

A collaboration with artists Cecilia Järdegar and Anna Ekman around historical dry-plate photographs from the Swedish Mission fields in the Congo 1890-1930, confronting issues around curating and re-coding colonial photography archives and photo-repatriation.

Inspired by Stanley's travels in the Congo delta, Svenska Missionskyrkan started sending missionaries to the area in the 1880's, and Sweden was soon one of the biggest operators there. The opening of the missionary fields coincided with the rapid spread of photographic techniques, and the camera's ability to meet, collect and construct the world was soon intrinsically linked with colonialism and the Christian missions.

Svenska Missionskyrkan sent cameras out with their missionaries, and the resulting photographs were used as a medium for enticing the home parishes to donate and collect funds for the missionary stations. It is clear that the missionaries consciously arranged the images to fit into a predestined narrative about their role as saviour, and depicted the local people as 'other', alienating and exoticising them in the process. It wasn't "Africa that came close to us" writes Raoul J. Granquist when he describes Missionsförbundets travelling exhibit from the Congo, it was Sweden who came close – Africa was denied. At the same time, the touring lantern plate-presentations in the countryside engendered a longing for elsewhere in the viewers, often entrenched in a reality marked by poverty and lack of opportunities.

We have been able to borrow boxes of dry plate negatives depicting the Congo, from the archive of Svenska Missionskyrkan, some of which have never been printed or catalogued before. The material is interesting both from a historical and a photographic viewpoint – and for Sweden as well as the Congo. Congo DR is currently trying to rebuild the country after the slave trade, colonization, Mobutu's dictatorship and both the Congo wars, but there is a lack of a common historiography. There are barely any photographs from the historical period left in the country, since the colonizers controlled the technology, and the tropical climate and political turbulence has destroyed what was left. The missionaries were also very much part of a process whereby they documented the existing culture in the places where they settled down – then set out to do their very best to change, or even destroy it, as part of the Christianisation.

How can we confront these types of images today, from a Swedish perspective, and from a Congolese perspective? How can historical images be repositioned and repurposed? What alternative meanings and readings can emerge by creating new artworks taking the archive as a starting point? Through a collaborative enquiry with contemporary Congolese artists, making works in response to the archive from both viewpoints, we attempt to look beyond our own context-specific histories. During several trips to the Congo, the archival images will be repatriated to the locations where they were photographed. The re-coded and reworked material will then be exhibited at the Musée D'Art Contemporain in Kinshasa, and then tour to various venues in Sweden, creating a contemporary alternative to the missionaries travelling museum.

Georges Didi Huberman wrote "To open? To break something, then. At the very least to make an incision, to rend."<sup>1</sup> Our artistic practice makes use of the cut, the crop, retakes and fragmentations as a means of opening up the archival images, reframing them as potential sites of negotiation where multiple conceptions of photographic meaning can prevail.

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<sup>1</sup> Confronting Images. Questioning the Ends of a Certain History of Art  
Georges Didi-Huberman, Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press 2005 p 139