

to 'Welcome to the USA'. Jaar's correction highlights the obscuration of the other Americas in *TIME*'s headline, which itself amounts to an informational border wall. Conversely, sometimes an image is so often reproduced that we know what it looks like without seeing it, as in *What will they leave behind?*, 1985, in which the backs of Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher are instantly, uncannily recognisable.

At times, I was slow on the uptake, shamefully so when trying to parse the difference between America and the USA. But this delay, I like to think, is crucial to Jaar's critique, for it accentuates the seamless reciprocity between the media image and public consciousness while also implicating us, no matter whose side we say we're on. A black void at the end of *Searching for Africa in LIFE* reflects - or perhaps absorbs - the viewer, withholding the privilege of distance that critical art often affords. Similarly, in *West's authority in the world*, 2023, Jaar has printed a two-page spread from an article in the *Economist* on the war in Ukraine. On one page is a large photograph of a vast pile of used missiles, while on the other Jaar has cut out of the text a shape of the same dimensions to reveal a mirror beneath - his act enlists our authority to make sense of the scenario. Here, Jaar conflates the safety of distance with that of the explanatory text. Not only must we think independently, we must also acknowledge the effects of what we think and say.

A smaller exhibition at Cecilia Brunson Projects considers Jaar's engagement with the politics of Chile surrounding the coup that brought the dictator Augusto Pinochet to power 50 years ago. Jaar's 1981 *Public Interventions (Studies on Happiness: 1979-1981)* documents a stunt in which he inserted the text '*¿Es usted feliz?*' (Are you happy?) on signs and billboards; the seemingly innocuous - and yet politically fundamental - words dodged Pinochet's censorial radar. The prints take the form of blown-up negatives, resounding a dictum from Ansel Adams that Jaar has used on other occasions: 'You don't take a photograph, you make it.' Ever conscious of the politics of images, Jaar won't let us lose sight of the staged mediation of his textual performance. Much of this show pillories the US politician Henry Kissinger for the brutal, by many accounts criminal foreign policy he conducted, including the US's support for Pinochet's overthrow of Chile's socialist president Salvador Allende. He is called *Manhattan's Milosevic*, 2001, on a cover of the *Village Voice*. *Nothing of Very Great Consequence*, 2008, invites us to scrutinise a transcript of a telephone call between Kissinger and Richard Nixon. Here, it is ironically the privacy of the conversation that makes it elusive, as the interlocutors seem so complacently familiar with the matter that they omit the details. 'We didn't do it. I mean we helped them,' says Kissinger. Words signifying nothing - and everything.

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Grace Ndiritu Reimagines the FOMU Collection

FOMU, Antwerp

17 February to 7 January 2024

Grace Ndiritu: Healing the Museum

SMAK, Ghent, 1 April to 10 September

Arriving at British-Kenyan artist Grace Ndiritu's exhibition 'Grace Ndiritu Reimagines the FOMU Collection' at the Fotomuseum in Antwerp, I'm asked by the museum's staff to remove my shoes and place them inside a cubby-hole below a long, narrow, dark wooden bench. With its sleek minimalist design, this beautifully hand-crafted piece of furniture forms part of a larger architectural transformation of the gallery, including white-carpeted floors, wooden benches and dividing screens that would not look out of place in the mid-century modern Californian home of US architects and designers Charles & Ray Eames. I'm also instructed on how to use the exhibition's audio guide that has been specially written and recorded by the artist, and which includes a series of guided meditations that encourage visitors to 'slow down and relax', setting the preconditions for 'keeping an open mind, making intuitive connections, and abandoning rational thought processes'.

Invited by FOMU to engage with what is, like many, a historically conservative collection of photography (museum staff confessed to me when they began working with Ndiritu they were shocked to discover how few works by women photographers and artists of colour are held in the collection), the artist set about selecting images and objects from the museum's archives based on her own research interests and aesthetic criteria. Ndiritu's reassuring voice guides the visitor through an idiosyncratic arrangement of photos without captions and absent of people; images grouped into colour-coded sections of the gallery under categories such as 'Travel, Sun, Plants, Objects' (lilac), 'Interiors, Landscapes, Exteriors, Crystals' (blue) and 'Abstract, Africa, Still Life, Animal, Colour, Textiles' (yellow). Ndiritu identifies the textile artist Anni Albers, the photographer Tina Modotti and the painter Georgia O'Keefe as the inspirational reference points for her reorganisation.

Ndiritu's efforts to 'reimagine' and 'reactivate' FOMU's collection forms part of her much larger project, 'Healing the Museum', which encompasses more than a decade of museum residencies, publications, films, textile work, performances, conference talks, social actions and policy interventions. 'Healing the Museum' is Ndiritu's particular response to the wider calls to rethink the contemporary museum in the light of its problematic histories of colonialism and racism. She says in a video interview on the FOMU website that 'in this day and age we talk about decolonising museums and therefore burning them down or throwing everything away'. Yet Ndiritu is committed to transforming rather than destroying the museum and her healing process involves a number of spiritual and communal approaches, from shamanic rituals to sharing practices and group meditations.

'Healing the Museum' is also the title of Ndiritu's large-scale mid-career retrospective that opened



Grace Ndiritu, 'Healing the Museum', installation view

in April at another Flemish art institution, SMAK (the Municipal Museum of Contemporary Art) in Ghent. This retrospective culminates in a similar reorganisation of the museum's collection, this time taking the form of a work entitled *The Temple, 2023*. An adaptation of a piece presented at Nottingham Contemporary in 2021, *The Temple* fills almost the entirety of a large gallery space with an enclosing circular wooden structure evoking both modernist design and traditional indigenous building forms, such as the sweat lodges of the Canadian First Nations peoples. Serving as both an infrastructure of display and a space for meditation and public events, *The Temple* exhibits works from SMAK's collection selected by the artist in collaboration with the museum's staff. In this case, Ndiritu has reassembled the collection around such themes as 'blackness', 'feminism', 'ecology' and 'community'. Alongside some of Ndiritu's works are paintings and sculptures by Marlene Dumas, Marina Abramović and Jimmie Durham, all displayed without labels, inviting undetermined connections to be made.

Elsewhere in the SMAK exhibition Ndiritu references a longer history of artists questioning the role and legacy of cultural institutions. In a particularly visually striking room, the artist displays one of her 'Protest Carpets', a series of black-and-white circular tapestries depicting images of historically significant political marches or gatherings. In this case, the carpet, surrounded by a ring of bright red floor-cushions, depicts Zambian-born British conceptual artist John Latham and the Artist Placement Group (APG) assembled around a table in 1970. APG was established in London in 1966 with the principal aim of expanding the role of the artist within a broader cross section of society. Between 1966 and the early 1980s, APG organised approximately 15 artist placements, lasting from two weeks to several years, within some of the UK's largest industrial, commercial and government organisations (from British Steel to the Department of the Environment - see, for example, Ian Breakwell's 'A personal history of work on placement with the Department of Health and related work, 1976-1980' in *AM40*). Ndiritu's APG protest carpet is accompanied by a film documenting an event held during the artist's

2022 residency at London's Flat Time House, Latham's studio-home turned gallery and archive. Sitting cross-legged on the protest carpet, Ndiritu and a group of young artists engage in a collective reading of Latham's 1981 essay 'Event Structure', an enigmatic text exploring notions of the limits of representation and a deep time beyond human experience. 'Language, as a medium,' Ndiritu reads, 'is unable to tell the whole truth.'

Standing in my stocking feet, listening on my headphones to Ndiritu's guided meditations and insightful readings of the artworks she has assembled, I have little doubt that my perspective of the museum spaces of FOMU and SMAK has been productively altered. Which leaves me thinking about the temporal questions of deep time and sustainability. Should we interpret Ndiritu's ritual healing of the museum as primarily a symbolic gesture, or might we hope for an institutional transformation lasting beyond the duration of the exhibition? It should be emphasised that Ndiritu's engagement with both museums was far from casual; the artist spent a year working with SMAK during a residency titled 'A Spiritual Inventory of a 21st Century Museum', and her project with FOMU was similarly involved and included the acquisition of three new works that help diversify the collection (they also acquired Ndiritu's room-sized installation from 2014, *A Quest for Meaning*). In the year leading up to the exhibitions, Ndiritu spent time with every member of staff at both museums, from the curators to the invigilators and building maintenance staff - the contemporary embodiment of APG's institutionally embedded artist.

Speaking to the curators at both FOMU and SMAK, it is clear they view Ndiritu's interventions not as an end point but as the beginning of a much longer process of organisational change. Ndiritu, they told me, had taught them to 'slow everything down', insisting they take the time necessary to consider each decision required to move the museum towards a better future. Indeed, preliminary discussions are currently taking place between Ndiritu and SMAK to determine how the artist can continue to be involved as the museum embarks on a major building expansion project to facilitate the permanent display of 500 works from its collection. True to her mediative practice, Ndiritu appears comfortable with the realisation that healing the museum requires patience. 'Now breathe in and out and slowly walk towards the first room with white carpet and wooden walls.'

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