

# Hauntological Relations of Monocultures

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Jonas Staal, *Vrijdenkersruimte Vervolgd*, 2012.  
Photo: M HKA, Wim Van Eesbeek.

**Why resurrect it all now. From the Past. History, the old wound. The past emotions all over again. To confess to relive the same folly. To name it now so as not to repeat history in oblivion. To extract each fragment by each fragment from the word from the image another word another image the reply that will not repeat history in oblivion.**

–Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, *Dictée*<sup>1</sup>

**The scramble suit represents one of our oldest dreams: that of escaping the body. In the ancient world, octopuses were valued for their ability to change shape as they merge with their surroundings – in the case of the mimic octopus, they can change colour too. The**

**polytropic Odysseus, clinging onto a rock to avoid being carried off by the waves, is compared to an octopus. [...] It was better, wrote Theognis, to have the craft and cunning of an octopus than to be atropiis (unchangeable).**

–Will Harris, *Mixed-Race Superman*<sup>2</sup>

**Consent not to be a single being.**

–Fred Moten, *Black and Blur*<sup>3</sup>

## Containers

This text is a subjective paratext, a pretext, a post-text, a post-face to monoculture, both *MONOCULTURE: A Recent History*, the exhibition, conference,<sup>4</sup> publication<sup>5</sup> initiated by curator Nav Haq at M HKA, and ‘monoculture’, the term. *MONOCULTURE* unfolds through time and space in a plurality of artistic, curatorial, editorial, discursive formats, just as its core concept (monoculture or ‘cultural homogeneity’)<sup>6</sup> questionably traverses many fields of enquiry, from agriculture to politics, economy to sociology, anthropology to artistic production. And to such an extent that Haq and editor Pascal Gielen pluralise the term in their introductory text to the publication *The Aesthetics of Ambiguity*.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, as paradoxical as it may seem, monoculture is not a ‘universe’ but a ‘pluriverse’,<sup>8</sup> which *MONOCULTURE*, the exhibition, reverberates within.

It follows that this text can only exist as a partial container for some of *MONOCULTURE*’s many pressing topics.<sup>9</sup> It attempts to carry the paths which I traced while visiting the exhibition, reading its publication and attending its conference. It also attempts to tell stories that respond to those paths – the octopus has many limbs and its soft body keeps changing colour. But while this container may fail at embracing *MONOCULTURE*, so does the project itself in many ways; monoculture is so plural that it is impossible to contain – ‘Pluralism bites too strong’.<sup>10</sup>

Indeed, *MONOCULTURE* and the concept are *un*-containable. The entry points into the term and the exhibition are too numerous and the meanings too diverse to arrive at a single definition; one can only observe its various modes and its coexistence with its so-called opposite: ‘multiculture’ or ‘cultural diversity’.<sup>11</sup> Monoculture is also, significantly, a recursive concept. And it’s always there somewhere, sometimes partially hidden – it’s a haunting concept. Monoculture is equivocal to the extent that disambiguation doesn’t seem a relevant path to take.<sup>12</sup> Monoculture and *MONOCULTURE* are therefore tricky, even slippery, which may explain why they trouble me. But that is also what makes the term interesting.

## Divergent Variations

The text stays with this trouble as it itself unfolds through a series of connections, which hopefully reverberate with those of monoculture and *MONOCULTURE*. I would like this text to keep haunting me, and you, when it comes to thinking about otherness and the knots that weave 'us' and 'them' together. Just as Pascal Gielen and Nav Haq 'start with a simple statement of "relations"', feminist theorist Karen Barad opens her essay 'On Touching – The Inhuman That Therefore I Am' with the following questions: 'When two hands touch, how close are they? What is the measure of closeness? Which disciplinary knowledge formations, political parties, religious and cultural traditions, infectious disease authorities, immigration officials, and policymakers do not have a stake in, if not a measured answer to, this question?'<sup>13</sup> Approaching 'touch' through the lens of quantum field theory, Barad shows that just like particles human beings move and evolve through a series of inter- and intra-actions, which testifies to the queer entanglement of things: 'All touching entails an infinite alterity, so that touching the other is touching all others, including the "self", and touching the "self" entails touching the strangers within. ... Every finite being is always already threaded through with an infinite alterity diffracted through being and time.'<sup>14</sup> Alterity emerges through an infinite active process of differentiation, an 'entangled relation of difference (*différance*)'.<sup>15</sup>



Andy Warhol, *Birmingham Race Riot*, 1964.  
Photo: M HKA, Wim Van Eesbeek.

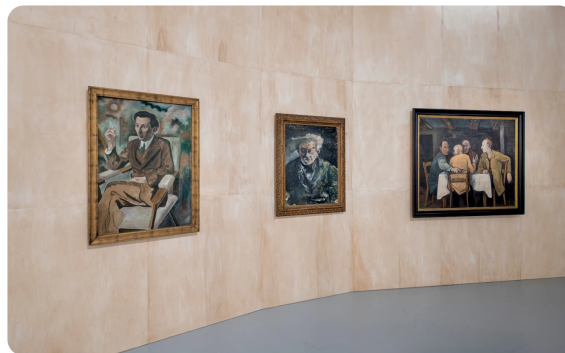
Reading this I can't help but think that these processes resonate with political philosopher Chantal Mouffe's thoughts on human identities and conflicts.<sup>16</sup> For Mouffe, as well as for Barad, any identity is relational. The notion of *écarts différentiels* (divergent variations), which Mouffe borrows from anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss,<sup>17</sup> describes this active, inherent tension between individuals and cultures through which identities emerge: for an 'us' to emerge, there always needs to be a 'them'. In this sense, monoculture is constituted by the affirmation of a difference (*différance*) with regards to a 'constitutive outside'.<sup>18</sup> The irreducible relationality between monoculture and its so-called opposites (say, polyculture) is one of 'being bound to the other';<sup>19</sup> the one(s) and the other(s) are constantly *in touch*. Talking about 'monocultural violence' also makes sense here<sup>20</sup> – tensions are inevitable. But, as Barad shows, there is not only antagonism but also touch.

## Diffractions

While Karen Barad uses 'diffraction' in relation to infinite alterity,<sup>21</sup> I would like to explore the term as a visual tool and as an instrument to think through and with 'monoculture'; an instrument for seeing is a framework for interpretation, which is, in itself, a practice of theorising.<sup>22</sup> Artworks are definitely instruments for seeing and thinking with. This exhibition explores a history of visibility and a history of erasure.<sup>23</sup> Within this space, that of erasure, monoculture manifests through the various attempts to obliterate difference, while (hopefully) being doomed to fail. The exhibition proceeds, then, as an enquiry, as a wandering, as a mapping of identity claims, just as 'diffraction is a mapping of interference'.<sup>24</sup>

## Mapping (Hi)stories

As the exhibition title suggests, a history is told. And yet, *MONOCULTURE: A Recent History* is also a container for (hi)stories, revolving around a concept that has been constantly appearing and disappearing in a range of fields – it visually echoes both the spiral and the vortex of historical time, as considered by artist Haseeb Ahmed in his contribution to the conference.<sup>25</sup> The exhibition is about how these stories resurface, recombine, with and within works of art, around and outside of them, too; how artworks are understood, accompanied and lived with, and sometimes banned and destroyed. It deals with 'what happens when histories are foreshortened, homogenised and smoothed over; and [our] responsibility for their recovery in all their complexity'.<sup>26</sup>



Entartete Kunst, including works by (L-R):  
George Grosz, Lovis Corinth, Karl Hofer. Photo:  
M HKA, Wim Van Eesbeek.

*MONOCULTURE* particularly loops around a crucial history in Antwerp, in Belgium, in Europe, in the entire world. A pivotal room of the exhibition is dedicated to the infamous exhibition *Entartete Kunst* (Degenerate Art) in Munich in 1937; just one day before its inauguration, another exhibition opened as a counterpoint: *The Great German Art Exhibition*.<sup>27</sup> Later, in 1939, many works exhibited in *Entartete Kunst* were sold at auction in Switzerland. The Royal Museum of Fine Arts Antwerp acquired paintings from artists Lovis Corinth, George Grosz and Karl Hofer as a way to save key artworks from destruction, but also as an opportunistic purchase. These paintings are on display in *MONOCULTURE*.



Jonas Staal, *Vrijdenkersruimte Vervolgd*, 2012.  
Photo: M HKA, Wim Van Eesbeek.

Not only was World War II an intense period when monocultural ideologies came to the fore, it also reveals the entanglements between ideology, propaganda, cultural and market value. *MONOCULTURE* discloses these, while pointing to other ambivalences and occurrences: ‘*Entartete* did not arise in a vacuum. It is a way of seeing; a persistence of vision.’<sup>28</sup> This persistence is found in artist Jonas Staal’s work in the exhibition, *Vrijdenkersruimte Vervolgd* (*Freethinkers’ Space Continued*), *Model 2012* (2012). It is a scale model of the original Freethinkers’ Space, ‘the first-ever exhibition space created in Dutch parliament in the political offices of the conservative-liberal People’s Party for Freedom and Democracy (VVD) and the ultranationalist Freedom Party (PVV), from 2008 to 2010’, which claimed to offer a space to artists supposedly affected by ‘Islamic censorship’.<sup>29</sup> Staal further states that this space ‘employ[ed] the degenerate art trope’ in reverse, and aimed to ‘expose the “degeneracy” of the ruling cultural elite that was unwilling to step to defend the freedom of speech of white “autochthonous” citizens’.<sup>30</sup> The artist traces this persistence of staging exhibitions as propaganda tools, so to designate a ‘them’, from *Entartete Kunst* in 1937, *Der ewige Jude* (The Eternal Jew) in Munich that same year, *Entartete Musik* in 1938 to the use of modernist art for propagandistic claims of cultural supremacy in the United States during the Cold War – ‘The *Entartete Kunst* exhibition never entirely closed’.<sup>31</sup>



Hannah Höch, *Mischling (Mixed Race)*, 1924.  
Photo: Liedtke & Michel.

## Monocultural Violence

Crucial to the entire *MONOCULTURE* project is a collage by German artist Hannah Höch, who was deemed ‘degenerate’. *Mischling* (Mixed-Race, 1924) shows an irreducible entanglement that suggests ‘to see race differently: not as a fixed sign but as a fluid signifier ... No single idea can make sense on its own, but no two ideas can be grasped simultaneously. The mixed-race person embodies this’.<sup>32</sup> Yet while Höch’s *Mischling* sits in the exhibition space as a dissonance yet harmonious embodiment of ambiguity,<sup>33</sup> monocultural violence is occurring everywhere. Indeed, as philosopher Judith Butler writes, ‘the visual field is not neutral to the question of race; it is itself a racial formation, an episteme, hegemonic and forceful’.<sup>34</sup> And accompanied by Olivier Marboeuf: ‘The production of a “we” definitely cost a lot somewhere else’, and ‘there is no “we” without violence’.<sup>35</sup> This systemic violence relies on a series of modernist separations, the first being the nature/culture divide. This primary divide contributes to a series of others, one being the human/non-human divide which allowed for the birth of capitalism through the plantation – the paragon of private property and colonisation. Ibrahim Mahama’s *On Monumental Silences* (2018), along with Vincent Meessen’s *The Intruder* (2005) and *How to Spin a Bad Yarn* (2020), as well as many other works in the exhibition incorporate these cruel dualistic intricacies. Just as Renzo Martens and CATPC’s *White Cube* (2020) ‘relates to the history of museums and how they were founded by people who were cultivating their wealth through setting up plantations, like Henry Tate or Peter Ludwig’.<sup>36</sup>



**Ibrahim Mahama, *On Monumental Silences*, 2018.**  
Photo credit: M HKA.



**Vincent Meessen, *The Intruder*, 2005. Image: the artist.**