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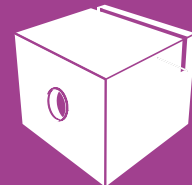
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***THE PANORAMA
OF CONGO:
DECOLONISING
HERITAGE THROUGH
ARTISTIC RESEARCH***

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Abstract

This article analyses the complexities surrounding the *Panorama of Congo*, a challenging object of inquiry due to its exceptional size and contentious historical context. Commissioned by the Belgian Ministry of Colonies in 1913 to promote the Belgian Congo, the painting raises critical questions about colonial legacies amidst contemporary debates on decolonisation. Utilising artistic research as a central methodological tool, the FilmEU RIT Congo VR project explores the broader cultural issues hidden within this heritage object. Through a transdisciplinary approach, integrating artistic, media archaeological, and postcolonial perspectives, the research investigates the imperialist implications of immersive media, particularly Panoramas, and the role of Virtual Reality (VR) in reinterpreting their embedded historical narratives. Highlighting the Congo VR project, the article showcases artistic creations and installations presented in exhibitions, emphasising the convergence of artistic research and decolonial approaches within museum contexts. This research contributes to a nuanced understanding of colonial heritage and its implications for contemporary discourse on cultural representation and memory.

Keywords: *Panorama, artistic research, decolonisation, virtual exhibition, critical museology, remediation.*

Introduction and Context

On a cold day in January 2022, a group of Belgian and Portuguese researchers visited a military warehouse in Ypres, in the Belgian countryside. They brimmed with expectation. They had travelled to see the *Panorama of Congo*, a huge painting of 115 metres by 14 metres, made for the World Exhibition in Ghent in 1913.¹ The painting had gained an almost mythic status among Panorama enthusiasts and scholars. Many had heard of it, but few had actually seen it. When the group saw it in January 2022, it had been in storage for almost ninety years. They encountered it rolled up, a bit dusty and somewhat sordidly wrapped in foil. Even without being able to see the painting's surface (the paint was on the inside of the roll, and it was impossible to open it out without extensive preparations), the object captured their imagination. This visit was the beginning of a long trajectory leading to an extensive research project on the *Panorama of Congo*. The object of study was problematic in many ways. First, the object itself was difficult to handle: the painting was rolled, its dimensions were enormous, it weighed approximately three tons and was not in pristine condition. Second, the image contained therein was commissioned from two Belgian painters by the Belgian Ministry of Colonies to promote Belgium's then recently acquired colonial territory: Belgian Congo. It shows the Congolese landscape in eight consecutive scenes, including views of the Congo River, the harbour and railway in Matadi, the market and village scenes. Thus, almost 65 years after Congo's independence (1960) and in the midst of contemporary societal debates on the long-lasting effects of colonisation – including the many activist actions regarding

colonial heritage – the object raised questions stemming from what it represented, why it was forgotten and why it came into existence in the first place.

Our research team took on the challenge of comprehensively investigating this colonial heritage artefact. We aimed to gain a thorough understanding of the painting, including its portrayal of Congo and the circumstances of its production, as well as the responsibilities of exhibiting such objects in public spaces. Artistic research is a central element in our methodological approach. As an epistemic inquiry that can generate knowledge above and beyond the purely scientific, the historical and rational, it allows us to tackle the broader cultural issues concerning decolonisation hidden in this heritage object. Artistic research thrives in exactly the transdisciplinary setting that we created. Our interdisciplinary approach combined artistic research with media archaeological and postcolonial theories, allowing us to critically reflect on the imperialist uses of immersive media and study the historical *Panorama* through contemporary VR technologies. Our critical approach aimed to rewrite and add to existing narratives and create a post-colonial perspective.

In this article, we want to highlight the artistic research we conducted and facilitated in the framework of the CONGO VR project and focus on some artistic creations presented in the framework of a general exhibition on the *Panorama of Congo* curated by the team. First, we will focus on two installations created for a contemporary exhibition on the *Panorama of Congo* at the National Museum of Natural History and

1. The *Panorama of Congo* is currently stored at the War Heritage Institute in Belgium.



Fig. 1 Photographing the *Panorama* required exceptional means. War Heritage Institute, Belgium, December 2022

Science (MUHNAC) in Lisbon.² Second, we focus on how VR and artistic research were paired in the project and investigate how a media archaeological perspective can inform the development of a VR application. Third, we will focus on the virtual exhibition *Panoptical Dissidence*, which was curated and integrated into VR as part of this project. Finally, we zoom out to look at how artistic research and decolonial approaches can come together in the museum context in a broader sense.

Re-Exhibiting the *Panorama of Congo* and Reframing its Violence

The *Panorama of Congo* is one of Europe's most significant, long-silenced legacies of political propaganda. Meant to obscure the history of oppression and violence in the Belgian Congo, it has been stored and kept distant from public sight for about ninety years. Current debates on displaying violence and propaganda in museum spaces shaped the curatorial

2. The exhibition *Panorama of Congo – Unrolling the Past with VR* was held at the National Museum of Natural History and Science in Lisbon from February 24 to June 16, 2024. It was curated by the authors of this paper.

decision to display this controversial object within a contemporary museum exhibition (Muchitsch, 2013; Dziuban, 2023). While these debates demonstrate how the logic of showing violence and propaganda to prevent further conflict has become increasingly contested, they also encourage new curatorial responses and exhibition techniques to counter and disrupt propaganda and violence. The exhibition *Panorama of Congo – Unrolling the Past with Virtual Reality* has been planned as one such response. Positioned at the intersection of virtual reality and installation art, it draws on the decolonial practices that have been unfolding since the turn of the century and on the role played by artistic research to rethink and reshape the display of violence in exhibition spaces. As such, it designed technical and semiotic strategies to resignify the *Panorama of Congo* and add new layers of context that could contribute to questioning its persuasive and idyllic message.

If the Congo is Belgium's forgotten skeleton in the closet, the *Panorama of Congo* stands as its best illustration. It is part of what Adam Hochschild (2002) called the 'Great Forgetting', a long period when Belgium's colony administration made every effort to distance itself from Leopoldian violent rule. Propaganda and colonial-era scholarship wrote that positive and amnesic history. Along with monuments, pro-empire

education and cinema, world fairs were a great opportunity to promote the colony (Stanard, 2011) and between 1908 and 1960, Belgium hosted five of these international exhibitions. The *Panorama of Congo* was commissioned for the second one, which took place in 1913 in Ghent. However, unlike most of the colonial heritage objects owned by Belgian museums, whose restitution process is currently being investigated,³ the *Panorama of Congo* is Belgian-made. It cannot be returned to the Democratic Republic of the Congo. The healing process relating to this monumental propaganda piece has to take place in Europe through curation and artistic practices that enable a healthy critical engagement and unsettle its propagandist message. This exhibition aimed to contribute to such critical curation and not being able to display the original *Panorama* – for preservation and logistical reasons – meant there was an opportunity to rethink its original public exhibition and reframe its meaning in the VR and non-VR installations curated for this exhibition.

Such curatorial reframing of the *Panorama of Congo* implied not reviving the iconography of horror that was historically used to denounce the violence in the Congo Free State.⁴ Rather than include images that perpetuate violence, the humiliation of victims, and the perpetrators' gaze, which also

3. Since June 2022, Belgium has had a legal framework for the restitution and return of property linked to the colonial past. Belgium and Congolese cultural institutions are cooperating to identify the origins of collections and negotiate their repatriation. See for example the project PROCHE: <https://proche.africamuseum.be/>. In 2024 an exhibition is taking place in the Africa Museum in Tervuren (Belgium) on provenance research of artefacts from the museum's collection (https://www.africamuseum.be/en/see_do/temporary_exhibition/current/ReThinkingCollections).

4. Probably the most famous of such images are the photos included in the 'Congo Atrocity Lantern Lecture', namely by the British Baptist missionary Alice Seeley Harris. The Congo Reform Association used these photos to denounce the violence in the Congo Free State during the rule of King Leopold II (1884–1908). Today they can be accessed at the online archive of the 'Antislavery Usable Past': <http://antislavery.nottingham.ac.uk>. As campaign photographs representing colonial atrocities, these images continuously raise a set of complex problems.



Fig. 2 Detail of the installation of the *Panorama of Congo* at MUHNAC, Lisbon. Photo by Oleksandr Lyashchenko

includes the missionaries and their religious indoctrination practices (Grant, 2001), the exhibition committed to excluding these images, which have been extensively published in recent historiographies and displayed in many museums and art galleries in the last decade.⁵ Instead, new means of

displaying violence and acknowledging ethical responsibilities to the past were sought. The exhibition's core curatorial decision – to re-exhibit the *Panorama of Congo* – was bold. Although this was accomplished with a small installation – a photographic print on fabric, eight times reduced to its

5. Some examples include: *Brutal Exposure*, at the International Slavery Museum, Liverpool, 2015; *Navigating the Congo*, at the Angus Library and Archive, 2015; and *'When Harmony goes to Hell'. Congo Dialogues: Alice Seeley Harris and Sammy Baloji* at, Rivington Place, London, 2014.

original scale, suspended from the ceiling in a 4.5-metre cylinder— requiring ‘unrolling the past’ and dealing with its ghosts. The *Panorama of Congo* depicts no explicit violence; quite the opposite, its violence is latent and symbolic. The Panorama was intended to erase the visual and indexical proofs of violence to generate new memories and, therefore, is a latent narrative and manifesto of violence. Scenes include the depiction of the railway (Matadi—Stanley Pool) that officially cost the lives of 1800 Africans between 1890 and 1898 and of the parading Force Publique, the military that ensured punishments and surveillance of the Congolese population; these are but two examples of such frames of violence and power left intact by this Panorama. To re-exhibit this image, special care and mediation were required.

This underlying tension conjured by the *Panorama of Congo* was reflected in the exhibition by the space's light and sound environment design. At MUHNAC, a long 400-metre² room with unpainted walls and still visible cement plaster created a rough and austere setting for the exhibition. This atmosphere was further accentuated with semi-dark lighting, a crucial feature for the first installation in the room: a gloomy forest of shadows thrown by tangled Congolese trees. This large wall projection grabbed visitors' attention with its dramatic lighting, immersing them in the tropical forest where intensive rubber harvesting took place and where the Congolese also took refuge from the military of the Force Publique. This ‘haunted space’ allowed the confrontation between the present (visitors' shadows were projected as crossing the forest) and the Congo's troubled genocidal past.⁶ While providing

these entangled temporalities, this installation also gave a more obscure and ambivalent dimension to the Congolese tropical forest, countering its colourful and seducing depiction in the Panorama.

This visual and haptic experience was combined with a soundscape that flooded the exhibition space, creating discomfort and a tense atmosphere. The sounds came from the suspended Panorama installation at the centre of the exhibition. They took the visitors to the various scenes depicted in the Panorama: the whistles of a steam train, the sirens of boats in the harbour, birds in the forest, waters of the rapids of the Congo River, people in the market and vibrant musical instruments. However, an attentive listener could also notice other sounds that the harmonious image of the Panorama wouldn't lead us to expect: whispers and muffled cries, violent whippings, and burning straw and wood. These sounds score the violent scenes not shown on the Panorama: the mutilations, the beatings, the village fires. Their perception is deliberately ambiguous – the screams and whips in the background are confused with the sounds of transport or music. These sounds are counterpoints and ‘wound’ the soundscape as *punctums* – to quote Roland Barthes' expression on photography – or as ‘instants of truth’ to refer to Hannah Arendt's description of the few and rare moments of reliable information during the Auschwitz process (Arendt, 1991). This contrasting information recalls the tension inherent in any colonial context. However, it can also be seen as a metaphor for how reality can exceed and resist propaganda.

6. Drawing on Jacques Derrida's hauntology, which reminded us of unaccomplished but present pasts (*Spectres de Marx*, 1993), ‘haunting’ has often served as a decolonial methodology to address the confrontation of violent legacies (Gordon, 1997; Tyner, 2023).



Fig. 3 Detail of the installation with shadows of the Congolese forest by Ana David Mendes at MUHNAC, Lisbon.
Photo by Oleksandr Lyaschenko

*Listen here to the exhibition's original soundscape
by João Alves*

Whenever the visitor enters the suspended Panorama, this soundscape is replaced by a track with the voices of contemporary Congolese artists and historians who provide critical readings of the image, adding context and personal experiences and interrupting the seductive message of this stunning image. These voices are drawn from interviews conducted by the research team, which formed an essential body of

reflections and counter-narratives for this exhibition.⁷ In one of these interviews, Joseph Tonda, a renowned Gabonese sociologist and anthropologist, calls our attention to propaganda's capacity to conceal violence:

Listen here to this excerpt from Joseph Tonda's interview.

This exhibition greatly valued voices and oral testimonies. At the entrance to the exhibition, the confessional testimony of a former employee of the concessionaire Anversoise about the crimes committed in the Congo sheds full light on the atrocities perpetrated during the rule of Leopold II, without the need for any visual illustration:

'I am going to appear before the judge for having assassinated 150 men and cut off 60 hands; for having crucified women and children; and for having mutilated many men and hung their remains on the village fence; having shot a native with a revolver; for having murdered a native.

This excerpt from the confession letter of Louis Lacroix, an agent from the Anversoise concession company, was published in the Antwerp newspaper *Nieuwe Gazet*. Lacroix was convicted by the Boma Court in 1900. To this voice of a perpetrator, the exhibition adds the poignant witness statement that was included in the 1904 report by Roger Casement, the

Irish-born British consul in Boma, appointed by the British Foreign Office to investigate the violence on the companies' concessions:

Listen here to an oral interpretation of this witness statement interpreted by Phil Lopes

These snippets can be heard and read in one of the exhibition's virtual reality builds: *Panorama of Congo – Historical Context*. This virtual experience was curated to convey the historical context of violence that this version of the Panorama aimed to eradicate. It takes visitors to the interior and central platform of the *Panorama of Congo*, re-enacting the immersive experience of this dispositif through the combination of the painting and its impressive faux-terrain scenography. In this virtual environment, we had the opportunity to enhance the Panorama with an audio narrative organised into five chapters, introducing visitors to the historical context of its creation and topics such as propaganda, heritage and violence that could be chosen from a menu.

The exhibition and the VR interpretation of this controversial painting aimed to push the boundaries within academic and artistic research. In addition to the challenge of creating a critical or serious VR experience with tools mostly designed for game development, the curatorial team had to respond to the need to downplay the spectacular effect of the Panorama and come up with audiovisual semiotic strategies that

7. The list of interviews conducted by the CONGO VR team comprises: Alberto Oliveira Pinto, Angus Mitchell, Deogracias Kihalu, Joseph Tonda, Lukah Katangila, Miguel Bandeira Jerónimo.



Watch a short video of the VR experience, *Panorama of Congo – Historical Context*.

drew visitors' attention and imagination beyond the overall ecstatic impact of such an imposing image and into more camouflaged facts and details. By dimming the interior space of the Panorama, the audio narrative could be illustrated with spotlights over the details of the image, directing the visitors' gaze just like the traditional scenic technique. Whenever the narrative refers to facts not depicted in the painting, overlays of historical photographs, maps and drawings appear, creating new information windows. These strategies allowed us to move away from game aesthetics, which proved inappropriate for addressing violence. This new multilayered virtual

Panorama of Congo argues against the long-held belief that propaganda must be kept in the closet. Instead, it demonstrates how its critical revelation can empower audiences and public discourse.

Immersive Media and Imperialism: How We Dealt with This in the VR

The link with imperial propaganda is not unique to the *Panorama of Congo*. Panoramas have been and are still frequently used to promote political agendas. From the 19th-century

battle Panoramas documenting the beginnings of European nation-states to contemporary Panoramas in countries such as Turkey or China that actively promote narratives of national identity or a shared national history, Panoramas were, and remain, popular.⁸ In this context Panoramas have been frequently linked to expansionist national agendas. Imperial or colonial topics were popular throughout the 19th and 20th centuries. The examples are numerous: W.H. Vernon's Panorama of 'South Africa, Cape Colony, and the Present Kafir War', exhibited in England in the 1850s; Louis Braun and Leopold Schönchen's 'The German Colonies in Africa' Panorama, exhibited in 1885; or 'Stacy's Great Panorama of the Australian Colonies and New Zealand' exhibited in Australia and the England in the 1870s and 1880s (Oettermann, 1997; Aguirre, 2002; Benjamin, 2019). The Panorama of Congo thus inscribed itself into a long-standing tradition when it was produced.

This link between imperialism and the Panorama is far from coincidental. As an immersive medium with roots in 18th-century Europe, the dispositif of the Panorama was instrumental to the Western project of modernity. Through the Panorama dispositif, viewers were trained to consume panoramic views in ways carefully designed to align with imperial agendas. This dispositif was meticulously described by the inventor of the Panorama, the Irish painter Robert Barker. In his patent

of 1787 he stipulated how in the Panorama (then called 'la nature à coup d'oeil') a large circular image needed to be viewed from a central elevated platform. For maximum effect, the edges of the painting were obscured from the viewer, and only natural light coming from above through a glass roof was allowed (Barker, 1796). What Barker described served as a model for most 19th- and 20th-century Panoramas in Europe and the US, and the *Panorama of Congo* is no exception. In the latter, the image's propaganda objectives and the dispositif's workings come together exceptionally.

The *Panorama of Congo* was presented in a large, purpose-built rotunda on the site of the International Exhibition in Ghent. The painting consists of eight scenes joined together via landscape features such as a river, a mountain range or the horizon line. Three of the scenes focus on the town of Matadi, the terminus of overseas ships entering the African continent via the Congo River and an important railway hub. The others correspond to the places on the outskirts of Matadi — Leopold's Ravine, Pic Cambier and M'Pozo Rapids and places farther away from Matadi, such as the (then) village of Kinshasa (some 300 kilometres from Matadi by railway) and the rainforest in Central Congo (Mathieu, Bastien, 1922). Despite being presented as such, these eight scenes are not geographically connected. This effectively makes the Panorama an imaginary landscape. Presenting a supposedly

8. An example of the latter is the Bursa 1326 Panorama Conquest Museum in Bursa celebrating the Ottoman conquest of the city of 1326, a key event in the period of the establishment of the Ottoman State. This 360° digital image Panorama with a faux terrain and an exceptional dome structure was created by art director Haşim Vatandaş upon the initiative of the local government of Osmangazi. It opened in 2018. Other contemporary Panoramas in Turkey are: the Panorama 1453 Istanbul that represents the conquest of Istanbul by the Ottomans; the Museum of Gaziantep 25 December Defense and Heroism Panorama represents the city's fight during the Turkish Independence War in 1921; and Konyanüma Panorama Museum represents the social life in thirteenth century Konya (Yilmaz & Mollasalih, 2020).

all-encompassing and comprehensive image of the vast Congolese landscape visualises its aesthetic and material availability for the coloniser. Its modern realist style of painting, *en vogue* at the time, contributes to this even more: it obscures the fact that what is presented is not reality but an artistic interpretation of two painters from the so-called 'Belgian School of Painting' with an interest in colour schemes, composition, pictorial traditions in landscape and portrait painting.

The Panorama is designed to demonstrate that Congo can be conquered and mastered. This is not only manifested in the painting but is also a feeling experienced by the viewers on the elevated platform: the Congo is literally at their feet. The dispositif of the Panorama encourages a certain kind of spectator and normalises their perspective. The entire constructed experience aims for seamlessness and neutrality. The image clearly serves Belgium's imperialist agenda and presents the Belgian Congo as a colonial Eldorado, an imperialist fiction. The fantasy functions and is perpetuated as long as the viewers behave disciplined (they stay on the platform). Only if they leave their prescribed position on the platform (which was impossible, of course), the construction and constructed-ness of the reality presented become clear and the illusion falls apart. This made the Panorama an effective ideological 'weapon' and tool for geopolitical ambitions. The Panorama dispositif is often compared to the panopticon prison conceived by Jeremy Bentham in the 18th century and further theorised by Michel Foucault (1975). In the panopticon, the concept allows a central observer a 360-degree view of all surrounding cells, while the occupants cannot see the observer. This asymmetrical visibility instils a constant sense of surveillance and self-discipline among the observed,

serving as a metaphor for the pervasive nature of power and control in modern societies, including their imperial projects.

The relationship between the Panorama apparatus and imperialism is inextricable. The Panorama exemplifies the centre-periphery dynamic and power (un)balances at the core of imperial ideology. In a very literal way, the Panorama creates a horizon of perception for the viewer from the decolonial perspective, which can be seen as a double enclosure of perception (Vázquez, 2020): the balustrade of the platform as well as the horizon on the canvas literally, and symbolically, delimit the viewer's experience of 'reality'. The viewers find themselves in Plato's Cave: as long as they remain in the cave, they take the shadows before their eyes for reality. Only through a deconstruction of the apparatus can the violence of expansion and the erasure of existing narratives, cultures and histories be questioned. So, when we want to work with this object as researchers, we need to debunk the myth not only on the level of the image (as demonstrated above) but also on the apparatus itself.

This insight has been put into practice in developing the VR builds of the Panorama developed by the team for the project exhibition. As described above, the *Panorama of Congo – Historical Context* build offers counter-narratives in audiovisual formats through a critical voice-over providing historical context, audio quotations from historical sources and the presentation of critical archival documents. While experiencing this build, the viewer remains on the virtual platform, conforming to the original vantage point of the 1913 audience. This means that the upper and lower edges of the painting are obscured by the baldachin and the *faux terrain*, respectively. Combined with the



Fig. 4 Detail of the VR and film installations at MUHNAC, Lisbon. Photo by Oleksandr Lyashchenko

three-dimensional figures and objects on the digitally reconstructed faux terrain, this enhances the immersive experience, and the viewer is confined to the original horizons of perception built into the Panorama. In this build, it was necessary to emulate the original experience so the viewer could understand the immersion and seductive power of the Panorama. In *Panoptical Dissidence*, the second build developed by the team, this

perspective is altered dramatically. This build is conceived as a virtual exhibition of contemporary artworks in dialogue with the painting. To explore the exhibition, the viewers can teleport themselves into the faux terrain, thus leaving the original *dispositif* and taking an entirely new perspective. The edges of the painting, the two-dimensionality of the flat painted figures in the faux terrain, and even the wooden construction underneath

the platform become apparent. This transgressive view completely breaks the suspension of disbelief crucial in the Panorama *dispositif*. This strategy is in tune with the decolonial intentions of the project as it allows the viewer to experience the deconstruction of the imperial fantasy. As will be discussed now, in furthering the development of the VR build 'Panoptical Dissidence', we aimed for what Rolando Vazquez has coined 'decolonial aesthesis': a plurality of sensorial expressions and experiences.

'Panoptical Dissidence': Curating Congolese Artworks for the *Panorama of Congo*

'Panoptical Dissidence' is a VR experience for the *Panorama of Congo* showcasing performances, video art and poetry installations by the Congolese artists Hadassa Ngamba, Lukah Kantangila, Castelie Yalombo, Deogracias Kihalu, and the Kongo Astronauts collective. The term 'panoptical dissidence' refers to the presence of voices that challenge or subvert dominant and oppressive discourses.⁹ The artists participating in this virtual exhibition pose questions, raise awareness, critique and disrupt the colonial propaganda message of the Panorama and add to its deconstruction. These artists were curated for their innovative approaches to exploring dialogues with the colonial past and rethinking post-colonial identities. The artistic research team¹⁰ conducted exploratory conversations to kickstart the collaborative curation process. These conversations helped in presenting a detailed overview of the *Panorama of Congo* and in gaining a better understanding of

the decolonial approaches adopted by the artists, which were largely influenced by their personal experiences.

After a series of discussions that included references to books such as *The Heart of Darkness* by Joseph Conrad (1899) or *Leopold's Legacy* by Oliver Leu (2020), the artists were invited to participate in an artistic residency in Brussels. During the residency, we got to know each other and decided on the locations for their installations on the faux terrain. The curators of VR artistic research experience, developers and designers of Congo VR were present to provide technical guidance to the artists and highlight the affordances and limitations of current VR technologies. This was particularly important because none of the selected artists had previous experience working with VR. The input from the VR experts allowed for multiple adjustments to the artistic projects and their digital development. This was crucial because the artists aimed to challenge the medium's specificity while questioning colonial narratives.

To deconstruct the Panorama's illusionist *dispositif*, we suggested a change in the environment and more freedom for the viewer in exploring the painting and scenography. We made scenography the site of freedom and artistic action. With the help of teleportation, visitors are allowed to wander on the faux terrain, engage with the artists' voices, avatars, and meaningful objects, and access a poem that echoes as a challenge to this large-scale painting. Deogracias Kihalu, the author of this poem, was born in the Democratic Republic of Congo in 1982:

9. This term was coined by Eleonor Hellio of Kongo Astronauts.

10. The artistic research team comprised the researchers: Wim Forceville, Ana David Mendes, Rita Carvalho, Veronika Romhányi, Jon Stam and Julian Garcia Long.

Mbote Panorama of Congo! Welcome and have a seat.
We welcome you with open arms. Let's talk about it!
Matoko zio! Ziola!
I'm from the north and I bring fabric, mirrors and...
We welcome you with open arms! Say everything!
Why are you here? I ask you to sign this document! A vague document! Vague! Give up your territorial sovereignty!
You are mine, your lands are mine!
What does that mean?
You are my colony and you belong to me!
Well no! Yes! Well no! Well, yes, well, yes, well yes. Do you like my hat? Have you seen my glasses? Do you need weapons and ammunition?
We welcome you with open arms: tell us!
What do you want from us!? You are indigenous and I bring you civilisation!
You're naked and I came to dress you! You are pagans and I bring you faith!
From now on, call me master! Go to work! once, twice.
So accept civilisation!
Painful civilisation! The severed hands of the Congo! rubber hands!
Painful civilisation! Domination!
Painful civilisation! Capitalism!
Painful civilisation! Humiliation!
Painful civilisation! Injury, trauma, trauma, trauma, trauma.

Listen here to the audio version of this poem interpreted by Deogracias Kihalu from the work 'Past-Present', in Panoptical Dissidence.

As Deogracias pointed out during one of our conversations, the *Panorama du Congo* is comparable to a beautiful curtain in a house that conceals the ugliness, or rather the atrocities, that the colonial industry inflicted on the Congolese territory and its people. He later also added:

My work overwrites colonial propaganda with real words: invasion (or occupation), capitalism in the Congo, severed hands, veils, humiliation, trauma, and so many others. The objective is to go through denunciation and resistance by touching the wound to clean and to heal it, by dialoguing (kinzonzi) and by demanding reparation to reinvent our future.

The tension between past and present, and the place of origin versus the place of lived experience, is a common theme among all these artists. However, this theme is particularly evident in the performances of Lukah Katangila and Castelle Yalombo. Katangila, for example, chose the river and rapids as the setting for his rain ritual performance, which his grandmother referenced from her memories. Although traditionally performed by women, he staged the ritual in the VR experience to raise awareness of dance as a form of activism. As a choreographer, dancer and activist, he founded the project 'Ndoto mchezo za watoto' ('Dream of Child dancers') with his brothers and friends to mobilise for the rights of Congolese children.

On another part of the virtual Panorama, we can see an astronaut waving at us from a liana bridge that takes us to the tropical forest. This is a portal to the video installation created by the Kongo Astronauts, a collective founded by Michel

Ekeba and Eléonore Hellio in Kinshasa. They examine forces that shape digital globalisation, such as electronics waste. This video installation also dialogues in the virtual Panorama with the work presented by Hadassa Ngamba focused on the extractivism in Congo and its crony capitalist dimension: we are presented with a 'work table' filled with commodities ready to be consumed. This table, a symbol of negotiations,

coexists with other elements, such as an organisation diagram that recalls the hierarchical complexity and rationality of the extraction system. Such signs of a domination and exploitation system are examples of the counter-narratives that inhabit this virtual Panorama and that are briefly presented in this video:



See here a trailer for the VR experience '*Panoptical Dissidence*'

Colonialism, Decolonisation and the Museum: The *Panorama of Congo as Agent Provocateur*

Cultural theorists Stuart Hall, Jessica Evans and Sean Nixon have offered that within the contemporary museum, the curator can operate as an 'agent provocateur' challenging extant, systematic narratives 'through experimental forms of installation'. Referencing the visual artist and historian James Clifford, they further suggest that contemporary museums can be re-conceptualised as 'spaces of encounter' or 'contact zones' where various communities and their diaspora can interact in the assessment and critical evaluation of collections in a relationship that is based on exchange, collaboration and the sharing of authority (Hall, Evans, Nixon, 2013). *Panorama of Congo: unrolling the past with virtual reality* is one such exhibition designed to encourage personal interpretation and engage public dialogue around the motivation for and impact of colonialism, decolonisation and nationhood. However, it is an exhibition without historical artefacts that does not directly reference its host's collections, situated within a national institution founded on scientific study as a systematic, rational discourse. Thus, the metaphor of provocateur can be extended to considering the entire exhibit as agitational: a provocateur within the confines of MUHNAC.

The *Panorama of Congo* exhibition recreates two versions of the notorious *Panorama du Congo* painting, a contentious colonial artefact held by another institution and in another jurisdiction. These re-created Panoramas are simulacra in both physical and digital formats: the former is a re-enactment, a to-scale version of the original painting suspended from the ceiling, that re-presents its original colonial rhetoric

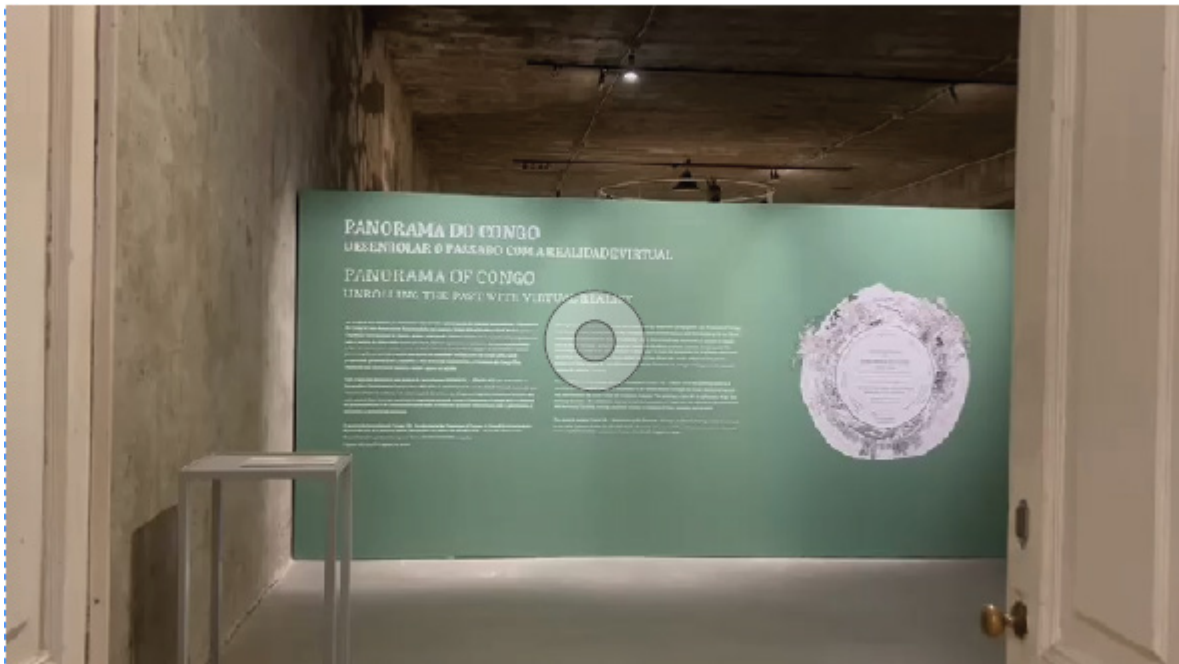
and propaganda; the latter has been conceived as a remediation of the original experience within a virtual environment to which layers of information have been added that challenge and contextualise its original intentions. The curatorial frame around these Panoramas comprises carefully chosen but minimal text, complemented by projections referencing the vegetation described in the original painting, Listening Stations where expert opinions on colonial history and African culture can be accessed, and two short films: one outlining the processes involved in photographing the original artefact so it could be digitised, the other an interpretative response to the themes suggested by the exhibition.

The exhibition in its totality can be understood as a work of artistic research, rejecting the museum environment's rational, scientific and instructional underpinnings and boldly encouraging personal interpretation of Belgian colonialism in the first instance, but also colonialism more broadly and its legacy. The inclusion of *Panorama of Congo* at MUHNAC highlights how much some (not all) national museums have changed in recent years, particularly concerning the increase of public engagement around discourses of colonialism and decolonisation and how artistic research can play a leading part in opening up such conversations. In such contexts, artistic research practices – as deployed here – are used to interpret, reflect and cast a critical eye on national collections, national narratives and historiography more broadly. Such interventionist strategies create mediations in some instances, disruptions in others, strategies that challenge the 19th-century construction of the 'modern' museum, conceived as a site of scientific study and as a form of 'social management' or social improvement (Bennett, 1995).

Framed by categorisation and classification – typically art, geology, ethnography – and as part of the apparatus of the state, the function of the modern, publicly-accessible museum was intended to be instructional, didactic and very much ‘top down’.

The modern museum was thus conceived as a rational mechanism, key to influencing public behaviour and beliefs. Western museums typically celebrated colonial prowess (many still do), shaped by individual curators’ specific interests and biases and the political landscape to which they

were beholden. This approach moved collecting from the ‘jumbled incongruity’ of 17th- and 18th-century practices, typical of the cabinets of curiosity favoured by royalty and gentry as private expressions of social and economic capital (Bennett, 1995). While these early collections were usually ad hoc in focus, they did offer audiences – limited though their knowledge may have been – a certain agency with regard to the personal interpretation of artefacts, informed by the random juxtapositions within display cases, in marked contrast to the imposition of order and reason that the modern museum came to provide.



Watch a short video of the exhibition space here

The options to navigate the content of the *Panorama of Congo* exhibition in a non-linear way and to provoke personal interpretation have resulted in high levels of public response. Our metric for recording such reactions has been three-fold to date: through comments written in our visitors' book in the museum, conversations between the curators and members of the public on tours, and social media posts. The day after the exhibition opened, the curators led a tour that comprised a British couple who engaged one curator in a lengthy discussion as to how the *Panorama of Congo* was helping them make sense of their own country's colonial past and the impact on the countries Britain had colonised. A number of responses, in a variety of different languages and left in the visitors' book, link the exhibition to current world events. One states: 'How cruel humans are in the name of progress, we stand on others to take, and take and take. Lessons here for today too. Where there are resources there is death. Free Palestine. Up the workers!' Another offers: 'From Ireland – Great to see Casement attempting to stand on the right side! Free Congo/Free Palestine!'¹¹ A third comment challenges museums more broadly stating: 'Really important that museums and other cultural institutions exhibit, host and develop decolonial and postcolonial projects such as this one'. Thus without a heavy didactic 'top-down' approach typical of Western museums, or original artefacts specifically reflective of colonial extraction, *Panorama of Congo* has encouraged high levels of 'grass roots' interpretations and feedback with regard

to a specific chapter in colonial history and colonialism and decolonisation more broadly.

Conclusion

Our claim here is not that the incorporation of artistic research within a museum context is an original idea or indeed, an unusual occurrence, more that it can be understood as a definite 'turn' within contemporary museology, creating a bridge between audience and institution, between public and scholarly discourse, and providing a platform to tease out complex and layered ideas. At the time of writing, there were many examples of artistic research as intervention or provocation within museum spaces. Some examples included: *Baloji Augurism* at the MoMu Gallery, Antwerp, in which the Congo-born, Belgian-based musician Baloji interrogates the relationship between Congolese and European cultures through an installation centred on clothing, film, music and photography; *Self-Determination: a Global Perspective* at the Irish Museum of Modern Art, Dublin, where specially-commissioned artistic research has been interspersed with historical artefacts (artworks, films and other examples of material culture) to prompt greater reflection on post-colonialism and nation-building in Ireland, Northern Europe and the Baltic states; and *Photo Impulse: (Dis)placing the Colonial Archive*, also at MUHNAC, where artistic responses to specific images or objects on display in the exhibition function

11. This comment has a couple of additional layers as it is a direct comment on the exhibition's inclusion of reference to the Irish nationalist Roger Casement as a voice of Western conscience who exposed colonial atrocities; it was during his tenure as a British diplomat in the Congo that he became politically radicalised, which led to his attempts to overthrow British rule in Ireland and for which he was executed for treason.

as agitational counter-narratives to the discourse of Portuguese colonisation in Africa.¹²

In speaking about ethnographic museums specifically (but we can extend this to other forms of national collections), anthropologist Wayne Modest has suggested that museums can do 'redemptive work' to address the historical injustices and 'crimes' committed by colonial powers. He offers that this could be called 'belonging work', becoming places where colonialism can be explored with a view to 'the fashioning of other futures' and connecting with postcolonial and 'post-migrant communities' (Modest, Thomas, Prlic, Augustat, 2019). *Panorama of Congo* is one such intervention that attempts to place human experiences at the forefront of history and thus broaden conversations and engage public comment. In hosting exhibitions and interventions such as this one, informed by artistic research strategies and encouraging personal interpretation and reflection, MUHNAC has concretised Modest's thesis and demonstrated a bravery in moving its remit beyond the promotion of 'curiosity and public understanding of nature and science' to tackling the highly contentious issue of colonialism and its legacy in a manner that has proved to be popular with and meaningful for multiple audiences.¹³

In consideration of these issues and contexts *Panorama of Congo: Unrolling the Past with Virtual Reality* is an ambitious

exhibition, arising from an ambitious and controversial research project on colonial media heritage. In this article we shed light on how we have explored the affordances of artistic research for critical engagement with colonial media heritage. Throughout the research, and in the resulting exhibition, we have sought to create multiple dialogues around the *Panorama of Congo* and create a polyphony of voices around this painting. Among other forms, the new narratives that emerged from our research take the shape of artistic collaborations, artists' interventions in VR, analogue and sound installations. These voices are not definite or exhaustive but are the first threads in a tapestry of experiences and resonances around the Panorama. With the latest exhibition in Lisbon,¹⁴ we have sought to provide audiences with thought-provoking suggestions as to how they might navigate this divisive object specifically and decolonisation more broadly. It seems to us, based on audience feedback so far, that the inclusion of specific artistic research in the exhibition and the overall framing of the exhibition as a piece of artistic research has created a mediation between MUHNAC as a cultural institution and the public, opening up opportunities for public discourse on colonialism and decolonisation.

In future projects we will further explore possibilities for deepening the dialogue around the *Panorama of Congo* with the wider audience, in and beyond the exhibition context.

12. *Photo Impulse: (Dis)placing the Colonial Archive* also at MUHNAC is running from 21 December 2022 to 31 December 2025; *Baloji Augurism* at the MoMu ran from 21 October 2023 to 16 June 2024; *Self-Determination* at IMMA ran from 28 November 20 to 21 April 2024.

13. This quote is taken from MUHNAC's mission statement, available at the University of Lisbon website of which the museum is part: <https://www.ulisboa.pt/en/unidade-organica/national-museum-natural-history-and-science>

14. In June 2023, an earlier iteration of this exhibition was shown at the Museu Bordalo Pinheiro in Lisbon. This included a version of the VR and translucent panels hung from the ceiling of scenes from the painting. This was contextualised with research material uncovered by the Congo VR team, including photographs, diagrams, sketches and books on colonial discourse.

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