Programmed Visions and Techno-Fossils: Heba Y Amin and Anthony Downey in conversation

Recorded on 30 May 2022 at Zilberman Gallery, Berlin, to coincide with the opening of Heba Y Amin's show 'When I See the Future, I Close my Eyes, Chapter II' (curated by Anthony Downey), this conversation discusses the history and future of image-making technologies and post-digital models of representation. Throughout the discussion, Amin and Downey explore the interdisciplinary relationship that exists between art practices and models of academic and critical research, neocolonial violence, machinic vision, photography and colonial exploitation, data extraction, France's nuclear experiments in Algeria, and a pyramid built by the Luftwaffe in al-Alamein (Egypt) to commemorate a World War II German fighter pilot.

Initially launched in 2020 by Amin and Downey at The Mosaic Rooms, London, 'When I See the Future, I Close my Eyes' is an interdisciplinary collaborative platform that explores art- and exhibition-making as a methodology for new and ongoing research. Focused on broadening conversations around emerging forms of digital authoritarianism, the evolution of machine vision, and the technologies that support asymmetric warfare, the research platform reflects upon the colonial histories of technology and their role in determining models of extraction and Western regimes of visuality.

A print version of this conversation is included in the exhibition catalogue for 'When I See the Future, I Close my Eyes, Chapter II'. For further information about the exhibition and the publication, see www.zilbermangallery.com/when-i-see-the-future-i-close-my-eyes-e311.html

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Anthony Downey I want to begin by reflecting upon the nature of interdisciplinary practice – how, specifically, Heba and I bring together our research to develop methodologies for thinking about image production. We both think from within the apparatus of image production rather than merely reflect upon it – that is, to observe. For Heba's practice-based research this usually involves producing work that is actively engaged in thinking *through* colonial processes of image production and their legacies; for me, likewise, it tends to involve developing strategies for understanding the violence of colonial representation (the extraction of data from images, for example) and the increasingly prevalent role of digital images in this process. The element that seems constant is how our interdisciplinary research and its

relationship to practice can produce methodologies for deconstructing digital images from within the infrastructures of their production.

So, let's start with one of your recent projects, *Windows on the West*, and see how this works. The project is basically a tapestry that touches upon a number of areas – data extraction, the violence of colonial representation, image production – that remain crucial in our ongoing discussion. But could you talk us through the image you have referenced – specifically what it is, and what it represents in the context of this project?

Windows on the West, 2019, handwoven Jacquard textile, recycled yarn, 135 x 250 cm, courtesy of the artist and Zilberman, Istanbul/Berlin, photo by Chroma

Heba Y Amin This is an image I have been working with for quite a few years now. It portrays the first documented photograph taken on the African continent, three months after the Daguerreotype was gifted to the world by the French in 1839. The image was taken at a moment when French artists, and particularly the Orientalist painters, were rushing to all corners of the world to capture the first photographs. The image itself is not necessarily the most striking aspect per se, but more compelling to me is what it represents and how that is still relevant to us today. The photograph depicts Mohamed Ali Pasha's palace in Alexandria, with a focus on the architectural wing of the harem. It was taken by the Orientalist painter Horace Vernet and his nephew Frédéric Goupil-Fesquet while on an expedition in Egypt. When it was exhibited in Paris for the first time, it supposedly created excitement due to the sexual implications it elicited in the European imagination. I find the story of this image intriguing because it speaks to broader issues that I would like to touch upon. I was fascinated by what it means to have this predatory gaze inscribed in the image, and what tools one could use to extract that male gaze. Up to this point I had been working with the photograph in

various ways, and settled on its reconstruction as a woven tapestry. It is important to note here that the image I have used for reference is an engraving of the original photograph, as it was common for nineteenth-century painters to utilise photographic documentation for art production, namely painting. The original glass plate no longer exists, but the engraving remains. For this work, I utilised a Jacquard weaving loom, which is essentially one of the first machines to perform automated tasks through a punchcard system. It is considered an important technological development towards modern computing. Of course, today we can use computers to help reconstruct the image, but in this case the tapestry is still created through an analogue or handmade process, which was important for me as I wanted to intervene personally in the process of production. This approach to image production is obviously different from taking a photograph or a snapshot that captures the entirety of the image at once through a lens. The image, broken down line by line, is only visible once the final tapestry is completed. While the embedded predatory gaze may not ever be eliminated, at the very least I can attempt to shift the perspective.

AD Could you talk us through this further, specifically the tapestry element that was woven on a Jacquard loom, a device invented by Joseph Marie Jacquard, a French weaver and merchant, who revolutionised how patterned cloth could be woven? The Jacquard machine used punchcards, which inspired the development of early computers, to produce detailed patterns. One of the first anti-industrial protests came out of that production process, when low-skilled weavers took their *sabots*, a wooden shoe or clog, and threw them into the looms (thus gifting us the word 'saboteurs'). For this project, we have a connection between the original weaving and a digital component. Could you talk us through the digital component of this image?

HYA As the first machine to follow algorithmic instruction, I would be curious to try the original punchcard system. However, the Textile Prototyping Lab in Berlin, who helped me produce this textile, have a mechanised loom which uses software that distils the image into various degrees of grey. The software determines which threads move up and down with black and white but also determines the weave structure to obtain gradation. The actual weaving is done manually.

During our test trials, I was intrigued by the way the test strips helped visualise the mechanisms at play by revealing the process of production through the different weaving patterns and gradation variations. These remained as the 'ends' of the tapestry, the stripes at either side. It helped me think through the idea of digitisation with what is often considered a traditional art form.

AD Your version of the original image, here woven from a photograph, is also a reflection on the history of photography as a mechanism for 'fixing' or producing realities – by which

I mean, in the colonial context, out of which the original photograph originated, the act of photographing an object or scene operated as a means to fix that present moment of colonial power and domination.[1] Could you talk a little bit more about that?

Windows on the West (detail), 2019, handwoven Jacquard textile, recycled yarn, 135 x 250 cm, courtesy of the artist and Zilberman, Istanbul/Berlin, photo by Chroma

HYA This is essentially what drew me to the image: the idea that these first photographs were taken in Africa in particular, and that the manner in which the French had sexualised North African women was merely an extension of territorial domination. When they first arrived with their cameras, however, they didn't find their imagined fantasy, it was completely contrived. In part, it is what is alluded to in the photograph that became the focus. This was also part of the orientalist tradition, of course: the staging of a reality or its contrivance. Some orientalists would pay or force women who had no agency to pose nude, in the ways that they had imagined. It is interesting how the French are still obsessed with undressing Arab women.

AD The one thing that has changed is the technologies of representation. The original photographs were circulated as material objects, and the display and circulation of the image would have had a physical context. As we move forward into our post-digital age, such images today are less material and more networked as digital images. The pixellated image also becomes data for use in machine learning systems and for training algorithms, so it has

[1] For a further discussion of these issues in relation to colonisation and drone warfare, see Heba Y Amin and Anthony Downey, 'Contesting post-digital futures: drone warfare and the geo-politics of aerial surveillance in the middle east', *Digital War 1*, 2020, pp 65–73, https://www.wheniseethefuture.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/01_-Amin-Downey2020_Article_ContestingPost-digitalFuturesD-2.pdf, accessed 17 June 2022

lost some of its symbolic context and has become more of an instrumentalised image. The pixellated image, in a neocolonial context, is both a way of mapping realities and a means of extracting and extruding data. We have both the violence of mapping and extraction concentrated in the pixellated image, in sum.

HYA I think it would be interesting to also talk about the duplication and the dissemination of these kinds of images before the digital age, because a lot of these images were actually produced as postcards in order to disseminate them cheaply and quickly. It is also about thinking through how images were used as a form of propaganda and a form of power, how one dominates territory through image production. I don't think this is dissimilar to how digital images are disseminated and data extraction is used to propagate propaganda for territorial domination today. I think it is a continuation of the same system.

AD Yes, I agree; so let's move to that issue of mapping and look at *The Devil's Garden* (2019), an ongoing work that looks at how colonial violence is engendered through material artefacts and their legacies. This work relates to the German Afrika Korps and their presence in northern Egypt, specifically the presence of a pyramid built by the Luftwaffe to commemorate the World War II German fighter pilot Hans-Joachim Marseille.

The Devil's Garden: Marseille's Pyramid, 2019, mixed media pyramid replica, 240 x 370 x 370 cm, courtesy of the artist and Zilberman, Istanbul/Berlin, photo by Chroma

HYA I have been doing research and fieldwork in northern Egypt for many years now. I was specifically interested in techno-fossils, or the remnants of technologies of warfare embedded in the earth.[2] More specifically, I was investigating landmines implanted by the German Afrika Corps during World War II in what Erwin Rommel dubbed 'The Devil's Garden'. What most people don't know is that more Egyptians have been killed by these landmines since the war ended than soldiers were during the war itself. World War II was a European endeavour, where locals were forced to battle on behalf of their colonisers and they are still paying the consequences today. Where is the lasting legacy of responsibility in that narrative? That is what I was interested in exploring. For several years now, I have been working with residents from al-Alamein to better understand their historical role in the war and why history and memorials have not valued their lives on their own lands as much as the lives of Germans, Italians, British and other Western nations who caused the devastation in the first place.

The Devil's Garden: Marseille's Pyramid (detail), 2019, mixed media pyramid replica, 240 x 370 x 370 cm, courtesy of the artist and Zilberman, Istanbul/Berlin, photo by Chroma

During one of my trips, I was taken to a pyramid in the middle of nowhere. I was appalled to discover that it was, in fact, a memorial for a German fighter pilot named Hans-Joachim Marseille, also known as '*der Stern von Afrika*' ('the Star of Africa') due to the large number of

[2] For an extended discussion of the historical application of technologies to the Egyptian landscape, see 'Avian Prophecies and the Techno-Aesthetics of Drone Warfare: Heba Y Amin in conversation with Anthony Downey', in *(W)archives: Archival Imaginaries, War and Contemporary Art*, Daniela Agostinho, Solveig Gade, Nanna Thylstrup and Kristin Veel, eds, Sternberg Press, 2020, pp 143–161

planes he shot down during the war. Imagine: an appropriated local cultural symbol used to commemorate a Nazi-era fighter pilot. I was shocked! An inscription on the memorial's plaque further states that Marseille died undefeated: his death was the result of a crash due to engine failure. It seems that his colleagues from the German Luftwaffe Fighter Pilots Association commemorated the site of his death through a memorial that has become permanent over time. I have been told that the current version of the pyramid that stands today was built in 1990. If this is true, it is a huge scandal. Who is maintaining it? Why are we not discussing how problematic this is? My interest became about how memorials like this have helped crystallise the narrative of the German Africa Corps as being separate from the dominant World War II narrative. The heroisation of Hans-Joachim Marseille and others through books, film and other narratives have helped perpetuate this narrative of the 'good' Nazi. And what about the colonial context in which Germans were fighting alongside the Italian Fascists to colonise North Africa? That seems to be of no concern to German historical discourse. The pyramid became a symbol for me, a tool to confront this narrative. Today, millions of landmines remain embedded in Egypt. When is the time to discuss this?

AD Just to recap: Hans-Joachim Marseille successfully ejected from his aeroplane but the tail fin of his aeroplane sliced his top part almost in half, according to records, and then he plummets fatally to the ground. So this memorial is built in honour of his death, but there is also a reference in this work to *Der Stern von Afrika*, or *The Star of Africa*, a 1957 film about Hans-Joachim Marseille. This film is also fascinating because it brings us to the story of Mathew Letuku. Could you talk a little about that?

HYA *Der Stern von Afrika* was considered, at the time it was produced in 1957, to be an anti-war film. Yet it is anything but an anti-war film. Quite the opposite! Because it heroises the German Africa Corps, the film was integral in the whitewashing of the German-Nazi-colonial context that unfolded outside of mainland Europe. In fact, the film makes no mention of the Nazis. Hans-Joachim Marseille is portrayed as a young, attractive, athletic, star fighter pilot who everybody aspires to be like. The story is, of course, removed from any German political context. More intriguing to me, however, is a secondary character in the film: Marseille's 'sidekick'. This character is a young African man. He sings and dances, often without his shirt; he has a beautiful smile. This actor turns out to be a young Roberto Blanco, and it is the role that launches his career. It turns out, however, that his character is based on a real person: a prisoner of war from South Africa named Mathew Letuku, fighting on behalf of the British. He was captured in Libya, handpicked by Hans-Joachim Marseille as his captive. It turns out Marseille was a fan of jazz and wanted a black man. So, this is the narrative used to perpetuate the ways in which the 'good' Nazis were not actually racist.

Interestingly, when I first exhibited this pyramid in Solingen at the Center for Persecuted Arts, we invited Roberto Blanco to the exhibition on a whim, not realising that he would

actually show up! Roberto Blanco, as you might know, is a black Schlager musician with enormous success in Germany. In getting to know him, I discovered many parallels in Blanco's and Letuku's roles as black figures instrumentalised by the German discourse. I conducted an interview with Roberto Blanco in front of my replica pyramid and we discussed his personal story as well as his character in the film.

AD Roberto Blanco plays a character called Mathias based upon a real character, Mathew Letuku, who was adopted by Hans-Joachim Marseille and becomes his domestic help. There is obviously a racial politics around that, but can you remind me: did Blanco know any of this history around Letuku at the time he made the film?

HYA He knew very little about the person he supposedly portrayed. Why would he? He was an eighteen-year-old medical student playing the role of his life. He was discovered by chance on an aeroplane when visiting his father in Germany from Spain. The director, Alfred Wiedenmann, witnessed his charisma and immediately hired him to play this role in the film. Indeed, Roberto Blanco came from a family of entertainers. Originally from Cuba, his parents were singers, and were performing predominantly in the Middle East during the golden era of cinema and music in the 1940s and 1950s. In fact, Roberto Blanco himself grew up in Lebanon, which is also why it is interesting to connect him back to the character that he plays in the film with Egypt as the backdrop. Blanco was very quick to adopt the story I revealed to him about Mathew Letuku when addressing the public.

AD It is interesting that a memorialisation of someone's death (that is, the demise of Hans-Joachim Marseille) could potentially become the means to reconstruct the facts of someone else's life, namely that of Mathew Letuku. That which was supplemental, or in surplus, or the element that is needed to complete something, is the very element (in Letuku's story) that returns to reveal a lacuna, or absence in the original narrative. The apparently supplemental aspect of Mathew Letuku's story and biography haunts, so to speak, the narrative of Hans-Joachim Marseille. On the subject of haunting, I want to turn to *Atom Elegy,* which you produced in 2022. The basis of this project is a photograph, but you have obviously expanded on that with the installation.

HYA This project came about a few years ago when preparing for my exhibition in Solingen, where I first met Roberto Blanco. In the museum's collection, I came across a book of poems called *Fruit from Saturn* by the French–German writer Ivan Goll. In the book is a poem called 'Atom Elegy', a sort of love poem to the atomic bomb. In fact, the museum had two versions of the poem: the first, unpublished version, which was a kind of confession of love to technological progress, and a second, published one, which was a highly revised version of the former after the atomic bomb was first dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki

and Ivan Goll witnessed the devastation it caused. I was interested in this shift of perception and how quickly we deem technological developments as progress. These two versions of the same poem inspired further research when I came across an incredibly haunting image that you see in the exhibition here. This photograph from 1960, taken in the Algerian Sahara, depicts the site of French atomic bomb experiments. In the 1960s, the French government conducted a series of nuclear tests, including an atomic bomb said to be three to four times as powerful as the one dropped on Hiroshima. They later discovered that the nuclear fallout was detected to have travelled as far as Sudan. You can imagine the vast amount of territory that it affected. We are not only talking about environmental devastation, but also all the long-lasting ailments that come with that, and a local population who are suffering the devastating effects. The French government continued these nuclear tests until 1966, even after Algeria had already gained independence. Here in Leipzig, there was a group of students from Mali who organised protests because of the vicinity of the testing sites to their villages back home. Of course, they understood the devastation at that time, everyone did. The French government has recently declassified these files, yet no public apologies have been issued.

I kept going back to this uncanny image. It captures the moment before the bomb is dropped, the pending violence of bodies being blown into pieces. The viewer is suspended in that moment where devastation is about to happen, but we never see the aftermath, we are only left to imagine it. Like Vernet's image of the harem palace, this photograph is about what you don't see and what it conjures in your imagination.

Atom Elegy, 2022, 12 miniature dummies, dummies: ca. 30 cm (height), table: 90 x 160 x 210 cm, courtesy of the artist and Zilberman, Istanbul/Berlin, photo by Chroma

AD Each of the figures is very heavily stylised in the photograph, which would suggest that whoever produced them went through a lot of trouble. Some of the original mannequins have pockets sewn in, buttons, proper buttons, proper shoes; they have been effectively aestheticised, but all of this energy seems slightly sadistic – they are about to be annihilated – and overdetermined. Is that part of the thinking, or part of what attracted you to it?

HYA Yes, to a certain extent. I saw many other images of the explosion from distant perspectives, but this image was about something else. I tried to understand it better through a reconstruction that borrows from archaeological strategies, by rebuilding the site to extract further narratives. I began to notice the sadistic nature in which these figures were made to look realistically human, fully dressed and accessorised. It really disturbed me. What is this image actually doing?

AD Going back to our earlier discussion, including how my own research-based practice and your practice-based research relate to one another, I was thinking about the apparatus of image production in relation to both the newest work here, *Atom Elegy*, and the earlier work, *Windows on the West*. One thing occurred to me: since the 1950s, there have been numerous treaties to legislate for (and against) the use of nuclear weapons. Today most nuclear 'detonations' are virtual. They exist as computer-based and algorithmic modellings of what happens to fissile material after the event of detonation. To this end, virtual modelling has effectively taken over from the actual explosion or the nuclear detonation itself. I think this is a great metaphor for thinking through the inscription of violence into the digital. How does the digital inscribe violence, how does it contain violence, how does it let violence erupt? Which brings us right back to the inscription of violence into the image we see in *Windows on the West*. Violence is there from the outset; the violence of the gaze inscribed in the realisation of an image of otherness. There is also the violence of extraction – what was being extracted, fixed, repurposed and perpetuated in that photographic moment.

This returns us, by way of a provisional end, to matters that you and I have discussed at length – specifically, how colonial violence has been reinscribed through digital technologies in order to occupy future realities. The question, as we have been discussing in relation to your practice and my research, is how do you disrupt that transmission of information? What methodologies do you use and what forms of digital methodology can you use to think from *within* these apparatuses of image production, be they based on photographs, the weaving of an image or a digital process?

HYA Indeed, not only what methodologies can one use to think from within the apparatus of image production, but also how does one critically confront that inscription of violence through formal and informal visual investigation and practice?

Atom Elegy, 2022, 12 miniature dummies, dummies: ca. 30 cm (height), table: 90 x 160 x 210 cm, courtesy of the artist and Zilberman Istanbul/Berlin, photo by Chroma

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Heba Y Amin is a professor of digital and time-based art at ABK-Stuttgart, the co-founder of the Black Athena Collective, curator of visual art for the *MIZNA* journal, and currently sits on the editorial board of the *Journal of Digital War*. She was awarded the 2020 Sussmann Artist Award for artists committed to the ideals of democracy and antifascism, and was selected as a Field of Vision Fellow, New York City, in 2019. Amin's work has been shown in numerous exhibitions including at The Mosaic Rooms, London (2021); the Böttcherstrasse Prize Exhibition, Bremen (2018); Eye Film Museum, Amsterdam (2020); Quai Branly Museum, Paris (2020); MAXXI Museum, Rome (2018); Liverpool Biennial (2021); 10th Berlin Biennale (2018); 15th Istanbul Biennale (2017); and the 12th Dak'Art Biennale (2016). Her latest publication, *Heba Y Amin: The General's Stork* (edited by Anthony Downey) was published by Sternberg Press in 2020. Amin was also one of the artists behind the subversive graffiti action on the set of the television series *Homeland* that received worldwide media attention.

Anthony Downey is Professor of Visual Culture in the Middle East and North Africa at Birmingham City University in the UK. He sits on the editorial boards of *Third Text*, *Digital War* and *Memory, Mind & Media*, and is the series editor for *Research/Practice* (Sternberg Press, 2019–ongoing). Recent and upcoming publications include *Unbearable States: Cultural Activism and Post-Digital Futures* (forthcoming, 2023); *Nida Sinnokrot: Palestine is Not a Garden* (Sternberg Press and MIT, 2023); *Topologies of Air: Shona Illingworth* (Sternberg Press and the Power Plant, 2021), *Heba Y Amin: The General's Stork* (Sternberg Press/MIT, 2020) and *Critique in Practice* (Sternberg Press/MIT, 2019). Anthony is the Cultural Lead and Co-Investigator on a four-year AHRC funded research project that focuses on cultural practices, education and disability in Lebanon, Palestine and Jordan (2020–2024).