

Elephants in the Archive

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Abstract: This chapter is an attempt to show how racialised meaning is produced through art practice. It is founded on the following paradox: How can we reconcile ourselves with the fact that racism exists in society when the majority of Norwegians will publicly denounce it? I examine how prevailing art teaching practices are influenced by racial understandings of the self and the Other. Inspired by post-colonial theory, I interrogate experiences in my own White artist-educator practice to uncover power differences and acts of racial dominance. I examine the events of a visual art workshop through two central concepts, White innocence (Wekker, 2016) and the cultural archive (Said, 1993; Wekker, 2016), and consider the operationalisation of structural racial bias through digital technologies and contextualising spatial understanding of art practice.

This is an experimental text that aims to engage the viewer with their emotional embodied understanding of racial positioning as much as academic discourse. I employ the figure of the elephant as a narrative device to disturb reading patterns. The clumsy elephant is a disruptive element in the text, weaving together two distinct forms: the literary and fictive narrative, and the academic discourse. I conclude with the idea of decolonial aesthesis (Vázquez, 2020) as a tool to challenge the dominant aesthetic understanding of art practice as an individual form of expression. Thus, decolonisation or undoing erasure of otherised knowledges and experience is deemed a vital process imperative for students' well-being, as well as that of teacher educators and student teachers wishing to teach in a pluralistic society. I ask the reader to resonate with the unfolding of "White" gaps in a subjective understanding of the self and give discursive room for addressing the complexities of race through understanding how Whiteness works as a complex phenomenon within Norwegian art education.

Keywords: post-colonial, cultural archive, White innocence, racist lens, artistic research, teacher education, narratives



Figure 1. © Eriksen, H. (2022). Elephant and wheel of production.

Once upon a time, a very long time ago, in a very different golden moment (Eriksen, 2019) that stretches time in all dimensions, a young man gave me three gifts. The first is the vignette “I look like a hungry African” that you will find in Figure 2; it is both the start of and the never-ending journey. The second gift is a White elephant, an imaginary figure, a metaphor of mind and intuition, my constant companion and insisting guide (Fig. 1). When she rests, she finds food to think with before she guides us further. The final gift that the young man gave me is always in front of us, a pot of rainbow gold, always in the making: insight. Together, we will unpack these gifts and hopefully allow you to experience the web that the co-protagonists, that is, the elephant, the vignette and I, are entangled in. The White elephant is gently tapping me on the shoulder, reminding me of her presence; sometimes I forget her; perhaps her name is *Intuition*. She is a form that allows me to poke into painful spaces where logic will often stop. She is helping me to find a way back to the place where we, a world broken apart, can heal ourselves. She stops me in moments of rupture to return with a thread to lead me back to “I look like a hungry African”, like a visit to an elephants’ graveyard¹ where we turn the bones of our ancestors, mourning the past and searching for present-day meaning.

In this text I argue that destructive globalised radicalised discourses and hierarchies are not only a concern of those who are marked as Other and otherised in a false narrative but also those of us who, albeit unwittingly, maintain and thus benefit from them. I place the White² artist/teacher of contemporary image-making in Norway in the foreground rather than focusing on representation of the minoritised in the larger institutional structure. I centre Whiteness in order to understand how racialised hierarchies of difference are produced through me. How can it be that Scandinavian societies exhibit racialised hierarchies whilst avidly denouncing racist ideologies as seen by the reactions that the word *racist*

1 The elephants’ graveyard is a mythological place where older elephants go to die. Legend says that the elephant knows when it will die. In this sentence, I understand that the Elephant is telling me that something in me should die. In life, when an elephant comes across elephant bones they smell, move and toss them, they mourn their loss before being able to move forward.

2 White and Black are capitalised in this chapter to draw attention to politicised categories and positions of power. My premise is that in order to discuss a phenomenon we have to name it.

triggers? I will do so by taking a single incident and contextualising the situation through images, post-colonial thought and histories, different personal experiences, and identifying underlying digital imaging technology bias.

My approach skirts around the edges of qualitative research and I enter the project as a visual artist engaged in post-qualitative inquiry as described in St. Pierre (2019). Furthermore, I situate myself in a forceful emerging paradigm steering from the qualitative paradigm towards a performative one (Østern et al., 2021). Both the performative paradigm and post-qualitative inquiry resonate with artistic practices in the field of research. The performative paradigm forwarded by Østern et al. (2021) centres the researcher and her entanglement with specific, complex phenomena in time and space:

A performative paradigm produces a space for movement, (artistic) freedom, (post-qualitative) experimentation and inclusion. A performative research paradigm also offers provocations that shake long-established notions about what research is and should be. Within a performative research paradigm, learning/ be(com)ing/knowing is always in-becoming – as is the performative paradigm itself. (Østern et al., 2021, p. 1)

In this mode of research, I raise the question: How am I as a subject affecting future art production and reception? I show that it is possible to continually produce racialised hierarchies in the art classroom despite honourable pedagogical and personal intentions. I do this by understanding racism as a phenomenon in which the cultural archive (Said, 1993), White innocence (Wekker, 2016) and physical, temporal agencies such as the camera and the White cube combine to stabilise art production as a possible racialising agent in itself. In this narrative, the agency of the photograph evokes the figure of the elephant that eventually led me to an acknowledgement of how colonial ways of being affect my emotional life, my thinking process and drive my actions. My way of being and of understanding my world has shifted as the incident continues to live in and through me.

Although this text might prove taxing I ask the reader for their time and patience to enact a *re-sponsible* reading as suggested by St. Pierre (1996).

I ask the reader to allow complexities and perhaps even contradictions to exist in the text; it is part of the confusion when repositioning oneself in the context of race in the paradigm shifts touched on above. There is no easy answer, no single straight line to follow. My aim is to allow the reader to understand themselves as already entangled in the machinations of a racialising discourse that disregards Other ways of being.

Firing the canon

Picasso, Debussy, Renoir, Munch, Pollock, Rodin, and Da Vinci are instantly recognised as central artists in art history. Their names signify innovation, genius and the rise of the modern. They are part of an undisputed canon in European art history centring the White male as genius (Pollock, 2013). Contemporary cultural and art-historical discourses have challenged this centring by arguing that the universality of experience seen in the canon is a dominating White male experience that cannot represent pluralistic experiences (Pollock, 2012; Said, 1993). The canon in itself acts as an erasure of otherised knowledges and experiences (Azoulay, 2019). This is inherent in European art educations and those from earlier colonised territories (Wolukau-Wanambwa, 2018). It is a global phenomenon whereby recognition for Indigenous art still struggles to find an equal rather than a compensatory place beside the modernist canon (Garcia-Anton et al., 2020). Scandinavian art institutions' reliance on the modernist canon can be illustrated through inspection of art historical, educational curriculums from the major Scandinavian universities. The lack of space for non-canon/modernist logics and images within the institutions has allowed entrenched marginalising structures to exclude other experiences and knowledges from the Nordic art scenes.

The Nordic art scene has recently been forced to take into account institutionalised racist strategies and educational practices that exclude minoritised citizens from institutions. Through focused debate and activist strategies, art professionals and students brought about a public debate about the place of minorities in art institutions (Garcia-Anton et al., 2020; Josef, 2019; Lundestad Joof, 2019; Nunes, 2019a, 2019b). The

discussion has drawn attention to art educationalists' role in accommodating otherised knowledges in their educational practices.

Analysis of the vignette in Figure 2 is inspired by post-colonial thought, using the cultural archive (Said, 1993) and White innocence (Wekker, 2016) as its central conceptual tools. The argument rests on the presumption that the naturalised globalised racialising discourses that Said (1993) identifies are mutually supported by the cultural archive and the phenomenon of White innocence that can organise racial understanding to ignore the complexity of otherised ways of being. I take the standpoint that colonialism not only harmed groups that were subjugated, enslaved and minoritised, but also harmed those placing themselves at the top of the racial hierarchy whilst wiping out the ability to understand how that position is established.

Slavery broke the world in half, it broke it in every way. It broke Europe. It made them into something else, it made them slave masters, it made them crazy. You can't do that for hundreds of years, and it does not take a toll. They had to dehumanise, not just the slaves but themselves. They have had to reconstruct everything in order to make that system appear true. (Toni Morrison, in Gilroy, 1993)

But what is my starting position, and where do I stand in the madness that Morrison perceives? I define myself as White, with a working-class, matriarchal background, a feminist, and an anti-racist. I fall on Frankenberg's, (1993) threefold understanding of race where Whiteness is a location and structural advantage or privilege, a standpoint or position in which I experience society, and most relevant to this chapter; Whiteness manifests in cultural practices that are naturalised, unmarked and unnamed (Frankenberg, 1993).

How can I, as a White female, commit to a pedagogy of pluralism when social and educational structures do not value otherised forms of knowledge? What part do I, as the teacher, play in undermining Other knowledges and experiences in art education? To look at these questions, I have journeyed through the idea of the minoritised Other living and intra-acting through students of colour in my professional life. This article asks the reader to understand the ongoing colonial complexities involved in how I, the representative of the White female artist-researcher subject,

can constitute a situation where I can unwittingly take a superior racialised position in the classroom, thus producing racial difference.

The cultural archive

The cultural archive is not a physical entity or thing (Wekker, 2016); it lives within us and is reinforced by media images in which we are engulfed. This cultural archive is an agential phenomenon: the complex entanglements of cultural materiality surround us and are at work in our everyday lives (Figure 3). This phenomenon is impossible to understand if separate cultural objects are seen outside of their colonial context (Said, 1993). Although Said develops the concept of the cultural archive through literary analysis, the mechanisms within the cultural archive are simple to understand despite being culturally invisible.³ Think about the naturalised position of tea, coffee and sugar in your own kitchen. It is almost unthinkable that European ancestors did not have access to these ingredients. Where do these kitchen staples originate? How have they become natural ingredients in your daily routine? The cultural archive works similarly; it normalises and bolsters existing racial hierarchy ideas as a scaffolding for Whiteness and White supremacy to work within. It is a system that has been naturalised to such an extent it is unquestioned by those who benefit from it. Destabilisation, such as the one described in Figure 2, is often unrecognised in its challenges to naturalisation or colonial racial understanding. In this case, it could easily be attributed to the young man's status as a teenager with all its connotations.

Wekker, (2016) suggests how the national majority conceive of themselves as an ethical nation, non-racist and not heeding skin colour as a defining factor of value or worth, despite continuing normalised colonial

3 Said (1993) argues that a close reading of the 19th and 20th canons of literature (and culture) exposes a colonial ontology that naturalises the imperial global context on which the metropolises were founded and in which they are still embedded. When single works from the 19th and 20th century canon are read together, they indicate a much larger discourse of colonialism that indicates a naturalising racialised discourse in the metropolises (Said, 1993; Wekker, 2016). Thus colonialism did not just happen far away, but it was happening in the metropolises, creating the idea of the European as a superior race.

structures functioning in society. There are strong parallels between Wekker's concept of Dutch exceptionalism and the Norwegian exceptionalism that foreigners living in Norway experience. There is a similar positive national narrative focusing on high ethical motivation and promoting colour blindness in Norway. Furthermore, when seen as a national narrative, White innocence can also be internalised in individual understandings of their own position within larger organisational structures. Individuals believe themselves to be part of a nation and organisation that is ethical and colour blind. This, combined with psychological manifestations of individual innocence in forms of White fragility (Diangelo, 2011) and White resistance to racial confrontation (Matias, 2016), can cement the individual in the unwitting position of White supremacy through acts of onto-epistemological violence. I will discuss how these mechanisms work by centring the phenomenon of White innocence and the cultural archive work in a specific teaching context.

The shape-shifting phenomenon of racism

Visual artist, mentor and educator Germain Ngoma tells me that there is “no template for racism.”⁴ In this statement, he is suggesting that we can never know where and when it will appear. Regarding it as a phenomenon, that metaphoric vampire (McQueen et al., 2020) becomes more than an individual or singular act; it is a complex entanglement of agencies and other phenomena that are not easily bound by disciplinary schools of thought (Rosiek, 2019). Furthermore, I would also suggest that neither is it easily submitted to an individual's conscious control. In Figure 1, I identify both animate agencies, myself and the young man, and inanimate agencies – such as the camera, the photograph, and the workshop space – and work to unfold this complexity. Differentiating processes, in one hour, converge previous historical processes and discourses in a single incident. The agencies present also include harder to define emotions and intuitions as seen in my elephant guide; the photograph, time, through history and the development of understanding and awareness of my own permeability; place, in

4 Conversation notes June 2020 and January 2021.

the space of the vignette and the visit to Zambia; inanimate objects; such as a camera, and scientific choices as in chemical film technology.

I suggest that for any teacher to commit to a life-long meritocratic and anti-racist pedagogy, they are obliged to account for their own entanglement in colonial history and racialising structures; it is an individual experience in the midst of a collective shift evoking change. Understanding our own position allows a critical engagement with it. An understanding of racialised pedagogical actions open to the complexity that the false binary of us/them me/Other, Black/White to challenge the idea of the world and humanity reduced to simplicities. As Toni Morrison declares, to divide the world into human and subordinates meant cutting humanising aspects of the White self-narrative. The consequences of which philosopher Hannah Arendt (2006) discusses in light of the post-war German understanding of the Holocaust as being perpetrated by individuals following national political agenda and the ethical understanding of actions did not affect the individual perpetrator's understanding of themselves as good people, but mere bureaucrats for the greater good (Arendt, 2006).

The images (figures) in this chapter are also traces of events unfolded in word and image. Much of the animal imagery is drawn from memories of the elders in my family entertaining me with Aesop's Fables, Beatrix Potter's *Adventures of Peter Rabbit*, Rudyard Kipling's *Tiger, Tiger and Just so Stories*, and Norwegian folktales. Images are also pilfered from hard media and from the internet, where the cultural archive is continually producing itself to be cut and collaged into new images visualising relationships and intra-actions. Lines drawn between words become three-dimensional mind maps in space and time.

How is this young person identifying with the representation he sees in the picture? Obviously, now, I failed to grasp that it was about representing an individual through skin colour. This failure to comprehend the foundation of his insistence allowed me to resist his protests that the image was not a good portrayal of him.

I LOOK LIKE A HUNGRY AFRICAN

“They are trying to close the school,” the teacher says –

“But why?”

“They say declining school numbers make us expensive.”

“They might have a point, though?”

“The point is there aren’t enough white faces in the school, and Norwegian families are moving away or sending their kids to other schools.”

“But what about how second language teaching is a core competency across the board? Not many schools have that, do they?”

“Doesn’t count for anything!”

“We’re going to be spread to the winds - We need help with a protest action!”

“I’m not sure how we can help! What other things are you going to do?!”

“There’s an organized protest. Could you do something for that?”

“Let us think about it. Perhaps we can come up with something.”

It was a very overcast day, and you were shooting indoors: a bad start. You had prepared for natural lighting and had no lamps. You had to resort to improvised aluminium foil reflectors to bounce ambient light back onto the faces of the students.

It did not take too long for you to understand that even though you had spent many years taking telling portraits of people who you came across, something was amiss. You just couldn’t get it. You also could not figure out what you didn’t get. You were struggling with the faces of these students – overexposed, underexposed black and white images filled the small digital screen at the back of the camera.

You were stressed, sweating and hardly communicating in whole sentences: neither a good teacher nor an artist. You were something else. You were fully focused on some sort of technical problem that you just couldn’t understand. You were almost choking; you had bitten off more than you could chew; You just couldn’t figure out where the problem lay. You didn’t give up, but you did give everyone a long break.

You just wouldn’t let it slide but kept taking pictures during the break. Perhaps your stress levels dropped because the focus was on food and not the project. Fiddling with white balance and exposure metering points, you managed to capture a fantastic portrait – full face – you had gotten it. You were ecstatic and enthusiastically showed it to the student.

His response:

He looked at you with the same serious look he had given the camera and asked you to erase the picture.

“I look like a hungry African,” he said flatly.

My response:

“You look like a boy. It doesn’t hide your skin colour, if that’s what you mean by African, but you don’t look particularly hungry to me!”

And on the discussion, went. He refused to give up; he refused to give in. Like boxers in the ring, you circled around each other, hoping the other would back down. He insisted: he insisted: he insisted. He made you listen, listen and listen again. He demanded that you erase the image. No! He did not want this picture of him in your camera. This photo was not one he wanted out in the world, and for the life of you, you couldn’t understand why?

So back and forth the debate went. You found pictures on the internet. You referenced black scholars and artists. You said that you understood where he was coming from, but you did not accept his opinion about his representation, and most importantly, you refused to wipe the image off your flashcard.

That day did, after all, end with a migraine. Eventually, you negotiated a deal to keep the image. You asked him how he wanted to his picture taken. He pointed at two young women and asked them to be in the frame with him. You felt a surge of anger; your heart sank; your eyes started prickling. You could see an oncoming escalation if this was to be the scenario.

Did the girls have to be entangled in this mess? Was this the best deal you could get? You were a teacher and obliged to follow through rather than argue even more, and you were also convinced that the young women would say no. To your amazement, they said yes, and they posed with him! You took some awful shots and thought he wouldn’t want them – he didn’t look like the macho man he was emulating when these young women were making signs behind his back.

They laughed when they saw the pictures. He was laughing with them, not you. He was annoyed still, but like you, he wanted it to end. He had said yes, and that’s how you managed to salvage the original portrait.

His portrait gained another meaning. One that you did not intend. The image will never be made public. It’s a sore on your hard drive to be scratched open every time your search engine discovers it through an algorithm interpreted from your need to find something else. You will catch your breath, feel the rupture, and wonder how this image repeatedly finds its way to your desktop.

I look like a Hungry African took place during an art workshop facilitated by Tenthaus Art Collective in 2010. Briefly, Tenthaus Art Collective has an ongoing artist in-school project, a socially engaged art project (Tenthaus, 2021; Ulrichsen, 2017). With only the best intentions, and as a workshop leader, I was working towards something that could represent a group of minoritised teenagers and their relationship to the future. They were stuck in a conflict in which politicians were pushing through the closure of the urban centre school they intended to sell on the commercial market. The consequences would mean that the whole teaching community would be split up into new schools; specialised teaching competencies, experience and knowledge of this group of teenagers would be pulverised throughout Oslo. Furthermore, the closure of the school signified that politicians did not want schools with students with non-European backgrounds only; they wanted more White Norwegian students to signalise better integration, and above all they measured success on exam results.

I find it difficult to describe the feelings that awoke in me during the workshop. I am, even now, highly ambivalent about how to articulate them. My journal reports feelings of confusion, loss of control and professional inadequacy, loss of laughter, headache, tightening of the skull, frustration, and irritation towards teenage vanity. There is no way of escaping that feeling of inadequacy and failure when I think about this workshop, even though the images were good enough for their intended purpose.

What was this obstinate teenager articulating beyond a vocalisation of his own position? How did this understanding of his body as a hungry African enter his imagination? How could he see himself in that way? From his language, he was obviously not foreign? He did not look starving, but he did look African.

How is the cultural archive affecting our way of intra-acting with each other today in Norway, a globalised national society? How is teaching images through practice or cultural history facilitating repetitions of unfounded racialised hierarchies?

An early reader of this text points out that the cascade above seems naive when Google can find thousands of “hungry African” pictures. Yet, a close look at this cascade of questions can say something about

how colour blindness works. Here was this past me, asking how a child of African heritage living in Norway could consider himself equal to the hungry African. I was puzzled; I keep reliving these moments in my thoughts and conversations, not only immediately afterwards, but even now the elephant is tapping my shoulder and nudging me forward, showing me routes back and forward through threads of conversations with my colleagues at Tenthaus, with educationalists and with colleagues of colour.

The initial emotional rupture of that conflict (Fig. 2) is the continual starting point for this haphazard journey. What really happened in that room? Every time I reiterate it, it develops; the event's narrative has its own agency; the narrative has moved to become a turning point, a pin in the map, which I circle around trying to understand it better. I am repeating and changing, repeating and changing. By repeating it, I keep the strangeness of the incident alive.

Rupture in the archive

Ten years after the event, when COVID broke into the world, I was teaching in a workshop in Zambia.⁵ I desperately needed a SIM card for cheap local communication, and a colleague arranged for a salesperson to visit the house. The young man came, and we sat under the shade of the tree as I signed the legal documents for a SIM card. He said that he needed to *capture* me. Puzzled at first, I smiled, realising that he needed to take a photograph of me when he waved his own phone at me. Capture is etymologically rooted in Latin *to take, hold, or seize*, and I thought of these connotations as I heard the imitation camera click in his phone. It disturbed me; it forced me to think about what photography meant to that particular person behind the camera and how the act of *capturing* a photograph has deeper connotations than that of mirroring the world. The word *capture* would not be used in a similarly informal context in the UK, where I am raised. Sitting under the tree in my colleague's garden, I was drawn back to "I look like a hungry African". And so, it has been,

5 Zambia, an earlier protectorate of Britain where English is one of the first languages.

small ruptures ripping into my activities and readings that bring me back to and forward towards a place of complex utter discomfort.

Gift Two: The White elephant in the archive

The White elephant, that gift I am continually unpacking, seems to be smiling at me. It hits me, a stone from a slingshot: Where do the animal images I am using in my research project come from? The only physical elephants I have encountered have been at a circus or zoo; I have no other knowledge of that creature; it is not a material part of my childhood or adult life. It is a literary figure transmitted through the cultural archive. It is presumed that Aesop's fables were told by anonymous slaves of the Roman empire and circulated ever since. Such is the power of the cultural archive to span history through me, so that the power appropriates and naturalises images and thus restricts the imaginary field on which art educators play.

Agency of the photograph through the cultural archive

By taking into account that the dominant ideas about non-European culture and Indigenous cultures are stored within the cultural archive, the agency of the photograph in question becomes part of an ongoing narrative whereby I, as a White teacher, define how the student is to be experienced and seen. The gap in our power positions in a racial hierarchy that I had naturalised was destabilised by the student response.

In your narratives, histories, travel tales, and explorations, your consciousness was represented as the principal authority, an active point of energy that made sense not just of colonising activities but of exotic geographies and peoples. Above all, your sense of power scarcely imagined that those "natives" who appeared either subservient or sullenly uncooperative were ever going to be capable of finally making you give up India or Algeria. Or of saying anything that might perhaps contradict, challenge, or otherwise disrupt the prevailing discourse. (Said, 1993, p. 32)

The student's resistance to his representation needs to be anchored through me to the ongoing colonial narrative within the agential cultural archive⁶ that thrives in the Nordic regions. The way that this image works on me, at an emotional level, must also be transferred to understanding the way the cultural archive works.

Photographic images = racialised discourses?

The cultural archive is active in all positions and perspectives within the photographic process: the photographer, the subject and the viewer. The photographer's decisive role in inscribing non-Europe and Europeans in terms of dominant discourse is historically embedded in early ethnographic photographic practices (Sealy, 2019). Much of that archival narrative plays on the need of the African subject for the intervention of Europeans to quell tribal violence, and uncivilised and pagan behaviours and rituals. Much post-colonial analysis has been written to contest these destructive embedded colonial narratives, yet these narratives and shifting associations are still active in our international relationships and media representation. It does not take much to see the intimidating and dangerous Black African chief's transformation to the New York gangster rapper. Despite continual waves of civil rights movements, these stereotypical images continue to naturalise the idea that White Europeans are civilised and superior to non-European subjects.

In a Scandinavian context, the cultural archive is filled with these images of Africa, as well as its own specific colonial activities. The people of Sápmi, Roma, and other national minorities are part of the Norwegian cultural archive. This can be exemplified by close examination of photographs of Indigenous Sámi people where colonising practices of Norwegianisation continued until very recently. These include

6 The fields of literature, art history and media studies have widely discussed how photography is used to represent and produce colonial knowledge of racialised Others; scientific neutrality of optics in the film camera has been previously discussed in terms of imagery and the references those images produce (Said, Sontag, Sealy, Hall).

photography used for quasi-scientific argument for racial hygiene and middle-class exotification trends of staging photographs for middle-class subjects appropriating Sámi clothing (Kyllingstad, 2014; Lien, 2017; Valkeapää, 1983). *The Norwegian Government's Action Plan against Racism and Discrimination on the grounds of Ethnicity and Religion 2022–2023* quotes that the Sámi national minority experience 4 times as much discrimination than majority Norwegians (Ministry of Culture, 2020). This and recent social media reports of continued racist attacks on the Sámi population in Tromsø (Andersen et al., 2020) point to the relevance of understanding the concept of the cultural archive in Scandinavia as a way of perpetuating and supporting racism.

The violence of the canon to capture for the archive

The dialogue between myself and the student displays our different positions in colonial experiences and histories outside of our own making. In the utterance “I look like a hungry African,” he refuses to accept the representation of his body as an image of generic African hunger needing help. On my part, I presumed he was referencing hunger stereotypes that have flooded the European media during post colonisation processes. My defence of the image was based on good intentions; I am not a wicked person, and I knew about the post-colonial discourse of the hungry African. I defended my good intentions and protected the image from interference with the dominating concepts of aesthetic “quality” that I abided by. I argued from a position of authority, after all, which parent has never argued with their child during a tantrum about a photograph deemed unacceptable when it has been on the living room wall since it was taken. As parents, we hold on to that picture as if it was a magic talisman fearing the destruction of the moment that the camera clicked. Once again, the agency of the photograph and the cultural archive working through us all, keeping familiar and unfamiliar in order, becomes apparent in all our lives.

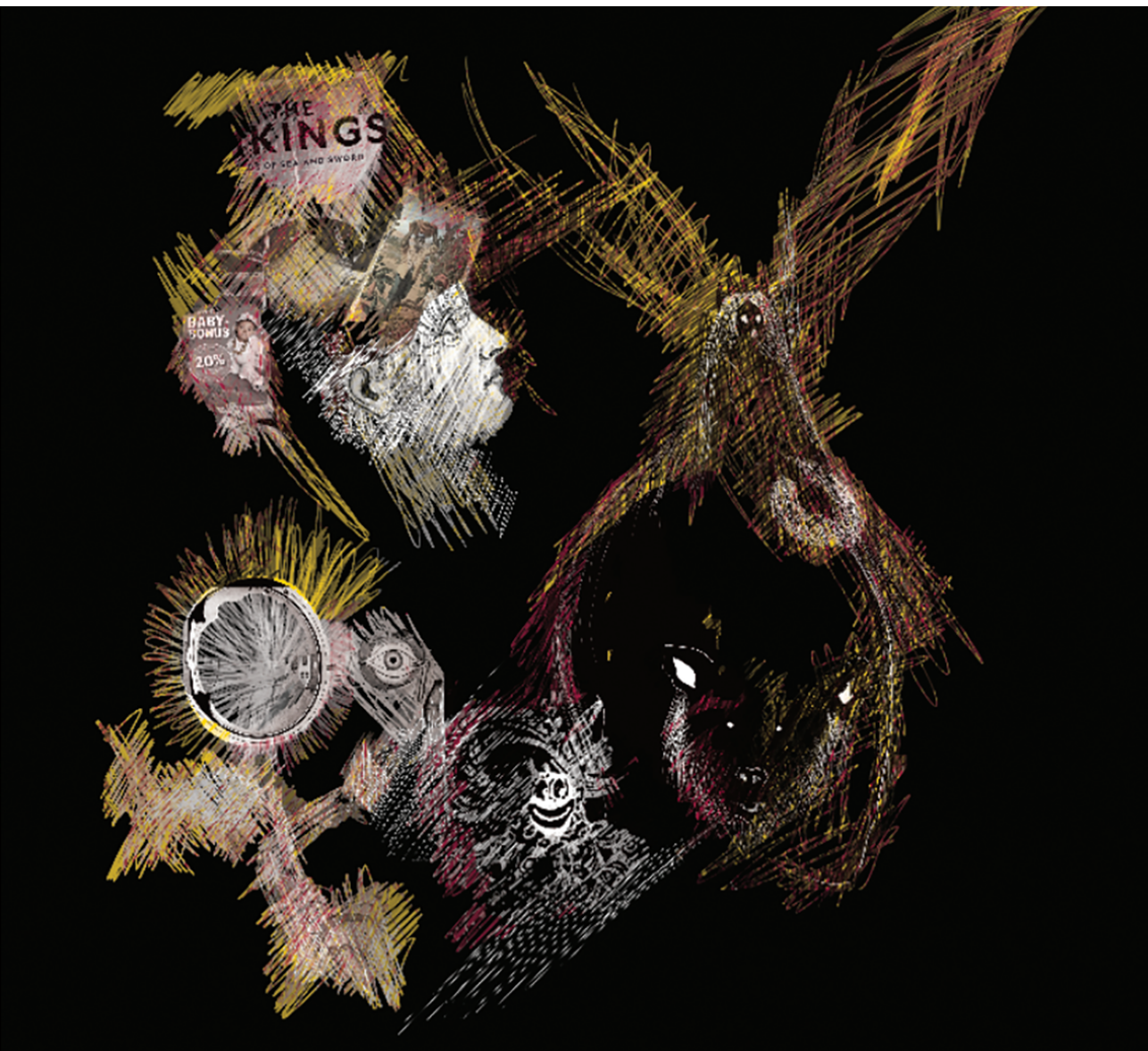


Figure 3. © Eriksen, H. (2022). *The Norwegian Cultural Archive*.

My artist autonomy and teacher authority gave me an ethical zone where I could assume that my image was something to protect and cherish. The student's protest was met with incomprehension painfully embodied as White innocence. It allowed me to resist him and defend the racialised narrative that I had created in that image. I literally could not see nor understand how I was instrumental in the cultural archive producing itself. The present me can see how that other me refuses to acknowledge how the young man's experience of Norway is connected to his skin colour. By refusing to engage with his embodied experience where skin colour is agential and an essential part of his identity, I disregard his opposition to normalised White experience and view him as an unruly, obstinate teenager. This perspective is part of my educational experience and training, and I had a neat category I could place the conflict into, where the source of the disagreement would rest firmly with the student. I gained comfort in a racial conflict by allowing me to see myself as an artist, non-aggressive, ordinary, and thus remain in a position of White authority, which is a position the White educator is deemed to possess. I was engulfed in a White reflective response; I was reflecting Whiteness in its work. It is a form of self-preservation of Whiteness at the individual level. In the self-preservation of the White educator, I also stabilised dominant White power structures.

The White cube

When writing this article, a colleague asked me if the space of the conflict itself could be described as agential. Yet, it took time to connect and understand how the physical aesthetic space intra-acts in this conflict. This incident took place in Tenthau collective's studio and gallery space, which in effect was a White cube artist space. The site of the conflict can be seen as an artistic territory of post-war modernity. For me, it was a familiar and naturalised territory: a habitat. That habitat is bounded by safe-ethical space (Eriksen et al., 2020), a concept whereby the belief in the autonomy of art acts as a mechanism to protect freedom of expression in artistic production, without broader responsibility to an audience

affected by that expression.⁷ Despite my part in a socially engaged art project that sought a liberating dialogical pedagogy (Freire, 2017), I was challenged as the gatekeeper of established modernist, and racist, artistic boundaries.

Calibrating the racial lens

Let us turn to the central agency in this conflict; an image on a tiny digital screen that faded quickly when the machine was shut down. The image itself can be seen as immaterial, manifested as pixilated light on the back of the camera and later, on my computer display. However, those few minutes of viewing the picture also have to be related to the confusion that preceded it. Why were the photographs not reflecting skin colour accurately? Why were my skills so inadequate? Why was there such a great need to compensate within the technology of the camera?

The agency of the image itself needs to be considered through the apparatus that captured the picture: the camera. Modernism and technological development have well-established links in art historical links (Kester, 2011). When I blame the camera as inadequate – do I simply become a second-rate tradesman blaming her tools? A colleague commented that the camera is not racist, but the person behind it can be. The comment is interesting because it weaponises the digital camera, apt in a post-colonial reading of the cultural archive and the role of photography. If the camera becomes weaponised, how does that weapon work? Does the camera as a technology have an agency of its own? What are the mechanisms of image reproduction in the digital camera itself? If the shutter button is a metaphorical trigger, how is the weapon built to deliver a metaphorical bullet; is it indiscriminate, or does it have mechanisms in it that make it more challenging to represent darker than lighter skin tones?

During these last months, my elephant has led me into conversations with photographers of colour; you could say she nudges me on, rummaging through the archive. The following is expressed not as a plea for forgiveness for actions described in the vignette, but to describe

7 For a wider discussion of Ethical Safe Space, see Eriksen et al., 2020.

the structural nature of the pictorial narrative produced in the cultural archive. Yet, I fear response, your response. Delivered on the White page and read by a dominating White audience, I ask of you: Could you believe that *your camera, your telephone, and everyone's camera lens have an inbuilt racial bias?*

How is this at all possible? It is best understood through understanding White skin as a historical and dominant norm (Lewis, 2019). When White skin was accepted and considered a social and cultural norm, commercial chemical emulsions for colour image reproduction were developed and chosen to favour White skin tones. Even when the possibility to use other chemical emulsions were available to give a broader range of skin tones, commercial chemical film continued to favour White skin (Roth, 2009).

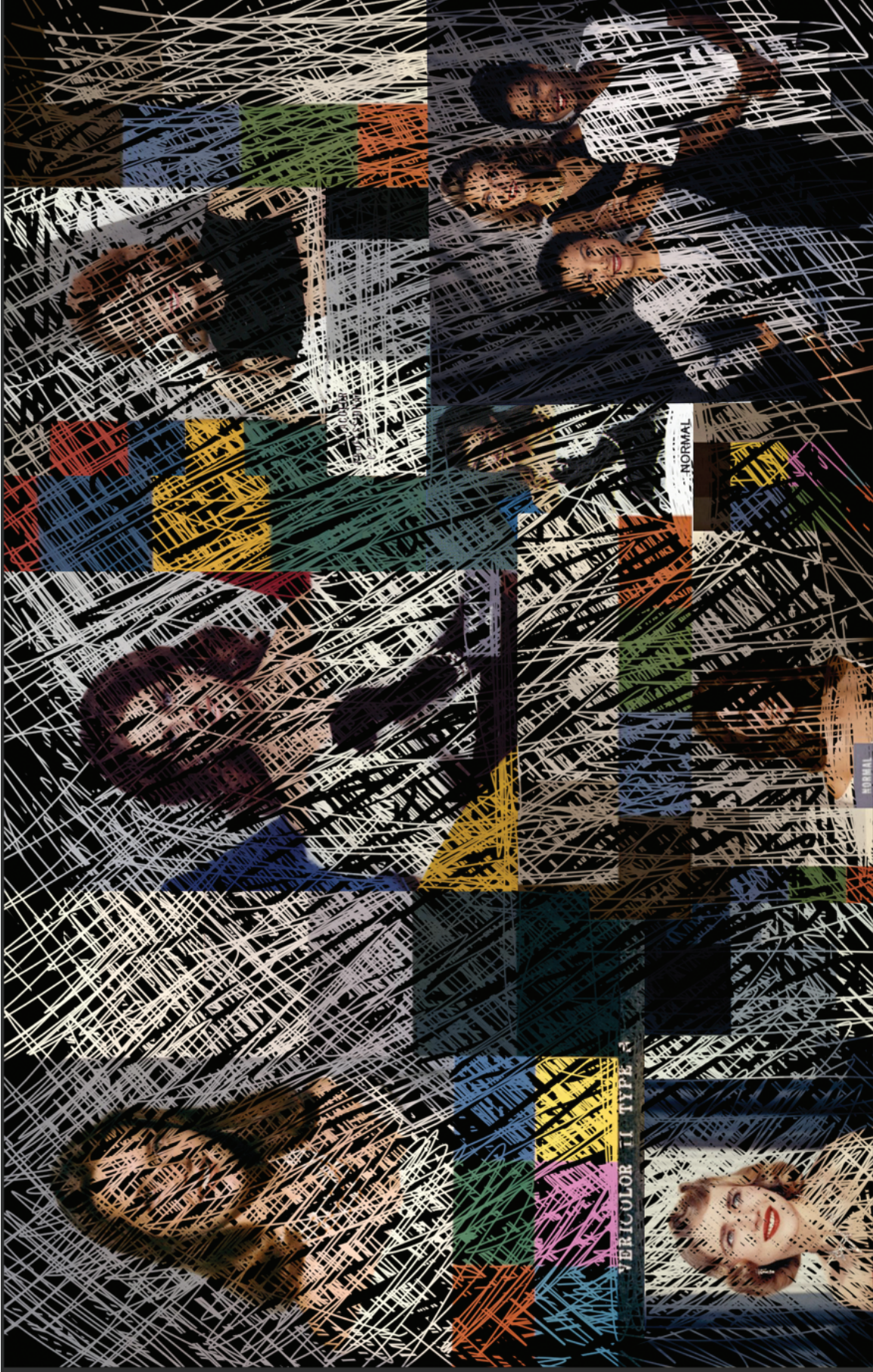
Shirley, a generic name for the women on colour processing calibration cards, was for generations White, evidence in itself of the prevailing normative White gaze (Fig. 4). This normativity inherited by the digital camera continues to favour and normalise White skin tones. This technological bias creates the idea that Black skin is a problem that requires compensating,⁸ and, furthermore, reinforces racialised behaviour when darker skin tones are perceived as a technical problem. Technology and racialised understanding and behaviour are seemingly mutually constitutive (Lewis, 2019).

Skin tone became an issue for me during the workshop; it was something that I was unprepared for. Why should I experience the reproduction of darker skin tones as an advanced technical problem? Why was this not a matter for camera manufacturers to educate their consumers about? After all, they have user manuals! This is not simply a matter for professional photographers whom I have been in conversation with; it applies to those being represented. Photographer and Nikon ambassador Jide Alakija has developed his own software to make processing darker skin tones easier. (J. Alakija, personal communication, May 28, 2020).

As arts education is becoming increasingly digitalised, it is vital to understand that digital image and facial recognition technology have an

⁸ This is not only in photography but also in stage lighting and make up artistry.

Figure 4. © Eriksen, H. (2022). Gift 3. *Insight – Shirley! The girl next door* (2021).



inbuilt racial bias that is seldom encountered by the White teacher in the White classroom. The agency of the camera exemplifies how racism is much more than individual acts of microaggressions and everyday racism or the ephemeral cultural archive but is a complex phenomenon with structural, physical components such as the camera and the White cube that we encounter daily. Multiple agencies play into the phenomenon of racism in (art) education (cf. Rosiek, 2019).

The third gift - insights

The photograph initiating the conflict continues to have its own agency. The incident itself pins the moment when a young man forced me into a conversation with my own emerging post-colonial knowledge of history and naturalised White understanding of the world. As time has passed, the agency of the photograph has departed from the object itself and is reinforced in its absence through conversations with beings both living and imaginary. The photo discussed in Figure 2 is not published because I can no longer prioritise my ideas of aesthetic quality and value that are so obviously related to wider schemes of racialised power structures in the art world. The so-called work of art itself has to be considered in light of the response by those represented in the work itself. This is perhaps a process of what sociologist Vázquez (2020) conceptualises as *decolonial aesthetics* in which the colonised aesthetic production of art is destabilised by other equally valid experiences.

In my reading, the photographic apparatus, the digital camera, is not a benign object – it is agential and a powerful tool that maintains and produces the cultural archive by wiping out details in the dark face. It leaves the unaware photographer to grapple with technicalities that could be pre-programmed into the camera imaging software and discussed in user manuals.

As an advocate for the need for art in society at large and in young people's lives, in particular, I cannot ignore how art education not only reflects society but lacks an inner criticality to its own mechanisms that support racialising processes (Gaztambide-Fernández et al., 2014). Art education is a very specific public sphere that carries with it a

responsibility for the way that images are made and received in society. When Scandinavian art education institutions are eurocentric and modernist and continue to exclude Other knowledges and art practices, they give agency to the racism inherent in the cultural archive. We must ask members of the art teaching communities to consider their own educational background and teaching positions and address their relevance to their teaching ethics and practices. The question “How is my heritage affecting future art production and reception?” then becomes a life project as manifestations of the cultural archive and technological bias are understood as constitutive of today’s society.

When Germain Ngoma says that “there is no template for racism,” he points to a mighty overwhelming phenomenon of racism as an agential shapeshifter. It finds new forms and strategies to survive to keep the racial balance in check. The part of arts education in an anti-racist pedagogy is to give the skills to identify and engage with the colonial racist narrative in the visual forms it takes on. Understanding how the combination of the concepts of the cultural archive and White innocence works through ourselves has consequences on decision-making in artistic practice and the reception of new images. These concepts are apt tools for anti-racist teaching in art education. It is crucial for students and instructors in visual art education to engage with the cultural archive’s continuing production whenever, however, and wherever it surfaces. However, these tools demand a personal conviction and dedication to not only master but to continually explore and develop. It can open the way to other forms of art developing, forms of art that cannot yet enter our imaginaries.

Time is now overripe for the Norwegian art education system to prepare its teachers to participate as anti-racists. This can be possible through teaching critical awareness that can destabilise power positions in the entangled material, immaterial epistemologies and imaginaries of their professional field. Without engaging in a critical discussion about racism, art production will be locked in an imaginary of a colonial past. Our aim must be to restructure the cultural archive in such a way as to open up to an imaginary of an encompassing, equitable future on and for Earth and all its beings.

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