the ‘body’ there is the ‘flesh’. [...] If we think of the ‘flesh’ as a primary narrative, then we mean its seared, divided, ripped-apartness, riveted to the ship’s hole, fallen, or ‘escaped’ overboard” (*Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar*, 1987, p. 67). The flesh is at once the terrain for violence and the terrain for a new kind of relationality.

See also the artwork description for *The Letter*, 2019, pp. 18–19.



Belinda Kazeem-Kamiński, *Fleshbacks* (video stills), 2021

THE LETTER, from the project VOIDS, 2019

Video projection, color and sound, 16:9, 18 min

The artist's inspiration for this work came from an open letter written in 1896 by Yaarborley Domei—a member of a group of West African performers brought to Europe—which she published in the Viennese newspaper *Wiener Caricaturen*. The video retells the story in a speculative and futuristic way to investigate the power of the archive in the constitution of collective memory and of the gaze.

More than a hundred years after the letter's publication, three protagonists, whom the artist calls "empaths" (ones who experience empathy—feel others' feelings—acutely), follow the traces of Yaarborley Domei's life, leading them to break into an archive as they attempt to further connect with her story, which is told in glimpses and seems to haunt them. Wearing gloves, dressed in black, and moving slowly, they walk the archive's corridors, slide open its heavy doors, and pull open its drawers. Then they gather to perform a ritual, arranging on a table little treasures they seem to have brought with them—in space and in time. A pair of golden scissors shaped like a bird, golden peanuts, red

candles, crystals, a pink lighter, an annotated book, pieces of wax-printed fabric, and more. Without a word, the empaths—by passing things to one another, by sensing, touching, smelling, and feeling—seem to enter into communication with an elsewhere and to find transtemporal connections. They appear to experience the very relations that the violence of the archive persistently tries to contain, to silence, and to erase. Once the empaths leave the space of the archive, something mysterious starts happening: a drawer opens, an image appears on the wall ... The archive itself now seems to be the haunted one.

See also the artwork descriptions for:

Yaarborley Domei's Brief [Yaarborley Domei's Letter], 2021, p. 42
To let them know what we think about them, 2021, pp. 12–13



Belinda Kazeem-Kamiński, *The Letter* (video still), 2019

IN REMEMBRANCE TO THE MAN WHO BECAME ETCHED INTO HISTORY AS

“DER ASCHANTI AN DER AKADEMIE”, 2021

Print on hard foam plate, wooden plinth, wooden stool, curtain, kauri shells

This work is dedicated to a Black model who posed in the drawing classroom at the Academy of Fine Arts Vienna in front of a group of (male) art students. He appears in a lithograph by Franz Wolf from 1833, after a drawing by Johann Nepomuk Hoechle, together with another model, a white man. Both men appear almost entirely naked on an elevated stage and in front of a backdrop of draped curtains. The props that seem to accompany only the Black model underline the actual ideological purpose of the setting. Arrows in a quiver alongside a club, kauri shells, and what could be a calabash complete the mise-en-scène of the Black model as the perfect “Other”, serving the discourse of supposed “wildness” and “primitivism” in opposition to Western “civilization”. The whole setting aims less at instructing art students in how to draw bodies than at claiming a radical civilizational differential, conveyed through the two supposedly contrasting bodies and their attributes. The location of this scene within the institutional art world underlines the historical entanglement of academic and cultural institutions

in the subjugation, objectification, and exploitation of people in the context of enslavement, colonialism, and their contemporary afterlives. The interplay of gazes of the art students conveys the spectacularization of racist dichotomies, not only through the composition of the image but also through the titles of both the lithography and the etching book in which it was published: respectively, *Der Aschanti an der Universität der Bildenden Künste Wien* [The Aschanti at the Academy of Fine Arts Vienna] and issue 9 of the *Journal Pittoresque. Mahlerische Darstellungen der neuesten merkwürdigsten Begebenheiten und Erscheinungen im Leben* [Picturesque Depictions of the Latest Strangest Incidents and Occurrences in Life].

Aschanti is the German word for Asante, referring to the population of the Asante Kingdom, but the term also translates as “a peanut”.

See also the artwork description for *Fleshbacks*, 2021, pp. 16–17.



Belinda Kazeem-Kamiński, *In Remembrance to the Man Who Became Etched into History as “Der Aschanti an der Akademie”* (installation view, detail), 2021



IN REMEMBRANCE TO THE MAN WHO BECAME
KNOWN AS ANGELO SOLIMAN, (ANTE MORTEM) I
& (POST MORTEM) II, 2015
2 C-prints, framed, each 71 × 47.6 cm

The two-part photographic work *In Remembrance to the Man Who Became Known as Angelo Soliman, (Ante Mortem) I & (Post Mortem) II* (2015) deals with the museal display of the body of Angelo Soliman (unknown–1790), a historical figure of eighteenth-century Vienna, in the former k.u.k. Hof-und Naturalienmuseum [Imperial and Royal Court Museum and Natural History Museum]. The man who became known as Angelo Soliman was abducted from the African continent as a child, enslaved, and ended up serving the Prince of Liechtenstein.

Immediately following his death, from what was most likely a stroke, his body was stuffed and later exhibited.

In this work, Belinda Kazeem-Kamiński concentrates on items that were assigned to Soliman—a turban, pyramidal objects, a metal lion, red, blue, and white feathers—and used to objectify him during his lifetime (ante-mortem) and after his death (post-mortem). The artist has pinned them to a red velvet background, numbered and annotated them, and finally framed them. The objectified



Belinda Kazeem-Kamiński, *In Remembrance to the Man Who Became Known as Angelo Soliman (Ante Mortem) I & (Post Mortem) II*, 2015

human is absent, whereas the tools of his objectification remain and become the objects of artistic inquiry. In employing this perspective, Belinda Kazeem-Kamiński contradicts the voyeuristic compulsion and racist prejudices that foreground (Western) museal (ethnographic) representation. But this diptych does not simply show the display cases containing Soliman's props: both photographs also feature two arms, with white gloves and black sleeves, that hold the cases, evoking the figure of the

custodian or restorer. In creating this effect of “a frame within a frame”, the work insists on the museal apparatus and its relentless logics of collecting, preserving, and exhibiting. Moreover, it is the whole exhibitionary complex that the artist tackles, and especially its entanglement with and role in upholding the foundational polarities of Western ideology: here/elsewhere, we/the Other, the known/the alien, culture/nature. In this way, the artist also questions scopic regimes, concluding that the gaze is never innocent.

See also the artwork description for *Unearthing. In Conversation*, 2017, pp. 38–41.

YOU ARE AWAITED, BUT NEVER AS EQUALS,
from the project **VOIDS**, 2021
Diashow, 26 black-and-white slides, dimensions variable

Taking up a medium evocative of academic settings—the slide show—*You are awaited, but never as equals* (2021) zooms in on a postcard image, decomposes it, and lays bare its underlying violence. The postcard depicts the arrival of a group of West African performers in Vienna in 1896. Arriving by ship after performing in Budapest, the group was “welcomed” by a crowd of hundreds of (white) people staring at them, pointing at them, and dissecting them with their gazes and gestures. The composition of the photograph—and its production as a postcard—emphasizes the opposition between “the norm” and “the Other”, the objectification of Blackness, and the spectacularization of Otherness. By showing only enlarged and dematerialized details of the looks and gestures of the audience, the artist prevents the reproduction of the original visual experience, thus defusing the panoptic, objectifying, and violent white gaze on Black bodies and underlining the extent to which racist ideology was and is inscribed and relayed by an incalculable number of white bodies.

See also the artwork descriptions for:
Yaarborley Domei's Brief [Yaarborley Domei's Letter], 2021, p. 42
The Letter, 2019, pp. 18–19
Schebestas Schatten [Schebesta's Shadow], 2017/2021, pp. 14–15
Unearthing. In Conversation, 2017, pp. 38–41



Belinda Kazeem-Kamiński, *You are awaited, but never as equals* (excerpts from slide show), 2021

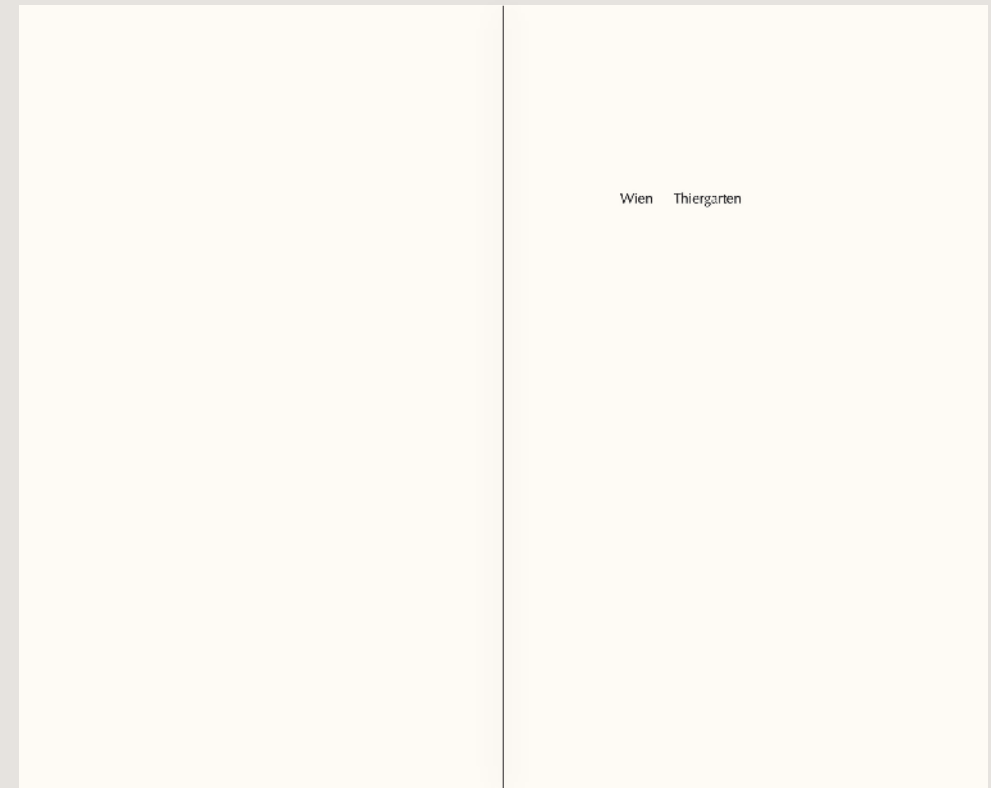
ASHANTEE, EDITED, from the project VOIDS, 2017–2021
Artist book, edition of 15 + 1

Ashantee, edited (2017–2021) as well as *Ashantee, edited & annotated* (2021) are both the result of a long involvement by the artist with a book published by Austrian writer Peter Altenberg (1859–1919) in 1897 entitled *Ashantee*, describing his repeated observations of and attempts to communicate with the West African performers in an enclosure, formerly known as Tiergarten am Schüttel, in what is today Vienna's Prater. Contradicting the all-too-common reception of Peter Altenberg's writings as a first step toward criticizing the objectification of African people in the colonial system, Belinda Kazeem-Kamiński carves out how this text—marked by profound ignorance, racist prejudices, and pedophilic tendencies—actually does not give voice to the people Peter Altenberg describes, nor does it show him as free of racist and exoticist presumptions and stereotyping. Rather, it simply reflects a voyeuristic distance and a dandyist critical position against nineteenth-century Vienna's bourgeoisie.

In her intensive investigation of the book, the artist focused on typographic and linguistic signs of Peter Altenberg's withdrawal from any positioning, like the use of the third person to speak about himself ("Sir Peter") as

well as the recurring use of "—" and "——". Reading these symbols as breaks, pauses, hesitations, or ellipses in the narration, the artist decided to expand on these blank spaces by removing all sentences and passages underpinned by racism or sexism. In a first version, she physically scratched out the letters. Later, Belinda Kazeem-Kamiński digitally removed Peter Altenberg's words to create, in collaboration with art educator Renate Höllwart, an artist book. By erasing some parts and creating more gaps, the artist not only gets rid of what blocked her view—the violent gaze and voice of the European male writer—but also makes space for something else: words carrying information that could potentially lead the artist to further elements related to the West African performers. In doing so, the artist made further deductions and connections, such as determining the language the performers were speaking—Gaa (a language Peter Altenberg tried to transcribe in his book and which contemporary commentators often misinterpreted as a fantasy language)—as well as an address in Accra.

Belinda Kazeem-Kamiński's artist book is an edited version of Peter Altenberg's *Ashantee* (1897), laid out with blank



Belinda Kazeem-Kamiński, *Ashantee, edited* (excerpt from artist book), 2017–2021

spaces, as according to the original layout. The spreads of the book are on view in the work *Ashantee, edited & annotated* (2021). The entire artist book is on view at the Kunsthalle Wien Shop in Museumsquartier.

See also the artwork description for *Ashantee, edited & annotated*, 2021, p. 34.

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Belinda Kazeem-Kamiński, *Ashantee, edited* (excerpts from artist book),
2017–2021

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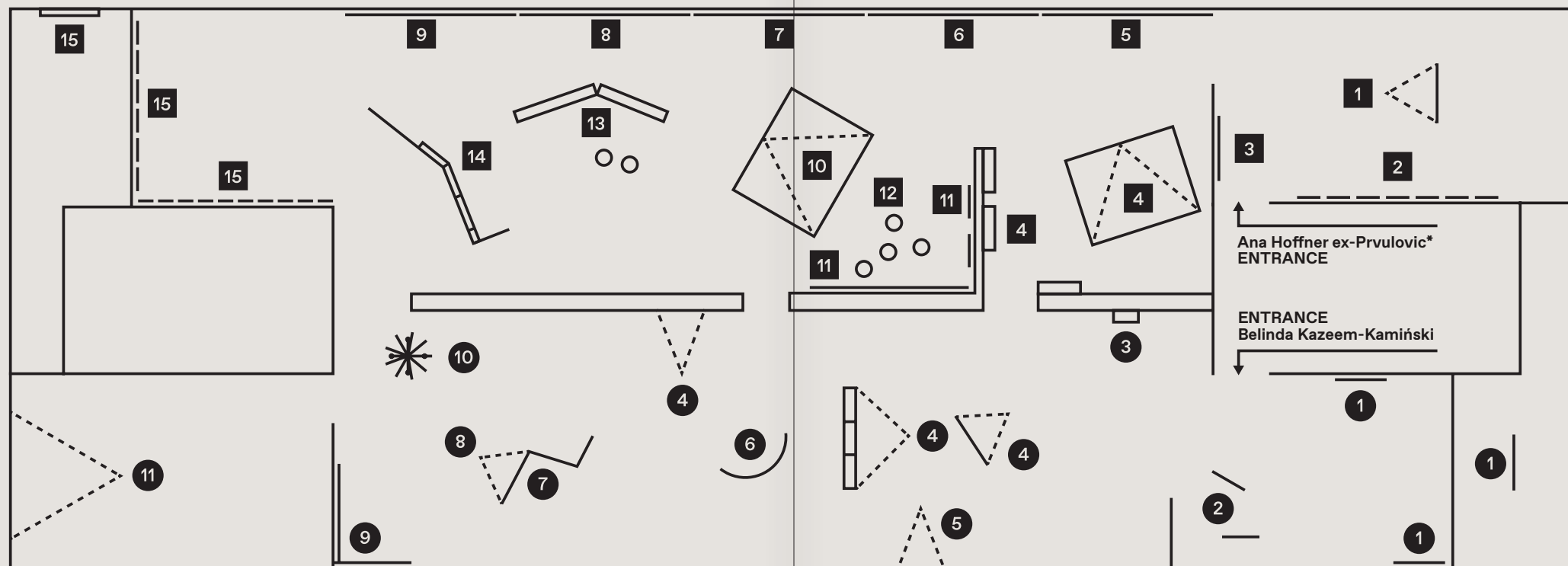
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Belinda Kazeem-Kamiński

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 - 5** The Letter, 2019
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(in the newspaper *Der Standard*)

Ana Hoffner ex-Prvulovic* (Further information on these works: see exhibition guide “Ana Hoffner ex-Prvulovic”*)

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 - 2** Future Anterior – Illustrations of War, 2013
 - 3** Fifty-One Pieces – Believing in Art, 2016
 - 4** Freud Film, 2017/2021
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 - 6** Private View – Modern Members, 2021
 - 7** Private View – Big Safari, 2021
 - 8** Private View – Special Gift, 2019
 - 9** Private View – Silent Weapon, 2018
 - 10** Non-aligned Relatives, 2021
 - 11** (from left to right) Simultaneous Contrast, 2018
The Queer Family Album, 2018
Disavowals or Cancelled Confessions, 2016
Double Still Lives, 2016
 - 12** Speech Objects #1, #2, #3, and #4, 2018–2021
 - 13** Духовна Деколонизација (Spiritual Decolonization) – Part I, 2021
 - 14** The Bacha Posh Project, 2016/2021
 - 15** Active Intolerance – Part II, 2021
- Outside the exhibition space:
- Active Intolerance – Part I, 2021
(Museumsquartier, entrance Halle E+G)

ASHANTEE, EDITED & ANNOTATED,
from the project VOIDS, 2021
Prints on paper, each 42 × 29.7 cm, dimensions variable

In *Ashantee, edited & annotated* (2021), Belinda Kazeem-Kamiński translates her intervention into Peter Altenberg's book into three-dimensional space. Spreads of the book are printed out as posters and applied directly to the wall. They constitute the first layer of an installation that will grow throughout the exhibition as the artist adds further materials, like photographs, images, and texts, which will complete, overlap, and even obliterate the first layer.

See also the artwork description for *Ashantee, edited*, 2017–2021, pp. 26–31.



Belinda Kazeem-Kamiński, *Ashantee, edited* (excerpt from artist book), 2017–2021

STRIKE A POSE (2017–2021)

& IN REMEMBRANCE TO ELLA WILLIAMS (2021)

8 digital C-prints on paper, metallic stand, 160 cm diameter and 255 cm height

In the photo installation *Strike a Pose* (2017–2021), six photographs are hung on a metallic display, and two others, both portraits, are pinned to the wall (with their own title: *In Remembrance to Ella Williams*, 2021). The work opens up a reflection on a specific pose—the out-stretched arm (mainly of the ethnographer, but also of the performer)—that the artist encountered several times in her research. This pose is a symbol of a colonial representational system based on classification, subjugation, and objectification, and hence a symbol of unequal relations and distribution of power. The photographs hanging from the display emphasize the gesture of the ethnographer, through the artist's intervention to cover the Othered people with blocks of color: originally overplaying his height next to that of the pictured models, the ethnographer is now alone to perform his authoritative gesture on top of a void.

A cutout and articulated photographic portrait of Ella Williams, an African-American performer from South Carolina who became known as Abomah the African Giantess, hangs on the wall next to the metal structure. The performer toured throughout Europe at the end of the

nineteenth century and beginning of the twentieth. When taken up by the performer, the pose certainly did not symbolize any empowering gesture; rather, it proved only the well-thought-out, systematic, and perverse undertaking of Othering over and of Black bodies, through any and all means available. Belinda Kazeem-Kamiński's work does not feature Ella Williams in her performing position, but instead brings the performer back to a resting position, in a gesture of delicate (and transformative) care.



Belinda Kazeem-Kamiński, *Unearthing. In Conversation* (video still), 2017

UNEARTHING. IN CONVERSATION, 2017

Video projection, color and sound, 16:9, 13 min

In the video projection *Unearthing. In Conversation* (2017), Belinda Kazeem-Kamiński performs on stage and in front of an empty auditorium. Sitting at a desk, she takes some photographs out of cardboard boxes. These are portraits featuring Austrian Czech ethnographer, missionary, author, and educator Paul Schebesta posing with people from the former Belgian Congo (today, the Democratic Republic of the Congo), taken at the beginning of the twentieth century. However, the pictures are not in their original form: the artist has applied various visual strategies to prevent the voyeuristic gaze. While manipulating the photographs, the artist speaks to the people they depict, trying to find ways to communicate beyond the racist filter of the colonial archive. She also addresses us, the absent and accomplice audience. All at once, Belinda Kazeem-Kamiński interrogates several layers of the colonial legacy—in its making of dominant history and its constitution of the gaze. As the artist states in the first line of the video: “This is in remembrance of those to come”. Looking at the past is a way to search for another future and dream about another present—one positively “haunted” by the

failures of the past, and hence able to negotiate for a future beyond the trauma of relentlessly being made Other. This work is about finding artistic and discursive methods to transform and reconfigure strategies of representation and structures of looking in order to rid them of their inherent violence.

Unearthing. In Conversation has been screened both nationally and internationally, including at Diagonale, Graz; International Film Festival Rotterdam, Netherlands; Vancouver International Film Festival, Canada; European Media Art Festival, Osnabrück, Germany; and Africa in Motion Film Festival, Glasgow, UK. The film is distributed by sixpack-film and part of the collection of mumok—Museum moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig Wien.

See also the artwork description for *Schebestas Schatten* [Schebesta's Shadow], 2017/2021, pp. 14–15.



Belinda Kazeem-Kamiński, *Unearthing. In Conversation* (video still), 2017



Belinda Kazeem-Kamiński, *Unearthing. In Conversation* (video stills), 2017

YAARBORLEY DOMEI'S BRIEF [YAARBORLEY DOMEI'S LETTER], from the project VOIDS, 2021
Artistic insert in the newspaper *Der Standard*

On October 18, 1896, Yaarborley Domei published an open letter to the Viennese public in the newspaper *Wiener Caricaturen*. Alongside other people from what was then referred to as the Gold Coast by European colonial powers and what is today Ghana, Yaarborley Domei had been brought to Europe to perform her everyday activities, as well as scripted gestures, in exhibition enclosures that functioned on racism, exoticism, and voyeurism. The Western world organized such colonial exhibits from the mid-nineteenth until the mid-twentieth century to entertain the paying public. Exhibitions like these consolidated the practice of Othering that upholds colonial expansion and exploitation.

In her letter, Yaarborley Domei describes the circumstances of the exhibit and how the visitors treated her and the other performers, staring at and interacting with them. Her description of the violence of the audience's gaze and behavior precisely points out racism and sexism without using those terms, thus acknowledging intersectional discrimination before it became a recognized social phenomenon. The letter goes beyond what is inflicted on her: she also emphasizes her own interpretation of

the visitors' behaviors, her pride in being able to react to them, and her demands to go back home to Accra. Yaarborley Domei particularly highlights her agency and will to continue to fight back any way she can—like scratching visitors who come too close. The letter was written in Ga, then translated into English by her husband, Kwaku Domei—who also led the group of Asante performers—and finally rendered in German by the editors of *Wiener Caricaturen*.

For this work, Belinda Kazeem-Kamiński republishes Yaarborley Domei's letter in a daily newspaper. Some excerpts from the letter also appear in Belinda Kazeem-Kamiński's 2019 work *The Letter*, which inspired this work and gave it its title. Here, the artist chose to translate the letter back into Ga from what is called the "original" German—in fact already a translation of a translation.

The artist is aware that the German version is unreliable as a historical document and treats it as a speculative object, one that she estranges even further by approaching the whole process from the other direction: from German, to English, and then back to Ga. At the end, a translation of a translation of a translation of a translation.

See also the artwork description for *The Letter*, 2019, on pp. 18–19.



Belinda Kazeem-Kamiński, *The Letter* (video still), 2019

INTERVIEW:

Belinda Kazeem-Kamiński in Conversation with Anne Faucheret

You work mainly with archival and museal material, be it photographs, or objects, or pieces of writing, which serve as points of departure for your artistic research. To put it very broadly by way of introduction: your artistic research is about finding visual, sonic, and performative strategies to tackle and counter the erasure of memories in dominant history, the persistence of enslavement and colonialism in contemporary social structures, and the racism inscribed in regimes of looking. Can you speak about your ways of working with the gaze?

I think of myself as a person who has been an observer since being very young. I am not the only Black artist and writer to point out the connection between being an object of the white gaze and the knowledge that is gained by observing how scopopic regimes operate. Michele Wallace, Frantz Fanon, James Baldwin, May Ayim, and many more come to mind. In my dissertation—I will most probably mention it several times in this conversation, because writing it has been formative in the process of making and revisiting some of the artworks assembled in the exhibition—there is this moment when I invite the voices and experiences of Yaarborley Domei, one of the West African performers who was in Vienna in 1896–1897; Kwassi Bruce, a Togolese German musician and entrepreneur who lived in Berlin at the same time; and again Frantz Fanon, a psychiatrist and philosopher from Martinique.¹ By doing so, I muse about what they would have said to each other in a conversation about the white gaze, since

all three of them were very outspoken about its function. Writing this chapter, just like working with archival material, is grounded in my interest in taking apart, analyzing, and laying bare scopic regimes. It is not about the look as such. It is about the ways in which the act of looking is connected with knowledge production and turns into this potent and violent means of classification. Scopic regimes are structurally embedded, yet still they are invisibilized and, as a result, normalized. I guess one way of framing what I am doing is to look at how I am orchestrating the gaze as a way of making the invisibilized visible. You can see this in many of my works; I'm thinking of *In Remembrance to the Man Who Became Known as Angelo Soliman, (Ante Mortem) I & (Post Mortem) II* (2015) or *You are awaited, but never as equals* (2021).

Your artworks refuse fixation and monumentality, they welcome blank spaces and voids, and they are open to constant reworking, rereading, reshaping. They deliver critical content while opening up spaces for the unknown, rather than taking a pedagogical or didactic path. Could you elaborate on these notions of openness and a never-ending editing process?

I love how you frame this. In fact, I have not seen it in this way—namely that I am engaging in a never-ending editing process—but it totally makes sense. I said earlier that writing my dissertation was also a way of revisiting some of the works I had realized, especially the films *Unearthing. In Conversation* (2017) and *The Letter* (2019). Now that I have also finished the work on *Fleshbacks* (2021), which are three cinematic annotations to *The Letter*, I just can't wait to go back to writing. Many connections—to other artists' works, texts, even stories—I had not anticipated opened up. I really enjoy how my works keep on surprising me.

I usually start working on a project in written form. This might be a text in which I reflect on my urge to do something. It can be a precise concept or just a loose summary of words. Sometimes the text is the actual work, but often I put into practice whatever I want to do in another medium. As I am equally interested in the outcome and the process, I use writing to revisit what I came up with. Sometimes this opens the gate for another editing round. Then I go back to what I have done, for example, the collage I have made, and

redo it. I make some slight changes or discard it altogether and start again. I can go on and on like this, if this is what the work asks for. There can be weeks, months, even years between the editing rounds. Some works ask for a rerun; they want to be actualized. And I am open to going in circles and engaging in these reactualizations. When I started working with Avery Gordon's notion of "haunting", as a way in which violent pasts make themselves known, I was very much informed by the image of the ghost.² In the process of writing my dissertation and revisiting *Unearthing. In Conversation*, though, I understood that thinking about the ones before us as ghosts had actually barred me from some crucial insights. Some weeks later, I arrived at the concept of "*Heim-Suchung*", by way of a tiny little footnote in a text by Nicola Lauré al-Samarai.³ *Heim-Suchung* is a German translation of "haunting", but it also means "looking for a home", which opens up a whole other set of passageways. Between haunting and arriving at *Heim-Suchung* lay years of reworking and rethinking actively, but also subconsciously, while working on other projects.

Belinda Kazeem-Kamiński, *The Letter* (video still), 2019



Since my practice has evolved in this way, I also learned to reconcile with the fact that I never fully know; whatever I think I know is just a snapshot. In addition, I remind myself that the will to know is very much connected to the will to control, and more often than not, to conquer. I do not want to invest in certainties. All too often, they are just dichotomies hidden in another outfit or linear HISTORY that favors white monologues. More than that, I am interested in opening up spaces for the unknown, in holding whatever it is we are confronted with when we are not busy trying to immediately verbalize and pin down what comes up.

In your works, you not only address this world but also create the condition for other worlds to come into being. Your practice is a multilayered conversation and also a polyphonic narrative—a “critical fabulation”, as the cultural theorist Saidiya Hartman puts it. What does it mean for you to practice critical fabulation?

I think by now it has become obvious that writing is a fundamental part of my practice. I consider writing to be my core medium. It is where my thinking and making sense starts from, along with processes of imagining and revisiting. Saidiya Hartman introduces critical fabulation as a writing strategy and practice, which is strongly connected to Black diasporic experience. It is a way of pushing against what the archive—an archive built on genocide and dispossession—allows us to say, if we want to believe in the ruse that we have to stay true to what is documented there.⁴ I underline this here, as too often the genocidal context is overlooked, resulting in repeated invisibilizations and oversimplifications of an otherwise complex terrain and ultimately this leads to the upholding of systemic violence.

In my practice, I am very much interested in what many would—and even I did for some time—understand as the voids of the archive. But I have come to realize that voids are not necessarily empty; in fact, they pose possibilities. In hindsight, I would say that I have engaged in critical fabulation for quite some time, without having words or a name for the way I am writing. “I am many”, a text I wrote in 2012 for *Conzepte: Neue Fassungen politischen Denkens* [Concepts: New Formulations of Political Thought], edited by Jo Schmeiser, was the first text in which I allowed myself to venture in



Belinda Kazeem-Kamiński, *The Letter* (video still), 2019

this direction.⁵ It is actually a text that turned out to be really important for understanding my practice. I am thinking of methods of layering, circling, inviting others into my work.

Inviting others into your work also means not only being accompanied by others, not only listening to their voices and thoughts, not only being attentive to their stories, but also entering a collective space of mutual care and concerted action. Humanities and Black studies scholar Christina Sharpe conceives of “wake work” as an affective and aesthetic labor to attempt to live “in the wake” of enslavement, violence, and dispossession. According to her, the affective register (meaning: a register of reading and seeing beyond a given frame) is necessary to build the ground from which to construct better histories, better presents, better futures—in other words, to take care of the past, present, and future. Could you tell us how you relate to the concepts of “wake work” and “Black care” in your artistic practice?

When I started out, I thought of my work mainly in the frame of memory politics and representational critique, but after writing *Unearthing. In Conversation*, performing it live, and

also mentally arriving at the last word, *haunting*, something started to shift. I end in Avery Gordon's words, with an unsolvable dilemma—"haunting as a something-to-be-done"—and there is nothing left to do other than follow this haunting.⁶ At least, this is what I took from the process. The conversations I engaged in in the performance, and later in the film, were built on this notion of "haunting as a something-to-be-done". They offered a kind of renewed activation. I was able to see that, besides the critique, there were affects that prompted me to take specific decisions, and most of all that the work is and was not done only by me—yes, I write the script and set the space, but if I really engage in a conversation, then there are moments I have no control over. Maybe this is when I started slowly thinking about what I was working toward as an ancestral and shared practice. A practice that is very much about carving out a space and time in which to engage with something fleeting, not readily tangible, and not done. Space and time are important when thinking about care, specifically "Black care as a meditative strategy",⁷ and, I would add, artistic strategy. Calvin Warren's understanding of Black care helped me to make sense of what was asked from me in situations like, for example, the encounter in the Weltkulturen Museum Frankfurt, which led to *Unearthing. In Conversation*.

Belinda Kazeem-Kamiński, *Unearthing. In Conversation* (video still), 2017



I understand care to be an antidote to the violence of degradation and objectification. While we have to accept that we cannot change what happened, we can decide to address the ones we are in conversation with, with care. In my practice, these decisions can be perceived on the level of the photographed people, but also the imagined audience with whom I or the people involved relate due to a shared—and I love how Noah Sow puts this—"sum of encounters with irritations of life".⁸ Time and space are what I want to offer.

Care is also the refusal to inject more images of exoticization, objectification, and victimization, particularly when it comes to Blackness, into an always hungry market. I do not think that I was ready to make sense of these threads before reading Christina Sharpe's *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (2016) and finishing *Unearthing. In Conversation* (2017), which was before reading her book. Reading what she frames as "wake work" rang a bell and made me look at what I was trying to do in the film differently. Engaging in wake work, deciding to stay with what hurts, is a "mode of attending to Black life and Black suffering" while knowing that "even as we experienc[e], recogniz[e], and liv[e] subjection, we [do] not *simply* or *only* live *in* subjection and *as* the subjected".⁹ I recognize all this in my repeated invocations of the moment in which I see the photograph of Paul Schebesta. Whether in the film or in my dissertation, "staying in what hurts" means revisiting and circling the primal scene, the moment of encounter, but it also means not solely being defined by it.

I would restrict myself and my vision if I only thought of my attempts of engaging with these his*herstorical events as expressions of a need to know and classify, or understanding my work as being solely interested in the technicalities of image and knowledge production and their critique. My insistence and urge to grasp the ungraspable and find expressions for what Saidiya Hartman refers to as the "unspeakable" underlines my practice as a form of wake work, as repeated acts of caring.¹⁰ These acts need to be repeated because what happened is not over and past. We are not over and past. The degradation of Black people has only changed its look; the underlying mechanics and grammar are the same.

In your practice, you rightly tackle the entanglement of cultural institutions in the construction and consolidation of forms of

knowledge and representation that uphold racist structures. Now you have a solo presentation in an institution for contemporary art. What was the working process for this exhibition like?

I do not distinguish my visual practice from what I engage with as a writer and scholar. Therefore, in my own understanding, this is not a “first”, although people do refer to it as my “first institutional solo show”, which is technically right. I have had other “firsts” and “solo shows”, so to speak, in other mediums with other institutions. As always, there are institutional logics that I negotiate as someone aware that their practice and presence is seen as a disruption of the usual status quo. Some tasks come along with these kinds of invitations, things I need to make sure to have an eye on. I do not enter institutions on my own; I bring along others in whatever form—guests in the framing program, collaborations—and not least in the projects I choose to share. Working with Kunsthalle Wien was not different in this way. Still, what was different was the possibility to work with a team of people dedicating their time and knowledge to realizing my visions. This was and is a possibility I do not take for granted.

I have been working on some of these constellations for quite some time. Even though a label might state that I made a photograph in 2021, this means only that I *produced* it in 2021. I carry works with me for many years. There are various reasons for that—overthinking, doubt, lack of resources, getting sidetracked, because I am like a sponge, always on reception mode. This means that often works are conceived far earlier than they are produced, but then again, they also change due to challenges that come up in the production process. The invitation from Kunsthalle Wien, and therefore the chance, or pressure, to realize some of the things I have been carrying, offered the opportunity to see my vision in one space and experience how the works relate and talk to each other. I wanted to witness what these projects would communicate when in close proximity, how fragmented stories engage in conversation despite what is missing.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Belinda Kazeem-Kamiński, “Fleshbacks & H(a)untings / Notes on Research, Blackness, Empaths, and the Destruction of the World as We Know It” (PhD diss., Academy of Fine Arts Vienna, 2021).
- 2 Avery Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008).
- 3 Nicola Lauré al-Samarai, “Inspired Topography: Hauntings Survivals and the Location of Experience in Black German Traditions of Knowledge and Culture”, in *Remapping Black Germany: New Perspectives on Afro-German History, Politics, and Culture*, ed. Sara Lennox (Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2016), 46–66.
- 4 Saidiya Hartman, “Venus in Two Acts”, *Small Axe: A Caribbean Journal of Criticism* 12, no. 2 (June 2008): 1–14.
- 5 Belinda Kazeem-Kamiński, “I am many”, in *Conzepte. Neue Fassungen politischen Denkens*, ed. Jo Schmeiser (Vienna: zaglossus, 2015), 115–122.
- 6 Avery Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*, xvi.
- 7 Calvin Warren, “Black Care”, *Liquid Blackness* 3, no. 6 (December 2016): 37.
- 8 Noah Sow, “The Beast in the Belly”, Heinrich Böll Stiftung, December 8, 2014, <https://heimatkunde.boell.de/2014/12/08/beast-belly>. Translation by Belinda Kazeem-Kamiński.
- 9 Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), 4 & 22. Emphases in the original.
- 10 Saidiya Hartman, “Venus in Two Acts”.



Belinda Kazeem-Kamiński is a writer, artist, and scholar. Rooted in Black feminist theory, she has developed a research-based and process-oriented investigative practice that often deals with archives, specifically with the voids in public archives and collections. Interlacing the documentary with the fictional, her works manifest themselves through a variety of media and dissect the present of an everlasting colonial past: a past without closure.

Screenings: International Film Festival Rotterdam, Diagonale – Festival of Austrian Film, Vancouver International Film Festival, among others.

Exhibitions she participated in include: *The World Is White No Longer. Ansichten einer dezentrierten Welt* (2021), *The Knowledge Potential of Childhood* (2019), *Dark Energy. Feminist Organizing, Working Collectively* (2019), *Hauntopia/What if* (2017).

Her awards and prizes include: Camera Austria Award (2021), DOC-Stipendium Austrian Academy of Science (2018–2020), Cathrin Pichler Prize (2018), Theodor-Körner-Prize for Art (2016).



Belinda Kazeem-Kamiński, *Unearthing. In Conversation* (video still), 2017

PUBLIC AND EDUCATIONAL PROGRAMS

The following offers an overview of the events accompanying both Belinda Kazeem-Kamiński's and Ana Hoffner ex-Prvulovic's exhibitions. More will be confirmed soon. We warmly invite you to visit www.kunsthallewien.at, as well as our social media channels, for regular updates and further details about our public program.

OPENING

Thu 21/10 2021, 6 pm
kunsthalle wien
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TOURS

All tours are free with an admission ticket.

CURATOR'S TOURS

Curator's tours give an overview of the exhibitions or focus on specific topics raised by the artists* involved, as well as provide insight into the working process of the exhibitions, from conceptualization to presentation.

Dates will be announced at:
www.kunsthallewien.at

SUNDAY TOURS

Sun 7/11, 21/11, 5/12, 19/12 2021,
 2/1, 16/1, 6/2, 20/2, 6/3 2022,
 3pm

With Wolfgang Brunner, Carola Fuchs, Andrea Hubin, Michaela Schmidlechner, Michael Simku

Every second Sunday at 3 pm you can discover the exhibitions together with our art educators and discuss the context and background of the exhibited works. (guided tour in German)

ACCOMPANYING PROGRAM

Several performative and discursive events will take place in the framework of the exhibitions. Listening sessions, performative readings, panel discussions, and workshops will bring guest artists, writers, activists, or scholars, offering different perspectives on the topics raised by the exhibitions. Screenings and talks will take place in cooperation with mumok kino and the film festival *this human world*.

You can find further details and regular updates on our website www.kunsthallewien.at as well as on our social media channels.

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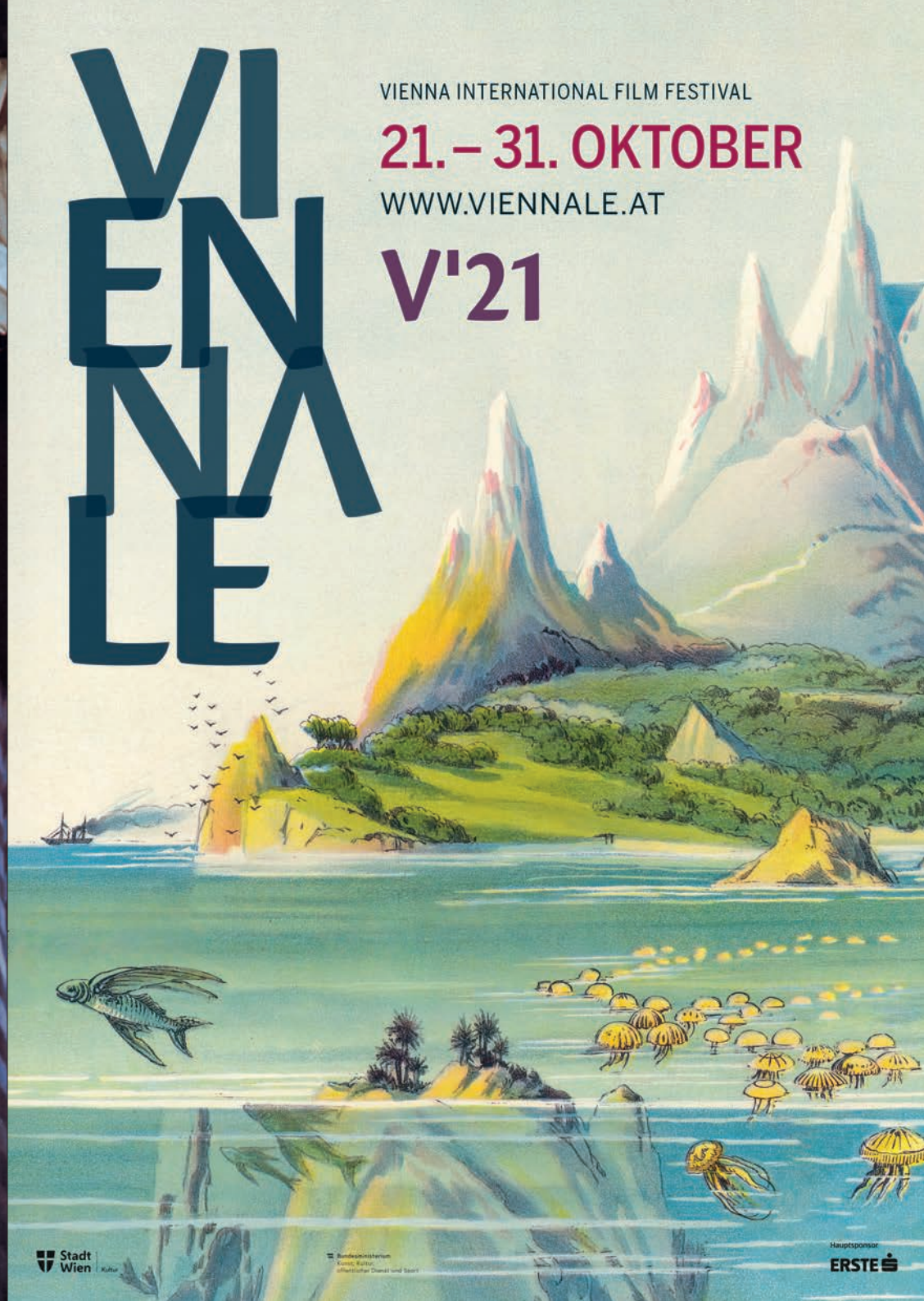
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Stephen Allotey • Nicola Lauré al-Samarai • Amoako Boafo •
Alessandra Ferrini • Renate Höllwart • Janine Jembere •
Catherine E. McKinley • Carole Myers • Emma Wolukau-Wanambwa
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Gezahegn, Femi Kamiński, Paweł Kamiński, Liesa Kovacs, Bisi Lalemi,
Sunanda Mesquita, Mzamo Nondlwana, Nick Prokesch
& the Team of **kunsthalle wien**

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VÖSLAUER



DERSTANDARD



CREDITS FOR WORKS PRODUCED BY BELINDA KAZEEM-KAMIŃSKI

Yaarborley Domeis Brief (2021)
CONCEPT: Belinda Kazeem-Kamiński
TRANSLATION & PROOFREADING:
Prince Mensah Akpo, Amoako Boafo

Ashantee, edited (2017–2021)
CONCEPT: Belinda Kazeem-Kamiński
LAYOUT: Renate Höllwart
PROOFREADING: Eva Schneidhofer
IMAGE RIGHTS: Wien Museum

*To let them know what we think
about them* (2021)
CONCEPT: Belinda Kazeem-Kamiński
DESIGN: Baba Issaka and
Belinda Kazeem-Kamiński
FLAGMAKING: Baba Issaka

Schebestas Schatten (2017/2021)
IMAGE RIGHTS: Austrian National Library

The Letter (2019)
WRITTEN & DIRECTED BY:
Belinda Kazeem-Kamiński
PERFORMERS: Amoako Boafo,
Verena Melgarejo Weinandt,
Belinda Kazeem-Kamiński
DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY:
Sunanda Mesquita
EDITORS: Sunanda Mesquita
and Belinda Kazeem-Kamiński
SOUND RECORDING / SOUND COMPOSITION:
Bassano Bonelli Bassano
SOUND MIX: Bassano Bonelli Bassano
and Manuela Schininà
LINE PRODUCER: Liesa Kovacs
ASSISTANT DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY:
Nick Prokesch
COLOR GRADING: Sunanda Mesquita
and Nick Prokesch
SUPPORTED BY: Cathrin Pichler Archiv,
Academy of Fine Arts, Vienna
IMAGE RIGHTS PROJECTION: Wien Museum

Fleshbacks (2021)
PERFORMERS: Ayo Aloba, Faris Cuchi
Gezahegn, Femi Kamiński, Belinda
Kazeem-Kamiński, Bisi Lalemi, Mzamo
Nondlwana, with appearances of West
African performers of the past*
WRITTEN & DIRECTED BY:
Belinda Kazeem-Kamiński
DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY:
Sunanda Mesquita

CAMERA ASSISTANT: Nick Prokesch
CAMERA OPERATOR, GHANA UNIT:
Peter Owusu
DRAMATURGY & EDITING:
Belinda Kazeem-Kamiński and
Sunanda Mesquita
COLOR GRADING: Sunanda Mesquita
SOUND RECORDING: Bassano Bonelli
Bassano (Vienna), Peter Owusu (Accra)
SOUND COMPOSITION & MIXING:
Bassano Bonelli Bassano
STYLING & MAKE-UP:
Belinda Kazeem-Kamiński,
Sunanda Mesquita
BEST (PINK) BOY, TECHNICAL SUPPORT:
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You are awaited, but never as equals
(2021)
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*In Remembrance to the Man Who
Became Etched into History as
"Der Aschanti an der Akademie"* (2021)
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Strike a Pose (2017–2021)
& *In Remembrance to Ella Williams*
(2021)
IMAGE RIGHTS: image of Ella Williams:
Sammlung Peter Winter; image of Paul
Schebesta & image of Belgian colonial
official: Austrian National Library; three
images of two men: Vera Broughton
(Pitts Rivers Museum); one found image
from an old newspaper




Unearthing. In Conversation (2017)
PERFORMANCE / CONCEPT / EDITING:
Belinda Kazeem-Kamiński
CAMERA / EDITING: Sunanda Mesquita
SOUND / LIGHT / EDITING: Nick Prokesch
SOUND EDITING: Victoria Grohs and
Flora Rajakowitsch
PRODUCTION / ASSISTANT DIRECTOR:
Liesa Kovacs
COLLAGES: Belinda Kazeem-Kamiński
Photos used with courtesy of the
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