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# Aesthetic Autopsy: Collective Memory and Trauma in Contemporary Art from Angola

Nadine Siegert \*

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## Abstract

In Angola, only very few works can be found that engage with the civil war and the topics of memory and trauma in particular. Nevertheless, this paper concentrates on artistic projects dealing with collective memory and collective trauma that critically explores the perspectives employed by the artists dealing with these topics. The central question is, if art might offer *another*, maybe even alternative perspective on engagement with the memory of the civil war that goes beyond the normative truth and reconciliation discourse dominant in southern Africa and its focus on forgiveness.

## Résumé

En Angola, on trouve peu d'ouvrages qui se confrontent avec la guerre civile et les thématiques de la mémoire et du traumatisme en particulier. Néanmoins, cet article se concentre sur les projets artistiques traitant de la mémoire collective et du traumatisme collectif, qui explorent de manière critique les perspectives des artistes traitant de ces sujets. La question centrale est de savoir si l'art pourrait offrir une perspective différente, voire alternative, sur la mémoire de la guerre civile, dans un engagement allant au-delà du discours normatif de vérité et de réconciliation dominant en Afrique australe, et qui ne se contente pas non plus de logiques de contrition.

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“There is no denying—we are a very wounded people. These works capture not only the horrors of war as portrayed by the mutilated bodies—the unimaginable damage to our souls, and the horrible violation of the common consciousness that emanates through every image.”<sup>1</sup>

-Brigitte Mabandla Deputy Minister of Arts, Culture, Science and Technology South Africa

“In the autopsy I performed on my innocence I discovered the beginnings of secrecy and denial that must accompany the large-scale lie.”<sup>2</sup>

- Colin Richards

Angolan history is mainly a history of wars. After the long anti-colonial fight (1961 – 1974) that ended with the independence of the country in 1975, a civil war between the former independence movements started. In the 1980s, Angola was the venue for a proxy war between the Socialist bloc and Western countries, supporting the different protagonists fighting on Angolan territory. After the crumbling of Cold War ideologies in 1989, the war continued as a struggle for political hegemony and access to natural resources until 2002, devastating lands, economy and social structures. These historical events might have led to trauma with the utmost probability. Direct or indirect violence has unfortunately become an enduring experience for most of the Angolan population. Many of Angola’s peoples and cultural traditions were scattered throughout the country or forced into exile. With Angola holding one of the highest rates of landmine injuries per capita in the world, amputees are a common sight in the streets of Luanda. Despite these hardships, the city might not be considered as a *city of trauma*. But in times of war, the city’s infrastructure was fatally neglected, particularly in the informal neighbourhoods. Traumatic experiences of war are thus brought with the migrants and refugees to the city and are situated within the biographies of the victims and perpetrators.

<sup>1</sup> Fernando Alvim, “Memórias - Intimas - Marcas/Memory - Intimacy - Traces,” *Social Identities* 5, Nr. 4 (1. December 1999), 364.

Nevertheless, there is no public discourse on the civil war and no reconciliation policy comparable to that found in Ruanda, Sierra Leone or South Africa. This might be due to its adjacency, suggesting that traumatising events need several years before being far away enough to be talked about. This produces a national amnesia that might be also politically motivated. Further, in the field of cultural production, we face a situation of silencing the recent past, particularly the years of the civil war to a large extend. But still there are some approaches by contemporary artists worth to look at.

## Collective Memory and the Arts

In the 1990s, a few critical artworks dealing with history such as *Hidden Pages*, *Stolen Bodies* by António Ole and *Memórias Íntimas Marcas* by Fernando Alvim have emerged, but the subject of civil war is still rarely to be found in contemporary arts today. These works are engaged with the collective memory, haunted by the phantoms of Portuguese colonialism, Portuguese fascism, the anti-colonial war, a civil war, socialism and, more recently, the emergence of a new capitalist economy that has made the country one of the leading economic powers on the continent. As members of a cosmopolitan elite, many artists have settled in the capital Luanda after the end of the war, having fled military service or having spent time being educated in Europe. After the ideological impact of the socialist cultural policy in the 1980s, the art scene was rather silent in the 1990s on a local level, when the civil war had its last heyday. Nevertheless, Angolan artists were visible on an international level through their participation in the international Biennials of Johannesburg, Havana and Dakar. The post-war situation, however, provided space for utopian dreams of Luanda as an epicentre of contemporary art on the African continent, primarily fuelled by the curatorial strategies of Fernando Alvim in the context of the Luanda Triennial. In this context,

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 276.

interest in the history of colonialism and postcolonial conflict and its archives also became a driving force in art production.<sup>3</sup>

Even if there are only very few works to be found engaging with the civil war, memory and trauma, I nevertheless want to concentrate on these projects. I seek to critically explore the perspectives employed by the artists dealing with these topics. My central question is, if art might offer *another*, maybe even alternative perspective on engagement with the memory of the civil war that goes beyond the normative truth and reconciliation discourse dominant in southern Africa that focuses on forgiveness.<sup>4</sup> In other words, this means: Can art be a coherent form to remediate memory or is it actually rather pointing towards the unrepresentability of trauma? I hereby try to make sense of contemporary art practice and its relation to the past of the civil war, as invented and fictional it even might be.

I base my analysis of the artworks on theoretical frameworks that support my understanding of the relation between contemporary arts and memory studies: the notion of collective memory by Aleida Assmann and the critical engagement with the representability of memory and trauma by Jill Bennett.<sup>5</sup> In particular, Assmann's notion of the *collective memory* is helpful to understand how activations and silencing work in cultural processes. Assmann distinguishes between the *functional memory* as active part ("Funktions-gedächtnis") and the *storage memory* as passive part ("Speichergedächtnis"), the latter being the repository and background for latent memories. The "storage" is described as the total horizon of collected texts and images, a potential that can be activated and actualized from different perspectives.<sup>6</sup> Redundancy and loss are part of this

process that creates (dis)order according to historical and cultural preconditions. The notion of collective memory embraces both remembering *and* forgetting, both on individual as well collective levels.<sup>7</sup>

How is this understanding of cultural memory connected to artistic practice? Their engagement is not only inspired by a desire to excavate the hidden or hibernating stories but also to exorcise—metaphorically speaking—the demons, in order to "repair" the past. When thinking of "repairing" in combination with trauma and artistic practice, not only the spatial dimension becomes important in the form of traumatized places or landscape, as the example of the work by Jo Ractliffe will show. A temporal dimension is also important here.<sup>8</sup> 'Repairing' the past through artistic practice can be regarded as a form of time-traveling, moving back to the traumatizing moment and intervening into the script in time to enable another future to come from that specific moment. The works discussed here function with very different aesthetic strategies. Ractliffe's sensitive photographic eye wanders over the traumatized landscape and creates a form of topology while looking into the present from the here and now. The past is present, though as a haunting that manifests in traces. Ractliffe's works make no attempt to intervene or to repair the past. They are rather affective documents. Fernando Alvim's approach is much more radical and has a certain kind of "magical" dimension. By performatively working through the traumatized landscape, he connects himself with the past, with the moment of violation, in order to start a process of autopsy and exorcism. He leaves traces himself, inscribes himself into the space, facing the ghosts. These "demons" can be regarded as the haunting presence of the unresolved past

<sup>3</sup> For more information on the Angolan art world see Nadine Siegert, "Luanda Lab – Nostalgia and Utopia in Aesthetic Practice," *Critical Interventions* 8, Nr. 2 (4. Mai 2014), 176–200.

<sup>4</sup> For an analysis of the reconciliation discourse in South Africa cf. Annelies Verdoolaege, *Reconciliation Discourse: The Case of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission* (John Benjamins Publishing, 2008); The relation of reconciliation and art is discussed in Stephanie Marlin-Curiel, "Truth and Consequences. Art in response to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission," in *Text & Image* (Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 2006); and Lizelle Bisschoff and Stefanie Van De Peer, *Art and Trauma in Africa: Representations of Reconciliation in Music, Visual Arts, Literature and Film* (London; New York: I B Tauris, 2012).

<sup>5</sup> Jill Bennett, *Empathic Vision: Affect, Trauma, and Contemporary Art* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2005).

<sup>6</sup> Jan Assmann und Tonio Hölscher, *Kultur und Gedächtnis* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1988), 13.

<sup>7</sup> Aleida Assmann, "Archive im Wandel der Mediengeschichte," in *Archivologie. Theorien des Archivs in Philosophie, Medien und Künsten*, edited by Knut Ebeling and Stephan Günzel (Berlin: Kulturverlag Kadmos, 2009), 168; this goes in line Caruth's concept of the language of trauma as entangled in complex ways of knowing and not knowing. This language is played out not only in the repetitive haunting of memories, but also in representations of trauma in artworks. Cathy Caruth, *Trauma* (Baltimore, MD: JHU Press, 1995), 4.

<sup>8</sup> Nadine Siegert, "The archive as construction site –Collective memory and trauma in contemporary art from Angola," *World Art* (April 2016), 103–23.

that have to be released in order to allow new stories and images to become visible.<sup>9</sup> Relating this constructive potential with Assmann's thoughts on remembering and forgetting as the two central modes of collective memory, artistic work can entail a motivation to bring forgotten things back to memory—even if this means (re)inventing them—but also, conversely, work towards the active process of forgetting by erasure or destruction. Thus, the artists discussed here work at the “frontier” between memory and forgetting, a shifting line that hides and reveals, allows and denies access to the cultural memory of the so-called border war.<sup>10</sup>

## The (Un)representability of Violence

The issue of adequate representation is a key question in the debate about art in relation to “events at the limits,”<sup>11</sup> as the Angolan civil war certainly was. This problem is closely connected to ethical responsibility in the visualisation of violence and the “pain of the others,”<sup>12</sup> as Susan Sontag has formulated it in her seminal essay on war photography. How can artists differentiate from a sheer aestheticisation of violence? The fascination for the violence of war in arts had its heyday during the futurist movement in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century,<sup>13</sup> after which came Theodor Adorno's question about the role of art after the Holocaust,<sup>14</sup> saying there has been no art-making that celebrates war and violence without being questioned. The Frankfurt School philosopher formulated his cultural pessimism in the question of if it is morally acceptable to write poetry in the aftermath of

Auschwitz. He later accentuated his argument and said that the representation of suffering is ambivalent: both unethical and necessary. Adorno didn't criticise the act of representation itself but the aesthetic pleasure that is probably resulting from it. From his perspective, art has the obligation to commemorate, but specific forms of representation are morally wrong.<sup>15</sup> Both Adorno and Sontag demand an active engagement with the topics of war and violence that go beyond a mere consumption of the images.

Considering the demands of Adorno and Sontag, we can argue that if a both emotionally touching as well as rationally challenging work of art is enabling a self-reflective process, an empathetic confrontation with memory that goes beyond aestheticisation or banalisation becomes possible. This goes in line with the art theorist Jill Bennett's elaborations of the role of art in an understanding of trauma and loss. For her, the difference between an active and passive attitude towards the exposure of violence and the possibility to experience the trauma of another in a post-memorializing way is central.<sup>16</sup>

How, then, might contemporary art engage trauma in a way that respects and contributes to its politics? If trauma enters the representational arena as an expression of personal experience, it is always vulnerable to appropriation, to reduction, and to mimicry. Is it possible, then, to conceive of the art of trauma and conflict as something other than the deposit of primary experience (which remains “owned” and unshareable even once it is communicated)?<sup>17</sup>

Bennett argues that art, which is able to actively engage with trauma is not only communicative but also *transactive*, pointing towards relation and not

<sup>9</sup> Cf. the discussion of “haunting” in cultural studies, see Avery Gordon, Avery F. Gordon, and Janice Radway, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008).

<sup>10</sup> The notion of “border war” was mainly used in the South African context, where the border was not a demarcation of a state territory but an imagined frontier that was drawn against the perceived threat of communism. On the side of the communist MPLA in power, the war was rather communicated as a prolongation of the liberation war, a continuous fight against imperialism. In my article, I mainly use the notion of “civil war,” which is also mostly common in Angola. On this discussion, see Gary Baines and Peter Vale, *Beyond the Border War: New Perspectives on Southern Africa's Late-Cold War Conflicts*, Revised (South Africa: Unisa Pr, 2008).

<sup>11</sup> Wendy Morris, “Art and Aftermath in Memórias Íntimas Marcas: Constructing Memory, Admitting Responsibility,” in *Beyond the Border War: New Perspectives on Southern Africa's Late-Cold War Conflicts*, edited by Gary Baines and Peter Vale (Pretoria: Unisa Press, 2008), 158.

<sup>12</sup> Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, Reprint edition (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003).

<sup>13</sup> Goedart Palm, “Das Format des Unfasslichen,” *Kunstforum International* 165 (2003), 69.

<sup>14</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Noten zur Literatur*, II (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1962).

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> Liese van der Watt has also developed a similar concept, working with the idea of “performativity,” see Liese Van der Watt, “Witnessing Trauma in Post-Apartheid South Africa. The question of Generational Responsibility,” *African Arts* XXXVIII, Nr. 3 (2005): 26–39; See also Liese Van der Watt, “Do Bodies Matter? Performance versus Performativity,” *Arte*. 70 (2004): 3–10; On this question see also Okwui Enwezor, “Remembrance of Things Past: Memory and the Archive,” in *Democracy's Images: Photography and Visual Art After Apartheid*, edited by Jan Lundström and Katarina Pierre (Umea: Bildmuseet, 1998).

<sup>17</sup> Bennett, *Empathic vision*, 6.

representation. What matters is less the meaning of a symbol but the question of *how* it works, its capability to trigger empathy or even an “emphatic unsettlement.”<sup>18</sup> Bennett defines this notion of empathy as a combination of emotional and intellectual operations, a deeply felt dismay that is able to change the perception or allows a critical engagement with an issue. In that sense, art should not translate or repeat traumatic events but search for an active, empathetic testimony.<sup>19</sup> In contemporary art, such “transcriptions” of the experience of violence are often not limited to individuals. The artists rather try to connect to trauma in a more abstract sense as a collective experience that also impacts whole societies in their post-memory work. To be an empathic challenge, the artwork has, according to Bennett, to be embedded in a broader societal context. “[Visual art] does not offer us a privileged view of the inner subject; rather, by giving trauma an extension in space or lived place, it invites an awareness of different modes of inhabitation.”<sup>20</sup>

## Trauma Art

Bennett's position suggests that artworks that deal with traumatic events become involved in a negotiation of how collective trauma is perceived and processed. But what is meant by “trauma” in relation to art? Can we speak about “trauma art,” when we analyse the contemporary artworks dealing with the civil war in Angola? In cultural studies, trauma is described in a more general sense and in close relation to memory, as the inability to remember or articulate a violating event. The original academic concept of “trauma” is more narrow and linked to psychoanalysis, which is only rarely considered in contemporary

artworks. Later, these psychoanalytical conceptualisations gave rise to a growing interdisciplinary field of study known today as Trauma Studies, reaching across disciplines and engaging in investigations of memory, witnessing and reconciliation, but also the relation to cultural production.<sup>21</sup>

Etymologically, *trauma* derives from the Greek *τράυμα*, meaning “wound.” Sigmund Freud defined psycho-trauma as the damage of the psyche that occurs as a result of a violating event.<sup>22</sup> In the context of studies on post-colonialism, it mostly touches on the negotiation of colonial traumas. In addition to trauma experienced by an individual, the authors describe a collective traumatised state of being that afflicts groups, societies and even nations as a whole.<sup>23</sup> This recent trend in social and cultural studies furthermore brings trauma closer to Assmann's concept of collective memory. It is therefore the collective loss of memory, zones of collective amnesia within the cultural archive.

Thus in art, the trauma generated by violent events leads to a non-representability, saying that it might be impossible to represent, and thus understand the cruelties that have been experienced by others. The non-representability, on one hand, and the urge to deal with the horrors of the past on the other, poses a complex dilemma for artists who engage in the field of memory and trauma. Nevertheless, many artists and writers try to visualise and write about traumatic experiences.<sup>24</sup> Considering these explorations of scholars engaged with questions of the representability of violent memory and trauma, we can come to a preliminary conclusion that art has the ability to enable a secondary witnessing, an empathic experience of a muted trauma. In the pages that follow, I will discuss a small selection of artworks dealing with

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Nicholas Mirzoeff, Shannen Hill, and Kim Miller, “Invisible Again. Rwanda and Representation after Genocide,” *Trauma and Representation in Africa* XXXVII, Nr. 3 (2005): 36–91.

<sup>19</sup> Bennett, *Empathic vision*, 7ff.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Caruths definition of trauma as wound inflicted upon the mind: Caruth, *Trauma*.

<sup>22</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Jenseits des Lustprinzips* (Leipzig: Internationaler psychoanalytischer Verlag, 1920).

<sup>23</sup> See amongst others Birgit Haehnel and Melanie Ulz, eds., *Slavery in Art and Literature* (Berlin: Frank & Timme, 2009); Lisa Saltzman and Eric M. Rosenberg, *Trauma and visibility in modernity* (Lebanon, NH: UPNE, 2006); Shannen Hill and Kim Miller, eds., “Trauma and Representation in Africa,” *African Arts* XXXVIII, Nr. 3 (Autumn 2005): 1–4; Susan L. Jarosi, *Art & trauma since 1950, a holographic model*

(Durham: Duke University, 2005); Ana Douglass and Thomas A. Vogler, *Witness and Memory: the Discourse of Trauma* (London: Routledge, 2003); Richard Cándida Smith, *Art and the Performance of Memory* (Routledge, 2002); Dominick LaCapra, *Representing the Holocaust: History, Theory, Trauma* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996); Michael S. Roth, *The Ironist's Cage: Memory, Trauma, and the Construction of History* (Columbia University Press, 1995); Caruth, *Trauma*; Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1992); Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain* (Oxford University Press US, 1985).

<sup>24</sup> One of the first exhibitions showing a broad overview of “trauma art” has been this: Gerald Matt and Angela Stief, eds., *Traum und Trauma. Werke aus der Sammlung Dakis Joannou, Athen* (Wien: Hatje Cantz, 2007).



the memory and trauma of the civil war in Angola, trying to explore if these come closer to a form of “trauma art.”

## Artists Engaging with the Past

The claim for the excavation of the hidden archive and the visualisation of unresolved collective memory has been developed under strong demands for a radical engagement with the past: Jo Ractliffe’s photographic journeys into the landscapes of the aftermath of the civil war and Fernando Alvim’s collaborative art project *Memórias Íntimas Marcas*.

### Absence

Before focusing on a very interesting project by Angolan artist Fernando Alvim, I first introduce another South African perspective that also offers a different approach to the topic. The photographer Jo Ractliffe works on the “revelation of absence.”<sup>25</sup> In Angola, she has realized the black and white photographic series *As Terras no Fim do Mundo*, where she also travelled to the sites of conflict. Often visiting sites at “the end of the world,” it was the site of the battle of Cassinga she visited for the project. Here, in 1978 a controversial air (part of the operation *Reindeer*) strike of the SADF on a refugee camp of the Namibian Liberation movement on Angolan territory had caused a high number of civilian deaths. For her project, Ractliffe accompanied veterans of the *61 Mech* battalion on their annual “Angola expedition” back to the battle venues.<sup>26</sup> This form of “travelling back—probably with very different motivations—seems to be a regular veteran activity. For the veterans, these journeys are a form of reconciliation with their past, whereas Ractliffe was motivated to translate her experience into images, mostly showing the absence of concrete traces of memory. She found primarily emptiness and an apparent invisibility of

the war. Nevertheless, she focused on this absence of obvious leftovers of violence in these abandoned spaces.

In the series of black and white photographs, these absences become only visible on second sight. But then, the silent traces of the war appear and their ghostly presences become obvious. Most of the photographs show deserted landscapes, often with an open horizon and some trees cutting through the foreground of the picture. On some, the trees become thicker and we gaze into a forest. When the caption tells us that this forest is infested with mines, walking through—even with your imagination—suddenly becomes unthinkable. According to how open the places look at first sight, they are actually quite inaccessible, sealed by trauma. This work also invites forensic metaphors, as Ractliffe speaks of the landscape as pathology, a space that encloses and discloses the past through the signs of war that become visible more on the edges of our attention. Only a few of the photographs are more straightforward in their subject matter, such as the portrait of the deminer who directly looks at us through his face shield. In his eerie presence, he appears like alien in these landscapes, where no human beings but only ghosts live.

Ractliffe’s project became an engagement with the aftermath as a moment when the landscape becomes, metaphorically speaking, an archive for ghostly memories or even traumas as unresolved memories.<sup>27</sup> Assmann’s storage memory as passive repository and background for latent memories is also applicable here. Landscapes can evoke memory but also point to the absence of it. The artist’s engagement with these sites of the aftermath can be regarded as a form of memory work that is fundamentally different than, for example, monuments or objects of official commemoration. Travelling and working *in situ* can reveal the coexistence of different traces of memory

<sup>25</sup> Sue Williamsom, “Jo Ractliffe,” *ArtThrob*, <http://artthrob.co.za/99mar/artbio.htm>  
<sup>26</sup> The 61 Mech (61 Mechanised Battalion Group) is a veteran organization. Cf. <http://www.61mech.org.za/>

<sup>27</sup> cf. Okwui Enwezor, “Exodus of the Dogs,” *Nka. Journal of Contemporary African Art* 25 (Winter 2009), 60–95.

in the traumatized landscape. The trauma is not extricable from the site, even if it is invisible.<sup>28</sup>

The photo series can be understood as a form of approaching the traumatized landscape of the Angolan civil war from the perspective of someone, who was not actively involved but as a sister and girlfriend who was also always affected. Ractliffe works with mediated memories that were transferred to her through soldiers. She departs on a journey into strangeness, into a country that is not known to her but still matters for the understanding of her own history. She doesn't want to reconstruct this history but rather tries to explore the conditions of her own perception through the generation of topographies of the present time in a landscape of absences. In her work, it is foremost the silence and emptiness, the lack of outspoken signs, that is disturbing. We *feel* that there is something under the surface. Her works raise questions instead of documenting past violence.<sup>29</sup>

Whereas Ractliffe leaves the beholder troubled with this experience of the haunting presence of the unknown, the project below went a step further. It was trying to gig out this haunting presence. In order to find answers to the poignant questions, three artists were actually digging the ground. Alvim approaches collective memory from a psychoanalytical perspective, which brings him very close to the original understanding of trauma. In his work, trauma is understood as a collective loss of memory in a traumatized society and the inability to visualize and translate the experienced event. From this perspective, trauma has an ontological presence and suggests the absence of a collective processing of traumatizing events. The amnesia generated by this denial causes significant gaps in the symbolic order of a society.

## Autopsy

Fernando Alvim has dealt with the civil war and the traumatic results related to Angolan history in a number of art works. One important aspect that makes *Memórias Íntimas Marcas* an affective art project is to be found in Alvim's artistic contribution in particular. In this project, his conceptual framework was formulated quite clearly, even if semantically sometimes blurred. His different works are often iconographically related to each other and thus form a group around metaphors from different semantic areas, such as medicine and psychology (autopsy, psycho-analysis), religion (exorcism, catharsis), memory culture (archive, amnesia) and war culture (camouflage, sniper). Recurring motifs from the visual archive are flags, political and revolutionary icons, the figure of Christ, angels and fetish figures (*nkissi*) from the cultural context of the Bakongo.<sup>30</sup> Next to these figurative elements, script is added, often only fragments of words in Kimbundu, Portuguese or English merged into new heteroglossic neologisms such as "anxuterrapia" as a combination of *anxu* (angel), *terra* (earth) and *terapia* (therapy) or the word *ueitink*, that reveals its meaning of waiting only when spoken out loud.

In particular, in these works from 1990s, Alvim reflects on the possibility of re-membling the fragments of the society of a dystopian war situation. At the first Johannesburg Biennial in 1995, Alvim showed a claustrophobic wall installation entitled *Niu Mujimb Nortsulu Kilombo*, that combined a number of these elements and was maybe the first time the artist engaged thoroughly with the topics of trauma and collective memory in an exhibition context. A white-golden text on the wall read "No, there is no image on this wall. We are in mourning. And Silence is invisible," next to the head of a sculpture of Jesus Christ that was pierced with nails. This reference to the Congolese magic figures known as *Nkissi* can be found frequently in Alvim's works and also in recent paintings. Another wall text read "This is not an abortion. It is a

<sup>28</sup> Bennett speaks about a "double tracking" in this context. Bennett, *Empathic vision*, 98.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 85–86.

<sup>30</sup> On this period in Alvim's oeuvre see Simon Njami, "Fernando Alvim: The Psychoanalysis of the World," in *Looking Both Ways. Art from the Contemporary African Diaspora* (New York: Museum for African Art, 2003), 42–49.



premature confinement. And, by extension, a life.” In this work, the artist combines the Christian idea of sacrifice with the image of premature confinement, abandoning the belief of the right moment in time for giving birth.

The work where he elaborated these preliminary concepts of a traumatized nation that needs further healing was the project *Memórias Íntimas Marcas*. This is the frame concept for a number of collaborative interventions organized by Alvim together with different international artists over a period of five years. The main point of departure was a 12-day process-oriented residency at Cuíto Cuanavale,<sup>31</sup> one of the major battlefields between the Cuban and South African military forces in the early 1980s. This first part was conceptualised in a kind of quasi-religious framework as a mythical journey and cleansing ritual.<sup>32</sup> In this context, he is not only artistically but also rhetorically developing the idea of an autopsy of the collective archive.<sup>33</sup>

MIM “was organized as a collective psychodrama, an experience of exorcism, in order to emerge from the trauma of the Angolan war.”<sup>34</sup>

Part of the project was a translation of the traces of memory and the engagement with the impact of the historical trauma into three-dimensional objects, that later have been exhibited in a number of shows in Angola, South Africa and also Europe.<sup>35</sup> This was probably the first time that an artistic response to the Angolan civil war was shown publicly.<sup>36</sup> The project has gained some interest in academic discourse around art in relation to memory studies,<sup>37</sup> but as an exhibition project it is only sparsely documented and discussed. Morris describes that in the context of the exhibitions in South Africa, the show opened up a possibility to

remember, to discuss and to admit responsibility. This extended to former veterans who were also partly engaged in the project. But the art project’s first results were not so much redemption, but rather a possibility to “touch” the images that have been denied and neglected before. Those who partook in the project were willing to enter a space of collective mourning and to open up their wounds.<sup>38</sup> Rory Bester’s critique of the exhibitions points to the unreflected framework of the violent archive, the project is embedded in. He asks for a more conscious contextualization and careful application of terms such as exorcism and amnesia and a clear distinction between them. The collective archive with its amnesic parts has not been thoroughly conceptualized by Alvim, Bester states.<sup>39</sup> I agree with Bester’s critique when it comes to the politics of representation in an exhibition context, where the question of the aesthetisation of violence has to be interrogated carefully, in particular in the complex postcolonial space of the cold war.<sup>40</sup> But in my paper, I want to focus on the first part of the project. From my point of view, this was clearly motivated by a conviction that artistic practice is able to intervene into the historical strata as a way of potent tool. This part of the project was not yet concerned with ways of representation of the violence and trauma of the civil war that has rightfully been criticised by Bester.

For the first part of the project (the residency at Cuíto Cuanavale), Alvim invited other artists to cooperate, in particular Carlos Garacoia from Cuba and Gavin Younge from South Africa (who returned to the southern African military conflicts). This selection is interesting in regard to the context of the proxy war situation in the 1980s. The title of the

<sup>31</sup> Rory Bester, “Tracing a War,” *Nka. Journal of Contemporary African Art* 9 (1998). Rory Bester says that this travel was 21 days long.

<sup>32</sup> cf. also Brandstetter’s analysis of the artwork as artistic fieldwork in search of lost memories: Anna-Maria Brandstetter, “Gewalt - Trauma - Erinnerung,” in *Entangled. Annäherungen an Zeitgenössische Künstler in Afrika*, edited by Marjorie Jongbloed (Hannover: VolkswagenStiftung, 2006), 122–55.

<sup>33</sup> cf. Fernando Alvim and Catherina Goffeau, eds., *autopsia & desarquivos* (Brüssel: Sussuta Boé, 1999); Anne Pontegine, “Memorias Intimas Marcas’ - Brief Article,” *Artforum International* 38, Nr. 9 (Mai 2000).

<sup>34</sup> Njami, “Fernando Alvim: The Psychoanalysis of the World,” 45.

<sup>35</sup> On the project see Alvim und Goffeau, *autopsia & desarquivos* Alvim organized six exhibitions (including Luanda, Cape Town, Johannesburg and Pretoria and later also Lisbon and Antwerp), a book project (*Autopsia & Desarquivos*), a series of catalogues (*Marcas News*) and two films (*Gele Uanga: War and Art of Elsewhere*; *Zinganeha Kutzinga: Blending Emotions*) out of this initial project.

<sup>36</sup> Morris, “Art and Aftermath in *Memórias Íntimas Marcas*,” 159.

<sup>37</sup> cf. Bennett, *Empathic Vision*; Marlin-Curiel, “Truth and Consequences.”; Anna-Maria Brandstetter, “Gewalt Trauma - Erinnerung,” in *Entangled. Annäherungen an zeitgenössische Künstler in Afrika*, edited by Marjorie Jongbloed (Hannover: Volkswagen Stiftung, 2006), 122–55; Morris, “Art and Aftermath in *Memórias Íntimas Marcas*.”

<sup>38</sup> cf. the individual statements by Colin Richards, “Aftermath: Value and Violence in Contemporary South African Art,” in *Antinomies of Art and Culture: Modernity, Postmodernity, Contemporaneity*, edited by Terry Smith, Okwui Enwezor, and Nancy Condee, 2008, 250–89; Colin Richards, “The names that escaped us,” in *Marcas News Europe*, 4 (Antwerpen: Sussuta Boé, 2000).

<sup>39</sup> Bester, “Tracing a War.”

<sup>40</sup> On this debate cf. Wolfgang Muchitsch, *Does War Belong in Museums? The Representation of Violence in Exhibitions*, 1. (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2013).

project refers to central aspects regarding artistic work dealing with trauma: *memórias* = recollection, *íntimas* = inside, *marcas* = tracks, or wounds. The project was built around the concept of the traumatized landscapes that form the archive of the civil war. In this understanding, a space can be regarded as carrier of memory that refers to an invisible past.<sup>41</sup> In this project, Alvim's artistic approach is similar to Jo Ractliffe's. In both Ractliffe's and Alvim's approach, the artistic strategy is not about the documentation of a spectacular moment but rather a search for traces. In this context, the artist rather becomes a witness who recognizes the neglected events in collective memory.

In *Memórias Íntimas Marcas*, the central intervention into that landscape archive was an artistic fieldwork at *Cuíto Cuanavale*, the battlefield of one of the most intense battles between the enemies' troops in 1987.<sup>42</sup> When the artists visited this place nine years later, the scenery was still marked by the conflict. Bullet holes in the houses were evident, but also abandoned armoured vehicles and, above all, the presence of the landmines was obvious. On some house walls, soldiers had left graffiti describing their emotional state of mind during their deployment at *Cuíto Cuanavale*. Alvim's artistic motivation was directed towards a collective healing process of this space in the context of an engagement with the three artists with the place and its inhabitants. The artist himself describes this process as a form of *psychoanalysis*, a *cleansing* of the traumatized landscape and even an *exorcism*. Here, Alvim borrows Freudian terms to develop his approach of an engagement with the collective archive inscribed into the landscape. To enable a reconciliation or catharsis, it was necessary to extract the images of the war from that collective archive in a form of "autopsy." The idea that an open contact with the collective archive allows healing processes was guiding the artist's

projects in situ—working through the fragmented memories in the haunted space.

The singular projects developed in the context of the larger collective artwork had an affective rather than representative motivation. *Memórias Íntimas Marcas* offers an example of an approach that deals with trauma beyond the (im)possibility of its representation. The engagement with the landscape as site of memory turns it into an accessible archive that enables intervention. Different artistic approaches were developed during the residency period. In particular, the given landscape as well as the leftovers of human presence such as the dilapidated houses covered with rough graffiti and bullet holes, were integrated into the performative actions. Cleaning and working through the sites was a major method in the artist's engagement. For example, the artists washed the houses in a symbolic healing process, dug holes into the soil or pulled a 2-headed doll through an underground tunnel in the soil in a kind of metaphorical birth, or a "miscarriage of death."<sup>43</sup>

The artist's choices are radical, but this *autopsy* of the haunting images might be the right choice to confront the traumatic experiences, since the project enabled a dialogue with members of former hostile nations. It also leads to the possibility of an empathic and performative approach to the archive. Where contingency and trauma meet, performance—or art more generally—activates memory, official and otherwise, opening it up for the healing process and for the all-important task of re-working in the present. Here, questions of affect are key: what art *does* rather than what it *means*. Through the art of recalling, Bennett writes, an emotion becomes perceivable.<sup>44</sup> Memory is figured as lived and felt rather than represented as meaning. This impact of the artistic process has been most obvious in the reaction of the local inhabitants of the territory of the former battle. After the performative engagement of the artists with the dolls, their symbolic rebirth in the

<sup>41</sup> Narmala Halstead and Heather Horst, *Landscapes of Violence: Unmaking, Forgetting and Erasing the Other* (Blackwell, 2008); Bettina Fraisl and Monika Stromberger, *Stadt und Trauma: Annäherungen, Konzepte, Analysen* (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2004).

<sup>42</sup> On the role of Cuito Cuanavale see e.g. Karl Maier, *Angola: promises and lies* (London: Serif, 1996), 33.

<sup>43</sup> Morris, "Art and Aftermath in *Memórias Íntimas Marcas*," 171.

<sup>44</sup> Bennett, *Empathic vision*, 7.

underground tunnel, the villagers asked for one of the dolls to stay as a kind of spiritual device and they installed it on a ritual altar. This symbolic appropriation of the artwork underlines the power of the project and its performative and transformative potential.<sup>45</sup> The artists acted as the channels of this memory work for an as-yet mostly neglected and silenced event in the collective memory.<sup>46</sup>

### Mutilation

One example of the physical quality enacted in the project is Garacoia's excessive seven day of digging of the soil at Cuito Cuanavale. This might have been motivated by the need to lay bare the hidden memories and make visible what had happened, even if it is not here anymore, to dig up answers to his questions about the reason behind this war.<sup>47</sup> But also by the need to create a new territory, that has been worked through with effort. He created visible pits and ditches, opened the metaphorical scars of the wounded territory again. Whereas the explosion of a mine had seriously injured his local guide, Garacoia himself was not wounded. Later, the video taping of the digging process became part of Garacoia's installation *In the Summer Grass*.<sup>48</sup> Gavin Younge was busy with cycling in the landscape of Cuito Cuanavale, a form of remapping the landscape with a rather quotidian means of transport, always in danger of meeting a hidden mine. He later used the filmed material in his installation "Forces Favourites" at the exhibitions. One of Alvim's approaches was also a kind of mapping of the landscape with the means of a radio-controlled car attached with a camera. Parts of the footage have later been used in *Zinganheca Kutzinga*. Maybe taking the perspective of a crawling soldier hiding before an attack, this was a

form of re-enactment of the characteristic imagery of warfare.

After the residency, a number of works were developed which were transformed into multimedia installations. Further artists were also invited to join the exhibitions. In particular, the installations by the three artists who had visited Cuito Cuanavale speak a common language of empathy that was so important during their journey. The curator Thomas Miessgang describes the objects as "haptic, tactile phantasmagorias of an existence born out of loss."<sup>49</sup> It is exactly this physicality that is most interesting for me in the discussion of the possibility of art as "working through" and "acting out" of the trauma. For example, South African artists Jan van der Merve and Colin Richard showed installations with quasi souvenir objects from war such as cartridges or helmets. These objects are charged in a certain way as having been part of the actual events; the artists use them in an auratic sense. Carlos Garaicoa's contribution was a detailed graphic work drawn straight to the outdoor walls of the galleries with an accompanying photograph, showing a fist holding a whip that touched a skull. Its title was "instrument to dissolve memory."<sup>50</sup> Alvim, on the contrary, loads his objects differently. Puppets were suspended in the springs of a hospital bed ("*El Hombre Solo*" 1997), another hospital bed carried a number of open scissors instead, all symbols not immediately associated with war. In his work "Difumbe" (1997-98) the Christ figure and the puppets float in glass boxes filled with water and emanate an unhomely presence by holding them in suspension.

The way Alvim installs them creates a specific scariness that might even be stronger in its affect than the representation of objects from the war. His objects work like fetishes, they are equipped with a certain power to trigger a mental catharsis. The

<sup>45</sup> Christian Hanussek, *Memórias Íntimas Marcas. Interview mit dem Künstler Fernando Alvim über den Aufbau eines afrikanischen Kunstnetzwerkes*, Bd. x, 2 (Springerin: Hefte für Gegenwartskunst, 2004).

<sup>46</sup> For a further discussion of the project see Alvim und Goffeau, *autopsia & desarquivos*; Rory Bester, however, criticizes if the project has been able to consider the question of violence in an adequate way by asking: "The exhibition suffers from Alvim's particular abstraction from the war archive. In framing the future of 'memórias íntimas marcas', more consideration needs to be given to the archive itself and the impact that this archive has on the meaning and understanding of a culture of

war. If exhibitions such as this are to move outside of an art context, play a role in the transformation of society, and affect people in their everyday lives, it has to engage the contradictions implied by what they seek to investigate." Bester, "Tracing a War".

<sup>47</sup> Morris, "Art and Aftermath in Memórias Íntimas Marcas," 163.

<sup>48</sup> Brandstetter, "Gewalt - Trauma - Erinnerung," 142.

<sup>49</sup> Miessgang, "Die Wunde des Seins. Neue afrikanische Kriege und ihre Spiegelungen in der Kunst," 266-67.

<sup>50</sup> Jan Wells, "Three exhibitions Yorkshire Sculpture Park Wakefield", UnDo.net, 7 Januar 2005, <http://1995-2015.undo.net/it/mostra/26678>

objects are not souvenirs from the actual war but are rather charged by the artist's conceptual framework. One of these symbols is the figure of Christ ("*Etranger*" 1996-2000), but he is detached from the cross he is usually nailed to in religious iconography. Christ becomes a floating signifier who is not able to promise redemption anymore, but still carries his religious meaning like a shadow. In 1995, during the context of the first Johannesburg Biennial, Alvim also showed works related to the Angolan civil war, such as a prosthetic leg including exposed femur and a burnt stump, with the inscription "can anyone find my body," in the open space. He also showed an installation called "Interventions" in the Angolan pavilion. Here too, he exhibited sculptures of corpses, crucifixes and body parts, using a mixture of sculpture and installations that might serve as a metaphorical representation of the Angolan civil war. Whereas the leg sculpture was quite "in the face," the inside installation was more subtle and also integrated Alvim's semantically transformed words, which is a characteristic feature in a lot of his works.

### **Conclusion: *As Terras no Fim do Mundo* and *Memórias Íntimas Marcas* as Trauma Art?**

Bennett states that in contemporary art, trauma is conceptualized as having a presence, a force.<sup>51</sup> This idea is very applicable to Ractliffe and Alvim's approach. Alvim is actually creating a counter-force through his art in order to exorcise the war-trauma. In the artworks *As Terras no Fim do Mundo* and *Memórias Íntimas Marcas*, the dimension of the healing process is triggered. Alvim's art project aims to exorcise the collective trauma that not only paralyses Angola but also former hostile countries South Africa and Cuba. This incommensurability can only be banned through aesthetic confrontation.

The idea is not only to remember and describe to the public details of this traumatic history, but, importantly, to educate, to attempt to exorcise its horrors, and ultimately to initiate a process of healing, both private and public, for those directly and indirectly involved. [...] presenting a 'common memorial' or an 'itinerary of intimate memories' generated by the personal experiences of the artists and their shared history.<sup>52</sup>

Ractliffe and Alvim avoid drastic representations of violence and work instead with metaphorical images and a physical engagement with the space as such. *Memórias Íntimas Marcas* in particular circles around the possibilities of healing a traumatised country, where this is meant both physically and metaphorically. The collective experience of travelling and being at a space that still carries marks of the battles violence such as bullet holes and graffiti on the buildings, left over tanks and unexploded landmines is comparable to Ractliffe's motivation. The healing takes place through a collective endeavour, a return to the actual physical place. But Alvim embeds his project in a much broader framework of a national healing process that he coins with terms from the cultural field of religion (exorcism) on the one hand and psychoanalysis (amnesia) on the other.

Another aspect is the level of participation and "experience" allowed. Marlin-Curiel points out, regarding different versions of theatre plays in the context of the TRC, that the ones that really allowed for a societal healing were strengthening participation. It is about "not watching an 'other' that are watching themselves. They are brought on a journey of healing as a community."<sup>53</sup>

In my analysis of *Nas Terras no Fim do Mundo* and *Memórias Íntimas Marcas*, I focused on the aspects that make these works, in my understanding, emphatic ones that go beyond representation. I see mainly two important aspects that enable these art projects to attain this quality: the involvement of the physical body of the participating artists

<sup>51</sup> Bennett, *Empathic Vision*, 12; On the possibility to represent trauma in arts see also Aleida Assmann, Karoline Jetic, und Friederike Wappler, *Rendezvous mit dem Realen: Die Spur des Traumas in den Künsten*, 1 (Bielefeld: transcript, 2014).

<sup>52</sup> Alvim, "Memorias - Intimas - Marcas/Memory - Intimacy - Traces," 351.

<sup>53</sup> Stephanie Marlin-Curiel, "The Long Road to Healing: From the TRC to TFD," *Theatre Research International* null, Nr. 03 (October 2002), 275-88; see also Marlin-Curiel, "Truth and Consequences."

(working through) and the choice of symbols that were rather metaphorical than representational. Why is this suffering important for the artists, who have never themselves undergone any the hardships of war and military service? It seems, all participants see it as a duty, an obligatory contribution of memory-work for the healing processes of their respective collectivities. Some individual artists' responses clearly state the importance of actually having been at Cuíto Cuanavale in its moment of aftermath, since this place has inscribed itself as mythical into the collective memory of all involved parties. Going there opens a possibility to find truth, as Garacoia points out the film "Gele uanga."<sup>54</sup>

Do the artists find ways to deal with the unrepresentability of collective memory when it is obscured by trauma or the legacy of the dominance of violence? The above-introduced artworks might have shown that working with collective memory and trauma are forms of alternative ways of dealing with the past and finding new ways of world making by emphatically engaging with the collective archive. The examples *Terras no Fim do Mundo* and *Memórias Íntimas Marcas* are important in opening the hidden parts of the collective memory and write history anew in a sometimes very radical form. They deal with silencing and trauma by collectively and affectively exorcising the haunting past. Artistic practices that explore collective memory are motivated by a desire to heal and disturb at the same time. In this process, those who deploy such practices might be seen to be imagining alternative futures as a means of transcending the trauma that becomes relevant through the trauma's excavation.<sup>55</sup> All three artists address this process in different ways, mining the collective memory as means of rethinking and, ideally, reshaping the present and future.

Their motivation goes beyond representation and is not so concerned with the unrepresentability of history but rather proposes a process of *working through* the collective memory by affective

associations.<sup>56</sup> In all the examples, memory and trauma—considered as incomplete and hidden, inscribed into the landscape or embedded in the collective memory of the civil war—is not taken for granted and its dominance is contested. Thus, the artworks also offer alternative readings of history by proposing ways to fill the gaps in memory and heal the trauma. By re-membering and dis-membering images of war atrocities, collective memory is stirred and disturbed. Accordingly, a new order might become possible. Harmonising is out of place, but the engagement with traumatic memory must release something uncanny and inconvenient to keep memory alive, and finally be able to work through it, to paraphrase LaCapra's concept of "emphatic unsettlement."<sup>57</sup> In this form, art is the opposite of amnesia due to its power to keep memory alive.

<sup>54</sup> Marlin-Curiel, "Truth and Consequences," 37.

<sup>55</sup> Hal Foster, "An Archival Impulse," *October* (October 2004), 22.

<sup>56</sup> Cf. Foster, 21.

<sup>57</sup> Dominick LaCapra, "Trauma, Absence, Loss," *Critical Inquiry* 25, Nr. 4 (1999), 696–727.