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THE HUMAN ZOO AND ITS LEGACY IN PRESENT-DAY SOCIETY

Comparison between *The age of colonial exhibitions* and
Exhibit B

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Name: Nina May Casarin

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A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Nina May Casarin". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, looped initial 'N'.

Keywords: human zoo, objectification, otherness, racial classification, controversy, awareness

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“If you want to deconstruct racism, and you don’t look at ‘human zoos,’ then you’re not
deconstructing anything.”

Pascal Blanchard, New York Times, December 29, 2021

1. Introduction

The existence of ethnological expositions shows how twisted and insensitive human minds can be, however it can be revealing for the contemporary issues of racism and discrimination. When mentioning human zoos to people that were unaware of their existence, the reactions are often the same, mostly shock and disbelief. However, their existence becomes more ‘understandable’ if placed in the context of colonialism and race classification theory. The relation between those is fundamental to explain today’s society as we think that we have overcome colonialism and its ideologies. But in reality, we still need to acknowledge the hidden sides of colonialism and face the truth regarding Europeans' horrible actions in colonized territories. Thus, the topic of this thesis is the representation of Human Zoos in contemporary exhibitions and their effect on European contemporary society.

The term ‘human zoo’ became popular after the French historian Pascal Blanchard used it to describe all colonial exhibitions with ethnic displays. Between the second half of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century, human zoos were a common attraction in European and American capitals, such as Brussels, Berlin, and New York. Despite being part of postcolonial legacies, the topic of human zoos has not been the object of interest as much as other postcolonial matters. However, there are still some artists, such as Brett Bailey and James Luna, that decided to focus on the theme of human zoos.¹ Blanchard also brought attention to the topic with the exhibition *Human Zoo, the Invention of the Savage* held at the Musée du Quai Branly in Paris.² The same exhibition has been revisited and presented in 2021 in Tervuren, under the name *Human Zoo, The age of colonial exhibitions*. Human zoos need to be understood in relation to colonial anthropology and colonial aspirations, and this is what *Human Zoo* tries to show. Also, when dealing with such topics, the curators, or artists, need to consider the issues related to cultural identity, ‘othering’ and post-colonial cultures. According to Chikha and Arnaut, when the artist focuses his work on those issues, he has to understand the anthropological aspects of human zoos. In fact, anthropological research was the ‘excuse’ that legitimized the organization of human zoos during colonialism. Among the aims of the human zoo, there was scientific research.³ Therefore, when an artist decides to dedicate his project to human zoos, he needs to take into consideration its historical aspects, the violence

¹ Lenore Manderson, “Humans on Show: Performance, Race and Representation.” *Critical African Studies* 10, no. 3 (2018): 257-258-261.

² Katrin Sieg, “Towards a Civic Contract of Performance: Pitfalls of Decolonizing the Exhibitionary Complex at Brett Bailey's Exhibit B.” *Theatre Research International* 40, no. 3 (2015): 253.

³ Chokri Ben Chikha, Karel Arnaut “Staging/caging 'otherness' in the Postcolony: Spectres of the Human Zoo.” *Critical Arts* 27, no. 6 (2013): 662.

and the human violation behind it, the meanings produced by such exhibitions, and the perception of the public in the contemporary world.⁴ The difficulties an artist encounters, while dealing with human zoos, are commonly agreed upon in literature, but the reception of contemporary exhibitions on this topic is heavily debated. According to Manderson, when focusing on the human zoo in an artistic project, it is difficult to engage with the problem of racism without perpetuating violence.⁵ The same problem is highlighted by Brown.⁶ All the artists and institutions, whose exhibitions were human zoo-themed, for instance, Bailey's *Exhibit B* and Quai Branly's *Invention of the Savage*, had the same intent of showing the cruelty of human zoo, and criticizing the idea it embedded.⁷ However, they have been received differently. *Exhibit B*, in fact, has been accused of being a reproduction and a form of perpetration of violence and racism. Until now, it has been the most debated and controversial instalment about human zoos. On the other hand, it is true that the exhibition caused some reactions and encouraged more discussion about the topic.⁸ So, while the work was misunderstood, it still had an impact on the audience and forced the spectators to ask themselves questions about what they were viewing. For instance, it made them feel guilty for their ancestors' colonial aspirations.⁹ As an independent artist, Brett Bailey chose to be provocative, and he managed to have a reaction from the public. Despite the reception was not the one he expected, he still succeeded in attiring attention to human zoos. Some European museums also proposed exhibitions about human zoos, Musée de Quai Branly in Paris hosted the temporary exhibition *Human Zoos, the invention of the Savage* between 2011 and 2012. A revisitation of the same exhibition is now on display in the Royal Museum of Central Africa in Tervuren, *Human Zoo, the age of colonial exhibition*. Similar to Bailey, the curators Blanchard, Couttenier and Etambala, wanted to 'highlight the forgotten history of the human zoos'. However, their execution was less risky, and, according to Manderson "the stasis of the objects arguably inhibited a reading of the exhibition as one of resistance." While the literature analysed above focuses on the critics of *Exhibit B*, comparing it with other exhibitions such as *The Invention of the Savage*, the authors do not focus on how the audience perceived the two and how their aims were achieved. Thus, there are different aspects of the two exhibitions that need to be analysed, namely aims, execution, critics, and results. These aspects are all related

⁴ Mercadies Brown, "The Human Zoo: A Critique of Brett Bailey's Exhibit B." *Digital Literature Review* 2 (2015): 108.

⁵ Manderson, 260.

⁶ Brown, 108.

⁷ Manderson, 261-262.

⁸ Chikha, 671.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 674-676.

to each other and show not only the reasons behind the exhibitions' critics but also current issues in society. In fact, the effects the two exhibitions had on the audience are completely different, while *Exhibit B* has raised questions and caused engagement, the other exhibition did not have a notable impact on the visitors. The comparison between *Human Zoo, the age of colonial exhibitions* and *Exhibit B* shows how the society is not decolonised itself and how it is not ready to admit the cruelty of the period. For example, *The age of colonial exhibitions* was a collection of real documents and photographs of human zoos. *Exhibit B* was a reproduction of colonial and racist episodes. How is it possible that reality was less shocking than reproduction?

Therefore, in this thesis, I will present a comparison between the two exhibitions about human zoos: the above-mentioned *Human Zoo, the age of colonial exhibitions* held in the Royal Museum for Central Africa in Tervuren; and *Exhibit B* from the independent artist Brett Bailey. This research will try and establish the common aspects of the exhibitions, while analysing the differences, in order to understand how these affected the results of these two projects, thus the critics. Both projects were travelling exhibitions, the first touring around Europe and the second around the world. Despite the differences, Pascal Blanchard, Maarten Couttenier and Mathieu Zana Etambala, and Brett Bailey, shared a common aim. Through the exhibitions, they wanted to raise awareness about the existence of human zoos, while explaining the roots of racism in the present day. Human zoos contributed to the ideologies of racism and white superiority, still perpetuated in our society. Addressing the topic through these exhibitions can help raise awareness and change the narrative in the present. Despite this similarity, curators' choices on how to organize their exhibitions differ substantially. This difference in execution affected the response to the exhibitions. On one hand, *The age of colonial exhibitions* was acclaimed positively, it was seen as the first exhibition that succeeded in bringing positive reviews to the highly criticised Royal Museum for Central Africa. On the other hand, Bailey's artistic project has been harshly criticised, resulting in its cancellation. The two exhibitions will be compared and analysed in order to understand the response to them and to highlight relevant issues in the current society. To juxtapose the two, there are various matters and questions to be kept into consideration. It is important to understand how the exhibitions were organised, what the curators aimed to do, and how they decided to put them into practice. Another relevant aspect is the success of the exhibition, whether they reached their aims, and succeeded in raising awareness about racism or not. Thirdly, it is important to evaluate the role of locations. As they were both travelling exhibitions, they had different effects according to the city they were held in, but also according to the museum or theatre they

were presented in. Thus, the comparison will analyse the aims, execution of the exhibitions, locations, and reception of the public.

1.1. Methodology

The research methods used for this thesis were qualitative, and the sources were both primary and secondary. The secondary sources were academic articles on the topic of human zoos and postcolonial-themed exhibitions. These served to give an overview of human zoo history and contemporary discourse within the museum, necessary to contextualize my topic. Other secondary sources used were newspaper articles, documentaries, and reviews of the two exhibitions *Exhibit B* and *Human Zoo, the age of colonial exhibitions*. Through the analysis of those, I could report on the exhibitions' receptions and impact on visitors, while understanding curators' aims and whether they were fulfilled. I also included television interviews broadcasted in the UK about *Exhibit B*. These interviews were conducted after the show had been cancelled due to protests, so they help explain why the show had been criticized and what people thought of it.

Regarding my primary sources, my first intention was to interview the curators of the two exhibitions, however, I only managed to interview two of the curators of Tervuren's exhibition. First, I interviewed one of the three official curators, Maarten Couttenier, then I interviewed Salomé Ysebaert, a RMCA coordinator who collaborated at the exhibition. These two interviews enabled me to look at the exhibition from a different perspective than that of a visitor. Furthermore, they explained their aims and reasons for certain choices. For *Exhibit B*, I will rely on interviews collected from newspaper articles and tv shows. I will look at Brett Bailey's interviews about his work and testimonies of the performers. I will also consider declarations of activists involved in the protests against *Exhibit B*. For instance, Art Africa interview with Sara Myers, leader of the movement #boycottthehumanzoo against Bailey's show at the Barbican. Finally, I will include my personal experience visiting *The age of colonial exhibitions*. As it was not possible for me to visit *Exhibit B*, I will rely on visual material of the performance, such as videos and photographs.

1.2. Research aims and expected results

My research aims at finding out the reasons why two exhibitions with the same intention and same topic have had such different outcomes, focusing on the execution of the two exhibitions and the reception of the public. I also aim to show how relevant the role of a museum, or

cultural institution, can be to face social issues such as racism and discrimination. In the specific case of human zoos, many people are unaware of their existence. They do not know how racism and ideologies of superiorities are deeply embedded in such historical events. However, as the comparison between *Human Zoo* and *Exhibit B* will show, society is not always ready to acknowledge such a dark period of our history. Or better, they are not ready to face it as cruelly as it was. On the other hand, the focus on the cities where the exhibitions have been held can explain the difference in reactions. *Exhibit B* has been criticised because of its execution. On one side, black citizens felt once again objectified but on the other side, the installations were shocking to the public. This causes the question of whether it is necessary to represent, or better reproduce, the past in such a way. *Human Zoo, the age of colonial exhibitions* was also criticised, however for other aspects. For example, its location in a former colonial museum. Despite these differences in critics, the exhibitions had the same aims, so what I expect to find in my research is that while the aims were the same, talking about colonialism and racism is still a taboo in some parts of the world, especially in Europe. In the case of *Exhibit B*, some scholars believe that the curator's intentions have been misunderstood and have failed to reach the audience. And that this exhibition still managed to trigger reactions and to attire attention to the topic of human zoos, which not many people were aware of. Concerning *Human Zoo*, instead, I expected that the change of the location, between its first version and its second version (from the Quai Branly to the Royal Museum of Central Africa), would have affected the press opinion and attire negative critics. As *Human Zoo, the age of colonial exhibitions* was held in a controversial museum, I expected the opinions about the exhibition to differ from the articles published regarding this same exhibition in Quai Branly. In fact, while Quai Branly is a museum opened to display non-Western Art in a post-colonial setting; the Royal Museum of Central Africa was commissioned as a colonial museum, where human zoos have taken place. Finally, throughout my research, and in particular after the interviews with Salomé Ysabaert and Marteen Couttenier, my personal opinion about the exhibitions has changed.

1.3. Limitations

There are different limitations I encountered during my research. Firstly, *Exhibit B* was temporary, and it was held between 2010 and 2014. While I could visit *Human Zoo, the age of colonial exhibitions*, with *Exhibit B* I could not. As a consequence, I had to rely on second-hand impressions and visual material available online. Apart from having a first-hand

experience of the exhibition held in Tervuren, I could interview two of the curators, allowing me to have an insight into the exhibition and understand curatorial aims. For *Exhibit B*, I could not interview Brett Bailey, however, due to its controversy, the sources available were exhaustive enough. Many were the accessible interviews made to Bailey after his show cancellation in London, where he directly addresses the controversies. In addition, other sources available provided an insight into different perspectives: the performers, audience and activists. For *The age of colonial exhibitions*, instead, most of the sources show one perspective, that of curators and then a general perception of the public. Another limitation has been the time frame. *Exhibit B* was held ten years earlier than the latest version of *Human Zoo*. The audience of then was different from the audience of now, however, this does not necessarily entail a different reaction. Thus, it is not possible to know how *Exhibit B* would have been welcomed today, while with *The age of colonial exhibition* is possible to look at its previous version, *The invention of the savage*, held in 2011. However, considering the response to *The age of colonial exhibitions* I will present later, the perception of *Exhibit B*, if it had been held in 2021, could be the same, or even worst.

1.4. Chapter outline

This thesis will be divided into five chapters. This first chapter was an introduction to the topic of human zoos and to the two case studies I will compare. The second chapter will present a historical background of ethnological expositions during the colonial era. The chapter will explain the birth of human zoos, their motivations and how they ended. The third chapter will be dedicated to the description of the case studies *Human Zoo* and *Exhibit B*. The first section will focus on *Human Zoo*, the Royal Museum for Central Africa, the exhibition's aims and execution, and its critics. The second section instead, will explain *Exhibit B*, its aims, its controversial execution, and its critics. There will be a section dividing the critics into topics as *Exhibit B* has been controversial for different aspects. The fourth chapter will present the comparison between the two exhibitions. The comparison will take into consideration similarities and differences. Firstly, it will compare the curators' aims and the exhibition topics. Secondly, it will compare their execution. Thirdly, it will compare the critics received and their results. The last section will be dedicated to the analysis of the above-mentioned aspects. The final chapter will be the conclusion.

2. Historical background: the origins of Human Zoos

This chapter will present a short historical background of ethnological expositions and how they became a common practice during the 19th and 20th centuries. I believe understanding the roots of human zoos serves to understand the roots of racism in current society, and consequently to understand the comparison between *Exhibit B* and *Human Zoo, the age of colonial exhibitions*. The curators themselves aimed at raising awareness about ethnological expositions and present-day racism, deconstructing its origins first. In fact, while the existence of human zoos is often a shocking revelation among people, they do not understand the relation to the contemporary issue of discrimination. However, raising awareness about human zoos is a fundamental step to questioning them. Curators and artists who themed their exhibitions on the topic of the human zoo, aim to explore the reasons behind this practice but mostly to address its legacy in the present. Human zoos were the practical representation of the idea of ‘Otherness’. They made the distinction between the White man and the Other tangible so that everyone in Europe was able to see and experience this ideology. Ethnological expositions reinforced colonial ideologies, and consequently the belief in the superiority of white men and their right to conquer and civilize.¹⁰ In 1885, the scramble of Africa during the Congress of Berlin, allowed European colonizers to encounter new races. This caused the promotion of pseudo-scientific categorization of races, which placed the white man at the top, as the superior race. Count Gobineau diffused the concepts of inferior and superior races, justifying then white men's actions towards the other races. These ideas also resulted in the creation of stereotypes of the Other, especially with the institution of human zoos, but it also permitted violence towards the Other, as an inferior being.¹¹ This same ideology is the cause of racism and discrimination in the present.

2.1. Human Zoos and their origins

Human zoos were common practice between the 19th and 20th centuries. They were widespread in Europe and North America.¹² In the beginning, humans were displayed together with animals, while later they became displayed in different settings exclusive to them.¹³ Human zoos were known as ethnological expositions displaying indigenous inhabitants of

¹⁰ Walter Putnam, ““Please Don’t Feed the Natives”: Human Zoos, Colonial Desire, and Bodies on Display.” *The Environment in French and Francophone Literature and Film* 39 (2012), 60.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 61.

¹² *Ibid.*, 56.

¹³ Brown, 108.

European colonized lands. They were often exhibited in settings recreating their villages, where they had to perform daily activities to represent their culture and their lifestyle. This type of exposition took inspiration from animal zoos and freak shows, common in Europe during 1800.¹⁴ The idea of exhibiting humans came after the invention of the typical zoo exhibiting animals and the first human zoo was held during the first colonial exhibition in 1896 in Germany. For seven months more than 106 people taken away from German colonies were forced into public humiliation. The practice of human zoos was a representation of colonial power and ideology. Europeans believed in their superiority to the extent of exposing other humans as they would exhibit animals. Their justification for such practice was scientific research, they wanted to exhibit the “inferior” races they had encountered during their explorations and show them to the rest of Europe.¹⁵ Human zoos were also a way of reporting on colonial expeditions, they were a way of showing their success. In these expositions, natives were treated as objects, without agency. They were dehumanized and turned into attractions.¹⁶ Human zoos became a practice to prove the scientific inferiority of any non-Western population and thus reinforcing European nationalistic ideas. They had the educational purposes of both showing colonized populations' cultures and lifestyles, and the new racial classification. Furthermore, these exhibits were a showoff of Western Hegemony over the rest of the world.¹⁷

One of the pioneers in the business of zoos and later human zoos was the German entrepreneur, Carl Hagenbeck. His first zoo was founded in 1907 in Hamburg. This zoo became the prototype for the modern western zoo, where animals were displayed in a natural setting without cages so that they looked apparently free.¹⁸ Hagenbeck started displaying humans in 1874, he started with Samoan natives and Laplanders. Later he also displayed people coming from different parts of the world such as Sami, Nubians, Indians, and Somalis.¹⁹ While such ethnological expositions had been common in Europe since the early modern age, Hagenbeck's way of exposing ‘exotic people’ was innovative.²⁰ The difference from the common ethnological expositions was in his way of recreating these populations' indigenous settings.

¹⁴ Ailurus. *r/MorbidReality Special: The History of Human Zoos*, Youtube, August 12, 2021, 16:26.

¹⁵ Töniges, Sven. “How colonial powers presented people in ‘human zoos’.” *Deutsche Welle*, January 10, 2022.

¹⁶ Putnam, 56-58.

¹⁷ Ailurus.

¹⁸ Putnam, 61.

¹⁹ Putnam, 62.

²⁰ Annika Zeitler and Rayna Breuer, “Carl Hagenbeck: The inventor of the modern animal park.” *Deutsche Welle*, June 11, 2019.

They were exhibited in their ‘natural environment’. And from then on, all ethnological expositions were set in this way.²¹ In France, ethnological expositions were known as *Jardin d’acclimatation*. More than thirty shows were organized between 1877 and the beginning of World War I. Humans were exhibited in circuses and fairs as well, but the most common place to exhibit ‘exotics’ were the native villages recreated during colonial expositions. In 1889, during the Paris world’s Fair, 400 Africans were displayed in the natives’ villages. Later in 1931, over 1500 Africans were exhibited during Paris Colonial Exhibit.²² In the same year, Hagenback hosted his last human zoo, however, the practice only ended after World War II.²³ The very last human zoo was held in Brussels in 1958 when Belgium was still ruling over Congo. The first ethnological exposition of Belgium was held in 1897. This year, King Leopold II brought 267 captivated Congolese to Belgium so to display them in Tervuren. Seven Congolese died of pneumonia due to the Belgian cold summer, and their bodies were buried in a mass grave without any marks. Because of its first exhibition’s success, Tervuren became the location for a permanent exhibition, now the Royal Museum for Central Africa. During his kingdom, King Leopold II ruled Congo as his own piece of land. The king exploited Congo and Congolese for their natural resources such as rubber and minerals. With his museum in Tervuren and his ethnological exhibitions, Leopold II contributed to the creation of a common imaginary of Congolese people and Africans in general, which resulted in Belgium’s long history of human zoos. The ethnological exposition of 1958 was organized for Brussels Expo and displayed 598 Congolese. They were showcased in recreated Congolese villages placed at the foot of the Atomium. The fair was Congolese-themed, the pavilions were dedicated to the activities of Belgians in Congo: mining and agriculture, and also to Congolese culture. The Congolese displayed in the human zoos decided to leave the fair after some time and return to Congo. Two years later, in 1960, Congo gained its independence from Belgium.²⁴ Belgian long history of human zoos is what inspired the exhibition *The age of colonial exhibitions* to be held in Tervuren, where a permanent human zoo was held for decades.

²¹ Zeitler, 2019.

²² Putnam, 62.

²³ Zeitler, 2019.

²⁴ “Belgium Comes to Terms with ‘human Zoos’ of Its Colonial Past; Sixty Years Ago, Belgium Set up a Live Display of People from Congo for the 1958 World Fair. Now the Country Is Rethinking That Legacy.” *The Guardian (London)*. 2018.

2.2. 'Celebrities' of human zoos

Human zoos were living museums, they showed people representing other races, and other cultures different from what was common in Europe. Western science classified the different races they had been in contact with by then, putting the White man on top as superior to all the rest. Their classification took into consideration those 'exotics' displayed in human zoos. These were often unique also among their people in their native countries. However, in Europe, they were considered representative of their kind and not a unique case. Many of the captives kept in human zoos are not known until today. Their names were not important as they were treated as objects.²⁵ Some of them though became popular for their uniqueness and appeal to the audience, making their stories object of interest. Famous examples are Ota Benga and Saartjie Baartman, both represented by Brett Bailey in *Exhibit B*. Ota Benga was a Congolese pygmy, brought to the United States in 1904. He was displayed at the St. Louis World Fair as a real cannibal. He had his teeth filed to a point shape just to incarnate the European imagination of cannibals. After a short return to Congo, Ota Benga moved again to the US, to be displayed as a permanent attraction in the Bronx Zoo. Within the zoo, he lived with monkeys, and he was a very popular attraction among the visitors. He was displayed as "The Missing Link". Thanks to humanitarian intervention, Ota Benga became free and was given the chance to live in the West. However, he was depressed and weakened by his past life in captivity.²⁶ Ota Benga wanted to return to Congo, but the war had started, and it was impossible for him to travel back to Africa. In 1916, he decided to put an end to his life.²⁷ Even more famous than Ota Benga, was Saartjie Baartman. She was a South African woman, kidnapped by British explorers and brought to Europe for her unusual appearance (Fig.1.). Baartman was affected by steatopygia, a condition that caused her to have protuberant buttocks and elongated labia, this condition made her famous as "The Hottentot Venus". She was brought to London with the promise of fame, and she ended up being displayed in a collection of human spectacles, being tortured and studied for 'scientific' purposes. After her death in 1815, her body and genitalia kept being displayed in the Musée de l'Homme in Paris. Saartjie Baartman returned to South Africa only in 2002 after Nelson Mandela officially demanded her remains to be reinstated.²⁸

²⁵ Putnam, 63.

²⁶ Ibid., 64-65.

²⁷ Ailurus, 13:12

²⁸ Brown, 109-110.

3. Human zoos representation in contemporary exhibitions: *The age of colonial exhibitions and Exhibit B*

In this third chapter, I will present the case studies used for comparison: *Human Zoo, the age of colonial exhibitions* and *Exhibit B*. I have chosen these exhibitions for different reasons, firstly the critics received and secondly their similarity in themes and aims, but the difference in execution and results. The first case study I will present is *Human Zoo, the age of colonial exhibitions*. In order to properly contextualize this case study, I will dedicate a section to the Royal Museum for Central Africa in Tervuren, a controversial location chosen for the exhibition which attracted more attention to the project. Then, I will focus on the exhibition, its aims, its execution, and the critics. I will also report the interviews I conducted with Marteen Couttenier and Salomé Ysebaert (see Appendix A). For the second case study, *Exhibit B*, I will describe the exhibition's execution, its aims, and its critics.

3.1. *Human Zoo, the age of colonial exhibitions*

Human Zoo: L'invention du sauvage, and later *The age of colonial exhibitions*, was a travelling exhibition. The first version was presented in the Musée Quai Branly in Paris in 2012, and the most recent version was presented in the Royal Museum for Central Africa in Tervuren. *L'invention du sauvage* was curated by Lilian Thuram, Nanette Jacomijn-Snoep and Pascal Blanchard.²⁹ Blanchard was also one of the curators for the later version of *Human Zoo, The age of colonial exhibitions* together with Marteen Couttenier and Mathieu Zana Etambala.³⁰ Both exhibitions collected and displayed visual material about human zoos. Paintings, postcards, documents, posters, photographs, and so on, supporting the racial discrimination of the colonial period and the birth of the human zoo. However, they differed in some aspects. Regarding the exhibition held in Paris, the museum's website explained how it aimed to expose the general history of the human zoo in the West while triggering critical thinking in the visitors, in relation to today's prejudice and discrimination. The same aims were shared by the curators in Tervuren, however, they focused on the history of ethnographic expositions in Belgium. When the first version of *Human Zoo* was presented in 2012, addressing such a topic with an exhibition or in a museum was new.³¹ But according to Marteen Couttenier and Salomé

²⁹ "Exhibition. L'invention du sauvage". Musée du Quai Branly Jacques Chirac.

³⁰ Africa Museum, Tervuren, Belgium.

https://www.africamuseum.be/en/visit/temporary_exhibition/expo_humanzoo

³¹ John Laurenson, "Paris museum exposes history of human zoos." *Deutsche Welle*, December 9, 2011.

Ysebaert, the exhibition has changed since then. The only curator that participated in both, the historian Pascal Blanchard, wanted the exhibition to change according to reviews and public opinion (See Appendix A). Thus, *Human Zoo* held in Tervuren was different from *Human Zoo* held in Paris. In particular, the location of Tervuren was chosen for specific reasons. The exhibition was held in the Royal Museum for Central Africa, once the Congo Museum because it is a very controversial institution, and because it is the symbol of Belgian colonialism. The next section will elaborate on this.

3.1.1 Royal Museum for Central Africa

The Royal Museum for Central Africa opened in 1910, three years after King Leopold II's death. The museum was inaugurated under the name of Congo Museum, an institution wanted by the King to host all the artifacts collected in Belgian colonised Congo. The Congo Free State was treated as a personal possession of King Leopold II, which after his death became Belgium's property. The collection owned by the King included specimens of all Congolese natural resources used by Belgium for profit, such as natural rubber, ivory, and latex.³² These raw materials were displayed along with Congolese natives during colonial expositions in Belgium. The Belgian officers ruling the colony held a regime of terror and exploitation to collect as much profit as possible but also to satisfy King Leopold's continuous requests for objects to be added to his personal collection.³³ The success of the Brussels International Exposition in 1897, encouraged the King to have a permanent Congolese exhibition, and in 1904 he commissioned Charles Girault to build a permanent expository space for his collection. The Congo Museum was built as a celebration of Leopold II's achievement in Congo, lacking any reference to the violence and destruction caused by Belgian colonialism. It celebrated the King's civilization mission.³⁴ The museum's permanent collection and its disposition were never questioned until 2010. Until then, the RMCA was a celebration of the Belgian 'civilization' of the Congo Free State, and in particular King Leopold II's achievements. The building's interiors are still covered with details referring to the King. The main entrance to the museum conducted the visitors inside a marble rotunda where they could observe a variety of allegories symbolizing Belgian contribution to Congo. The collection in the museum and its display, contributed to the creation of the narrative of Congolese as savages, in need of being

³² Debora L. Silverman, "Diasporas of Art: History, the Tervuren Royal Museum for Central Africa, and the Politics of Memory in Belgium, 1885–2014." *The Journal of Modern History* 87, no. 3 (2015): 619.

³³ *Ibid.*, 621-622.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 625-626.

civilized. In 2010, the Belgian government decided to address the problem and renovate the museum, with a new director, Guido Gryseels.³⁵ The official renovation started in 2013 and finished in 2018 when the new RMCA was opened. The surroundings of the museum did not change, except for the access point. The interiors were reorganized, and the collection was divided into themes, each section was dedicated to an aspect of African culture: such as music, language, art, and crafts. A small section was dedicated to colonialism. The renovation also included a new part of the museum, an area dedicated to temporary exhibitions, where *Human Zoo, the age of colonial exhibition* was hosted. The project to renovate the RMCA involved both Belgians and Congolese, so to recreate a more realistic image of Congo and Belgian colonialism.³⁶ The renovation, however, was more disappointing than expected. As Silverman says about Gryseels' approach to the collection "...it only creates a new way to deny a past that will continue to haunt."³⁷ The new director, in fact, replaced the present with the past, he focused on showing Congo's culture and artifacts but did not address the colonial past efficiently. Considering all mentioned above, it is obvious that the RMCA is a controversial space for an exhibition willing to raise awareness about the human zoo and contemporary racism, so why would Blanchard, Couttenier, and Etambala choose such a place? Tervuren was not only the location of the Congo Museum but was also a place chosen for ethnographical expositions. The park surrounding the RMCA hosted many Congolese villages as part of the museum's collection. However, these are not addressed within the permanent collection. According to Couttenier, these are the reasons why the RMCA was chosen for *Human Zoo, the age of colonial exhibitions*. The curators wanted to challenge the name of the museum and contribute to its decolonization with an exhibition displaying the truth, without hiding Belgian crimes conducted in Congo and against the Congolese people (See Appendix A). The following chapter will elaborate on this, while next section will be about the exhibition.

3.1.2. *L'invention du sauvage* and *The age of colonial exhibition*

The series *Human is Zoo* comprises two exhibitions only. The first one was in the Quai Branly Museum in Paris and the second was in the Royal Museum for Central Africa in Tervuren. Despite being part of the same projects, the two exhibitions were quite different. *L'invention du sauvage* was held in 2012, while *The age of colonial exhibition* was held almost ten years later in 2021. When talking about *L'invention du sauvage*, one of the curators, Nanette Snoep,

³⁵ Ibid., 628-630.

³⁶ Ibid., 633, 634.

³⁷ Ibid., 636.

mentioned how an exhibition on such topic was quite new in those years.³⁸ The exhibition held in 2021, instead, did not focus on a new topic, however, it was new for the former colonial museum RMCA and Belgium. In the interview with Couttenier, he declared that the main curator Pascal Blanchard modified the exhibition between 2012 and 2021. According to him, Blanchard integrates opinions and critics to improve his work, and in this case, the exhibition in Paris was mostly a report on ethnological expositions. It was meant to make people aware of the existence of human zoos. In the case of the Tervuren exhibition, apart from raising awareness about human zoos' existence, particularly in Belgium, the curators wanted to trigger people's minds into critically thinking about racism. The RMCA's coordinator who took part in the exhibition, Salomé Ysebaert said *The age of colonial exhibitions* had to encourage visitors to think about their daily life behaviour toward black people. She wanted visitors to think about their own actions or words which have a discriminatory connotation (See Appendix A). In order to do so, she proposed to add questions and sentences on the wall used daily, sentences that had a racist or discriminatory character, for example, "You don't act like a black person" or "Je hebt ritme in je bloed"(Fig.2.).³⁹ The exhibition was a collection of photographs, posters, and documents testifying both human zoos and the scientific research about race conducted on the natives. The objects were accompanied by videos and the above-mentioned text on the walls. At the end of the exhibition, there was a section curated by the Congolese artist Teddy Manzina. This section showed a revisitation of human zoos, videos on the walls show footage of white people being measured and examined by black people. The opposite of what happened with colonialism. This last section served to link the past with the present, making the visitors question what they had just seen. In the next section, I will explain what the aims of the curators were as claimed by Couttenier and Ysebaert.

3.1.3. Aims of the *Human Zoo*

Human Zoo, the age of colonial exhibition was opened in Tervuren in November 2021, 125 years after the first human zoo was opened by King Leopold II. During the first Belgian ethnological exposition in 1897, seven Congolese died of influenza and pneumonia after being exposed in Tervuren park. According to the New York Times, *The age of colonial exhibitions*

³⁸ Laurenson, John. "Paris museum exposes history of human zoos." *Deutsche Welle*, December 9, 2011.

³⁹ Jan Van der Made, "'Human Zoo' expo in Belgium's Africa Museum highlights colonial past as EU/AU summit continues." *RFI*, February 17, 2012.; "You have rhythm in your blood".

was a commemoration of this tragedy, however that has not been confirmed by the curators.⁴⁰ Despite the practice of human zoos ending in 1958, the stereotypes and ideologies spread by those expositions are still present in our society.⁴¹ The official book of the exhibition mentions curatorial aims in its introduction addressing these problems (Fig.3.). The curatorial aims were (1) to expose the history of colonial zoos, (2) to “lift the anonymity of the persons exhibited”, and (3) to encourage visitors to question their view of the world.⁴² While the official curators are Blanchard, Couttenier, and Etambala, according to Couttenier two of the RMCA coordinators played a fundamental role in the exhibition (See Appendix A). In fact, Salomé Ysebaert and Marie-Reine Iyumva were fundamental for the display. They collaborated with the curators, and they were responsible for the addition of the text on the walls. While Couttenier and the other curators mostly focused on reconstructing the history of human zoos, Ysebaert and Iyumva aimed at linking the content of the exhibition with the present, and this is what inspired them to add the only interactive section. Ysebaert believes that such an exhibition would be useless if it did not address the present, it would not make sense to portray the past without aspiring at changing the narrative in the present (see Appendix A). Despite the controversial location, Blanchard’s exhibition received positive critics, however, there were also negative comments. The next section will summarize them.

3.1.4. Critics of *The age of colonial exhibitions*

As mentioned earlier, the RMCA is a very controversial institution. The foundation was a wish of King Leopold II, the main perpetrator of Belgian crimes in Congo. As such, the museum was a celebration of brutality and violence, masked as a civilising mission. After the renovation of the museum, which aimed at its decolonisation, it is still a place that generates controversy. The building itself gives the impression of colonial austerity to its visitors. The inside contributes to this view, with an architecture meant to celebrate the king. Unfortunately, the interiors could not be modified as the building is a historical institution. This resulted in the colonial symbolism being hidden by the contemporary representation of Africa. This tendency of hiding the past, without addressing it is one of the problems of the RMCA. Another issue is in the portrayal of Africa. The renovation was supposed to help change the stereotypes and

⁴⁰ Farah Nayeri, “Remembering the Racist History of ‘Human Zoos’.” *The New York Times*, December 29, 2021. Accessed May 1, 2022.

⁴¹ Jan Van der Made, “‘Human Zoo’ expo in Belgium’s Africa Museum highlights colonial past as EU/AU summit continues.” *RFI*, February 17, 2012.

⁴² Pascal Blanchard, Marteen Couttenier and Mathieu Zana Etambala, *The Age of Colonial Exhibition*, 2021, 5.

people get in contact with the real cultures of Africa. However, the permanent exhibition seems to promote an overgeneralisation of Africa as if it was one culture. When asked about the location choice, Couttenier explained that the museum was chosen especially for its controversy. He wanted it to be held on the ‘scene of the crime’, where the antagonism between the exhibition and the museum would make the exhibition attire attention. Both Couttenier and Ysebaert claimed *Human Zoo, the age of colonial exhibitions* was the first event that made RMCA receive positive critics. The exhibition was praised by the New York Times for its topic and its relevance to contemporary issues. On the other hand, critics came from other museum coordinators from the RMCA. Ysebaert mentioned how some of her colleagues did not approve of the exhibition. They did not like seeing changes in the museum and asked her why she would put sentences on the wall with negative connotations instead of the ‘good things white people say about black people. She also mentioned how only three curators in the RMCA are of African origins, while all the rest is purely Belgian. Couttenier also reported the disapproval of his colleagues. As a historian, his fellow professors from Ghent University did not agree with his choice of collaborating with such an exhibition. They told him it would be a bad move for his career as they believe the exhibition was portraying a bad image of Belgium. According to him, the fact that professors in universities still have this mindset is due to the Western approach to education, as decoloniality is a recent topic and postcolonial studies do not exist as a discipline yet. Both Couttenier and Ysebaert are ready to admit the RMCA needs to undergo a real decolonization process, however, they think their exhibition has been the first step toward a new awareness. It was the first time the RMCA had a space for discussion (see Appendix A).

3.2. Brett Bailey’s *Exhibit B*

This section is dedicated to the second case study: Brett Bailey’s *Exhibit B*. The choice of this exhibition as a case study is due to both its controversy and unique way of execution. In addition, the topic's relevance and similarity with *Human Zoo, the age of colonial exhibition*. The temporary exhibition *Exhibit B* is part of a bigger project focusing on the history of European colonialism. The *Exhibit Series* includes *Exhibit A*, *Exhibit B*, and *Exhibit C* and has been touring Europe between 2010 and 2014. The first ‘human-installation’ *Exhibit A* was presented in Vienna, in the former Vienna Ethnology Museum. *Exhibit A* focused on German colonialism, *Exhibit B* on Belgian and French colonialism, while *Exhibit C* portrayed

Portuguese and British colonial crimes.⁴³ All the exhibits are scenes of colonialism placed next to contemporary episodes of racism and discrimination. While all the series has received both positive and negative reviews, *Exhibit B* has been the most controversial. In Paris, Berlin and London's activists accused the exhibition of objectifying black people, re-enacting human zoos, and perpetuating racism. Yet, only in London, they succeeded in the cancellation of the show.⁴⁴ *Exhibit B* came from a collaboration between Brett Bailey and his Third World Bunfight. Third World Bunfight is a company that promotes performance and installations focused on post-colonial Africa and the power relationship between Africa and the West.⁴⁵ According to his explanation for the *Exhibit* series, Bailey was inspired by a book titled *African on Stages* from Bernth Lindfors. Lindfors narrates the history of African people brought to Europe and to the United States to be exhibited in human zoos and freak shows.⁴⁶ Bailey's reinterpreted these stories into a contemporary exhibition in order to raise awareness about the roots of racism in modern society. The first time *Exhibit B* was presented was in 2012 in Brussels, at the Kunstenfestivalsdesart.⁴⁷ Out of the three shows of the *Exhibit* series, *Exhibit B* focused on the crimes committed by European colonisers of Southwest Africa and Congo. Due to the relation to Belgian colonialism, this exhibition will be taken into consideration so to be compared to Tervuren's exhibition about Belgian human zoos.

3.2.1. The exhibition's execution

Exhibit B was planned to be hosted in more than thirty-eight cities, including major European capitals.⁴⁸ Between 2012 and 2015 it was presented in Brussels and then moved to Berlin, Avignon, Paris, Wroclaw, Strasbourg, Ghent, Moscow, and Edinburgh.⁴⁹ It was planned to be held in London and other European cities, however, protests against the show resulted in its cancellation.⁵⁰ According to the activists who started the petition, Bailey's work was too close to original human zoos. Black actors were 'exhibited' to entertain the white European public once again, exactly as in human zoos.⁵¹ The exhibition in fact was a live performance. It can be considered as such as the installations created by Bailey were scenes interpreted by actors

⁴³ Chikha, 674.

⁴⁴ Sieg, 251.

⁴⁵ Third World Bunfight. "OUR MISSION STATEMENT." Third World Bunfight. Accessed May 1, 2022.

⁴⁶ Irene Brown, "EIF 2014, Exhibit B, Playfair Library Hall, review." *Edinburghguide.com*, August 10, 2014.

⁴⁷ Chikha, 671.

⁴⁸ Mercadies Brown, 108.

⁴⁹ Irene Brown, 2014.

⁵⁰ "Exhibit B: is the 'human zoo' racist? The performers respond." *The Guardian*, September 5, 2014.

⁵¹ Sieg, 251.

standing in colonial-like settings. All the actors were black Africans living in the diaspora, they were recruited in the city where the performance was taking place apart from a Namibian quartet singing during the whole exhibition (Fig.4.). More than 180 people took part in the performance.⁵² Bailey also assigned a role to himself, and as a white man, he decided to interpret a sadistic colonialist placing himself at the centre of the performance space. As in a theatre performance, the actors had the chance to interact with the visitors.⁵³ Differently from any other exhibition, ‘those exhibited’ were able to use their agency on the visitors, resembling, or imitating the interactions between visitors and the captives in the human zoos. According to the press, this interaction between the actors and the visitors through the look was what ‘affected’ the audience the most. The actors were silent and immobilised, all they could use to communicate was their looks. On the other hand, the white visitors could move around, they could talk even if they had been requested to remain in silent. About this interaction, Bailey declared that it was fundamental for him that the actors looked at the public, ‘I tell the performers always: you are the public and you consider the white spectator as a performer’.⁵⁴ However, this inequality in the movement, together with the themes of the scenes caused many critics.

The live exhibition presented a series of settings colonial-themed, others with contemporary features. Each setting portrayed a scene; however, they were interpreted by humans, displayed as in a human zoo. As previously mentioned, *Exhibit B* was about colonised Congo and Southwestern Africa.⁵⁵ The show was composed of 13 installations.⁵⁶ Chikha and Arnaut focused on five of them, those considered more relevant and provocative. The first scene referred to the famous human zoo figure Saartjie Baartman. In Bailey’s setting, a woman was standing on a rotating platform. She had a similar body feature to the ‘Hottentot Venus’, as Baartman was known. Baartman was kidnapped in South Africa and brought to London to be exhibited for her exotic appearance. She was affected by steatopygia, causing her to have protuberant buttocks and very thick lips.⁵⁷ The second setting displayed ‘Samira Adamu’, an illegal immigrant who died on her forced return flight to go home. In Bailey’s interpretation of the story, a woman was sitting on a plane, taped to her seat and with tape on her mouth so that

⁵² Third World Bunfight. “OUR MISSION STATEMENT.” Third World Bunfight. Accessed May 1, 2022.

⁵³ Manderson, 258.

⁵⁴ Chikha, 676.

⁵⁵ Mercadies Brown, 109.

⁵⁶ Charlie McBride, “People have a very profound, deep, response to it.” *Galway Advertiser*, July 9, 2015.

⁵⁷ Mercadies Brown, 109.

she could not speak.⁵⁸ In the third installation, titled ‘A Place in the Sun: quarters of an officer of the German Colonial Forces, Windhoek 1906.’, a woman was sitting on a bed with a chain around her neck (Fig.5.). The audience would be able to see her from behind but could still see her face, and be started, through a mirror hanging in front of her. The wall where the mirror was hanging on, was full of colonial pictures and heads of wild animals hunted in Africa. The bed she was sitting on was covered by clothes belonging to a German uniform. Military boots were left on the floor. The African woman portrayed in that tableaux vivant represented all the women chained up by European colonialists, who were given food in exchange for sexual services.⁵⁹ In the fourth setting, men in contemporary clothes portrayed refugees and illegal immigrants being profiled in a mugshot. Bailey named them ‘Found Object’. The fifth, and last setting, displayed four Namibian singers but only their heads were visible while they sang polyphonic ‘Pigmy’ songs.⁶⁰

3.2.2. Aims of Brett Bailey

Brett Bailey’s inspiration for the *Exhibit* series can explain the aims of his exhibitions. Despite him mentioning Lindfors’s book *African on Stages* as his first inspiration, his roots play a fundamental role in all his works. Brett Bailey is a white South African artist, born in 1967 in Cape Town. His controversial works touch upon post-Apartheid themes, criticising South Africa’s constant issues with discrimination and racism.⁶¹ His life experiences are the main inspirations for his projects, thus also for the *Exhibits*. When asked why he represented black people as victims, slaves, or threats, and not heroes, Bailey explained that “how ‘the other’ is represented in order to legitimize systems of subordination, of racism...well I know that from the history of my own country.”⁶² On the TWB website, *Exhibit B* was described as “A human installation charting a river of racism that runs through the ethnographic displays, human zoos and scientific racism of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, and the current dehumanizing policies towards immigrants in various parts of the world”.⁶³ After the critics moved to *Exhibit B*, Bailey explained his aim as to “explore the machinations of systems of racism and how they dehumanise all who are touched by them.”. The installation aimed to explain how the roots of

⁵⁸ Chikha, 672.

⁵⁹ Mercadies Brown, 107.

⁶⁰ Chikha, 673-674.

⁶¹ Sieg, 251.

⁶² Keane, Caomhan. “Exhibit B exhibition shows its true colors.” *Irish Examiner*, July 10, 2015.

⁶³ Third World Bunfight. “OUR MISSION STATEMENT.” Third World Bunfight. Accessed May 1, 2022.

today's racism and xenophobia reside in colonial and racist ideologies of 19th century Europe.⁶⁴ He also aimed at commemorating all those men and women dehumanized by human zoos.⁶⁵ As a white South African, who has been raised in privilege, this part of history was hidden from him, and this is the reason why he decided to focus his project on a part of history not explored enough.

Bailey's intention was not just to portray the past but to criticize it and analyze its effect on the present. *Exhibit B* was a critic of current racist and discriminatory policies in modern society, and how these are rooted in 19th centuries of ideologies.⁶⁶ In the interview with Brett Bailey, released by the *Irish Examiner*, the artist explained "The work is about how 'the other' has been framed to legitimize racist policies. The way certain races have been portrayed in art and as curiosities in ethnographic museums; theories of evolution and their perversion by anthropologists and scientists; the eugenics of the early 20th century which led to the Holocaust; the current policies of the EU countries towards African immigrants and how artists, activists, and representatives of asylum seekers have responded to these policies, it is all of these things that the work is about."⁶⁷

3.2.3. Critics to *Exhibit B*

Brett Bailey's show received a lot of attention from the media, both positive and negative critics. As noble as his intentions might have been, most critics were negative, causing his show to be cancelled in London and following cities. His first show, *Exhibit A* did not receive much criticism until it was held in Berlin. There it led to protests against the installations and their representations. However, the most backlash was received by *Exhibit B*. The show provoked protests in Berlin, Paris, and London. Bailey expected some reactions to his project as he was aware of its provocative side, however, he did not expect such backlash.⁶⁸ The critics moved to Bailey are the results of its provocative work, however not those he wanted. These reactions are revealing of the current issues in the society, where post-colonial activism and racially charged performance are still not understood and accepted. When searching about Bailey's

⁶⁴ "Brett Bailey: The intention of Exhibit B was never hatred." *Mail & Guardian*, September 27, 2014.

⁶⁵ Third World Bunfight. "OUR MISSION STATEMENT."

⁶⁶ McBride, Charlie. "People have a very profound, deep, response to it." *Galway Advertiser*, July 9, 2015.

⁶⁷ Caomhan, 2015.

⁶⁸ Peter Crawley, "The trials of Brett Bailey: 'I was seen as a racist South African. That typecast me.' *The Irish Times*, July 11, 2015.

Exhibit series, the first results link it to the critics and protests.⁶⁹ He has been accused of re-enacting human zoos, perpetrating the violence, and enforcing it. One of the most contested aspects was his role in the show. Bailey placed himself between the installations representing a white colonizer. While for him this could have been a way of showing his awareness about the Western role in colonization, what people perceived was different. According to the South African artist Philipp Khabo Koepsell, Bailey's role in the *Exhibit* does not serve to raise awareness, it just reinforces the colonial legacy and its structures of power.⁷⁰ The misunderstanding of his work and aims has to do with the means he used. Bailey reproduced colonial scenes and contemporary scenes of racism as crude and realistic as possible. His intention was that of being provocative, triggering reactions in the public, however making them aware of today's racism and its link to the past. His involvement with local actors living in the diaspora is also directly related to his aim of criticising contemporary society. There are different components of the installations Bailey chose to implement to achieve his aims. These components are the same that caused the controversies. First of all, Bailey decided to structure his show as an ethnological exposition. In his installations, humans were being displayed alive as in a human zoo. Secondly, these actors came from the diaspora, so representing the marginalised people in contemporary society. Thirdly, the actors were instructed into staring at the visitors of the show. They were standing still; they were not allowed to move but they could have eye contact with the audience. Forth, the instalments represented both colonial settings and recent events of racism. Fifth, the locations chosen for his shows were always institutions where Western Culture and hegemony had been represented.⁷¹ These five components were fundamental for Bailey to make the European audience learn about institutionalised racism and see racism as something we are responsible for. According to Bailey, his exhibition was "a series of installations, featuring performers who identify themselves as black [who] present a catalogue of the atrocities that were committed—and concealed—by European powers in Africa in the name of 'civilization.' It commemorates the men and women whose dignity was stripped away in this process."⁷² However, those five components Bailey relied on for the success of his exhibitions were those that caused negative

⁶⁹ Megan Lewis, "Until You See the Whites of Their Eyes: Brett Bailey's Exhibit B and the Consequences of Staging the Colonial Gaze." *Theatre History Studies* 37, no. 1 (2018): 116.

⁷⁰ Crawley, 2015.

⁷¹ Lewis, 120.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 118.

responses. In the following sections, I will present the responses to the show according to those five aspects.

3.2.4. Re-enacting the human zoo

As mentioned earlier, Bailey's inspiration for his work came from a book about ethnological expositions. So, he decided to use the same format as the human zoo for his exhibition. He recreated settings where humans were displayed as the natives were displayed in human zoos. This aspect of *Exhibit B* is fundamental to its provocative intention. Reproducing the human zoo, was a way to make it as realistic as the zoos were, and to give the audience the same experience, however not to entertain but to make them aware of the cruelty of those shows. According to Bailey, the scenes represented were more effective if inside his tableau vivant there were living subjects and not just pictures. However, the fact that the installation was so close to a human zoo is what made it look like a reproduction of it and not a critic. The antagonism between the black actors and the white spectators seemed to deny once again black people's agency, put on display to entertain the Western audience. In order to have local representation and more effect on the audience, the actors chosen by Bailey were always local black actors, part of the diaspora of the cities where the show was being held. This aspect became the subject of critics as well as they were accused of taking part in a racist project and being exploited by Bailey for his show.

3.2.5. Actors from the diaspora

The actors chosen by Bailey were African descendants who self-identified as black and who had agreed with his project's aims, many of them were artists themselves. However, this was not enough to avoid controversy. His involvement of black actors has been seen as a perpetuation of the human zoo. They were exposed once again without having an agency, and the audience was free to stare at them as if they were lifeless objects. This perspective made *Exhibit B* seem as discriminatory and denigrating as ethnological expositions of the 19th and 20th centuries. Many of the actors involved in the performance declared their support for Bailey and his project and The Guardian reported some of their statements. Tamara Nyrienda said *Exhibit B* meets Bailey's aim of making people aware of the past and its legacy in the present. Rania Mondy believes the show was a chance for herself to be educated and educate others about racism. Furthermore, the show is defined as a healing process for black and white

descendants coming to deal with the past by Shingiriai Musunhe.⁷³ And while the local actors testified in favour of Brett Bailey, critics by activists such as Lee Jasper, accused theatres such as the Barbican in London, of not having involved local black communities enough. According to Sara Myers, the activist who started the movement #boycottthehumanzoo, as a white South African, Bailey does not have the right to talk about racism in the way he did. She also believes that no other culture would be represented in that way. Myers accuses the Barbican Theatre of not being able to engage with the community regarding *Exhibit B*.⁷⁴ While the activists mentioned above criticise the lack of agency of the back actors in the show, others address their regained agency through their gaze.

3.2.6. Performers gaze into the audience

The most powerful aspect of *Exhibit B* is the interaction between the actors and audiences. Differently from human zoos, the actors in *Exhibit B* are not there to entertain the public. They are there to make them feel guilty, uncomfortable, and shameful. The humans displayed are not objectified anymore, they have their agency and exercise it on the audience. They confront the audience with the history they are part of.⁷⁵ Or at least that is what Bailey wanted to achieve, succeeding on part of the audience. The South African American author Meghan Lewis talks about her experience at the exhibition and the interaction with the actors. She says she felt obliged to make eye contact with them and acknowledge their humanity, which instead was denied in human zoos. And when looked back, she could experience a little bit of that dehumanization, and objectification Ota Benga and Saartje Baartman were subjected to.⁷⁶ While this interaction might have been considered enough for Bailey to give black people agency, for others this was once again a limitation of the agency. The actors were standing still, and their interaction was limited to eye contact. In opposition, the white audience was free to wander around the installations. Many of the critics moved towards the show were made by activists and people who had not taken part in it, in defence of the actors' agency, they released a statement regarding the importance of their gaze. According to Musunhe, words were not an effective means to communicate the pain and the trauma of colonialism, while the gaze was. The actors had been instructed by Bailey to look into visitors' eyes and they explained how at

⁷³ Exhibit B: is the 'human zoo' racist? The performers respond." *The Guardian*, September 5, 2014.

⁷⁴ Ashraf Jamal, "The Controversy Issue (13.2): Exclusive Interview with Sara Myers." *ArtAfrica*, December 4, 2014.

⁷⁵ Lewis, 122-124.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 125.

the moment their eyes met with the eyes of the spectators they were not seen as objects anymore but as humans. When facing those scenes, the visitors had different reactions, some cried, and some jumped back and put their looks away. Their reaction shows the exhibition had had an impact on them, that it was triggering a reaction inside them. And that is what Bailey aimed at.⁷⁷ In an earlier article, The Guardian reported a certain scepticism from the actors. Some of the performers recruited in Edinburgh were uncertain about the show, they were doubting whether white people would be there just to look at black people being displayed. Then what was the difference between a human zoo?⁷⁸ Despite this, later statements from the actors defended their roles and Brett Bailey's project.

3.2.7. Locations

Bailey's location choice was not casual. He wanted his show to be held in a place where Western hegemony was represented and thus challenge it with his exhibition. More important than that, the city where the exhibition was held made a difference in its reception. *Exhibit B* was planned to be presented in thirty-eight cities around the world. However, it did not have the same reception in every European city. Protests were raised in some capitals, first in Berlin, where left-wing antiracist activists protested against the show. Later in London, enraged antiracist activists led by Sara Myers petitioned for the cancellation of the show. The violence of the protests forced the Barbican Theatre to cancel the show. The show moved to the next city, Paris. There the protests followed and resulted in a court case. *Exhibit B* was shut down as the court declared its intent of condemning racism was seen as ambiguous and more as a way of perpetuating it. Despite all, the show continued its tour, and so continued the controversy. Following up the protests in London, other cities became the setting of violent riots against *Exhibit B*. Protestors accused Bailey of representing black people as inferior humans, as subjects of white supremacy used to entertain. After Berlin, Paris, and London, the show became the subject of protests in Sao Paulo, Brazil, where once again it was cancelled. Following these events, *Exhibit B* was held without too much controversy in China, Chile, Ireland, Greece, Korea, and Australia. Last *Exhibit B* was held in Estonia, in December 2016. While *Exhibit C* was never performed.⁷⁹

⁷⁷ The Guardian, 2014.

⁷⁸ John O'Mahony, "Edinburgh's most controversial show" *Exhibit B*, a human zoo." *The Guardian*, August 11, 2014.

⁷⁹ Manderson, 265-266.

4. Case Studies Compared

After the presentation of the two case studies and related criticism, in this chapter, I will compare them according to the aspects mentioned in the previous chapter (see Appendix B). Firstly, I will compare the similarities between *The age of colonial exhibitions* and *Exhibit B*, thus aims and topics. Then I will proceed with the differences, such as execution and critics. Finally, I will try to evaluate whether their aims have been achieved or not, and so the success of the exhibitions. This chapter will serve to analyse the exhibitions and highlight the strengths and the weaknesses of their executions.

4.1. Aims and topics of the exhibitions

In general, *Human Zoo* and *Exhibit B* shared the same topics and aims. Both exhibitions were meant to shed a light on human zoos while exposing the colonial legacy in our contemporary society. The curators involved in these projects wanted to guide visitors through an exhibition narrating a history of violence and discrimination, based on racist ideology and white supremacy, while triggering the visitors into questioning their own mentality regarding racism. When asked about the exhibition's objective, Marteen Couttenier explained how he, together with Pascal Blanchard and Mathieu Zana Etambala, aimed at raising awareness about the history of human zoos and making the audience think about racism. At the same time, he aimed at changing the narrative in the Royal Museum for Central Africa. According to Salomé Ysebaert, the exhibition had to make visitors aware of the connection between human zoos and discrimination in the current society (see Appendix A). *The age of colonial exhibitions* shows how racism was created; it deconstructs the origins of racial discrimination. Both Couttenier and Ysebaert also believe *The age of colonial exhibitions* was the first occasion to really decolonize the RMCA, and that it finally gave space to a conversation about racism within the museum. Similar to them, Brett Bailey explained his project had to link the past and the present. His inspiration for *Exhibit B* comes from his personal experience with Apartheid. As explained during his interview with KulturStruktur, the South African society during Apartheid was built on ideologies of superiority and racial differentiation. After realizing these ideologies are socio-political and economic constructs used to legitimize governmental actions, he started to question his own education. He questioned how the White South African population was made to believe of their superiority based on skin color. When looking for answers, he found Lindfors' book *African on Stages*. The book explained how human zoos served to legitimize

and spread the theory of white supremacy and reinforce racial theories.⁸⁰ In another interview held as a response to the critics moved to his show, Bailey explained how in *Exhibit B* he tried to ‘reverse’ the human zoo. The performance was structured in a way that the spectator would be looked at by the actors so that he/she would feel their power as subjects and not objects.⁸¹ Different from *The age of colonial exhibitions*, which had an educational scope, *Exhibit B* did not. Bailey explained that the idea behind his tableau vivant was not teaching the spectators about history, but he wanted to show his ‘findings’ and report them to people. Throughout his education in South Africa, he was taught colonialism as a civilizing mission. Europeans were depicted as saviours of Africa liberating it from Arabic slave traders. Instead, with his project, he wanted to reveal the truth about colonialism, depicting it as it was and juxtaposing it with racism in current society. His installations were made to show the objectification of black people in the past and compare them to the present. Bailey aimed at showing spectators how the racist ideologies of the past are still perpetrated in current society.⁸² Thus *The age of colonial exhibitions* and *Exhibit B* shared the same aims. They wanted to raise awareness, and link the past and the present so that spectators could question their knowledge about colonialism and their behaviours towards black people. Despite the common aims, the topics of the two exhibitions were slightly different. The exhibition held in Tervuren focused on the history of human zoos in Belgium, and so relied on documents retrieved from museums’ archives reporting on ethnological expositions and scientific research about racial classification. *Exhibit B* instead is ‘structured’ as a human zoo, as explained by Bailey, but the topics are colonialism and discrimination, and immigration in the contemporary world. While the connection between human zoos with present issues of discrimination was also mentioned by Couttenier and Ysebaert as the topic of their exhibition, the way those were addressed was less explicit than in *Exhibit B*. The next section will compare the execution of the two exhibitions in relation to their aims and topics.

4.2. Differences in execution

Despite the common aims, Brett Bailey and Marteen Couttenier, Pascal Blanchard, and Mathieu Zana Etambala presented very antipodal exhibitions. As mentioned earlier, *The age*

⁸⁰ Brett Bailey, *Kultur Struktur*, 2015. <https://vimeo.com/114078324>

⁸¹ Brett Bailey, interviewed by Douglas Herbert, “Curator of Paris ‘slavery’ exhibition says show must go on”, *France 24*, December 8th, 2012. <https://www.france24.com/en/20141208-interview-brett-bailey-theatre-maker-exhibit-b-paris-centre-104-protests-racism>

⁸² *Kultur Struktur*.

of colonial exhibitions intended to deconstruct the history of racism, it wanted to display the steps that created racial classification and white hegemony while showing how these theories were spread and reinforced. In order to do so, the curator displayed a series of photographs representing human zoos, surrounded by posters promoting ethnological exhibitions and reporting on racial classification. Between these visual specimens, various books and objects were accompanying the pictures. These were all specimens regarding the scientific research conducted during the 19th and 20th centuries on the natives from colonized lands. While the exhibition was motivated by Tervuren's relationship with Belgian colonial activities in Congo, the exhibition showed how racial classification placed the white man as superior to any other race and not only Africans. Those discriminated against were not only black people but anyone that was not white. So, also the photographs chosen for the exhibition portrayed all different races exposed in human zoos. Amongst them there were African, Asians, Indians, Eskimos and so on. This contrast between pictures and documents showed how human zoos were justified by scientific research while spreading the idea of Otherness. In opposition, *Exhibit B* did not display any document or picture but recreated colonial and discriminatory episodes through live theater. Bailey organized his exhibition around a series of live installations where actors portrayed scenes of the past revealing the violent sides of colonialism. Other scenes referred to the stigmas of immigration, and minorities' objectification. The actors hired by Bailey were instructed to look back at the spectators, to stare at them until they had moved to another installation. Before entering the exhibition, spectators were told to remain in silence during the whole experience and that they were only allowed to enter singularly. According to Bailey, this served to let them face the reality of what they were observing while being observed back. This interaction with the spectators was necessary to trigger them into questioning what they were viewing. Whether it was a colonial scene or a more recent episode, the spectator was dealing with cruel reality, thus he was forced into becoming aware of the effects of racial classification and racism. In opposition, in *The age of colonial exhibitions*, the interactions were limited, almost absent. During the interview with Salomé Ysebaert, she explained how the only interactive part of the exhibition was the wall with sentences. As also mentioned by Couttenier, those were added as a suggestion by Ysebaert and Marie-Reine Iyumva. The sentences referred to common micro-aggressions used in daily conversations by everyone without being aware of their discriminatory nature. Those showed how racism is eradicated in our culture, without us even noticing. Despite this interaction, the rest of the exhibition left the visitor to formulate his own interpretation of what he was viewing. On the contrary, *Exhibit B* imposed Bailey's interpretation of history on the audience. At first sight *Exhibit B* was largely more provocative

than *The age of colonial exhibitions*. Brett Bailey not only portrayed the scenes as close to reality as possible, but he also asked the performers to actively impact the visitors. Videos of the preparation the actors went through, show Brett Bailey telling the actors to stare at the spectator, right in his eyes.⁸³ He wanted the visitors to acknowledge the violence inflicted by their ancestors. This strong emotional component was lacking in *The age of colonial exhibitions* experience. Or better to say, in *Exhibit B* the visitors were forced to have an emotional reaction. The actors and the whole setting exercised agency on the audience. Blanchard's exhibition had a more passive approach. In *Human Zoo*, the exhibition was composed of photographs and documents of real events, with some curators' additions, such as the sentences on the walls. However, the whole setup was passive and all the agency was left to the visitors. When looking at this exhibition it seems that the curators had not taken any risks. They did not create a provocative exhibition narrative, but they simply displayed historical facts. Or at least that was my first impression. Obviously, looking at photographs of people living in human zoos does have an effect on visitors' conscience, but that was left to visitors' own sensitivity, and also background knowledge on human zoos and colonialism. The emotional component in *The age of colonial exhibitions* was undeniable, but it did not have the same impact as *Exhibit B*. When asking Marteen Couttenier about the exhibition, and whether it had a provocative side, he explained that the choice of the location was seen as a risk. According to him, hosting *The age of colonial exhibitions* in a pseudo-decolonized museum was both provocative and risky. In particular, the RMCA cannot be considered a successfully decolonized museum, and apart from the controversies that could be caused by the history of the museum, both Couttenier and Ysebaert mentioned the difficulty of explaining to their colleagues the reasons behind their project. But despite the lack of approval shown by RMCA curators and coordinators and some backlash caused by the museum's colonial origin, the exhibition itself was not provocative. It did present history but without an active critique or a re-contextualization of the present. As a visitor or potential visitor would not be aware of curators' choices, he/she could not understand their intention was provocative when choosing RMCA for their exhibition. From my perspective, after understanding curatorial aims and visiting the exhibition, I could look at the exhibition as a powerful project to be presented in a museum such as the Royal Museum for Central Africa. However, other visitors did not have

⁸³ BhamUrbanNewsUK, "Debate: Exhibit B - Should art ever be censored?", *Youtube*, September 28, 2014. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q6in5dTz2-c&ab_channel=BhamUrbanNewsUK

the perspective of curators. In addition, once the exhibition ended the RMCA would remain the same controversial institution it was before.

The effects on the audience cannot be evaluated as there were no statistics conducted on their affluence or opinions about the exhibition, but I do believe that only those with prior knowledge about the topic have been able to relate the history of human zoos with today's social issues. For other visitors, unaware of the existence of human zoos, the exhibition has been just another history lesson, especially if they had not paid attention to the sentences on the walls. The audience of *Exhibit B* instead had to be shocked after the experience. As Bailey explained to KulturStruktur, at the end of the performance, the spectators would meet with members of antiracist associations who could explain to them the work and the reality of what they had seen, so that they would help them to cope with the shock.⁸⁴

4.3. Critics and results in comparison

Same aims, different execution, different critics. *Exhibit B* and *The age of colonial exhibitions* generated very different reactions among the public, despite some common controversies. The negative critics moved to *Exhibit B* were of great surprise for Brett Bailey. The show was held for four years, and it had never become the subject of protests until it arrived in London. According to Bailey, when *The Guardian* published an article calling the exhibition a 'human zoo', anti-racist activists in London started a petition against the Barbican to cancel the show.⁸⁵ After the show's cancellation, the *Exhibit B* tour continued and reached Paris, however, the backlash from London protests followed and new petitions were signed in France to stop the show.⁸⁶ The movement started in London was guided by Sara Myers, a journalist, and activist who started a petition against the Barbican, reaching 20.000 signatures. The petition accused *Exhibit B* and the Barbican of "complicit racism".⁸⁷ Lee Jasper, a British Race Relations activist, described Bailey's work as offensive and reinforcing racism. He also accused the Barbican of not having encouraged a conversation between the artist and London black community regarding the live performance.⁸⁸ Both Lee and Myers believe *Exhibit B* is a misrepresentation of black people, as once again they are represented as slaves and victims of

⁸⁴ Kultur Struktur.

⁸⁵ O'Mahony, 2014.

⁸⁶ France24, 2014.

⁸⁷ Hugh Muir, "Slavery exhibition featuring black actors chained in cages shut down", *The Guardian*, September 24, 2014. <https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2014/sep/24/slavery-exhibition-black-actors-cages-shut-down>

⁸⁸ "Debate: Exhibit B - Should art ever be censored?".

Europeans. According to them, Bailey's representation objectifies African people and ignores how black history is way more than that.⁸⁹ As mentioned by Salomé Ysebaert, *The age of colonial exhibitions* had received the same criticism, some believed the exhibition portrayed black people as victims. However, she responded that they needed to see the exhibition in order to criticize it, but some of her peers even refused to do so. Similar was the situation with *Exhibit B*. Lee Jasper, one of the main opponents of the show, as well as Sara Myers, both declared they had not seen the show.⁹⁰ When asked the reasons, Jasper explained that there was enough media coverage to understand the nature of the show, so he did not need to see it to know it was racist. In defence of this, Bailey explained how his work needed to be seen in order to be understood. He also believed that the media's report on the show, made it misunderstood.⁹¹ When looking at the picture of *Exhibit B*, published by the media, people perceive a feeling of humiliation, objectification, and reaffirmation of white supremacy behind his work, especially because it is done by a white man. Participating in the show instead is a different experience as the interaction with the actors would make the audience feel uncomfortable, it would make them feel objectified.⁹² As Bailey was confident about the powerful message of his show, he invited some of the protestors in Paris to see it. And according to him, at the end of the exhibition, they apologised to him, realizing the importance of his work. In his own words 'One-to-one intimacy is fundamental for the exhibition experience'.⁹³ When comparing the exhibition experience with that of *Exhibit B*, *The age of colonial exhibitions* did not have the same effect. Visiting the exhibition or looking at the picture of the exhibition does not make a big difference for a visitor. As the interactive part is very limited, Tervuren's exhibition cannot leave the same impact as *Exhibit B*, neither it can be misunderstood by the media's coverage. The critics moved to Bailey and accused him of reproducing a human zoo, of 'exploiting' black people for Westerns to be entertained. On the contrary, most of the actors involved in his show were artists themselves who supported Bailey's project. In defence of the show, many of the performers decided to publish their opinion regarding its cancellation and to support Bailey. During the BBC interview where Lee Jasper accused *Exhibit B* of being offensive and racist, and the Barbican of not having taken into consideration the London Black community, Stella Odunlami, artist and performer involved in *Exhibit B*, explained that the show was made for a larger audience and not just for Londoners. All the artists involved were educated about the

⁸⁹ "Debate: Exhibit B - Should art ever be censored?".

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ *Kultur Struktur*.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ France24, 2014.

topic and chose to participate as they thought it had a powerful antiracist message.⁹⁴ As Brett Bailey also explained, the installations were chosen and organised in order to denounce the colonial legacy. He juxtaposed the past with the present to show the roots of present forms of racism while portraying the colonial past as cruel as it was. Although Bailey understands how those scenes might have been very provocative for black people as they still face a lot of racism in Europe, he believes it is necessary to show the audience another side of history they were not taught in school.⁹⁵ As Brett Bailey admitted, his work was provocative and disturbing, and so showed the reactions. *The age of colonial exhibitions*, instead, had a softer approach. The exhibition was also meant to show an unknown side of history; however, it was not made to leave a mark on people. It had a passive approach that aimed at educating people. When asked about the exhibition's success, Couttenier mentioned that in his opinion it had an impact on the audience but there were no official ways to measure it. Reconsidering the aims of *The age of colonial exhibitions*, I have asked Couttenier and Ysebaert whether these were achieved. They both believe that the exhibition was the first occasion for the RMCA to talk about racism. According to them, this step had to be taken. They also mentioned how *The age of colonial exhibitions* attracted the first positive critiques of the RMCA. Apart from this optimistic view, Couttenier admits that photography is not that powerful, and in such an exhibition where photographs were the main component, this might have become 'boring' for the visitors. Ysebaert also mentions that photography dehumanizes its protagonists. The people portrayed in the pictures were presented without their stories, and their effect on the audience depends on the audience's background. Compared to *Exhibit B*, Couttenier believes that his exhibition had a more nuanced approach. As he himself had visited *Exhibit B*, he recognizes Bailey had the same aims as him. Despite this, Couttenier thinks that people are not ready yet to face reality as it was presented in *Exhibit B* and that emotionally distancing yourself from pictures is possible but distancing yourself from people staring at you is not. But then again, are their aims so similar? *The age of colonial exhibitions* brought positive critiques to the RMCA, it opened a dialogue about racism in the museum. But there are no comments about the impact on the visitors. Ysebaert says that people she knows from her collective refused to see the exhibition especially because of its location. Some criticized the exhibition as it shows once again black people as victims, but she believes the exhibition needs to be seen as it does not only show the history of human zoos, but it also explains how certain ideologies were made

⁹⁴ "Debate: Exhibit B - Should art ever be censored?"

⁹⁵ France24, 2014.

and spread. Learning about the history of racism enables the fight against racism in the present. But relying on my experience of visiting the exhibition, during the interview I mentioned the lack of interaction with the audience. Ysebaert then admitted she agrees there was a lack of interaction, and that for most people unaware of human zoos, the exhibition did not have the impact she desired. Despite these negative outcomes, both Couttenier and Ysebaert were satisfied with receiving positive critics from the press and bringing such an exhibition to the RMCA.

Both repeatedly mentioned how *The age of colonial exhibitions* had had a positive effect on the Royal Museum for Central Africa, but this is the problem. Most of the reviews about *The age of colonial exhibitions* did not address the content of the exhibition, they referred to its location and its impact on the RMCA. Curators explained how they wanted the exhibition to be in the RMCA as it was the ‘scene of the crime’ and as it is an institution that still needs to be decolonised. They succeeded in changing press opinions about the museum, and in proposing a decolonial exhibition. However, there have not been any comments about the main aims of the exhibition. The curators aimed at educating the audience about ethnological expositions and at raising awareness about the construction of racism. Whether these aims have been achieved or not cannot be measured, yet there have not been reviews regarding these matters. All the critics mentioned in the interviews were moved internally, while all the public comments on *The age of colonial exhibitions* refer to its location. I also asked curators about their opinion on *Exhibit B* in comparison to *The age of colonial exhibitions*. Couttenier had the chance to see the show and admitted he was shocked after he had left. He also mentioned how *Exhibit B* had a stronger emotional component, *The age of colonial exhibitions* lacks, however, he believes current society is not prepared for such a traumatic experience as that organized by Brett Bailey. Ysebaert instead had not seen the live performance, but she had heard of it. Apart from agreeing with Couttenier about the fact that society is not ready yet to confront live theatre about human zoos, she believes that re-enacting certain scenes can be very painful for the black community. She also sustains that in order to face the past and improve the present, reproducing history is unnecessary. On the contrary, we need to ‘rewrite’ history. This same critic she has mentioned for the results of *The age of colonial exhibitions* as she thinks it lacked an explicit reference to the present. In her opinion, the exhibition she worked at lacked a section where the visitors could see how human zoos relate to current racism and then understand the reasons for the whole project. Another failure for her relates to the RMCA, in fact, she realises that the exhibition brought positive critics to the museum, yet when the exhibition would be over, the

RMCA would remain the same colonial museum, without any trace of the exhibition. On the contrary, *Exhibit B* with all its controversies and backlash has definitely had an impact on his audience and also on those that refused to see it. The first article of *The Guardian* which caused protests in London defined the show as ‘unbearable and essential’. It praises Brett Bailey for taking the risk of representing hidden aspects of history and confronting the cruel reality of colonialism.⁹⁶ According to Chikha and Arnaut “The heavy atmosphere of shame, guilt, and mourning of the human installation brings together visitors and actors in a joint undertaking of morally assessing each other’s conduct and engages them in a process that produces ‘good’ and ‘bad’ subjects, whereby the good ones are the victims of ‘human-zoo’ dehumanisation and the bad ones are the perpetrators.”⁹⁷ Jelle Saminnadin, performer of *Exhibit B* in the French cities, explained to *The New York Times* how she could see the reaction of visitors during the performance. While looking at them, she could see the shame in their eyes, some visitors even started crying. In the same article, Pascal Faracci, director of museums of Poitiers, compared *Exhibit B* to *Human Zoo, l’invention du sauvage*, and said how the latter did not have the same emotional impact as Bailey’s tableaux vivant.⁹⁸ Apart from positive comments showing how *Exhibit B* reached its aims, the negative critics could be also seen as useful for Bailey’s aims. He wanted to shed a light on the real colonial history and racist episodes of current society, with the protests he attracted more attention to his show and on the topic. While he believes he has failed into creating a dialogue with his project, he caught the media’s attention on the themes of racism, discrimination, and black minorities’ artistic representation.⁹⁹ The protests sparked in London are evidence of how delicate and sensitive the topic of racism still is. It also shows the difference between countries, in this case, the UK is still suffering from its heavy colonial past, however, it is not ready yet to deal with it. On the other hand, this case shows how black minorities are still feeling misrepresented and excluded from local institutions. Despite Bailey himself becoming the subject of their rage and disapproval, he ‘encouraged’ them to spread their voice and protest against what they had seen as racist and offensive towards the black community. Regarding *The age of colonial exhibitions*, it did not exercise

⁹⁶ Lyn Gardner, “Edinburgh festival 2014 review: Exhibit B – facing the appalling reality of Europe’s colonial past”, *The Guardian*, August 12, 2014. <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2014/aug/12/exhibit-b-edinburgh-festival-2014-review>

⁹⁷ Chikha and Arnaut, 677-678.

⁹⁸ Doreen Carvajal, “On Display, and on a Hot Seat”, *The New York Times*, November 25, 2014. <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/11/26/arts/exhibit-b-a-work-about-human-zoos-stirs-protests.html>

⁹⁹ *Kultur Struktur*.

the same effect. However, it attracted attention to the RMCA, it was the first fully decolonized exhibition held there, and it will hopefully encourage more exhibitions of the same nature.

As mentioned by Couttenier, photography dehumanises its subject as these are seen without their stories, but also, allow the spectators to distance themselves from what they are seeing. Live performance as *Exhibit B*, imposes the story on the visitor. He is unable to distance himself from what he is seeing as the setting forces him to experience it. The spectator faces history without filters, and he has to deal with the cruelty of those scenes. The audience of *Exhibit B* was forced into becoming aware of colonialism, racism, and discrimination. The visitors of *The age of colonial exhibitions* could look away, or see the objects as part of a historical period distant from them. The agency left to the visitors during the exhibition required them to have background knowledge about ethnological expositions and colonialism in order to understand the relation to the present and the importance of such exhibition. With *Exhibit B*, the less the audience knew about colonialism the better it was for Bailey's portrayal of colonialism as it was not taught in schools. He tried to show people that all they know about colonialism is just one version of the story, it is a romanticization of the reality to bury Europeans' colonial crimes. Entering *Exhibit B* with basic knowledge about colonialism did not affect the results of the performance, as the audience was forced to acknowledge the truth even if they were unaware of it. They were forced to compare colonialism and present episodes of racism and see the link between them. They were forced to be part of the scene and to admit their ancestors' role in those crimes. The spectators of *Exhibit B* would leave the performance with new awareness. They could be shocked, impressed, or even disturbed, but the exhibition would have had an impact on them they could not forget. *The age of colonial exhibition* instead, could have had a strong impact on some visitors while on others no impact at all. Couttenier believes the audience of his exhibition would leave the museum thinking about human zoos and racism, reflecting on what they had just seen and making sense of it in the present. On one side this result cannot be evaluated in any way, on the other hand, considering the form of the exhibition, and my own experience, many visitors were not as affected and moved as Couttenier believes. As a passive exhibition, the audience could completely distance itself from what they were seeing. On one hand, they were able to look at the photographs and the objects as specimens of the past, a period of history far from today and that we have already dealt with. On the other hand, the display dehumanised the victims of human zoos as their stories were not told within the exhibition, making them anonymous people. As mentioned previously the exhibition also lacked a clear allusion to the present and how racism is linked to colonial zoos.

The only way to involve the audience is to address them directly, to make them feel part of the exhibition so that they feel their responsibility in the problem, and that is what Brett Bailey achieved with *Exhibit B. The age of colonial zoos* also achieved its intents partially, in fact, it managed to attract new visitors to the RMCA with a decolonial exhibition, however it did not achieve its main aims of raising awareness about human zoos and the birth of racism.

4.4. Reflections

As mentioned in my introductory chapter, the two exhibitions were chosen for their similarities, but at the same time differences. I also mentioned how I had the chance to visit *Human Zoo, the age of colonial exhibitions*, and this experience, together with the interviews I conducted, affected my view about the two exhibitions. When visiting the exhibition, the first impact on the audience is given by the building. The RMCA building is a colonial mausoleum that at first sight transmits a feeling of austerity. After entering the museum, I visited the temporary exhibition. On one hand, I was already aware of the history of the RMCA, so when visiting *The age of colonial exhibitions* I was biased by that knowledge, thus I had a critical approach towards anything I was viewing. On the other hand, the first impression was given by the building, an evident colonial glorification of King Leopold II. The exhibition itself looked different from the rest of the museum but hosting it in that space felt disrespectful towards the victims of human zoos. The display was very simple, there were very few descriptions and the explanatory videos available were only in Dutch and French. These two aspects made me think the exhibition was not meant for everyone but mostly for Belgians. According to Ysebaert, this was also a limitation of the exhibition. While interviewing her and Couttenier, I realized how I had completely missed the sentences on the walls. Or at least I had read them, but I did not look at them as part of the exhibition. I also agreed with what they said about the dehumanizing nature of photography, in fact, most of the pictures did not have a label or they only had very brief descriptions, resulting in the people portrayed being anonymous, without a personal story apart from being captives of human zoos. After the exhibition, I decided to visit the rest of the museum. Then I started questioning myself why an exhibition about human zoos would be held in such a museum. It was obvious that the exhibition was a critic of colonialism and ethnological expositions, but the permanent collections did not have the same approach. On the contrary, it barely addressed Belgian colonialism in Congo and focused on portraying African culture as seen by Belgium. This narrative was in high contrast with the building, which instead was referencing the King's colonial achievement in all corners. After seeing the whole

museum, I was left with mixed feelings about what I had seen. The contrast between *The age of colonial exhibitions* and the permanent collection made me feel uncomfortable with what I was viewing. The contrast between the view did not reinforce the message of the temporary exhibition but vanished it. Despite Couttenier's explanation of why the exhibition was held in the RMCA, I still believe its execution was not powerful enough to contrast the museum's controversial nature. Evidence of this is the many reviews about the exhibition. Most of them refer to the RMCA and not to the content of the exhibition. This experience is the main reason that brought me to compare *The age of colonial exhibitions* to *Exhibit B*. *Exhibit B* was hardly criticized for many aspects, however, those critics were all related to its execution and not its location. It was a representation of history, as horrific as it was, and an explicit critic of the present. It rehumanized the victims of colonialism and human zoos, it gave them agency and power over the white man, visiting the exhibition. But this provocative format made the critics focus on the execution and not on the results. According to the curatorial aims of *The age of colonial exhibitions* mentioned in the exhibition's official book, curators aimed at rehumanizing the victims of human zoos, however photographs did the exact opposite, and both Couttenier and Ysebaert admitted it. Moreover, the exhibition was held in a place made to celebrate what the curators meant to criticize. And instead of generating critics, it made the RMCA look like an improved institution without addressing the issues of the museum and its future after *The age of colonial exhibitions*. In contrast, *Exhibit B* was projected as a place for collective learning. Bailey wanted to share his finding with the public and the actors participating in his project. It was a place for improvement and learning; however, he faced a society that was not ready to acknowledge such truth and that prefers to criticize than to be criticized.

I see these exhibitions as opposite to each other but also very similar. The comparison and analysis of both shows how the difficulties encountered by the curators involved socio-political dynamics they had not taken into consideration. The reactions of the public cannot be foreseen, moreover, it cannot be overgeneralized as the results were different according to the cities in which the exhibitions were presented. In the case of *The age of colonial exhibitions*, the exhibition was not provocative enough to trigger a reaction in Belgian society. For *Exhibit B*, instead, the exhibition was too provocative. But the biggest difference is in the result. Apart from the impact the exhibitions could have had on each singular visitor, *Exhibit B* succeeded in creating a dialogue about a new topic, it attired media attention to the issues of racism and the representation of black people. *The age of colonial exhibitions* could not do that. The

curators' approach was respectful, nuanced, and critical but probably the only risk they took is what resulted in the exhibition not being commented on his topics but only for its location.

Conclusion

Human zoos and colonialism are some of the darkest events of human history however, this did not prevent ethnological expositions from becoming an attraction in the daily life of the Europeans living between the 19th and 20th centuries. Thinking about them today makes their existence almost impossible to believe. As the curators of *Human Zoo* and *Exhibit B* aimed at showing, acknowledging the existence of human zoos enables the understanding and deconstruction of the origins of racism, fundamental steps to overcome racism and discrimination in contemporary society. This link between human zoos and colonialism, and the issues in the present, affected the results of the two exhibitions. *The age of colonial exhibitions* and *Exhibit B* touched upon sensitive topics and showed how these still problematic topics in our society. The exhibitions shared the same aims: raising awareness about human zoos and colonialism while highlighting their legacy in the present. As explained by Bailey and Couttenier in their interviews, our society is still intrinsically affected by racial ideologies. Moreover, there is still a large portion of the Western population unaware of the real face of colonialism or still convinced that Europeans brought civilisation to Africa. Despite these common aims, the curators had very different interpretations of history, thus their exhibitions differed substantially. In fact, the different reactions to *The age of colonial exhibitions* and *Exhibit B* are due to their executions and their interaction with the visitors. Through their comparison it is evident that the starting point was the same, however, the results were different. The exhibitions have been compared according to aims, executions, critics, and results. Concerning the execution, Baileys tried to tackle serious issues of our society, opening the eyes of the Western audience with live theatre. Though his approach was considered too provocative and shocking for his aims. Many in Europe are still denying the horrors of colonialism and believe it was beneficial for Africa. Others are aware of the truth but are not ready to face it as brutal as it was. Brett Bailey made the mistake of targeting his performance on the Western white audience regardless of the black audience. In this way, he ignored the effect his tableau vivant could have on those that were the victims of colonialism and human zoos, this resulted in their resentment. White spectators were definitely shocked after leaving the performance, they were feeling ashamed and guilty. But how effective was that in educating them about current racist and discriminatory behaviours? Somehow, they could still distance themselves and look at the scenes as if they belonged to the past only, or as something that did not relate to them but only to their ancestors. The black audience instead, would perceive *Exhibit B* very differently. It could be seen as a painful re-enactment of their daily lives and

struggles.¹⁰⁰ Some of the protestors, after seeing the performance, asked Bailey why only the victims were represented in his show and not the perpetrators.¹⁰¹ Bailey explained that he wanted to focus on the victims however he did not really have an answer to this question and admitted his mistake. The approach used in *The age of colonial exhibitions* was completely different. It did not reproduce the past, but it deconstructed the birth of racism based on the racial classification of the colonial period. The exhibition presented ‘facts’ such as objects, documents, and photographs. It did not reproduce history, but it reconstructed it. The exhibition could be seen as shocking for its topics but not for its execution. In this case, the curators did not have a specific target as their aim was education, however, according to Couttenier, it was mostly visited by Belgians and Americans after the positive reviews in *The New York Times*. The exhibition itself was not provocative but the location was, the RMCA is still considered a colonial museum, and the exhibition setting was in contrast with its content. This contrast affected the opinions of the exhibition as well as the affluence of visitors, discouraged to visit *The age of colonial exhibitions* as they thought it would be similar to the museum's permanent collection. Despite the different approach, Blanchard’s exhibition was still criticised for its representation of black people. As mentioned by Ysebaert, and similarly to the critics moved to *Exhibit B*, members of the Belgian black community thought the exhibition was portraying them as victims and it did not portray the white perpetrators. Another aspect that was criticised, and that I have noticed myself, was the lack of interaction and thus impact on the audience, as visitors were left all the agency of how to experience the exhibition. Thus, both exhibitions have been criticised for their execution still some of these critics can be seen as a positive result. In fact, both *Exhibit B* and *The age of colonial exhibitions* have attracted press attention to the topic of human zoos. In particular, they placed the victims of colonialism at the centre of their projects. *The age of colonial exhibitions* succeeded in portraying Belgian colonialism closer to its reality than the whole Royal Museum for Central Africa ever did. The curators addressed the cruelty of ethnological exposition while criticising the dehumanization of natives within the process. However, this was not perceivable by all visitors as the message was implicit. On the other hand, *Exhibit B* was a general critic of colonialism, it did not focus on one specific country. The scenes portrayed were reproductions of the past and the present, which juxtaposed enabled Bailey’s message to be explicit for the spectator. Compared to *Exhibit B*, *The age of colonial exhibitions* softer approach might have been the right way to

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 266.

¹⁰¹ *Kultur Struktur*.

address the topic in current society, but it did not succeed in raising awareness or encouraging the dialogue. Even if it has brought attention to the past and the RMCA, it did not address the issues of racism in present society. But it also did not have a permanent effect on the RMCA as once the exhibition was over the museum just remained the same. The exhibition was planned to question people's knowledge and self-awareness about racism and the sentences on the walls were meant to trigger the audience into rethinking their daily behaviour towards minorities. However, these were not effective enough, reading them was optional and not significant for the objects on display. The very limited interaction affected the success of the curatorial aims, but also the background knowledge of the visitors, or lack of it, must have affected their understanding of the exhibition. *The age of colonial exhibitions* and *Exhibit B* could be seen as antipodes. On one side, there is an exhibition displaying real pictures and documents about the past. On the other side, there is an exhibition recreating the past relying on live performances. *Exhibit B* was too provocative, *The age of colonial exhibitions* was not provocative enough. But according to the critics moved from black communities and the interviews to the curators, both exhibitions did not take into consideration the black voice enough to make them feel represented. When evaluating these exhibitions and taking into consideration their lack of involvement of minorities, both projects can be seen as a failure. They did attire attention to the topic, but did they raise awareness about the relationship between colonialism and present-day racism? They surely opened a dialogue about the topic but did not leave the mark they expected to leave in the Western world.

Illustrations



Fig.1. Saartje Baartman, naked. British Museum.

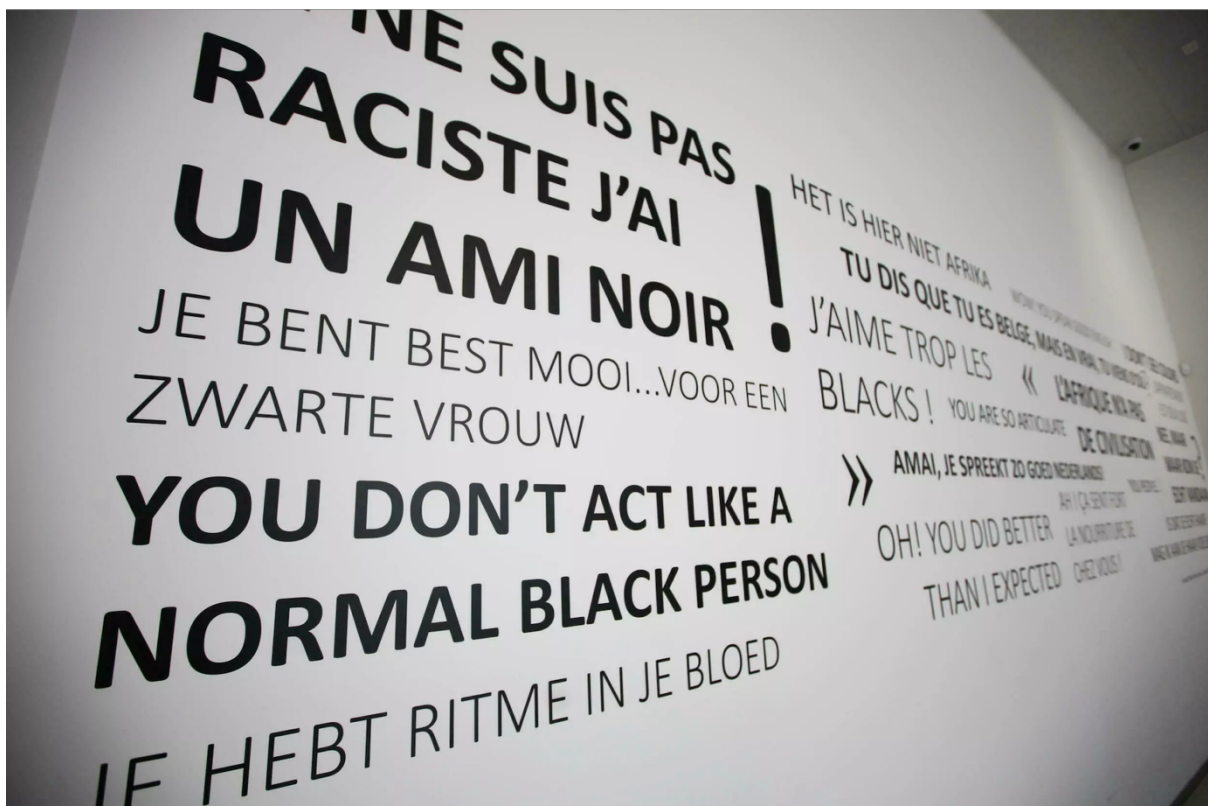


Fig.2. Wall with "micro-aggressive" phrases, created by Marie-Reine Iyumva and Salomé Ysebaert of the Africa Museum in Tervuren, Belgium, 17 February 2022.

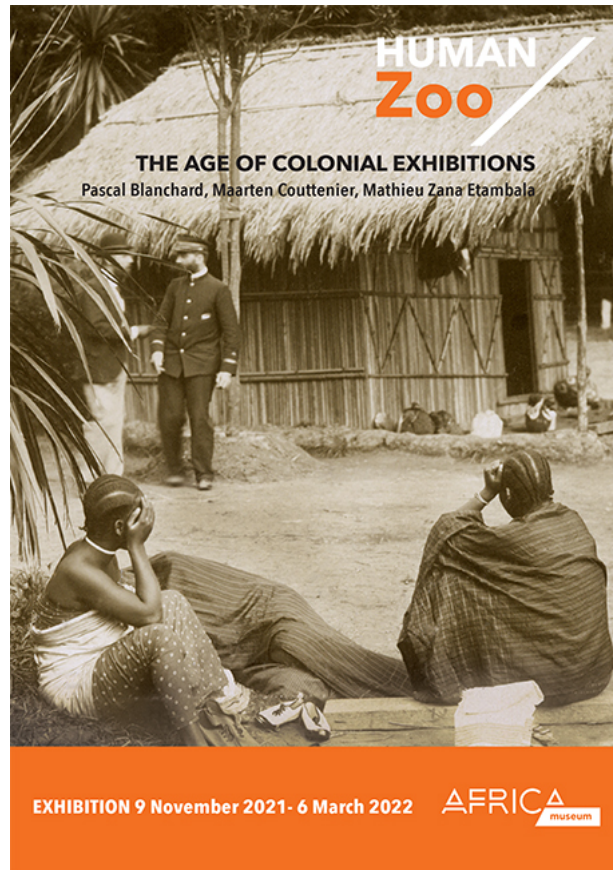


Fig.3. Exhibition poster, the Royal Museum for Central Africa, Tervuren.



Fig.4. Namibian Quartet, *Exhibit B*, Edinburgh International Festival, 2014.



Fig.5. A Place in the Sun: quarters of an officer of the German Colonial Forces, Windhoek 1906, Brett Bailey.

Credits illustrations

Fig. 1. Downloaded June 9, 2022.

Brown, Mercadies. “The Human Zoo: A Critique of Brett Bailey’s Exhibit B.” *Digital Literature Review* 2 (2015): 106–13. <https://doi.org/10.33043/DLR.2.0.106-113>.

Fig. 2. Downloaded June 9, 2022.

<https://www.rfi.fr/en/africa/20220217-human-zoo-expo-in-belgium-s-africa-museum-highlights-colonial-past-as-eu-au-summit-continues>

Fig. 3. Downloaded June 9, 2022.

<https://www.africamuseum.be/en>

Fig. 4. Downloaded June 9, 2022.

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/articles/12ynxPVNKF1pYVrzZB9R2sM/exhibit-b-edinburghs-controversial-art-show>

Fig. 5. Downloaded June 9, 2022.

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Appendix A: Interviews

Interview with Marteen Couttenier – 16th February 2022

1. Do you think that the Royal Museum for Central Africa was the right location for *Human Zoo, the age of colonial exhibitions*?

So, you have maybe a permanent exhibition that is not decolonial and then you have temporary exhibitions that try to be decolonial. So that antagonism between temporary exhibitions and the permanent exhibition between the 1980s and the years 2020. So this evolves like society evolves and there's conflicts within the museum. Like there's conflicts in football teams and in universities. To me, it was very important to have it in Tervuren because it is the scene of the crime. So to speak, and seven people died over there. So to me, it was very important to point to the 15 people from Congo that died in Belgium, between 1894-1897, and 1958. To point out to the underlying structures that legitimized human zoos, human race, and the current effects of that which is racism. And so we worked with Salomé Ysebaert and Merie-Reine Iyumva, both working in the museum now, to illustrate how this racism is still occurring today, so they put these sentences on the wall. And that works very well. That's the most important part of the exhibition. I think. And it was not present in (the exhibition) in Paris and in Liege. That's a bit of the force of the exhibition I think, that Pascal is always listening to new ideas and new interventions also by artists, like Teddy and Romeo did. But it's highly political. People on the left will say, or have already said to me, "yes, but it's still in Tervuren and you're still a colonial Museum and you are a decolonial person and what you do with the diaspora is added afterwards, and it's a thin layer on what is essentially still neo-colonialist. Yeah, it's always difficult to work in such a museum, with such as history, that is weighing and pulling you down and sucking the energy out of you. But I am convinced that you have to find it, and you have to create exhibitions that have some inputs. I was working at the renovation of the permanent exhibition from 2010 until 2016. And then I left the project because I didn't agree with the way it was developed. I was present during the meeting and those were horrible, that's why I left. Because people don't listen. And I hate people that don't listen. So it's all about dialogue. And if you if you think that you're better than somebody else, and you have the truth in your possession, then you quit all conversation. And with this exhibition, we tried to open conversation.

2. So, how was the exhibition received?

There's no analysis made of (the visitors). There's only document numbers and nationality also. So a lot of Belgian people visited the exhibition but also a lot of Americans. Because we had a very

positive impression in the New York Times. New York Times national, nationwide, and then New York Times International there was half a page which was very, very positive. What is most striking is that press was overall positive. I have not read a negative report, which is for Tervuren unique. I mean, normally, like your promoter has said, it's the museum we love to hate. So there is a lot of bashing going on. It can't do anything good almost. In this case there is no negative argument. Yesterday I visited the exhibition with an Afro American professor in law. So very critical person and she was depressed when she left but she also thought it was a very good exhibition. So it's not an exhibition you visit on a Sunday afternoon and then afterwards you go for an ice cream. No, you go home, and you feel bad for three days. That's the goal and also to make people think and not see colonization as something as "Oh, we did so good in Congo. And we taught them how to write and read." No. We destructed a culture by importing people here to look at them and to point your finger at them, that is the final humiliation for people, treating them like animals in the zoo.

I was working in an environment with colleagues that don't agree. So all my colleagues within the History Department don't agree with what I did. Today, they put me in a very uncomfortable place.

3. Why do you think your colleagues do not agree with your choice of curating *Human Zoo*?

Is it because of the theme or because of the location?

Well, there are still people that think that we did good in Congo. And there are people that think Leopold II is a genius. These people exist, that publish books. They even are in the commission of the parliament, in the Congo report. And these people have political power also because they're in the commission. The global societal problem, which is in museums but also in universities. Even in Leiden, I'm sure, there will be professors that are pro colonization or not so much pro but they say "We don't have to look into that sort of past" and then there are other people like Hugo DeBlock, who are seen by those people is activists. But according to me, these activists are academics that finally have the courage to show what really happened. And so you're in a conflict zone where it's difficult to work. When did postcolonial studies really breakthrough was in the end of the 70s, 80s, 90s and in some universities it is still ongoing. It's so recent. I have studied in Leuven University, it was very traditional... Middle Ages, new times, contemporary history, and so all the classifications were made by Western. (...) If you look at it now, it's very strange. When I went to anthropology that was a completely different world, completely different. We talked about post-colonial studies and how history became a hybrid concept. That's also very recent, and that was in 1959 or so. And now, in the history, there's still continuing this very Western approach.

So we had one co-curator, (...) Mathieu is Congolese by birth and he came to Belgium when he was very young but he retired recently. And I think that there are no Congolese professors now anymore

in Leuven. Whatsoever, all faculties, this is a huge, huge problem, not only, but also in universities. Which become these white spaces. Ivory towers. Big problem. The problem is that in Congo, there are no history students anymore. Zero. Because Congo is economically destroyed, and so people don't go to university. They can't pay it. And the ones that go to university will study economics or IT. So you have this power imbalance. And then you ask Congolese people to act like we do in restitution debate. So we are going to retribute your objects to you and we are going to tell you how you have to take care of them. Totally Western framework. Nobody listens to the Congolese. So, I'm more and more convinced that you should focus on colonization as a Western problem and the effects of it. (...)

4. Have you ever heard of *Exhibit B*? What do you think about it? Why do you think it has received so much criticism?

Yes, I visited it. I know definitely the maker (Brett Bailey), he came to Tervuren one day. And then I know also people that were acting from the cages, and I think it's the same goal and to fight racism. But the means were very different. As you see *Human Zoo* now in Tervuren is very quiet. Everybody's very silent. And everybody walks in the museum style, hands behind your back. So people can create distance also between photographs (and themselves). And they don't move, they speak or not look in the eye. And *Exhibit B* was very in your face because it's of course living people looking at you. They looked at you like if they said, "It's your fault that I'm here." At least that's what I felt. And so you left and you were sick for a week.

5. Do you think people are not ready for that type of confrontation?

Maybe but these were actors, of course. When the show is over, they get out of the cage. They go home. They are paid and so it's not a human zoo so there's a big difference. But people don't like to be confronted with their own past. Britain is a very peculiar place. So if you visit London, and you visit British Museum and Imperial War Museum, they're very convinced about having spread civilization and then you have the Commonwealth... Belgium is surreal countries. Everything happens here. This is different than London. Brussels is totally different than London. And if you would do that show in New York, it would cause riots as well. Afro-Americans have another opinion about things and diaspora than in Belgium.

6. In *Humaz Zoo* exhibition, who is telling the story? Whose perspective is the main one?

I mean, the main storyteller is Pascal Blanchard. Like I explained, he listens to people and so he constantly adds things. So for example, the research of materials of Etambala is in the exposition.

Because he sees things differently than I do. (...) So it's very important that he is there because he's a Congolese intellectual. So it's very important to have that person there to stress that all not people are primitive like in the humans zoos. Africans are also intellectuals. And I added something on the history of racial ideas which is then based on my research and then Teddy Mezina added something on inversion of racism. Salomé and Marie-Reine added something on contemporary racism. So according to me, there are many curators, but only three have the name of curators. According to me Salomé and Marie-Reine are as much as curators as I am. They made the most important thing at the end, which is the most popular and has the most impact. (...)

7. When working at the exhibition, did you have to take into consideration the museum's name?

I have left that thought behind. Lot of people are afraid to lose their job, if they write critical articles, they think the director will be angry and they'll get fired. Yes. Also in universities, if I'm too critical, the department will think that I'm an activist, I might lose my job. But the exhibition we've shown that you can be very critical and have a very positive press. We are not inventing things we are just showing. I mean, I am not shouting, I'm not doing something emotional with a series of critical exhibitions. The diaspora is always into emotion. Yeah, but this is not emotional, but it is emotional. I think the tone in the exhibition was also a bit understated, it's very sober. But the reactions in the public are very emotional. People cry, people are upset, people are depressed when they leave, they are very silent. And I think that sort of emotional reaction is a positive thing. The idea that we always have to be rational and composed is not a good idea. I think people are not stones. And academics are not machines. (...)

They're just pictures you display and that's the disadvantage of the exhibition. At a certain point of time, you say "Okay, another human zoo, another, another one." You know, in the beginning people look at images, but in the end, they move faster. Don't look at the people on the pictures. But these people have a family. They have children, and those children had children, and those children are still alive. They have opinion about things, about their ancestors that are, for example, in Tervuren. They want them back. I think that's the next step. Now you dehumanize people by showing those pictures without telling the public who they are. Some people say you show these images and so you reconfirm racism. And although I don't totally agree, the way out is to interview people that are linked with a family history to those events. It will be a beautiful change in the future. It's also very new subject and so this research will develop new perspectives. But if you continue in that field of research, I'm certain you will find new perspectives and ideas so that's a good thing.

Interview with Salomè Ysebaert – 23rd February 2023

1. What was your role in the exhibition?

I am working as staff for the exhibition in the museum. Thus, my job is to help to organize the exhibition, ... to help to coordinate with my boss. It was my first exhibition that I coordinated, and I also helped to give feedback, but all the main things of the exhibition are from the curators. I just gave sometimes advice (...) and you know, little things in the exhibition (..) it's just my job, my role is maybe to try and put another voice, maybe because I'm young and and also, I am half Congolese. I've also other narratives, I think it is also my role to try to support diversity in the exhibition. I put more African voice, I don't like to use African voice because it is too broad but yeah, that's African voice in the exhibition, and not Western voice.

2. Were you responsible for the sentences on the walls?

Yes, with my colleague Marie Rein from Rwanda. We saw that there was not really a link with racism today. And we thought it was very important to put it in exhibition because in the exhibition you can see how racism is created and propagated through the human zoo. And we chose them (the sentences) to make a wall about racism, but we chose for microaggression for different reasons, actually, because it's the most common form of racism in our society. They are all sentences we hear every day. And people don't know this but when you receive this (comments) every day, it will have a negative impact on mental wellbeing. Because these micro-aggressions actually discriminate people from a marginalized group, but indirectly. It is another form of racism.

This space for us, it was more for discussion, to show the people that racism is a system that we all live in. And it's really important that people realize and that they can see racism, because we are all embedded in this imaginary in the exhibition. You can see how this imaginary is created. It's everybody's role. We want to say if we can create these theories, we can discuss them and deconstruct them. This was very important for us to show and also we put on the on the ground, like data from articles and it's about racist events in the Belgian society. It's also important for us to show to people that racism is not something that is finished, it's still there.

3. Which were your aims? Do you think you have managed to achieve these aims and like reach the people in the way you wanted?

It's half half. You have people that did not know about human zoos. A lot of people were really shocked. Sometimes when I'm done visiting the exhibition with a group, I try to discuss with them. And last week with a students' group some of them were crying. Some (of them said about the

sentences) “I say this every day, and and I didn't realize it came from there which was something racist”. But for the people coming from the diaspora, it was not so interesting to them, it was reductionist. Some images were really hard for them to see them again.

But I think we have achieved our aims. We had a lot of media attention, a lot of students came, and I think we did it. It was really good and also it was the first time that in the museum we talked about racism. Because, you know, the history of the museum that it contributed to the colonial propaganda. And also, it's really good. So, it was a really necessary exhibition. Really important.

4. So, do you think that that museum was the right location for such an exhibition?

The museum is very problematic, and I'm working there but every time I'm like, I want to stop but it is the only one Belgian and they have so much. The collection of the museum is so rich, and they can do so much. And like we've decided for the *Human Zoo* exhibition it was good place because most of the visitors are white: rich people, or students or schools. Now in Belgium, a lot of schools are going to the African Museum, and for me that is the reason it was good, it was the right place. I'm working at the colonial exhibition room in the museum and it's small. It's the smallest exhibition space of the museum but it's the most important theme. It's really problematic. They talk about the criminal history, but not enough. It's too small. It should be the first room, the first thing you see when you come in, so you can also better understand where the objects were taken. Because you just walk in the museum and you don't see anything about colonization, you cannot read something about colonization. There is no storyline, but you can see it in the museum. It is not made by one person; every room is made by someone different. They just do what they want to do, and they don't see what the others are doing.

5. Have you ever heard of *Exhibit B*? What do you think about it? Why do you think it received so much criticism?

I think people see the pictures as away from them. If you see people in front of you (like in *Exhibit B*), it's in your face. There is no distance and that's also the reason. And I think you realize more when you can see it in your face. I saw some pictures (of *Exhibit B*) and it's too hard. And also to do it again...Why? I don't like this idea. It's like repeating history. I also don't like to show the pictures again. Just for me, it's more important to rewrite history. You can show some pictures, but I think it's more important that... if you have too shocking pictures, it is also possible to show them in other ways. (..) Okay, but now I think we know these pictures. And if you're just showing them (...) you have to show respect for the victims and people in the diaspora. For our people, they are linked to our history. It's important to find a way for both.

It's difficult because racism is a consequence (of human zoo), it emerged at the same moment. (In the exhibition) it's more of a Western voice. It's a white man actually telling the story (Pascal Blanchard).

Some people just do not want to see the exhibition because we are in this museum. I'm active in a collective. And yeah, I was talking with other member of the collective, and they were like "We don't like this exhibition, because it depicts black people in a bad way again, it just shows pictures we don't want to see". But they never came to the exhibition so how do they know. Because the exhibition is not only about us about African people. Also Asian people, and Maghrebin people, Indians, too, so diverse. It is important for them to see this kind of exhibition to think, to change the narrative about it, about this history about Human Zoo. But they just don't want to go to the Africa Museum because of the reputation of the museum. They also criticized the poster but when I told the story, you know, behind this picture, they were like "Okay, now it's interesting". But you know it's difficult sometimes because you want to make something strong. It's only when you talk about it, or if you go in the museum with a guided tour, because otherwise you cannot find information about it. It's important that everybody knows why they choose this picture but because of the reputation of the museum people don't want to come to see and they just criticize.

The museum is still the same and permanent exhibition is not going to change in an hour. Going back to the racist sentences wall, they worked. Also my colleagues became aware that we have to change our narratives and the way we are thinking. I think for a lot of people inside the museum it was also really shocking. There was also internal debate when we first present the project. Not everybody was happy with it, and some people didn't understand as it was really confrontational. One colleague told me why I did not put sentences from white people saying good things about Africans. Why I didn't make the opposite of what I did. They thought it was too negative. They were not happy with the exhibition and with the wall. Some people told me they were really shocked about the sentences and that they are aware now and other people, they don't want to know, they just don't want to understand. They are in denial. Some colleagues told me "You really changed the way I'm thinking about others. And it's like okay, nice, but it is difficult in the museum.

Appendix B: Table

	<i>The age of colonial exhibitions</i>	<i>Exhibit B</i>
Topics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ethnological expositions • Belgian Colonialism • Origins of racism • Racism in present-day society 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Colonialism • Recent episodes of discrimination • Immigration • Racism in present-day society
Aims	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Deconstructing racism • Raising awareness about the existence of human zoos • Rehumanizing victims • Encourage visitors to question their behavior towards minorities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Revealing the real ‘face’ of colonialism to the Western society • Showing the relationship between the past and present • Rehumanizing the victims • Encourage visitors to question their knowledge about colonialism
Execution	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Display of visual material: photography, documents, objects, books, etc. • Wall of racism • Videos 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Live performance • Tableaux vivants • Music • Interactions between performer and visitor
Positive critics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Attributing media to the RMCA • First decolonial exhibition in the museum • Respectful approach 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Necessary for the West • Provocative • Victims (performers) exercise power on the perpetrators (audience) • Interactive
Negative critics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Little interactive • Objectifying black people • Portraying Africans as victims only • Non-involvement of black communities • Lack of connection between the present and the past • Controversial location which caused restricted visitors 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Too shocking • Objectifying black people • Portraying Africans as victims only • Non-involvement of black communities • Disrespectful and offensive • Perpetuating racism and discrimination
Results	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Attracted positive attention to the RMCA but not to the exhibition content • Visitors did not see the link with the present • Did not change the RMCA 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cancellation of the show • Attributed attention to the topics of human zoo, racism and discrimination • Had an impact on all visitors • Encouraged dialogue

Table 1: Visualization of the comparison between *The age of colonial exhibitions* and *Exhibit B*.