

❖ We—Chao Tayiana Maina of the Museum of British Colonialism (MBC) and documentary photographer Max Pinckers—are currently developing long-term art projects visually reconstructing Kenya’s struggle for independence. In examining the presence and subsequent erasure of oppression in colonial Kenya, we feel an urgent need to confront the past—a past that’s been shrouded by the mantle of imperialist history. We’re attempting to revive a suppressed history through the agency of oral witness, living memory and bodily experience. We’ve been in dialogue since 2019, sharing resources and archives, and we continue to contribute to each other’s projects as they develop. This text explores reenactment as an artistic documentary strategy in the form of digital visualizations of the architectural structures in the MBC’s virtual models of former concentration camps, and it also examines a photo series by Pinckers in which people reenact their experiences in the form of in-person demonstrations.<sup>170</sup>

**A Brief History of Mau Mau:  
Regimes of Memory**

In Europe today, the words ‘Mau Mau’ are still synonymous with terror and fear. The mighty propaganda machine of British imperial rule made sure to perpetuate the image of ‘impulsive savagery’, as one of bloody, sadistic killings and seemingly senseless violence. Kenya’s freedom fighters were portrayed as a group of criminals and gangsters, a violent and primitive secret society with bestial oath-taking rituals and explicitly anti-European sentiments. Not much is known, however, about ‘Britain’s Gulag’—the empire’s brutal response to Kenya’s independence movement.<sup>171</sup>

In October 1952, the British colonial administration in Kenya declared a state of emergency and was on the verge of one of the bloodiest and most protracted wars of decolonization in the empire that lasted more than seven years. In the name of retaining colonial control and ‘rehabilitating’ those in favor of an independent nation, the British state constructed a large-scale network of more than one hundred work camps, detention camps, torture centers and emergency villages throughout the country. This network of detention camps was formally known as the ‘pipeline’. The notion of a pipeline was used to denote the progression of individuals from their initial detention to their ultimate release. Some detainees would be moved through dozens of different camps in an attempt to extract a confession. Along with the pipeline, a rigorous villagisation program was developed that placed over a million Kikuyu women and children in villages behind barbed wire fences, spiked trenches and watchtowers.

The fight for independence was initiated by the Kenya African Union, a political organization, and gained momentum in the early 1950s with the Kenya Land and Freedom Army, its militant counterpart that popularly became

## Reimagining Time, Reconstructing Space: Visual Approaches to Mau Mau History in Kenya

### Chao Tayiana Maina & Max Pinckers

<sup>170</sup> Although the editorial guidelines of *Trigger* require the use of British English, we have deliberately chosen not to write this text in the colonizer’s language, hence the use of American English.

<sup>171</sup> For a first-hand account of life in detention camps Josiah Mwangi Kariuki, *Mau Mau Detainee* (London: Oxford University Press, 1963). Caroline Elkins, *Imperial Reckoning: The Untold Story of Britain’s Gulag in Kenya* (New York: Owl Books, 2005) and David Anderson, *Histories of the Hanged: Britain’s Dirty War in Kenya and the End of Empire* (London: Phoenix, 2003); these two books eventually led to Britain’s official apology.

<sup>172</sup> The origin of the name ‘Mau Mau’ is uncertain. The term arose from a linguistic void, its etymology a mystery, and like the creation of any myth, there are now many stories that lay claim to its meaning. Some read it as an anagram of ‘Uma Uma’ (which means ‘get out, get out’ in Kikuyu); others speculate that it was created by the British in an attempt to diminish the movement’s meaning and international legitimacy. J.M. Kariuki suggested that the name was appropriated by the rebellion in order to counter the colonial propaganda against it. Wangari Maathai has referred to the Kikuyu phrase ‘maũndũ ni mau’, which indicates the beginning of a list in which one holds up three fingers introducing its main points—in the case of Mau Mau, these were land, freedom, and self-governance. More recently, it’s been adopted by the Swahili backronym ‘*Mzungu Aende Ulaya, Mwafrika Apate Uhuru*’ (‘let the foreigner go back abroad; let the African regain independence’). Most important is that the veterans refer to themselves as Mau Mau, and this has become the most widely recognized name for the movement internationally and by Kenyans alike.

known as Mau Mau.<sup>172</sup> Armed with rudimentary homemade guns and pangas, the Mau Mau developed renowned guerrilla warfare tactics in the Aberdares and the forests around Mt. Kenya, against which superior British military power was ineffective.

Only thirty-two European settlers died in the rebellion, and fewer than two hundred casualties were recorded among British regiments and police. Yet, according to the Kenya Human Rights Commission, the British held more than seventy thousand Kikuyu people in detention camps at the peak of the emergency, with at least one hundred and sixty thousand people passing through the network over the course of the war. Many were forcefully deprived of their land, which has not been returned to this day. Thousands were systematically tortured as the Empire tried to ‘rehabilitate’ them. One thousand and ninety Kikuyu were hanged for Mau Mau crimes, executed in ‘mobile gallows’ that travelled from one town to the next. “In no other place, at no other time in British imperialism, was the state execution used on such a large scale,” wrote historian David Anderson.<sup>173</sup> Kenya’s central region is littered with mass graves, and human bones are emerging from the soil.

“Mau Mau was a disease which has been eradicated and must never be remembered again,” wrote Jomo Kenyatta on the eve of independence in 1963, shortly after becoming Kenya’s first president. “I have no intention of retaliating or looking backwards,” he famously proclaimed in his post-election speech, “we are going to forget the past and look forward to the future.” This collective amnesia has led many people in Kenya to forget where these camps were or even that they existed at all. Kenya’s freedom fighters are forgotten heroes, mostly living in poverty, deprived of their land and recognition. Former detention camp sites, prison cells and torture chambers have been repurposed into school compounds or as other community buildings. Despite the presence of so many camps in Kenya, and with thousands still bearing unhealed wounds, the history of detention isn’t taught in schools, and it’s not even part of collective national memory. It remains hyper-localized, only alive within families and villages.

This lack of awareness can be attributed to numerous factors. In an attempted cover-up known as Operation Legacy, the British Colonial Office destroyed or hid all documentation related to the presence of camps and the human rights violations that took place within them in order to prevent the records from being inherited by its ex-colonies. Neocolonial Kenya banned the Mau Mau movement in fear of its dissenting voices. The utterance of the words ‘Mau Mau’ remained illegal and taboo up to 2003, when president Mwai Kibaki scrapped the colonial-era legislation that outlawed Mau Mau as a terrorist organization. This greatly suppressed oral history and community discussions around the subject, and at the same time, it prevented Mau Mau veterans from forming organizations and claim-



A three-dimensional visualization of holding cells at Aguthi Works Camp, reconstructed on the basis of present day evidence © Museum of British Colonialism (2019)



A three-dimensional render of the watch tower and entrance to Aguthi Works Camp, reconstructed from archival photographs. The watchtower and gate were brought down after independence while other buildings within this camp were repurposed into a secondary school © Museum of British Colonialism (2019)



General Bahati demonstrates how he led a group of Mau Mau carrying a wounded soldier, 2015 © MMWVA & Max Pinckers (in collaboration with Michiel Burger)



Field Marshal Mwariama, leader of the Mau Mau rebels, at his forest hideout © Hulton-Deutsch Collection/Corbis via Getty Images

ing compensation from the British government in U.K. courts. Many of those who experienced life in the camps, villages and forests are now of old age, ill health or have passed on. But Kenya's colonial past hasn't been forgotten. On 6 June 2013, a speech by U.K. Foreign Secretary William Hague in the House of Commons made unprecedented history in the form of an imperial apology: "The British Government recognises that Kenyans were subject to torture and other forms of ill treatment at the hands of the colonial administration. The British government sincerely regrets that these abuses took place." Fifty years after Britain's exit from Kenya, the United Kingdom agreed to a compensation payment to 5,228 claimants for a total sum of £19.9 million.

It was the first time an imperial power expressed grievance for the atrocities it committed. In 2011, as a result of these court hearings, the U.K. government was forced to admit that it had secret documents pertaining to its Kenyan operations, leading to the declassification of what is now known as the Migrated Archives: a vast collection of some twenty thousand colonial files from Britain's thirty-seven former colonies.<sup>174</sup>

#### The Reenactment: The Touching of Time Beside or Across Itself

Film critic Bill Nichols defines the reenactment as rehearsals that stand in for a historical event while indicating that they are, at the same time, neither an indexical record of that event nor merely a later act of representation, but rather some uncanny combination of the two. He describes the reenactment as a fold in time: it takes "past time and makes it present" and takes "present time and folds it over onto what has already come to pass," allowing the past and present to "coexist in the impossible space of a fantasmatic."<sup>175</sup> Unlike the traditional documentary mode in which events are registered while they unfold in time, in a still image of a reenactment, time folds onto itself in a singular moment. The reenactment is thus a critical challenge to linear homogenous time and proposes multiple and coexisting temporalities and registers.

Considering the traumatic and complicated nature of a civil war within an anti-colonial revolt, with sensitive issues of personal complicity and conflicting national narratives, survivors of the emergency are more inclined to show rather than tell. When re-performing traumatic events, art historian and film director Lukasz Ronduda asserted that "what is real cannot be presented directly, because the essence of trauma is that the psyche is not ready to represent it and capture it in words. Therefore, in the life of the psyche, the real can only appear in the form of unclear repetitions."<sup>176</sup> During such confrontations, the specters of colonial oppression cannot be uttered; rather, they can be visualized or demonstrated. Images as mute witnesses create an implicit space for expression that leaves room for ambiguity, a way of intervening in the present by reconstituting and revising the past. This liberating trait of

a visual and silent reenactment is what makes it so appealing both as a documentary strategy and a form of expression—it's an uncanny spectacle of a traumatic moment displaced in history, yet remarkably present. In this sense, reenactments such as these are more telling than the original depictions of the events because they reveal the true nature of trauma as a gap between the real and the unspeakable.

Although Nichols made an elegant analogy of the fold in time from the present onto the past in an imaginary time-space construction, he omitted the importance of the impact on the future. Reenactments not only bring forward the possibility of altering the past—altering the archive through personal agency—they also direct themselves to the future spectator with the potential of the coming generations to create change based on what is made visible. This is a way of working with time as malleable material; malleable *political* material. The reenactment is therefore always also a possible *pre*-enactment, forms of speculation that allow us to make a difference in the present and its possible futures. The reenactment is a "past moment on the run in the present," wrote performance studies professor Rebecca Schneider, "moments when the past flashes up *now* to present us with its own alternative futures—futures we might choose to realize differently?"<sup>177</sup>

#### The In-Person Demonstration

How can one visualize the past by photographing the present with a future audience in mind? History and memory have a complicated relationship with photography. It culminates in the form of 'in-person' reenactment in which people demonstrate personal experiences from their own past. Since 2015, Pinckers has been involved in an ongoing co-creation in collaboration with Kenyan Mau Mau veterans and detention camp survivors, who are now between 85 and 108 years old.<sup>178</sup> Together, they perform 'demonstrations'<sup>179</sup> in which they claim their roles as heroic victims instead of terrorists in a visual response to a skewed historical narrative that still dominates popular perception today. Photographs of embodied experiences slide through time in a process described by Schneider as the "touching of time beside or across itself in the zigzagging lived experience of history's multi-directional ghost notes."<sup>180</sup> What distinguishes the in-person demonstration from other forms of mimetic, illustrative reconstructions of the past is that the agency of what is being demonstrated lies entirely with the performers themselves. The document now becomes the individuals—their physical presence and the performance of their imaginations. This ambiguous agency of the protagonist-turned-actor grants the performers the opportunity to treat the original events and experiences creatively, allowing them to transform their memories in order to resonate with the contemporary context.

These spontaneously improvised micro-per-

<sup>173</sup> David Anderson, *Histories of the Hanged: Britain's Dirty War in Kenya and the End of Empire* (London: Phoenix, 2005), 7.

<sup>174</sup> All files are publicly available and can be consulted in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO, 141 series) at The National Archives in Kew, London.

<sup>175</sup> Bill Nichols, "Documentary Reenactment and the Fantasmatic Subject," *Critical Inquiry* 35, No. 1 (2008): 72-89.

<sup>176</sup> Lukasz Ronduda, "Reenactment as a Photographic Act," in *Reframing Photography: Theory + Practice*, ed. Rebekah Modrak (Abingdon: Routledge, 2011), 204-215.

<sup>177</sup> Rebecca Schneider, *Performing Remains: Art and War in Times of Theatrical Reenactment* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 180.

<sup>178</sup> A continuation from the project "The Struggle for Freedom in \_\_\_\_\_", in collaboration with Dutch artist Michiel Burger, initiated at the Archive of Modern Conflict, London, 2015.

<sup>179</sup> The dictionary definition of the noun 'demonstration' reveals to be a more suitable term instead of 'reenactment'. The three variable meanings according to the *Oxford Dictionary of English*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), s.v. "Demonstration": '(1): an act of showing that something exists or is true by giving proof or evidence; an outward show of a feeling or quality. (2): a practical exhibition and explanation of how something works or is performed. (3): a public meeting or march protesting against something or expressing views on a political issue.'

<sup>180</sup> Rebecca Schneider, *Performing Remains*, 31.

performances are examples of *how it may have been*, emphasizing the act of the demonstration itself and the spectral aura of repeating what is historically unique. Elderly veterans, for instance, don't wear the same clothing that they may have while living in the forest; rather, they appear in casual suits. Walking sticks can be seen along the fringes of scenes with many other anachronistic objects. But historical accuracy isn't the point here. Rather, the very fact that these people, decades later, are able and motivated to physically perform what they've experienced is what resonates. Some of the photographs in the project so far depict forest fighters tending to wounded soldiers, women smuggling food and hiding ammunition, people behind barbed wire fences in a detention camp replica, women sleeping in caves used as hideouts, the assembling of a homemade gun, interrogation sessions, a woman burying her dead baby after being beaten during forced labour, secret oath-taking rituals and the unveiling of bodily scars and bullet wounds.

Although much of the human experience is intangible, the physical traces of wounds remain not only on bodies but within the landscape and as repurposed structures, former camp sites and unmarked mass graves. This tangible, material experience necessitates a different kind of confrontation, mediated through digital technology and virtual restorations as proposed by the MBC.

**The Museum of British Colonialism:  
Visualizing Structures of Detention in Kenya**

In September 2018, the MBC team conducted their first field work exercise in Nyeri, one of the hotspots of the Mau Mau movement in Kenya's Central Province. The aim of the fieldwork was to visit former detention sites to assess whether there were any structural remains from the detention period. Our attention was drawn to two secondary schools that were said to be former detention camps and that had been repurposed into schools after Kenya's independence.

A visit to these two sites revealed significant evidence of camp structures still present today. These included buildings that were formerly used as mass holding cells, solitary confinement cells, torture chambers and camp officers' quarters. The evidence is there, and it's harrowing, to say the least.

In some of the former mass cells now used as classrooms, the barbed wire can still be seen running along the space between the roof and the walls (used to prevent detainees from escaping through this gap). Other structures, such as the torture chambers with their sunken floors, lack of ventilation and barbed wire, remained virtually unchanged.

After documenting these structures with photographs and measurements, the next step was to ask ourselves: "What would be the best way to share our findings and communicate this history to as many people as possible?" Working across two continents with limited resources, we chose to use digital tools as our primary means

of presenting, disseminating and exploring this past. Additionally, we saw digital media as a way of dismantling the power structures put in place to suppress this history both in Kenya and the United Kingdom by directly challenging notions of access and representation.

The practice of 3D reconstruction presents an alternative for heritage that falls outside the so-called authorized heritage discourse (in which certain heritage sites are seen as more significant than others) by challenging established historical narratives.<sup>181</sup> Here, lesser known, underrepresented sites of community interest are visualized and open to public engagement through interactive digital visualization.

The key strength of digital media in this project is that it made the inaccessible accessible, and we're not just making the structures virtually accessible but also the conversations and sentiments around them. The MBC has attempted to explore both tangible and intangible colonial history in three main ways: by creating 3D reconstructions of the camps based on existing physical remains and archival sources; overlaying these reconstructions onto an interactive digital map, showing scale, spread and location across the country; and populating this map and 3D models with oral histories and the experiences of those who lived in the camps.

The MBC used a form of investigative esthetics that combines different historical sources and present-day evidence to communicate the architectural nature of the detention structures and where they were/are situated. This approach locates itself within a growing global practice in architecture, academia, art and cultural theory in which historical narratives and facts can be visualized through multiple modalities of knowledge. Multiple historical sources bring together a visual representation of history that presents certain challenges, particularly around the representation of ambiguity, transparency and evidence. Instead of looking at ambiguity as taking away from the historical reconstruction process, the MBC treats it as an inherent part of the process that needs to be communicated in a transparent and evidential way.

To this end, we've taken an iterative approach to 3D visualization, communicating to our audiences through social media channels that the virtual models are open to modification and subject to revision as new evidence and research emerges. As a result, we have embraced openness and vulnerability in communicating a visual historiography in which ambiguity, uncertainty and speculation are inherent to the retelling and reclaiming of history based on memory and personal expression. A way of coming to terms with the past, creating a space for discussion and embracing documentary's blind spots.

**Possible Futures**

We're not attempting to position our documentary works as expert outputs but to present them as stages in our own individual learning processes.

181  
Laura Jane Smith, 'Discourses of heritage: implications for archaeological community practice,' *Nuevo mundo mundos nuevos*, Current issues (January 2012), <https://doi.org/10.4000/nuevo-mundo.6448>.



A photorealistic three-dimensional digital reconstruction of the mass cells in Mweru Works Camp. Oral testimony from the local community drew our attention to the fact that the original cell structures did not have windows, while the present-day structures which are used as classrooms do. This has been factored into the digital reconstructions as shown above © Museum of British Colonialism (2019)



Buildings that were used as mass cells in Mweru Works Camp (today, Mweru High School). Today, the structures are used as classrooms © Museum of British Colonialism (2019)



Beninah Wanjugu Kamuju demonstrates how she was interrogated by Home Guards, 2019 © MMWVA & Max Pinckers

We want to demonstrate that you don't have to be an expert to take an interest in this history, participate in this work or record the testimony of a vanishing generation of witnesses to mass atrocities. This prerequisite of 'expertise' has confined studies of decolonization largely to privileged White academic circles, only accessible behind paywalls.

Therefore, being open about our learning processes becomes a strength through which we can invite different opinions and different narratives. If something in our visualization is incorrect, then we'll change it, and if we've forgotten something, we'll add it. There are still many levels of uncertainty brought about by limitations, such as research sources, barriers in access and lack of funding. Nevertheless, we try to communicate this very uncertainty within the process of documentation itself. Perhaps the essence of true decolonization is not about experts teaching non-experts but in learning to unlearn what we've believed to be true. This is about teaching one another and sharing our lessons, whether you're considered an expert or not. We consider this to be restorative and vital history. ❖



Mau Mau Screening Camp at Lang'ata, Nairobi, April 1954  
© The East African Standard, Nairobi, Kenya

Chao Tayiana Maina is a member of the Museum of British Colonialism, founded in 2018 as a volunteer collective from Kenya and the United Kingdom dedicated to exploring inclusive ways of communicating British colonial history. Working across two different continents with limited resources, they chose to use digital tools and digital media as their primary means of presenting, disseminating and exploring colonial history in Kenya. Additionally, they see digital media as a way of dismantling power structures that suppress this history and of increasing dialogue within Kenya and the United Kingdom by directly challenging notions of access and representation.

Max Pinckers is an artist based in Brussels, Belgium. His work explores the critical, technological and ideological structures that surround the production and consumption of documentary images. For Pinckers, documentary photography involves more than the representation of an external reality: it is a speculative process that approaches reality and truth as plural, malleable notions open to articulation in different ways. He is currently an artistic doctoral researcher at the The School of Arts / KASK Ghent and a founding member of The School of Speculative Documentary. Pinckers is *Trigger's* guest editor for this issue.



Eliud Mwai Muniyiri demonstrates how he was held in a detention camp, 2019  
© MMWVA & Max Pinckers