Call for Chapters: German Colonialism and Contemporary Art

Deadline: Aug 28, 2026

Lucy Byford, Bremen

Collected volume title:
German Colonialism and Contemporary Art: Interventions into Living Histories through Artist Research, Curation and Pedagogy.
Editors: Lucy Byford (Constructor University, Bremen), Sela K. Adjei (University of Media, Arts and Communication, Accra), Fabian Lehmann (Hochschule für Musik und Theater, Hamburg).
Proposals for chapters in English of a length of 7000-8000 words, including footnotes, will be considered. Please send an abstract (no more than 150 words) and a short bio to lbyford@constructor.university by 28th August 2026.

In addition to chapter proposals, proposals for artist statements (reflections on the field, personal practice, past experience) and artistic interventions (images, diagrams, visual essays, manifestos) are welcomed.

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As part of a shift away from the ‘colonial aphasia’ that dominated in Germany after reunification (Gallagher, 2023), contemporary artists have played a critical role in increasing the salience of German colonial history. Contemporary artworks addressing histories of German colonialism have become important tools in maintaining public pressure and stimulating critical debates on issues of reparation, restitution, repatriation, and commemoration. To name but two examples, the topic of unrepatriated human remains is addressed in Kathleen Bomani's 'The Fire Last Time' (2026), while Tuli Mekondjo's map-like 'Kwariri Nyoko Kevako: Echoes of the Matriarchs' (2024) displays transcriptions of German colonial atrocities while on view at the Deutscher Bundestag in the exhibition ‘WIR. 19 Grundrechte’. In parallel, artistic interventions into histories of German colonialism are met with new pedagogical and curatorial approaches, seen in the work of, for instance, Bonaventure Soh Bejeng Ndikung, Clémentine Deliss, and Ibou Diop. Contemporary art’s long-diagnosed ‘archive fever’ (Enwezor, 2008) and the historical nature of the German colonial era have prompted contemporary artists working in this area to develop idiomatic modes of decolonial or postcolonial artist research.

Black women artists with connections to either Germany or former German colonies, such as Memory Biwa, Kathleen Bomani, Muningandu Hoveka, Isabel Katjavivi, Natasha Kelly, Syowia Kyambi, Cheryl McIntosh, Tuli Mekondjo, Vitjitua Ndjiharine, Silvia Rosi, and Hildegard Titus – among others – play a particularly prominent role in this emerging cohort, suggestive of the importance of Black feminist theory to this critical and artistic development. The list cited here is far

from exhaustive, not least as most of the above-mentioned are internationally recognised artists. As performance artist, educator, and writer Nashilongweshipwe Mushaandja reminds us, a comprehensive view of practitioners in this area must extend beyond the field of urban and internationally acclaimed artistic production to those rarely found in art museum collections (Mushaandja, 2019).

Artistic research projects to address the neglected area of German colonial history are significant for the novel archival foci they encompass. For example, artist researchers Lisa Hilli (from 2017) and Ye Charlotte Ming (from 2023) have focused on previously under-discussed German colonial territories, such as those formerly located in the Pacific, and the Chinese protectorate of Jiaozhou Bay, respectively. These and other examples indicate how artistic research continues to expand the geographical and archival boundaries of German colonial memory, challenging the persistent privileging of African colonial histories within public and scholarly discourse.

Scholarly overviews of this small but rapidly growing field remain rare, with some notable exceptions (see, for example, Sarah Hegenbart, ed., Curating Transcultural Spaces: Perspectives on Postcolonial Conflicts in Museum Culture, 2024; Julia Rensing, Troubling Archives: History and Memory in Namibian Literature and Art, 2025; selected chapters in Itohan Osayimwese, ed., German Colonialism in Africa and its Legacies: Architecture, Art, Urbanism, and Visual Culture, 2023; and Marianne Bechhaus-Gerst and Joachim Zeller, eds., Deutschland Postkolonial? Die Gegenwart der imperialen Vergangenheit, 2021; Fabian Lehmann, Postkoloniale Gegenbilder: künstlerische Reflexionen des Erinnerns an den deutschen Kolonialismus in Namibia, 2021; and Paul Wilson, ‘Remembering the Herero-Nama Genocide in Namibia’, African Arts, 2023). The proposed volume will begin to address this imbalance, exploring the range of aesthetic approaches adopted by contemporary artists to interrogate topics of German colonialism, noting, in particular, the wide critical knowledge base from which they draw. These approaches span a familiarity with Eurocentric views of colonial history, post- and decolonial theory, non-Western epistemes, philosophies and knowledge systems, and inherited or embodied knowledge.

The volume argues that this methodological breadth, coupled with the creative reappropriation of historical tools and sources for new critical purposes, enables artists to intervene in, reinterpret and actively rewrite (post)colonial history in the present. Artists often view archival sources as, on the one hand, valuable and implicating records of colonial crimes, and on the other, overtly ideological images or documents whose formal qualities warrant deconstruction or neutralisation to counter the processes of dehumanisation they enact. One response to this conflicted relationship with the archive can be seen in the interdisciplinary research piece 'Unwritten Archives – (Re)constructing the Past' (2023), coordinated by Sebastian Hirn working with a collective of German and Namibian artists, which navigates archival material as one component in a broader performance-based strategy for remembering and grieving the Ovaherero and Nama genocide. As part of its appraisal of contemporary artworks addressing German colonial history, the volume seeks to scrutinise the patronage and funding structures facilitating such projects and collectively position these works in relation to colonial history’s contested role in German Erinnerungskultur (memory culture).

Contributions are broadly categorised into three key areas:

1. Vision: Photography and Aesthetic Treatments

Contemporary artists addressing the histories and ongoing impacts of German colonialism frequently engage with photographic sources in order to disrupt the colonial gaze, counter exoticist constructions of alterity, or highlight fleeting moments of resistance. Viewing photography as a key colonial tool for constructing notions of empiricist rationalism and racial pseudo-science (Löffler, 2026; Hayes, Silvester and Hartmann, 2002; Geary, 1988), this section traces how practitioners, such as Lisa Hilli, Rajkamal Kahlon, Tuli Mekondjo, Vitjitua Ndjiharine, and Silvia Rosi, engage in forms of 'critical remediation' (Jana J. Haeckel) to reinstate ancestral agency and dignity of photographed individuals. Equally relevant here are strategies for countering omissions and erasures of German colonial history seen in contemporary commercial photography. For example, the 'non-landscapes' of artist-researcher Nicola Brandt disrupt romanticised, touristic ideals of the Namibian landscape as a vast expanse, instead portraying railway lines built during the colonial period using forced labour, or staging interventions, in which Katuvangua Maendo and Uakondjisa Kakuekuee Mbari stand with their backs to the camera in Ovaherero traditional dress (Brandt, The Distance Within, 2025). The section will explore a range of artistic interventions, including the critical reimagining of colonial archives through applying bold colour to black-and-white colonial photographs, interfering with the photographic plane through collage, and enacting a politics of care by recontextualising photographic subjects. Closely related to these concerns is the aesthetic problem of how to expose the physical and epistemic violence encoded in colonial photography in a manner that does not inadvertently reproduce this same violence.

2. Historiography: New Memory Cultures, New Archives

Another core strand asks how artists address archival erasures or irreparable forms of loss and widescale damage enacted through German colonialism that cannot be fully redressed through processes of restitution, repatriation, reparation or memorialisation. It observes how, in pursuit of new models for working with the archive, some artists draw on processes of re-sacralisation to de-commodify and de-objectify entities in museum holdings. Responding to Saidiya Hartman's call to 'transgress the protocols of the archive and the authority of its statements' (Hartman, 2008), contemporary artists also opt to locate or build up their own 'counter-archives' (Schweizer, 2023). In doing so, they encourage new ways of engaging with museum collections by focusing on affective encounters or reconceptualising what constitutes an 'archive' altogether, seen, for example, in SAVVY Contemporary's participatory 'Colonial Neighbours' archive project. Meanwhile artists, such as Tjijandjeua 'Gift' Uzera, Philip Kojo Metz, Kang Sunkoo, Anike Joyce Sadiq, Zwoisy Mears-Clarke, Hannimari Jokinen, and Hew Locke have mounted direct challenges to German memory culture, pursuing critical or ironic forms of memorialisation to highlight the complicity of German institutions in obscuring colonial-era atrocities or generate less atomised and more 'multidirectional' cultures of remembrance (Rothberg, 2009). Also significant in this area are artists, such as Anguezomo Nzé Mboulou Mba Bikoro, Bill Kouligas, Frederike Moormann, Memory Biwa, and Robert Machiri, who explore sound and resonance to construct or revive sonic archives, incorporating recording and sound production, oral histories, field recordings, or musical elements into their work. As many of these artists have developed practices grounded in performance, the section additionally considers the 'afterlives' of these ostensibly ephemeral artistic interventions and the lasting traces they might retain in cultural institutions. In contrast to purely symbolic forms of commemorating colonial violence, the artistic interventions in question actively reshape public memory, opening up new possibilities for historical accountability, collective healing, and emancipatory futures. The section subsequently asks how new memory cultures might extend beyond

acts of memorialisation to function as sites of critical engagement, political imagination, and demands for reparative justice.

3. Epistemology: Curatorial Practice and Pedagogy in German Institutions
The final section adopts a Critical Heritage Studies lens, extending the scope of the book by assessing how artworks that interrogate histories of German colonialism interact with institutions. It considers how anticolonial artworks are taught, researched, and exhibited in institutionalised spaces, such as museums, universities, and galleries, questioning whether innovative methods seen in decolonial artistic research can change the way cultural institutions generate knowledge. Of particular note here is the increasing number of recent exhibitions exploring colonialism's entanglements with local histories, for example, 'Signale der Macht: Nauen, Kamina, Windhoek', Brandenburg Museum, 2025; the Dekoloniale!-curated exhibits in Berlin's district Museums, 2020-2024; and 'Der blinde Fleck: Bremen und die Kunst in der Kolonialzeit', Kunsthalle Bremen, 2017. Closely intersecting with the topic of decolonial artistic research set in institutions is the role of the contemporary artist in the German ethnographic museum. Within this context, the artist has taken on an ever more crucial role in aiding institutions negotiate what curator Mirjam Shatanawi has termed their 'crisis' of legitimacy (Shatanawi, 2023). Scholars and artist researchers have criticised the practice of singular or short-term artist commissions, for the way these projects outsource the work of decolonising German museums to contemporary artists (Wienand, 2018; Adler, 2021). This section asks how such collaborations can be conducted in a dialogical and equitable manner that resists extractive relationships and brings about long-term institutional transformation, putting 'new relational ethics' (Sarr, Savoy, 2018) into practice. The section assess curatorial approaches alongside critical pedagogies to identify critical shifts in German memory culture.

Possible topics could include, but are not limited to:

1. The use of contemporary art to draw attention to issues of the restitution and repatriation of cultural belongings, looted entities, and human remains
2. Critical methods of de/postcolonial artist research applied to topics of German colonialism and neo-colonialism
3. Art that explores German colonial history through post/decolonial approaches to historiography or engagements with intangible cultural heritage (oral history, traditions of storytelling, song, dance)
4. Addressing lacuna in German memory culture through Black and Indigenous (e.g. Blak) feminist approaches
5. The use of affective aesthetics and performance to remediate historic trauma enacted through German colonialism
6. Contemporary art addressing German colonialism or collaborations between artists and German institutions viewed through Critical Heritage Studies or Critical Whiteness Studies lenses
7. Novel pedagogical approaches for teaching the cultural and visual histories of German colonialism and memory culture
8. Pedagogical approaches to post/decolonial curation practices in Germany
9. Alternative practices developed by contemporary artists for archiving the German colonial era, including through personal or counter-archives
10. Techniques for mapping sites of memory relating to German colonialism

11. Applications of investigative aesthetics to histories of German colonialism
12. Memorialisation projects commemorating victims of German colonialism
13. The use of eco-critical approaches in contemporary art addressing German colonialism to counter Enlightenment dichotomies of Natur and Kultur

Note from the editors: Authors are individually responsible for sourcing and financing high resolution images and rights for images included in each chapter. We therefore encourage authors to make enquiries to determine associated costs prior to submitting a contribution.

Reference:

CFP: Call for Chapters: German Colonialism and Contemporary Art. In: ArtHist.net, Jul 18, 2026 (accessed Nov 23, 2026), <https://arthist.net/archive/53500>.