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Various Others 2022

Anna Ehrenstein & Andrew Gilbert

In collaboration with KOW, Berlin

September 10 – October 15, 2022

Andrew Gilbert

In his works on paper and large-scale installations, Andrew Gilbert depicts the repetition of history and the impact of 19th-century colonialism on the present. With absurdist humor, he parodies Western historical narratives and systems of propaganda. His works respond to the contemporary nostalgia for Empire and racist Settler nationalist mythology, which in recent years has manifested in, for example, the Brexit propaganda campaign and the ever-growing far-right Christian influence in the USA today.

In “Sacred parrot helicopter” (70 × 100 cm, 2022) for example, Gilbert imagines the UK being destroyed by foreign invaders and its citizens becoming refugees, a reversal of Iraq, Libya, Afghanistan, etc. In the crashed helicopter seen in the foreground, the drawing references the 2001 American propaganda film “Black Hawk Down”. Gilbert notes the identical narrative between this and the 1964 film “Zulu”. Instead of modern U.S soldiers in Mogadishu, 19th-century British “red coats” are seen defending the downed Helicopter. Rather than hordes of Somalians being gunned down, masses of Zulus are seen charging the defender’s position. Grenfell Tower burns in the city skyline, a direct comment on the absurdity of the British myth of “Greatness” – while citizens burn to death as a direct result of austerity and lack of investment in housing. The drawing “Get Brexit Done!” (62 × 48 cm, 2022) further parodies Johnson’s slogan and combines Brexit anti-foreigner propaganda with the image of British soldiers standing over the victims of the 1879 massacre at Rorke’s Drift, South Africa.

Other drawings exaggerate and mock the importance of the white male in western history. “The Funeral Procession of Emperor Andrew” (30 × 42 cm, 2022) shows crowds gathered in mourning to remember the glorious legacy of “Emperor Andrew”. The drawing also comments on how ridiculous it is in 2022 to see crowds celebrate the life of a German aristocrat/Tribal leader (Head of State – “The Queen”). Emperor Andrew’s attributes are carried by elephants as part of the funeral procession – these include his paintbrush with which he dictates history, his Emperor Andrew Instant Coffee (tm) which makes the link between commerce and imperialist slaughter, and his Leek Phone (tm) with which he orders Drone Strikes and makes business deals (a parody of the art world (tm) pretending to engage with social issues while remaining an elitist power structure).

Anna Ehrenstein, Tools for Conviviality, 2018 – ongoing, mixed media

Questions about the future are becoming more and more pervasive in contemporary debates about the increasingly fragmented state of the world. In this context, talk about divisions in society frequently proceeds as though any reference to a

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lived reality that is different from one's own must be seen as separating people from one another rather than making differences visible and indicating problems in the system. Especially those who worry the most about divisions and the chaos likely to ensue from them imagine society as harmonious and egalitarian. With regard to differences, however, it is important to conceive of the system, i.e., the way in which we live together, as a process that is far from complete. And so perhaps the most important question arising from the division is "what next? What are we going to do? How do we want to live together in the future? How can we put all these small parts together in something that works well? And, finally, what role will technology play in any of this?"

The title of Anna Ehrenstein's project *Tools of Conviviality* refers to Ivan Illich's book of the same name. Published in 1973, Illich's work develops a critique of Western industrial society. Rather than taking the exploitation of man by man as his starting point, Illich concentrates on the enslavement of man by counterproductive tools under the guise of technological progress.

Ehrenstein adapts Illich's critique to the technocratic and neocolonial conditions of the digital present. Rather than inventing new tools, Ehrenstein seeks to create something new with the means we already have. Her *Tools of Conviviality* came into being in Dakar and in collaboration with Saliou Ba, Donkafele (Mandé Mory Bah and Thibaut Houssou), Nyamwathi Gichau, Lydia Likibi and Awa Seck. In their organic growth, her *Tools* present a kind of answer to the question of how we can live together well and creatively. From 2018 on, the project developed little by little, with photographs, videos, and textile sculptures. It was a spontaneous and open process, to which all participants contributed with their ideas and talents and from which they in turn drew something for themselves and their individual work. Ehrenstein's tools came about through a form of structured improvisation.

"Depending on how the video is shown, it's not always possible to perceive the whole subtext. Sometimes a subtext is missing. And sometimes it comes later to emphasize particular perspectives," Ehrenstein explains. Her 360-degree video constantly encourages viewers to move, turn and look up or down in order to capture all aspects. In her statement, the word subtext has two meanings: it literally refers to subtitles, but it also signifies an underlying meaning that may not always be obvious at first glance.

Pursuing a glitch aesthetic, the various elements of her installation remain to some degree flawed and unfinished. They break decisively with the idea of perfection, thereby disrupting Western expectations: "the glitch as a type of 'poor' aesthetic speaks out against classist, capitalistic ideas inscribed into photography's history as a medium." Inasmuch as glitching is reminiscent of early computer aesthetics, it always seems to date back to another time. Wherever there is glitching today, there is thus a strange simultaneity of hypermodernity and backwardness. In their ostensible contradictoriness, these two temporalities are frequently associated with the African continent viewed from a Western perspective. While Africans simply seem to make their tools for survival out of (waste) products from Europe, on closer inspection they undertake a creative transformation of them.

The radical attempt to allow for a measure of irony and humor, to create a space for laughing with others, is another constant theme running through Ehrenstein's oeuvre. It makes the resistance enacted in her works softer and more fluid without losing clarity.

Dr. Mahret Ifeoma Kupka