

NAKED BUT NICE

LEHER'S

LIBERTÉ

EGALITÉ

FRATERNITÉ

$E=mc^2$

Coca-Cola

21

MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

LEHER'S WAS HERE



A CONVERSATION WITH MÂTRE LEHERB

Desneux Grégory



»Die politische Kultur, die auf dem Boden Europas gewachsen ist und sich wie üppig wucherndes Unkraut über die ganze Erde ausgebreitet hat, gründet sich auf Ausschließlichkeit. Sie ist immer darauf bedacht, Fremde in Schach zu halten oder zu vernichten. Sie ist kannibalisch in ihren Neigungen, nährt sich von dem, was andere Völker notwendig zu ihrem Leben brauchen, und versucht, deren ganze Zukunft zu verschlingen.«

Rabindranath Tagore, »Nationalismus in Japan«, Nationalismus, 1921. [1918]

»Wie der Soziologe Orlando Patterson bemerkt hat, sollten wir uns nicht darüber wundern, dass die Aufklärung sich mit der Sklaverei abfinden konnte; wir müssten uns eher wundern, wenn dies nicht der Fall gewesen wäre. Das Konzept der Freiheit entstand nicht in einem Vakuum. Nichts rückte die Freiheit derart ins Licht wie die Sklaverei – wenn sie sie nicht überhaupt erst erschuf.«

Toni Morrison, Im Dunkeln spielen. Weiße Kultur und literarische Imagination, 1994. [1992]

»Europa hat sich an dem Gold und den Rohstoffen der Kolonialländer unmäßig bereichert: aus Lateinamerika, China und Afrika, aus all diesen Kontinenten, denen Europa heute seinen Überfluss vor die Nase setzt, werden seit Jahrhunderten Gold und Erdöl, Seide und Baumwolle, Holz und exotische Produkte nach eben diesem Europa verfrachtet. Dieses Europa ist buchstäblich das Werk der Dritten Welt. Die Reichtümer, an denen es erstickt, sind den unterentwickelten Völkern gestohlen worden.«

Frantz Fanon, Die Verdammten dieser Erde, 1966. [1961]

After an intensive analytical inventory of the indirectly mental and optical phenomena of the **continents**, I created 'imaginary portraits' of the **continents** Asia, Europe, America and Africa by means of surrealist alienations and irrational associative images: over several years working on more than 2000 ceramic plates using the brittle and difficult technique of faience majolica in the old Italian ceramic city Faenza. In terms of dimensions, the university panel paintings are the largest faience paintings of this century.

»Im Mittelpunkt der europäischen Kultur während der vielen Jahrzehnte imperialer Expansion stand ein unbeeindruckter und unerbittlicher Eurozentrismus. Dieser Eurozentrismus akkumulierte Erfahrungen, Territorien, Völker, Geschichten, er studierte sie, klassifizierte sie, verifizierte sie [...]; vor allem aber unterwarf er Völker, indem er ihre Identitäten aus der Kultur und sogar aus der Idee des weißen christlichen Europa verbannte. [...] Die eurozentrische Kultur kodifizierte und beobachtete alles im Umkreis der nicht-europäischen oder peripheren Welt und ließ nur wenige Kulturen unangetastet, wenige Völker und Landstriche unbeanspruchte.«

Edward W. Said, Kultur und Imperialismus. Einbildungskraft und Politik im Zeitalter der Macht, 1994. [1993]

»When racism and sexism are no longer fashionable, what will your art collection be worth?«

Guerrilla Girls, 1989.

»Historically, Europeans expected to witness the eradication of the Indigenous people of this country, and Australian governments have attempted to erase the identity of Indigenous people by physical or cultural genocide, the latter often parading under the title of ›assimilation‹. Despite their failure, ›imperialist nostalgia‹ is everywhere. The passing of an ancient culture is both mourned and celebrated. The collection of art, for example, can serve as evidence of

Tony Birch, »Nothing has changed«: The making and unmaking of Koori culture, 2010.

»The history of the United States is a history of settler colonialism – the founding of a state based on the ideology of white supremacy, the widespread practice of African slavery, and a policy of genocide and land theft. Those who seek history with an upbeat ending, a history of redemption and reconciliation, may look around and observe that such a conclusion is not visible, not even in utopian dreams of a better society.«

Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, An Indigenous Peoples' History of the United States, 2015.

»My response to racism is anger. That anger has eaten clefts into my living only when it remained unspoken, useless to anyone. It has also served me in classrooms without light or learning, where the work and history of Black women was less than a vapor. It has served me as fire in the ice zone of uncomprehending eyes of white women who see in my experience and the experience of my people only new reasons for fear or guilt. And my anger is no excuse for not dealing with your blindness, no reason to withdraw from the results of your own actions.«

Audre Lorde, The Uses of Anger. Women responding to racism. Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches, 1981.

»What are we to make of a world that responds to the most lucid enunciation of ethics with violence? What are the foundational questions of the ethico-political? Why are these questions so scandalous that they are rarely posed politically, intellectually, and cinematically – unless they are posed obliquely and unconsciously, as if by accident? Give Turtle Island back to the ›Savages‹. Give life itself back to

Frank B. Wilderson III, Red, White & Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms, 2010.

the superiority of the imperialist culture, while allowing its owners the gratification of appreciating the ›beauty‹ in objects from a past time. James Clifford has noted the Western preference for collectables that are from an ›ancient (preferably vanished) civilisation‹. This is so for art and bodies. For mourning to occur ›innocently and purely‹, without opposition, the possessed and commodified culture must be certified dead.«

»The struggle is inner: Chicano, Indio, American Indian, Mojado, Mexicano, immigrant Latino, Anglo in power, working class Anglo, Black, Asian – our psyches resemble the bordertowns and are populated by the same people. The struggle has always been inner, and is played out in outer terrains. Awareness of our situation must come before inner changes, which in turn come before changes in society. Nothing happens in the ›real‹ world unless it first happens in the images in our heads.«

Gloria E. Anzaldúa, Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza, 1987.

»Aus Gründen, die sicherlich genauer psychologischer Untersuchung bedürfen, scheint der Westen an tiefen Ängsten hinsichtlich der Gefährdung seiner Zivilisation zu leiden und zur Selbstbestätigung ständig den Vergleich mit Afrika nötig zu haben. Wenn Europa, zivilisatorisch voranschreitend, hin und wieder einen Blick zurückwerfen könnte auf das in urtümlicher Barbarei gefangene Afrika, könnte es aus vollem Herzen sagen: Da gehe ich allein aus Gottes Gnaden.«

Chinua Achebe, Ein Bild von Afrika: Rassismus in Conrads ›Herz der Finsternis‹, 2002. [1977]

the Slave. Two simple sentences, fourteen simple words, and the structure of U.S. (and perhaps global) antagonisms would be dismantled. An ›ethical modernity‹ would no longer sound like an oxymoron. From there we could busy ourselves with important conflicts that have been promoted to the level of antagonisms, such as class struggle, gender conflict, and immigrants' rights.«

Between 1980 and 1992, the Austrian painter Maître Leherb created six eight-by-eight meter majolica paintings in Faenza, Italy, for the then new buildings of the Vienna University of Economics. The images show the six continents: Australia, Asia, Europe, America, Africa and the Antarctic. Leherb had to compress each continent history into one picture and did so using allegories referring to what seem to be the key moments of each land in the fashion of what resembles surrealism.

A debate about the pictures started recently. It is, as in many other European cities, a controversy about dealing with colonialism and its heritage in the form of monuments and commemorative plaques, which usually glorify the former colonial powers, in the form of works of art or literature. Leherb, who loved the 'anti', would probably be surprised to be accused of lacking critical distance regarding the painted content. Of course, this current criticism has a lot to do with the actual atmosphere where communities, minorities step up to fight for their rights and destruct all signs of pride or celebration to the harm done.

As the artwork can't be moved and was considered for some time to be covered. Given the fact that maître Leherb never gave a description about his master piece other than the one you can find on the top, the public in the person of the Academy of fine Arts Vienna decided to engage a conversation with the group of works under this form:

While its historic main building on Schillerplatz is being renovated, between 2017 and 2020 the Academy of Fine Arts Vienna will take shelter in a complex of buildings which used to house the Vienna University of Economics and Business. Since its erection in the early 1980s, the spacious entrance hall of this complex has featured the monumental and permanent exhibition of the faience cycle »The Continents« (1980–92) by Austrian artist Maître Leherb (1933–1997). The pictures of the continents »Europe«, »America«, »Africa«, »Asia«, »Australia«, and »Antarctica« are mounted on ceramic tiles of a size of 64 square meters each and represent stereotypical views of the continents, which, from a postcolonial perspective and against the backdrop of feminist history of art, must be regarded with a very critical eye. For the duration of its use of the building, the Academy of Fine Arts Vienna will put the faiences into context by creating a dialog between the works of art and a variety of theoretical and critical approaches. For this purpose, a number of quotes by renowned scientists, authors and artists will be conspicuously displayed on the sides of the faiences. Most of these texts, selected in cooperation with Christian Kravagna, Professor of Postcolonial Studies at the Academy, date back to the time when the faiences were created and represent critical, decolonial and feminist discourses. By providing this context, we aim to encourage a contemporary approach to Leherb's art, and to provoke criticism of stereotyping, colonial and sexist content.

www.akbild.ac.at/Portal/universitaet/uber-uns/news/2018/kontextualisierung-der-kontinentbilder-von-maitre-leherb-im-ausweichquartier-augasse/Handout_Kontextualisierung_Kontinentbilder_web.pdf

So, the sensitivity might have been different in the 80's and 90's, which doesn't serve Maître Leherb's work in a changed context with different concerns. The paintings, even if addressing the ecological, political and social preoccupations of its time aren't up to date when new questions are raised in our society.

The work being so massive and pretty much unmovable forced the public to find an other solution and started this conversation with the corpus to recontextualize it and talk about the weaknesses and contemporary incorrectness. Placing the group of works in the middle of a reflection as a base to address these issues allowed us to keep the images in place and preserve the memory of a time past which we shouldn't forget and on top of which we should keep building.



Maître Leherb's *Continents* in a building like a time capsule.