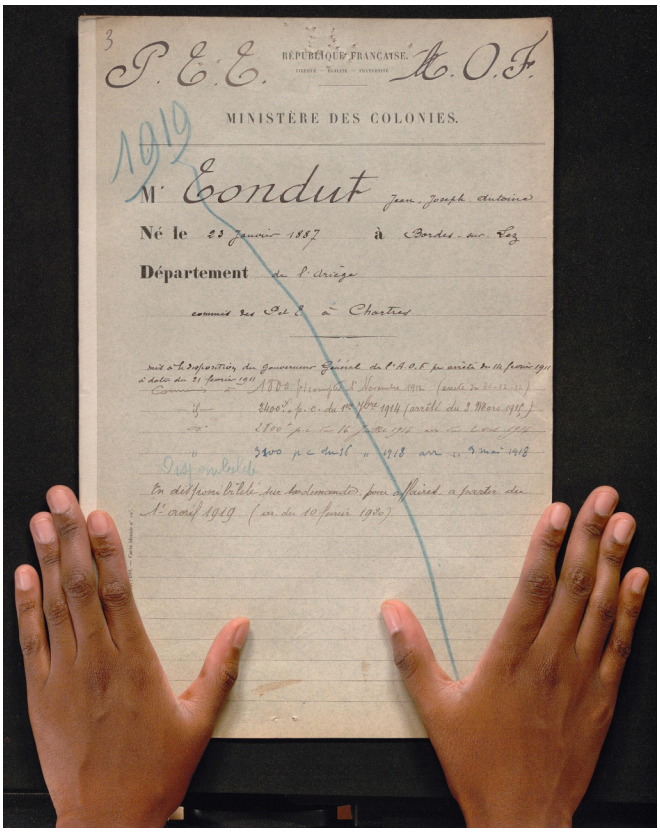
KUVATAIDEAKATEMIA

a rememory that belongs to somebody else
Stories of (un)welcoming



Master of Fine Arts
Thesis of Anna Karima Wane

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Summary

a rememory that belongs to somebody else is the graduation work of Anna Karima Wane at the Academy of Fine Arts, University of the Arts Helsinki. It consists of an exhibition which took place 4-12 May 2024 at the Museum of Impossible Forms in Helsinki, and a written thesis project.
The exhibition centered around issues of archive and memory through the lens of the artist's family histories. Wane explores the place their own family history occupies among the great narrative of History. They explore colonial archives and memories passed down from their grandmother and generations of women in their family. Through video and installation, they aim to create an archive that exists without hegemonic ways of knowledge creation. This archive focuses on the domestic and the everyday: how the act of eating a mango connects one to their ancestry, how something as commonplace as a trivet, or a table napkin, or the table they are on, can carry so much meaning and history built through daily use. The exhibition also served as a place to welcome people in a way that is not always compatible with the contemporary art space.

The written component of the thesis centers the idea of welcoming. Wane makes a connection between the importance of hosting in their practice and the feeling of being unwelcome in an institution like the Fine Arts Academy. They write extensively about their decision to show the thesis work outside of the institution, stressing the structures that have made them feel alienated, and elaborating on the tactics they have developed as a result. They also write about the process of making this work, speaking on their relationship with family and their various influences, rooted in intersectional feminism, and how these have inspired the work presented in the exhibition. Among these thoughts, are interspersed a few of the texts presented in the exhibition.

Introduction

a rememory that belongs to somebody else is an exhibition that ran at the Museum of Impossible Forms located at Aallonhalkoja 9, Helsinki in Finland, from 4th to 12th May 2024, as part of my Master in Fine Arts thesis work for Kuvataideakatemia (Academy of Fine Arts, Helsinki). The work and this thesis are largely occupied with interrogating power structures, whether they are the ones contained within colonial archives and history-making, the ones that govern exhibition-making, or the ones perpetuated by the administration of an institution like the Fine Arts Academy (Kuvataideakatemia known colloquially as Kuva).

The artistic work itself is concerned with questioning the power structures present in the telling of History. It interrogates the place of an archive which glosses over so much of the lived experiences of those whose stories it claims to tell. However, an artwork does not exist in a vacuum. I could write a thesis focused on my artistic practice and family history, but it would not do justice to the journey that produced this final work. That is why I am interested in discussing the structures I have encountered along the way, and the choices I have made as a direct result of being faced with them.

I want to start by stating and discussing the things that go without saying: the ideas and context that shape my world and that inform both the artistic work and the writing of this thesis but are not necessarily spoken within them. I must credit the work of Sarah Schulman who begins her book *Conflict is not Abuse* with a discussion of methodology in which she presents a genealogy of her ideas and grounds them in queer feminist literature.[1]

First, I consider myself a student of decolonial thought and intersectional feminism. I strive to interrogate and dismantle the structural impositions of empire and white supremacy and their entanglement with the patriarchy. That is one of the most important underpinnings of my work.

Second, I am writing this in July of 2024, a few days after the International Court of Justice declared Israel's assault and occupation of Palestine "unlawful."[2] This is an important development as the genocide in Gaza has been a presence over everything I have done in the past year. It has shaped my social circles and my work, as well as my relationship with my schooling institution. I will write more about this in the body of the thesis but I wanted to provide this context early on.

In addition, my lifetime has been shaped by great injustices and by the advancement of technologies that contribute to the disenfranchisement of some while giving many a platform to speak their oppression.
I write this alternatively on a computer and a phone whose parts have sowed doom and exploitation up until the finished products reached me. The cobalt and copper mining in the

[1] Schulman, Sarah. *Conflict Is Not Abuse: Overstating Harm, Community Responsibility, and the Duty of Repair*. arsenal pulp press, 2016, p. 17
[2] Hearst, Katherine. "ICJ: Israeli occupation of Palestinian lands is 'unlawful' and breaches laws concerning apartheid." Middle East Eye. July 19, 2024. https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/icj-delivers-landmark-opinion-57-year-israeli-occupation#:~:text=The%20International%20Court%20of%20Justice%20(ICJ)%20issued%20an%20advisory%20opinion,concerning%20%22racial%20segregation%22%20and%20%22.

Democratic Republic of Congo has been called “modern day slavery”[3] and has led to many human rights violations in the country.[4] It is a grim aspect of modern life that the phones and technologies that lead to oppression and exploitation in DRC are giving visibility to a genocide in Palestine. The interconnectedness of struggles in the 21st century is an important thread. I have spent many moments wondering whether this work — and art-making in general — was necessary, whether it was not an exercise in self-absorption when there is so much death, destruction and oppression happening in real time. As with many of the questions that pepper this work, there is no definitive answer, only attempts at finding and creating meaning.

I am anti-objectivity. I do not believe that human beings are capable of objectivity, nor should they aspire to it. We are all a result of our contexts and have to accept that shaping our perspective and worldviews. Much of the work I am doing here and in general, is about complexifying the notion of truth, is about questioning what is posed as fact. Perspective is everything.

The works in the exhibition, *a rememory that belongs to somebody else,* were made between 2023 and 2024, although the thought processes for them go back much further. These works are an exploration of archives or their lack, family histories and colonial histories through various media. They explore truth and question the written record. They are attempts at formulating an archive of the domestic, using the often-overlooked history-making of the home.

How to eat a mango (08:34) is a four-channel video installation showcased on four JVC CRT monitors.

A living/reading room installation which consists of a dining table and six chairs around it, an invitation to sit. On the table were three trivets from my grandmother’s house, five table napkins with reworked images of colonial Kindia laser-printed onto them, and handwritten notes about various tables in my grandmother’s home. On the walls, were images of archival documents sourced from the Archives Nationales d’Outre-Mer, and handwritten notes spread throughout the room, recounting my journey to the archives. There were also two texts on the wall, *The Story of Aye Touré* and *About Verlaine, crochet and motherhood*.

[3] Amnesty International. “POWERING CHANGE OR BUSINESS AS USUAL?: FORCED EVICTIONS AT INDUSTRIAL COBALT AND COPPER MINES IN THE DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF THE CONGO.” Amnesty International, 2023.
[4] ibid

Chapter I: Stories and Inspirations

Prologue

There are many starting points to this project. Ideas and questions that have come in waves since 2020.

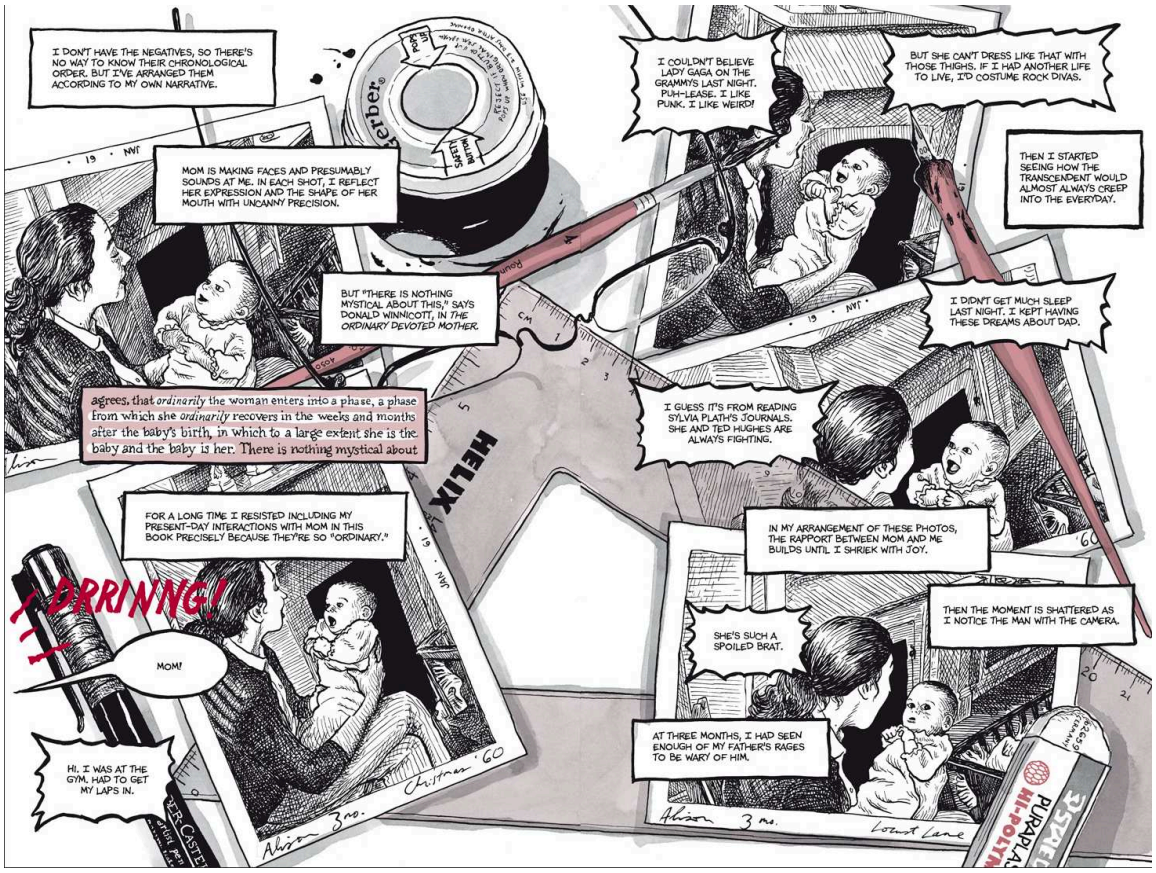
It is an interesting exercise to wonder where something started. I tend to think in mind maps – everything is deeply connected – so there is rarely one thread to follow from inspiration to project. In this part, I will try to corral these different moments of inspiration to trace my own genealogy of ideas.

In 2020, I became particularly interested in the topic of parenthood, specifically motherhood. I read in quick succession *Fun Home: A Family Tragicomic* (2006) and *Are You My Mother?: A Comic Drama* (2012) by Alison Bechdel. These two graphic novels are respectively about Bechdel's relationship with her father and her mother. Difficult conversations abound in these books, and she has to confront, as we all do, that her parents, these giant mythical figures in her life, are only human. She learns to see them as flawed but not all powerful through writing them, and recalling them. These confrontations as well as the uncovering of family secrets and histories, the mapping both geographical and emotional of her parents' lives resonated deeply with me. I was on a similar journey. Having returned home after seven formative years abroad, I felt a strong need to reconfigure and think through my relationships to family and my place within my community. I had grown elsewhere, but to my relatives, I was still the seventeen-year-old who had left in pursuit of academic opportunities. I had spent years away, and missed marriages, births, divorces and so many moments of shared meaning. I could relate to Bechdel's need to understand her parents by writing and drawing them.

Not only did I feel a strong affinity to the topics Bechdel explored, but I also felt that her approach to them was quite fruitful. She weaves in and out of her memories, her reflections on those memories, and theoretical writings. For example, in *Are you my mother?*, she spends quite a bit of time discussing the writings of D.W. Winnicott, a child psychologist whose writings had a resurgence in the 2010's.[5] Quoting his work about the "ordinary devoted mother,"[6] and contextualizing it with images from her infancy and conversations with her mother in the present, and telling about dreams she had and interpreting them, but also hearing her mother's interpretation. I appreciate the multiplicity and the layering of thoughts and storytelling in this book. Bechdel does not enforce the existing hierarchy between the personal and the academic. Instead, she marries the two in an effort to tell her story.
She also illuminates the messy process of writing both of these memoirs. She embarks on a weighty emotional journey, unpacking these oft-unspoken dynamics within families, and she

[5] Nelson, Maggie. The Argonauts. Graywolf Press, 2015, p. 23
[6] Bechdel, Alison. 2012. *Are You My Mother?: A Comic Drama*, p. 34

does not gloss over that. I appreciated being able to follow on this journey to see this image of her drawing table, with reproductions of her baby pictures, excerpts of Winnicott and the voice of her mother in the background.[7] In this excerpt (below), she arranges these baby pictures in a sequence, theorizing about her own facial expressions in them and how they reflect experiences of growing up within her household.



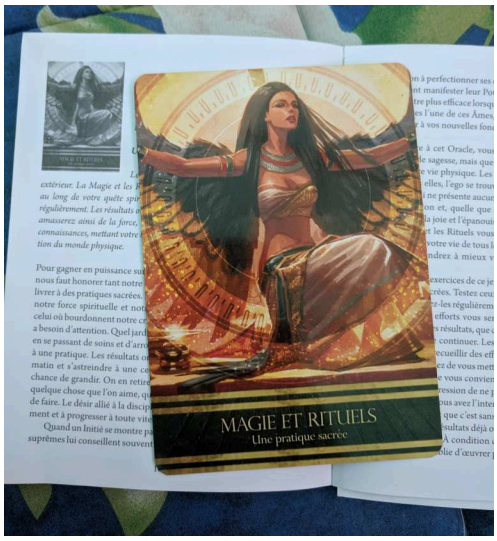
Bechdel's books are also reminiscent of one of my favorite books: *The Argonauts* (2015) by Maggie Nelson. Nelson's work introduced me to the concept of autotheory. She writes beautifully about her relationship, her pregnancy and finding a place in the world as a queer family. She also acknowledges and presents other works and texts which influence her thinking, and develops her own way of seeing and thinking which combines all of these threads. I fell in love with that book and its complexities. It exists in this space challenging the "historical disparagement of self-reflective work as a supposedly narcissistic and therefore nonintellectual or fundamentally uncritical mode."[8] Nelson belongs to a long tradition of feminist writers who view the personal as political and emphasize such connections in their work. These writers, artists, thinkers confront the patriarchy first and foremost by bringing into question the tools that enforce it. Where their male counterparts used academic writing and spoke of a "human

[7] Bechdel, Alison. 2012. *Are You My Mother?: A Comic Drama*, p. 32-33
[8] Fournier, Lauren. 2021. *Autotheory as feminist practice in art, writing, and criticism*. MIT Press, p. 6

condition," they used lived experience and their own subjectivity to support their theoretical assertions.[9]
It is no coincidence that I was so drawn to the form of autotheory that came from these two queer feminist works. They are using this disruptive form to explore disruptive ideas, to challenge the status quo and bring into question aspects of society which we are taught to take for granted. Everything that I strive to do in my practice.

Aye Touré

In 2020, I had also joined a group of women who did group meditations on the full moon. They met on the terrace above a natural products store in Dakar. After the meditation, we sat in a circle and the woman hosting the gathering had us draw cards. I picked "Magie et Rituels" (pictured left). The explanation suggested creating my own rituals. I did not have to think for long. I immediately knew what that looked like for me: a strong sense that I needed to massage my grandmother's feet. I used to do this as a child and I had not had the chance since my return home. It had always been a chance to connect with her and to offer her relief.



I bought some oil in the store and went to visit my grandmother. I sat on the floor by the red chair in her room, and we talked as we always do. We call her Mamima, like her mother before her. It is a title passed down with the responsibility of carrying stories of the family, memories of moments before her birth. She tells me again the story of her father Alphonse Tondut/Thiécoura. I have heard it before but I listen again. He was born of a white French father Antoine Tondut and a black mother in Guinea. Antoine had a French wife though, and when she found out about his other family, she asked the colonial authorities not to send him back to his post. When Alphonse's mother got remarried, her new husband made her give away her son. She sent him away with a couple from Côte d'Ivoire who were passing through the town. In Côte d'Ivoire, Alphonse – because of his light skin – was taken in by another French administrator who sent him to school.

For once, I asked what his mother's name was. I had somehow never thought of it until that moment passing my hands back and forth on her feet, senses floating on the scent of an herbal essence.

"Her name was Aïda Touré but everyone called her Aye." I had a name I never knew I craved to hear. Once the first question had left my lips, I had to keep asking where she was from, what was her mother's name, how old was she when she "married" Antoine Tondut. So many

[9] Fournier, Lauren. 2021. *Autotheory as feminist practice in art, writing, and criticism*. MIT Press, p. 11

questions she could not give me the answer to.
And the one I could not ask Mamima about the woman who had given away a son: did she have a choice in all of this?
In Mamima's retelling, the two were married, there is not even a hint that her father may have been born from an act of violence. Perhaps I could not bring myself to ask her, to hear something that would break my heart. I much prefer to live in this suspended state of questioning without having to know. I suspect she does too.

I read Donna Harraway's *Cyborg Manifesto* and became fascinated with the figure of La Malinche, the Mother of Mexico. She was a young indigenous woman who served as an interpreter to Spanish explorers such as Hernan Cortes[10]. Her name is used as an insult, an accusation of betrayal. After all, she did betray her people to the colonizers, and she did bear a white man's children.

But, somehow, lost to History, the same questions haunted me, and Mexican feminist scholars: did she have a choice in all of this?[11]

Another question would arise, as I read Bechdel and Nelson, as I read Morrison and learned about La Malinche, and became interested in these figures of failed* mothers: do we tend to blame the mother who is a victim of her circumstances, because we see it as a failure to protect herself and by extension us, the children?
*(*failure in this case is not a value judgment. It refers to the heavy expectations that society puts on the figure of the mother. Failing to meet those does not make one a bad mother.)*

Octavio Paz explores this idea in his famous essay about Mexican identity, *The Sons of La Malinche*. He delves into this disdain towards La Malinche, and *la chingada* whom he calls the Mexican mother. In both of these designations, there is an undertone of violence, of aggression, of violation. He compares the perceptions of the "Virgin Mother" to that of the "violated Mother": "Her passivity is abject: she does not resist violence, but is an inert heap of bones, blood and dust."[12] The resentment towards the mother, the need to construct an identity away from her and from the original act of violence, those sentiments felt familiar.

Sethe came to mind, the protagonist of Toni Morrisson's *Beloved*, which I borrow the title of the exhibition and thesis from. Sethe kills her child rather than see her enslaved and finds herself haunted by the ghost of the infant. She must live in an in-between space, in the memories of the plantation and in her present as a free woman bound only by her rememory – "the recollection of an obscured memory that can be similar to a haunting, an uncanny sensation of both

[10] Downs, Kristina. "Mirrored Archetypes: The Contrasting Cultural Roles of La Malinche and Pocahontas." Western Folklore 67, no. 4 (2008): 397–414. http://www.jstor.org/stable/25474939.
[11] Haraway, Donna. 2017. "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-feminism in the Late Twentieth Century." In *Bloomsbury Academic eBooks*. https://doi.org/10.5040/9781474248655.0035, p. 58
[12] Paz, Octavio. "The Sons of La Malinche." In The Mexico Reader: History, Culture, Politics, edited by Gilbert M. Joseph and Timothy J. Henderson, 20–27. Duke University Press, 2002, p. 25

familiarity and unfamiliarity."[13]

"'Places, places are still there. If a house burns down, it's gone, but the place – the picture of it – stays, and not just in my rememory, but out there in the world. What I remember is a picture floating around out there outside my head. I mean, even if I don't think it, even if I die, the picture of what I did, or knew, or saw is still out there. Right in the place where it happened.'
'Can other people see it?' asked Denver.
'Oh, yes. Oh, yes, yes, yes. Someday you be walking down the road and you hear something or see something going on. So clear. And you think it's you thinking it up. A thought picture. But no. It's when you bump into a rememory that belongs to somebody else."[14]

I started seeing my great-great-grandmother Aye Touré as a companion to Sethe. Her life, her personhood swallowed by the stories of the men: the one who "married" her and the one she gave birth to. She does not get a speaking part in the story. "She loses her name; she *is* no one; she disappears into nothingness; she is Nothingness. And yet she is the cruel incarnation of the feminine condition."[15] She is simply a vehicle in a foundational myth, a cog in the explanation of how the name Tondut comes to a family in Dakar, all the way from Ariège. Her story is one of erasure, but also of implicit blame. Her sin was passivity. There was a disregard for her in the story I had received and it made me want to know her more. I wondered if, like Sethe, she was haunted by the child she could not keep. Were there creaks and whispers in her house? Did she dream of him? Or did she try her best to forget?

Did she bend under the weight of her scars?

When I look back on the notes I made at the beginning of this process, the word RAGE is inscribed on page after page. I was angry that I had never heard her name, angry that I had never thought to ask. Above all, I could not imagine her responding to these circumstances with anything other than rage.
Yet, I knew she could not have. I knew how a woman's rage is perceived now, let alone how it would have been received then. I knew that if she had expressed her rage, the story would have ended differently.
Perhaps I was projecting my own powerlessness.

I started looking for Aye Touré.

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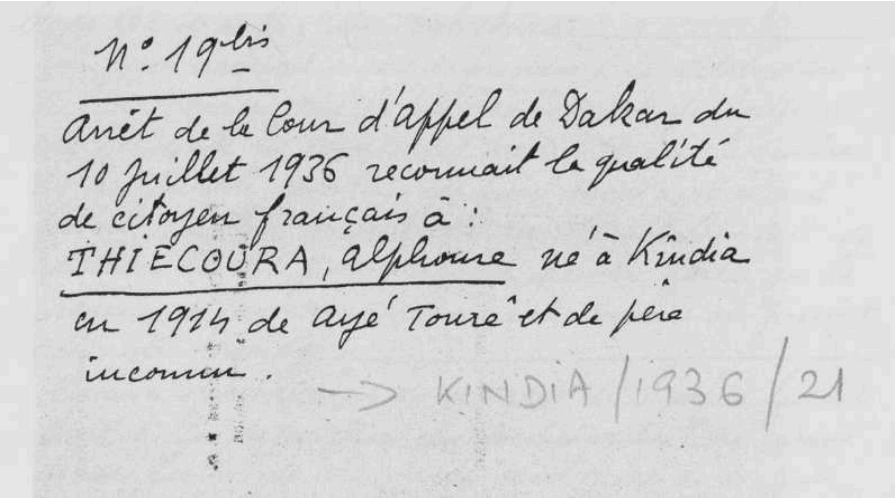
[13] Roski, Onra. "Re-visiting Re-memory: Beloved Vis À Vis One Never Remembers Alone — One Never Remembers Alone." One Never Remembers Alone, April 28, 2020. https://www.oneneverremembersalone.com/blog/eve
[14] Morrison, Toni. Beloved: A Novel, 1987, p. 36
[15] Paz, Octavio. "The Sons of La Malinche." In The Mexico Reader: History, Culture, Politics, edited by Gilbert M. Joseph and Timothy J. Henderson, 20–27. Duke University Press, 2002, p. 25

Like Bechdel and Woolf[16] before her, I was clinging to something I have always been taught to view as fact: the written word. I looked for traces of Aye Touré in archives, examining images of Kindia as though I would suddenly see her face among the crowd in the market or standing under a banana tree, and recognize her. As if she had always been there, just waiting for me to find her.

I found a piece of history in the 1914 civil register of Kindia.[17]
According to this note, Papipa, my great-grandfather, obtained French citizenship in 1936. On this piece of paper, he is referred to as Thiécoura, Alphonse. Thiécoura is the name his grandmother had given him, a nickname akin to “my little sweetheart.” That a sweet name becomes his identifier in official documents reminds me of the in-between spaces marginalized people actually occupy. In the past decade, my grandmother struggled to get a passport. She could not get a Guinean passport – having spent most of her life in Senegal, the documents of her life all bore the stamp of Senegal. She could not get a Senegalese passport because every document that was meant to identify her to the governing body bore a different name. There was one for her birth certificate, another for her marriage license, another on some of her children’s birth documents and yet another for the rest of her children’s. She could not be recognized by a bureaucracy that had never known her. It is not the aim of bureaucracy to know the people it governs, only to categorize them.

It struck me that Alphonse did not wear the name Tondut, and even more that the document claimed his father to be unknown. I had been looking for these traces, and somehow forgotten that they mean nothing. The written record says “père inconnu” while the photo of said father sits in my grandmother’s living room, while his last name is the same one my grandmother responds to. I wondered how I could hold space for these ‘truths.’ Did I need one version of events written on a piece of paper? Was I going to bring said paper to my grandmother to prove some kind of point? Who gets to decide what is true?

[16] Bechdel, Alison. 2012. *Are You My Mother?: A Comic Drama*, p. 27
[17] Colonie de la Guinée Française, Cercle de Kindia, Registre de L'État-Civil, Année 1914. http://anom.archivesnationales.culture.gouv.fr/caomec2/osd.php?territoire=GUINEE&commune=KINDIA&annee=1914


N°. 19 bis
Arrêt de la Cour d'appel de Dakar du 10 Juillet 1936 reconnait la qualité de citoyen français à : THIECOURA, Alphonse né à Kindia en 1914 de Ayé Touré et de père inconnu. → KINDIA/1936/21

Excerpt from Colonie de la Guinée Française,
Cercle de Kindia, Registre de L'État-Civil, Année 1914.

I had to change my perspective, let go of finding Aye Touré, of finding truth, of taking the archive at face value.

Two of the texts I read at the time helped me refocus my research and thinking: *The Truth of Fact, The Truth of Feeling* by Ted Chiang and *Venus in Two Acts* by Saidiya Hartman.

The Truth of Fact, The Truth of Feeling[18]

The truth of fact, the truth of feeling is a short story from Ted Chiang's Exhalation. Exhalation is a collection of short stories exploring humanity's relation to technology.
The Truth of Fact, The Truth of Feeling is a story unfolding in two parallel worlds. The first one is of a near future where humans have developed technology to record every single interaction. This text is from the perspective of a journalist who is tasked with writing about this emerging technology and muses about its effects on memory.
In parallel, unfolds a story taking place in a colonized West African village. We follow a young man Jijingi who starts learning to read and write from Moseby, a Christian missionary who has come to stay in the village. When a dispute happens between the elders in the village, Jijingi goes to consult the archives collected by the Europeans and brings back a piece of paper. He shows it to the elder Sabe, arguing that this paper holds the truth.
He is met with a question: "Have you studied paper so much that you've forgotten what it is to be Tiv?"[19] This sends Jijingi into an existential questioning. He is confronted with his own thinking and how the practice of reading and writing has changed his relationship to knowledge and truth. "Even without attending a mission school, he had begun thinking like a European; his practice of writing in his notebooks had led him to disrespect his elders without his even being

[18] Chiang, Ted. The Truth of Fact, The Truth of Feeling. Exhalation. Pan Macmillan, 2019, pp. 343-428
[19] Chiang, Ted. The Truth of Fact, The Truth of Feeling. Exhalation. Pan Macmillan, 2019, p.418

aware of it."[20]
I could relate to Jijingi of course. I had been to the European school and I had spent many years unlearning. The words of my undergraduate advisor Ka-Man Tse ran through my mind: "Take five years before thinking of a master's degree," she had told me over a meal. "You need at least five to unlearn everything they taught you here."
It had only been two years at that point and I was just starting to understand her words.
This story helped me with that, by provoking me to ask new questions.
Who gets to decide what is true? Why does something being written down give it more authority than the word being transmitted orally? How do we read an archive that, by design, writes over the complexities of existence?

Venus in Two Acts[21]

I encountered of the concept of "critical fabulation" from a piece[22] about Tourmaline's film *Salacia* (2019), written by T. Jean Lax. The film was a beautiful dream-like reimagining of the life of Mary Jones, a Black trans woman in 1830's New York. Tourmaline relocates Jones from Manhattan to Seneca Village, a place where free Black people congregated and could own land.[23] They were removed to create Central Park.
In between the scenes of joy and solidarity in Seneca Village, Tourmaline shares archival footage of trans rights activist Sylvia Rivera, speaking as though through time, to Mary Jones: "Every time you look at that damn river and meditate on the river you got to keep fighting, girly, 'cause it's not time for you to cross the River Jordan."[24]
In writing about this piece, T. Jean Lax recalls Saidiya Hartman's writing, specifically the notion of critical fabulation which they define as "a way of describing the past that plays with the basic elements of a story revealed within the archive. It re-presents the sequence of events from divergent and contested points of view."[25]

Hartman begins her essay with a discussion of the name Venus, which appears in many accounts describing enslaved girls and women. Venus is a name given by the oppressor, a reductive, "libidinal"[26] nickname, which speaks volumes about the perception of these Black women's bodies in the various instances they are brought up. They are sexualized and stripped of their will. In other words, they are *las chingadas*.[27]

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[20] Central Park Conservancy. 2024. "Artifacts and Archives: The Rediscovery and Research of Seneca Village." Central Park Conservancy. May 29, 2024. https://www.centralparknyc.org/articles/rediscovery-and-research-of-seneca-village
[21] Hartman, Saidiya. "Venus in Two Acts." Small Axe a Caribbean Journal of Criticism 12, no. 2 (June 1, 2008): 1–14. https://doi.org/10.1215/-12-2-1
[22] Lax, T. Jean, "Anything We Want to Be: Tourmaline's Salacia" The Museum of Modern Art Magazine, 25 June 2020, n.d. https://www.moma.org/magazine/articles/360
[23] The Central Park Conservancy. 2024. "Artifacts and Archives: The Rediscovery and Research of Seneca Village." Central Park Conservancy. May 29, 2024. https://www.centralparknyc.org/articles/rediscovery-and-research-of-seneca-village
[24] Lax, T. Jean, "Anything We Want to Be: Tourmaline's Salacia" The Museum of Modern Art Magazine, 25 June 2020, n.d. https://www.moma.org/magazine/articles/360
[25] ibid
[26] Hartman, Saidiya. "Venus in Two Acts." Small Axe a Caribbean Journal of Criticism 12, no. 2 (June 1, 2008): 1–14. https://doi.org/10.1215/-12-2-1, p. 6
[27] Paz, Octavio. "The Sons of La Malinche." In The Mexico Reader: History, Culture, Politics, edited by Gilbert M. Joseph and Timothy J. Henderson, 20–27. Duke University Press, 2002, p. 25

Venus only exists in so much as she can be exhumed for the perverse pleasure of the man writing and silencing her. “The archive is, in this case, a death sentence, a tomb, a display of the violated body…”[28]
Hartman asks: “How does one revisit the scene of subjection without reproducing the grammar of violence?”[29] I write this question out over and over again, on mind maps, work documents, notes, and stare at it. I remember it as I flip through the pages of Sexe, Race et Colonies,[30]a weighty tome full of images of subjugation made by some French researchers. This book charts the fascination Europeans have had with various non-white bodies throughout history. These researchers have collected hundreds of postcards, photographs, illustrations, paintings, etc. which depict exoticization and exploitation of women of color. Page after page of grotesque representations, lascivious commentary and almost-nostalgic writings about the objectification of colonized bodies. At a certain point, I begin to wonder who this book is for, and realize it may not be for me. It triggers and appalls me. The pretext is research but violence hangs over the whole affair. I wonder if it is possible to speak of abuse without perpetuating it.

Hartman says, in no uncertain terms, that this is personal for her, this is about the “pain experienced in [her] encounter with the scraps of the archive…”[31]
Critical fabulation is a survival tactic. It is “to reckon with loss, and to respect the limits of what cannot be known.”[32] It is looking at death and humiliation, and finding the glimmer of life. It is looking at violation after violation, after assault and giving room for agency. It is the only way to see yourself in the archive, to exist outside of oppression.

I needed that for Aye Touré. I knew she was nowhere to be found, that her encounter with power had not been documented.[33] I knew that I needed to write her story.

Back to the Archive

In August of 2023, I went to the Archives Nationales d’Outre-Mer in Aix-en-Provence. I had perused their online archives for a few years, and arrived at the conclusion that I needed to see some of the documents and images that had not made it to the website. I walked into the air-conditioned reading room with little expectation. At most, I would get a picture of Kindia and Guinea in the early 1900’s, a setting to place my ancestors within. I started with those, piles and piles of documents, reports and letters from the colonial administration.

Scribbled among the names and numbers of the files I looked up, a sentence stands out: “That something like the subjugation of a whole group of people should appear commonplace and boring is a failure of the archives to capture the reality lived by many.” The absurdity of this

[28] Hartman, Saidiya. “Venus in Two Acts.” Small Axe a Caribbean Journal of Criticism 12, no. 2 (June 1, 2008): 1–14. https://doi.org/10.1215/-12-2-1, p. 2
[29] ibid, p. 4
[30] Blanchard, Pascal, Nicolas Bancel, Gilles Boëtsch, Dominic Thomas, and Christelle Taraud. Sexe, Race & Colonies: La domination des corps du XVe siècle à nos jours. Éditions La Découverte, 2018.
[31] Hartman, Saidiya. “Venus in Two Acts.” Small Axe a Caribbean Journal of Criticism 12, no. 2 (June 1, 2008): 1–14. https://doi.org/10.1215/-12-2-1,, p. 4
[32] ibid, p. 4
[33] Ibid, p. 2. Hartman quotes from Foucault’s *Lives of Infamous Men* and suggests “that what we know of Venus in her many guises amounts to ‘little more than a register of her encounter with power.’...”

colonial archive claiming to contain the “truth,” being held up as an example of objective record-keeping when all I could see was the obscuring of human experiences. I knew this of course, but being confronted with it directly was different than knowing it. In that cool archive reading room in Aix-en-Provence, I felt it. I felt the inadequacy of this archive. I felt my heart breaking all over again for the voices we do not get to hear even if we find the bridge that is meant to connect us to the past.

I then looked up the name “Tondut” in their system and found the personnel folder of my great-great-grandfather Jean-Joseph Antoine Tondut. I did not expect it and had to sit in a moment of contemplation just looking at this folder. I knew not to take what I found as gospel but I also knew that this was an important moment.
I opened the folder and found a telling of this man’s life through correspondence and official documents. Of course, there was no mention of Aye Touré or Alphonse Tondut. The vague statement “raisons personnelles” (personal reasons) written over their existence. While Aye was struggling and ready to send her son away, Antoine was in Conakry with his French wife, Thérèse Meda (a name found in an archive somewhere) who would soon give birth to one of their daughters.

Some artworks and an image

There are quite a few inspirations to this project, and to my approach to the archive. Many of them are listed above but here are a few others I would like to share.

A Glossary of Words My Mother Never Taught Me[34]

A Glossary of Words My Mother Never Taught Me is a film by Kenyan filmmaker and curator Renée Mboya. Mboya uses the source material of the 1966 Italian documentary *Africa Addio*, and intersperses clips of the film, and other archival footage with musings on family and nation-building.

In a sequence of the documentary, we see British colonists simulate hunting conditions in England, by having a “black houseboy” holding a flown-in frozen fox and running so that they (on horseback and followed by their dogs) can give chase.
In another, we see Jomo Kenyatta, Kenya’s first president, give a speech while the white narrator undermines him.

Mboya's intervention into these scenes, as she defines the words uhuru, mzee, native reserve, property, shujaa, manifest destiny, is rememory of times before she was born, the moments after Kenya obtained its independence. She comments on Jomo Kenyatta: “he is the one we grew up calling baba… father” and then of his cult of personality, “this is how you raise children who are afraid all the time.”[35]

[34] Mboya, Renée Akitelek. “A Glossary Of Words My Mother Never Taught Me,” 2021. https://vimeo.com/686835455.
[35] ibid

I am inspired by this work as Mboya uses an archive, this film which describes the oppression of her people in a matter-of-fact, almost jovial tone, and she creates a space among its footage for herself, for the voice of the oppressed.

Once Upon a Garden

One artist whose work I have been increasingly drawn to in the past few years is Linda Dounia Rebeiz. Rebeiz is an artist from Mbour, Senegal who works with AI (artificial intelligence) and NFTs (non-fungible tokens). I can be a bit of a Luddite and the technical aspects of her work are rather foreign to me, but the philosophical implications of it resonate deeply. Rebeiz is interested in challenging the limits of these technologies, specifically in terms of the biases and exclusion that can be perpetuated through AI because most of the people training these models are from the Global North.

One of her projects in particular, *Once Upon a Garden* (2022-2024), starts from a simple question: "which flowers did I grow up seeing as compared to my mother, grandmother, and great-grandmother?"[36] From this question, Rebeiz embarks on a research looking for the plants her great-grandmother might have seen. She explores the rapidly changing landscapes of her environment, and sees "that my great-grandmother saw more flowers than my grandmother did. That my grandmother saw more flowers than my mother did. That my mother saw more flowers than I ever will. That I will see more flowers than my daughter ever will."[37]

She also does a work of rememory with the AI, imagining – despite a lack of data – the color and shape of the plants and flowers her grandmother might have seen.

The work itself is beautiful but I find myself drawn to this installation the artist made as part of the exhibition *Beyond AI: Resistance and Coexistence.*[38] While presenting the work in this show, the artist decided to also create a research wall showcasing the different components that allowed her to create this final work.

I find the different images stuck on with pink tape, unfolding the process before the audience, quite compelling. They show how much work went into obtaining the final image, and it is quite a vulnerable thing for the artist to invite us into their studio in a way. To welcome us to see the parts that are not fully formed. A finished artwork does not hold the same appeal for me, as a work presenting and elucidating the process of making it.

[36] Rebeiz, Linda Dounia. "Once Upon a Garden, Genesis." Linda Dounia's Portfolio. 2022-2024. n.d. https://lindarebeiz.com/once-upon-a-garden,-genesis

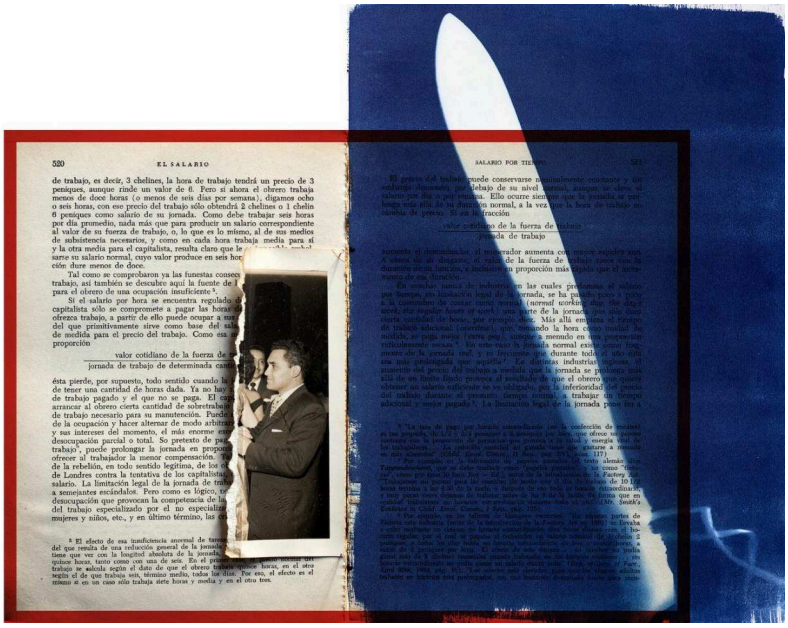
[37] ibid

[38] »Beyond AI: Resistance & Coexistence«," M.Bassy e.V., 2024 n.d. https://m-bassy.org/en/programm/beyond-ai

Jardin de mi padre[39]

Jardin de mi padre (2020) is a body of work and book by Colombian artist Luis Carlos Tovar. Tovar's father was kidnapped by the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC), the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, a guerrilla group.
During his imprisonment, Tovar, the father collected butterflies in the pages of the books his captors would leave for him. Even after his release, he is left to find his way through the jungle for three weeks and he keeps collecting.

Tovar, the son, hears, from his older sister who keeps a clearer picture of the whole affair, that the kidnappers had sent a ransom note along with a photograph of his father. As an adult, he asks to see the photograph only to find it had disappeared from the family archive – a red folder in which his mother put all documents relating to the abduction.[40] This project begins as a search for this image and becomes an exploration of his family's coping with this traumatic moment.



Collages of archival images, cyanotypes and organic materials, the artist creates his own archive and brings into discussion "collective and personal memory."[41]

I was very interested in the variety of materials Tovar used to show that memory works in so many different forms. He creates an archive that highlights his own subjectivity and personal investment in the story he is telling. In a way, he is chasing a memory of a time he could not remember, creating documents and images to capture something as abstract and complicated as ambiguous loss: the moments of his father looking for a way back, his family looking for a

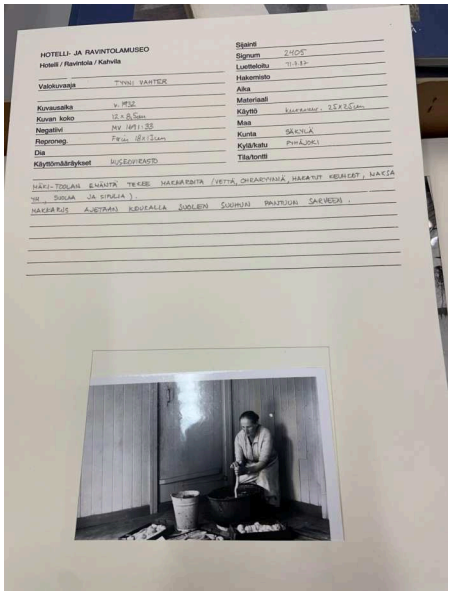
[39] Tovar, Luis Carlos. *Luis Carlos Tovar: Jardín De Mi Padre*. Rm. 2020
[40] Fontcuberta, Joan. Embrasser l'oiseau. Luis Carlos Tovar: Jardin de mi padre, 2020. pp. 214.
[41]Posada-Villada, Valeria. "Jardín De Mi Padre." LensCulture. 2022.
https://www.lensculture.com/articles/luis-carlos-tovar-jardin-de-mi-padre

way to build around his absence, the father looking for a way to forget his traumatic experiences, thus turning it into a larger-than-life myth for his family members.

How do we capture a history we did not witness but looms so large in the psyche? Even if the factual truth is far, can we claim to get close to an emotional truth as artists?

Woman making sausages

In July of 2023, my friend Juliane Foronda was visiting Helsinki to do some research in the archives of the Hotel and Restaurant Museum - which I often mistakenly refer to as the Hospitality Museum. She invited me along on one of her research days. I had only been in Helsinki a few months at the time, and was intrigued to find out more about this museum, and the extensive collection that had my friend visiting it from Scotland.



Looking through images of bread-making, table-setting and moments of sharing around food, one in particular caught my eye. This image of a woman making sausages. The caption reads: “Mäki-Toolan emäntä tekee makkaroita (vettä, ohrarryyniä, hakatut keuhkot, maksa yh, suolaa ja sipulia). Makkarus ajetaan kouralla suolen suuhun pantuun sarveen.”
Translation (from Google Translate): “The mistress[42] of Mäki-Toola makes sausages (water, barley groats, chopped lungs, liver, salt and onion). The sausage is driven with a handful into the horn placed in the mouth of the intestine.”
This parenthesis made me look closer. To me, it was breathing a new life into the practice of archiving. The ingredients and instructions made the image of this woman more than just a forgotten photograph in a dusty folder. It made it an experience I could recreate. It made her real. It made the things she did make sense to me in a new way. Just as Bechdel was showing

[42] A disputed translation. Perhaps matron or housewife would be more appropriate.

the messy process of remembering and growing, the explanation on this image of the housewife makes space for another form of memorializing, and escapes the quite often sterile space of the archive.

I found the image of the woman making sausages the day I was traveling home for the summer holidays. Arriving at my grandmother's house, after those months away, I saw the parentheses. So many things I had taken for granted, grown up around but never really looked at. I often joked with my grandmother that her house was a museum. I say it because she holds onto things, no matter how much her children plead with her to part with them. But, with a new perspective, each object was one sentence away from unraveling before my very eyes, one question away from an explosion of meaning and perspective.
One such moment happened during that summer when I asked my grandmother about this picture which had been hanging up in the living room for as long as I could remember.
"This is my grandfather, Antoine," she answered.
"How did you get this photo?" I asked
What followed was a story I had never heard. About her sister Mame going on a trip to Ariège in the 1980s and finding Antoine's daughter. This daughter then came to Dakar to meet her brother, Alphonse. She brought this photo of her father as well as his watch to give to his only son. She was so happy to meet the family she had spent decades imagining, and just in time, as she would pass away two years after that visit.

I had asked one question and the parenthesis had opened to give me a glimpse of more threads holding lives and stories together.

Pause: *The Story of Aye Touré*

(written in 2020)

Her great-great-grandchildren did not know much about her. They knew her name was Aïda, but everyone called her Aye - and they wring out loveliness from that fact. They knew she was a descendant of Samory Touré. They knew she was the indigenous "wife" of the postmaster of Kindia. They knew that she had a child - their great-grandfather - and was made to give him away by a man. They knew that that child returned years later and worked in the same post office his father had occupied, every summer, to help her provide for her other children.

Aye lived in Kindia, at the time a village on the Conakry-Kankan railroad. Like many before her, like many after her, a man saw her and that altered the course of her life drastically. He was a French official at the head of the post office of Kindia - a man who had come all this way to bridge the gap between the colonizers and their families.
He himself had a wife and children back in Ariège.
At the time, colonialists were encouraged to take an indigenous wife, out of some myopic effort to preserve the Christian values they were teaching the natives. And, so she was taken.

A cloud of speculation engulfs her story. Did Aye have a choice? Could she choose to not marry this French official? Could she choose to give herself to him freely? Or did she have to accept that his power meant more than her life? Was she sad when this man was assigned elsewhere, if only because she was left to fend for their child alone? Did she cry when her new husband made her give up her son? Or had she already accepted that nothing - not even herself - belonged to her? Was she happy when that son came back to her, years later?

I come from Aye Touré and I know little about her. I can only dream up the shape of her face, the curve of her smile, the sound of her laughter. I search for her in my grandmother's face, as she tells me this story. I see her shadow in archival photos. I read about Kindia, hoping I will find the one detail that will unlock her story, that will bring me closer to her. I scour registers hoping to see her name, a proof of her existence.
I struggle with this idea that her existence being recorded on paper would make it real. As if it is not enough that I exist, and am thinking about her. As if it is not enough that her story has been passed down through generations to reach me. I know her name and maybe that is enough.

The spaces of uncertainty, the spaces of questioning I can fill with tenderness.

I see Aye as a young girl, with light feet and a lifted brow. I see her furtively snatching bananas from trees and running away, her laughter like a train behind her. I see her playing in the dirt, and losing her balance, as she spins and spins around. I see her eating a mango with the same enthusiasm both my grandmother and I show for the task, its juice rolling down our chins. I see her sitting still and listening to the stories her grandmother told her. I want to believe that before this white man stepped into her orbit, she had a life, and she felt joy, and she was cared for.

I do not know much about Aye Touré, but I know that she lived, and that is worth celebrating.

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Chapter II: a rememory that belongs to somebody else

My thesis work: *a rememory that belongs to somebody else* took the form of an exhibition on view at the Museum of Impossible Forms in Helsinki, Finland from 4th to 12th of May.
This exhibition had many components and a few thoughts and processes did not make it in but were still instrumental to the work. In this section, I will write about the things that made it in and some of the ones that did not.
I thought of this exhibition alternately as a living room and as a book. I do not think it is either/or. It has borrowed elements from both formats, giving time to the viewer to read but also relax.

How to eat a Mango

The first piece I knew would be in the exhibition is the four-channel video work *How to Eat a Mango* (2023). It was presented on four JVC CRT TVs.
There was a seating area in front of the TVs: a rug and a small Moroccan-style pouf.
Next to the window, and in front of the TVs, a table was set up with some documents from the Archives.
On a Sunday in the spring of 2023, I decided to film myself eating mangoes in the bare, all-white kitchen of my Hoas (Foundation for Student Housing) apartment.

The idea had come from seeing a video on the social media website TikTok of a Mexican woman demonstrating to her white American boyfriend how to cut a mango[43]. He had dared to use a peeler in her presence. She sliced through the skin but not the flesh four times long ways, and simply pulled the skin off. Presented with the bare mango, she dug in. I had never seen this method being used and was quite struck at its simplicity but appalled at how much of the flesh remained on the skin.

I started thinking about my own experiences with the mango — it just so happens to be my favorite fruit. And never too far from my mind when thinking about food is my grandmother, Mamima. She raised me and my tastebuds, so much so that I was for a long time the only child I knew who enjoyed various porridges that were looked down upon by my peers.

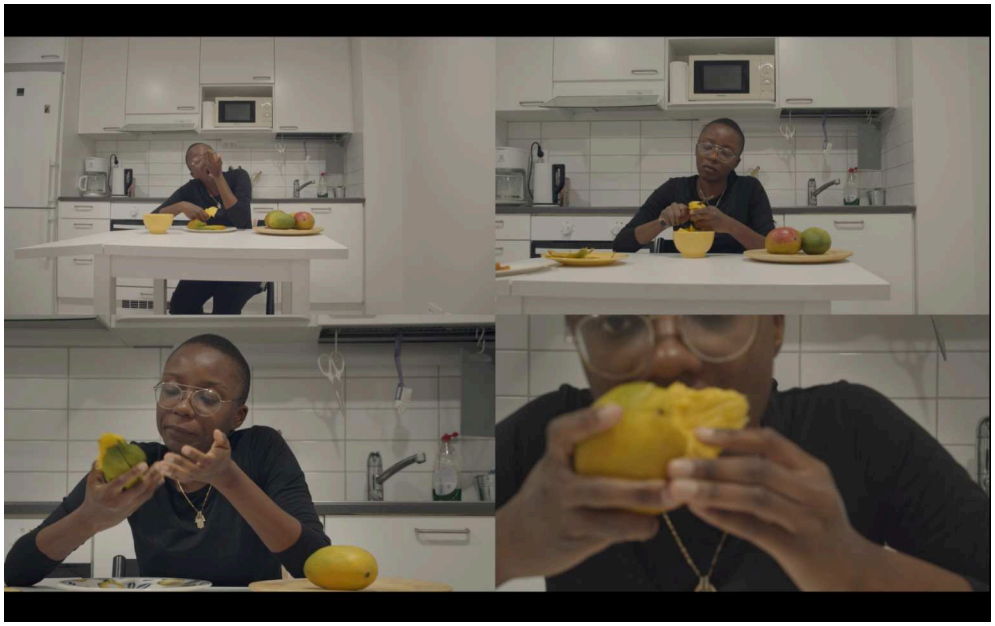
Lakh – a millet porridge accompanied with sour milk
Fondé – a different millet porridge either with lemon or yogurt depending on the mood
Sombi – a rice porridge with milk
I grew up enjoying these with my grandmother and the occasional *poñsé guet ndaar*: bread dipped in sugar water.

The mango was always part of our bonding. Every mango season, without fail, one or more of my grandmother's "children" would bring her sacks of mangoes from Casamance, the Southern region of Senegal. Every mango season I have been there with her, our respective love for mangoes grew our kinship.

These memories played in my head as I sat down to write about the different ways to eat mangoes. I took some time to watch myself using the different methods and the words flowed from there.

The work was inspired by Martha Rosler's *Semiotics of the Kitchen* (1975).[44] This work is a parody of 1960s cooking shows, in which Rosler stands looking at the camera, but instead of giving the instructions of a recipe, she goes through the alphabet, assigning each kitchen utensil to a letter and demonstrating increasingly aggressive ways of using them. "As the woman speaks, she names her own oppression."[45] Rosler is speaking against gender roles and the oppression of women. I did not know that this work would be exploring similar themes when I started writing. I knew it was about my grandmother and women in my family, but of course, the systems that govern their lives (and mine) are never far from my mind.

[43] "TikTok - Make Your Day," n.d. https://vm.tiktok.com/ZMrA2n7sq/ Last accessed: July 8th 2024 (video has since become unavailable.)
[44] Rosler, Martha. Semiotics of the Kitchen. 1975 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZuZympOIGC0
[45] Smithsonian American Art Museum. "Semiotics of the Kitchen," n.d. https://americanart.si.edu/artwork/semiotics-kitchen-77211



“I don’t remember the first time I ate a mango. I think its taste predates my ability to form memories, or maybe it is anchored within my body and does not need the mind to remember. But I remember the first time I had a mango after a long absence from home.
It was a big one, juicy and tart, from Pout, a village outside of Dakar, which has some of the best mangoes I have ever tasted. Simply seeing them on the side of the road, adorned with the reddish hue that signals: this will be a treat. Inviting the eye and taunting. You know you are in for a good time.
I remember cutting into it, cutting the cheeks like my grandmother always did for me, and plunging a spoon in the tender but still firm flesh and bringing a spoonful to my mouth. Waiting only for an excuse to abandon all cutlery and dig in with nothing but my hands and mouth. The excuse is found quickly. And I remember my senses reawakening to a world of flavor and life I had forgotten, or maybe I had never been able to appreciate it until that very moment.

My grandfather always said that we should never eat chicken with cutlery, that it was meant to be eaten with your fingers. I feel the same way about mango. It is much more satisfying to eat it with your fingers. It is a fruit that invites mess, and sometimes you must bow down to it, reject Eurocentric order and eat with your hands. Accept that you will get dirty and wonder what makes something dirty. Get sticky and revel in the stickiness. Question the idea of civility entirely.”[46]

[46] Wane, Anna Karima. “How To Eat a Mango.” 2023.
https://drive.google.com/file/d/1j3GQq9ArbnmBc7OY6NWi6po5OLdWfHfo/view?usp=drive_link

Living room installation

It is hard for me to separate the remaining works in the exhibition, as I feel they have come up in relation to each other. I will group them under the umbrella of a living room installation.

Table

At the center of the installation was my dining table. I had many moments of hesitation, wondering if another, easier-to-transport table would do, wondering if I needed a table at all. I knew I wanted one, the image of a living room still present in my mind.

I wrote a text titled Mamima's Tables[47] and my questions were answered. This text runs through some of the tables in my grandmother's house: their everyday choreography, the memory of the mundane. I was interested in how the things we take for granted — the way we set a table for a meal, the placement of the table in the room, the trivets that have always been there — are full of suggestions and memories, and shape so much of our perspective.
Once that was written, it seemed obvious that I could not just bring in any table. It had to be one that meant something to me. Reminiscing about my grandmother's house made one thing clear: even in Finland, I was looking for these same feelings of community and meaning and I had hopes that the home I was building in Helsinki could be "a beginning for me to write those for myself."[48] This table my roommate and I carried through a journey on the metro and the bus in the dead of winter, hoping that it could become a space for sharing in our household, seemed like the right fit.

Around the table, I set up some stools, hoping people would see it as an invitation to sit down. It did not read that way to everyone, as the space of contemporary art comes with rules that are hard to subvert, no matter how hard we try. The number one rule of visiting exhibitions – from a

[47] Wane, Anna Karima. *Mamima's Tables*. a rememory that belongs to somebody else. 2024
[48] ibid

quick Google search – is “do not touch anything.”[49] This rule has permeated the art world so much so that it does not need to be spoken aloud, and in fact it needs to be actively challenged. I have trouble with this rule, as with many rules that determine how to be in a space. I wanted to think of ways to invite people into the space and to allow them to be in the space differently, without having to make a big sign with “PLEASE TOUCH” written across it.

During the opening event, I asked two friends to sit around the table so that visitors would know they were allowed to. They did, their presence an invitation to other visitors to sit and take a moment.

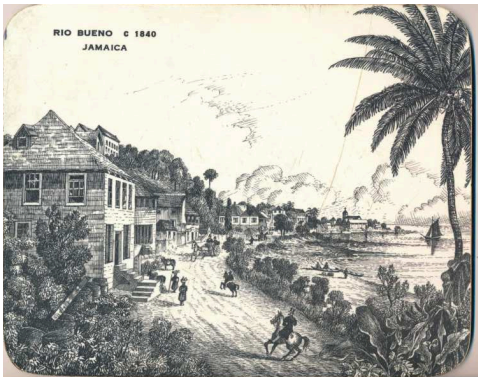
On the table

Trivets

I borrowed these three trivets from my grandmother’s house. They have been in the house for as long as I remember, gifted by someone long forgotten. I had never paid much attention but once I saw them, I could not unsee them. They depict images of colonial Jamaica, in what I

[49] “Rules of Visiting Art Exhibition - Google Search,” n.d. https://www.google.com/search?q=rules+of+visiting+art+exhibition&sca_esv=0a4e35a17b34b12b&sca_upv=1&rlz=1CDGOYI_enSN1010SN1010&hl=en-US&sxsrf=ADLYWIIR9uzrSOE4WUI-QX6_dHYeVOEKfQ%3A1726635159196&ei=I1zqZv3OC4fBwPAPkanp4Aw&oq=rules+of+visiting+art+exhibition&gs_lp=EhNtb2JpbGUtZ3dzLXdpei1zZXJwIiBydWxlcyBvZiB2aXNpdGluZyBhcnQgZXhoaWJpdGlvbjIIECEYoAEYwwRIgVdQoT5YikRwLHgAkAEBmAHBAaABzQSqAQM0LjK4AQPIAQD4AQGYAjGgAs4EwgILEAAYgAQYsAMYogTCAgsQABiwAxiiBBiJBcICBBAjGCfCAggQABiABBiiBMICCBAAGKIEGIkFwgIKECEYoAEYwwQYCpgDAIgGAZAGBZIHBDQ3LjKgB6kR&sclient=mobile-gws-wiz-serp&dlnr=1&sei=sVzqZsW4Hdz_wPAPoJKLoAI.

have started referring to as “colonial nostalgia.” A strange thing to have in our home, I thought. Perhaps it struck me more dramatically as I had been researching the town of Kindia – where my great-great-grandmother lived – and found the same kinds of images, in photographic form. Establishing shots of sorts where the indigenous people are viewed as part of the scenery. It spoke to me of the omnipresence of colonial imagery and its legacies within everyday life. I wanted to showcase these in the show, because of this colonial history, but also because of all that they carry. I am very interested in household objects. I am fascinated by how much history is carried through everyday objects, how many spoken and unspoken moments are contained within domestic objects. Like the tables in Mamima’s house, and all of the choreographies of everyday life and the stories of all that have passed through the house that they carry. Like these trivets which wear burn marks and food stains from years of being used within the household.



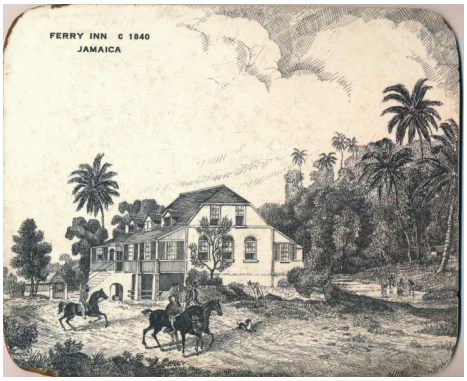


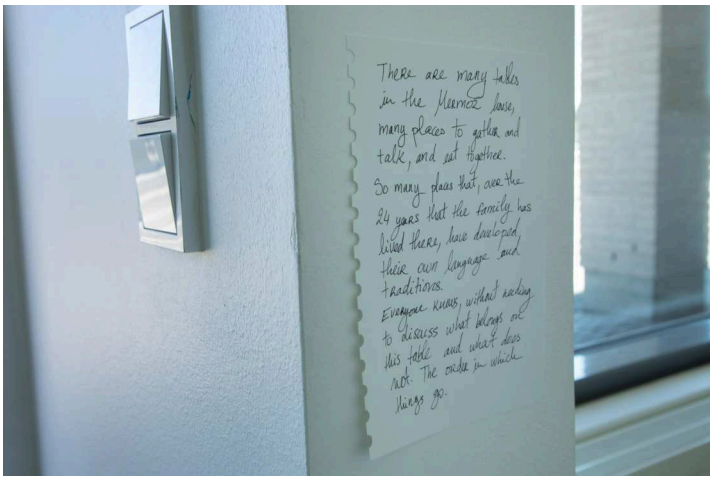
Table napkins

There were many ideas: I wanted to make curtains and tablecloths and dress the space in all of the colors of my childhood. I wanted to project these images of Mamima teaching me how to crochet, and various videos I have taken in the house over the years.

In the end, I chose to go with a more contained format: the table napkin. I had chosen several images of Kindia in the Archives Nationales d’Outre-Mer (ANOM) but I did not want to present them as they were. I wanted to spend more time with them, and reimagine the sceneries I was presented with. I worked with some of the images manually: printed them, ripped them up, and

put them back together in new configurations or back together, with only my rip marks indicating that something had changed.
Working with these images manually was cathartic but the results were not exactly what I was looking for, so I decided to scan the work and spend a bit more time with it in a digital space, rearranging the scenery.
I then went on to use a laser printer to lightly burn these images onto cloth squares I had spent a whole night hemming. There was a lot of back and forth on the method I would use for this. I chose laser cutting after many experiments because of the sensory nature of the result. The slight smell of burned cloth, the grooves and dips the laser leaves on the fabric reminiscent of the marks years of usage have left on the trivets.

Notes
I divided the text *Mamima's Tables* into different parts, handwritten on notebook pages and spread across the table, and on the wall, as a thread that people could follow around the table and across the space. I decided to use handwritten notes at the last minute. I had a lot of notes printed out to stick around the room, but writing them instead highlighted my personal stake in the stories I am telling, and allowed me to make changes in the moment.



On the walls

I put up images from the archives on the walls, as well as handwritten notes of reflections of my experience in the archives.
These images — captured with the scanner at the Archives Nationales d'Outre-Mer (ANOM) — were from the personnel file of Jean-Joseph Antoine Tondut, my French ancestor.
I purposely picked the images in which I had put my hand or pointed at something, as a way to make my presence known, to question the objectivity of the archive by reflecting the person searching it.

Alongside the images, there were two full texts printed out on the same matte paper: *The Story of Aye Touré* and *About Verlaine, crochet and motherhood.*

In the summer of 2023, I spent five days in Marseille, to go to the Archives Nationales d'Outre-Mer in neighboring Aix-en-Provence.

On August 9th and 10th, I woke up early and went to the Gare de Saint-Charles.

Amid heaps of trash — the sanitation workers had gone on strike — I walked one day and biked the next.

The kindness of strangers

* When I asked the person at the station counter for a ticket, he glimpsed the address on my phone and drew me a map.

* When I arrived at the airport, I ran into an artist I had met once in Dakar. She was in Marseille to sell a work and, since she was taking a taxi, she dropped me off where I was staying.

* On the bus to Aix-en-Provence, the driver struck a conversation about ticket prices. His route took the highway and the ticket was double the price of the local bus ticket. He said him and the other drivers found the disparity ridiculous and advised me to take the other bus if I was not in a hurry.

I arrived in the chilly archive reading room. A surreal environment, where people from so many different places encounter each other and histories of those the French have colonized and oppressed.

The silence of the room, difficult to get used to, after a month in Dakar.

The only sound, the turning of pages and the occasional camera shutter.

I could only wonder what everyone was looking for, how far they had traveled to make it to this absurd repository of the histories of so many...

I could only wonder what I was looking for in a place like this. What answers could there be in the rustling of old pages?

In the careful handling of the words of oppressors?

What I found mostly was the banality of evil.

Document after document outlining decisions that affected and shaped real people's lives, in the most mind-numbing, florid language.

I also found this:

Antoine Tondut's personnel file. My French great-great-grandfather.

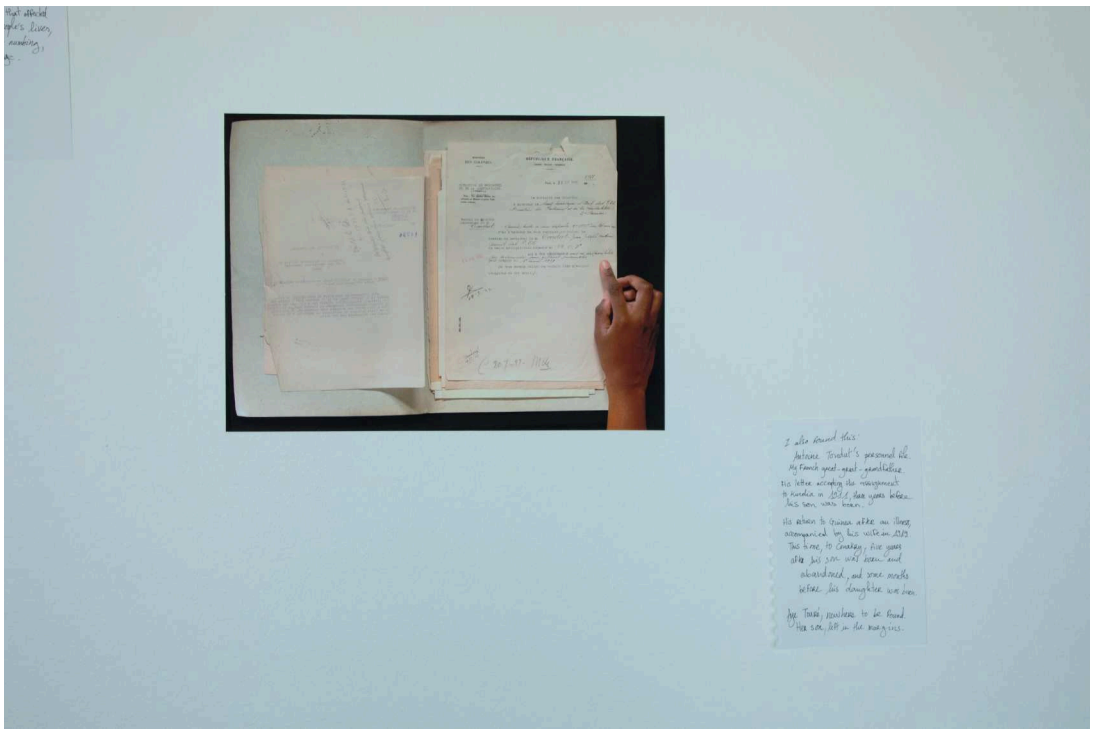
His letter accepting the assignment to Kindia in 1911, three years before his son was born.

His return to Guinea after an illness, accompanied by his wife in 1913.

This time, to Conakry, five years after his son was born and abandoned, and some months before his daughter was born.

Aye Touré, nowhere to be found. Her son, left in the margins.


Conduit


I also learned that
Antoine Tondut's personnel file
My French agent-agent-assistant
his letter accepting the assignment
his son was born.
Age Travel, residence to be found
Her son, left in the margins.

Pause: *About Verlaine, crochet and motherhood*

"Il pleure dans mon cœur comme il pleut sur la ville"[50]
I grew up with my grandmother. I feel the need to specify that my mother was there too but sometimes when I call for my mother, my grandmother answers and I laugh and say my other mother. At times, I do not have the heart to correct her so I continue talking to her as if she is the one I was addressing. I imagine having raised so many children means you can't help but answer when a mother is being called.
Everyone calls my grandmother maman, even people who are older than her, my grandfather's friends, her friends, her sisters. She earned the title at some point in the 70s, as she collected semi-permanent houseguests. She was always the hostess, perhaps because my grandfather never said no to anyone and would continuously invite people to the house for a meal or a stay. I always wonder how she felt, a true introvert, having to entertain so many people, never having the luxury of being off in her own home.
When we were growing up, my grandmother used to line me and my cousins up for two things: to give us medicine and to make us recite French poetry. I still remember the taste of cod liver oil coating my tongue and the shape of the sentences I did not fully understand following and supplanting the bitter medicine.
Now, when she will start a poem and forget the words halfway through, a chorus of voices can continue the thought.
She can say, Il pleure dans mon cœur
And we will answer, Comme il pleut sur la ville[51]
Or, Demain dès l'aube
And automatically we will say, a l'heure où blanchit la campagne, je partirai.[52]
Or even, Ô rage, ô désespoir, ô vieillesse ennemie
And I will answer, N'ai-je donc tant vécu que pour cette infamie?[53]

I never noticed how truly sad these poems were until now, until I could read them on their own, remember their words on my own.
Last year, faced with many new births in my family and friend group, I asked my grandmother if she had any gift ideas for all these new mothers and babies.
She told me about the blanket she had crocheted for my uncle, her youngest son and offered to teach me how to crochet. She told me about going to France in the 60s and being alone while my grandfather traveled through Europe for work. Her uncle, who lived in Paris at the time, came to pick her up and brought her to his house. His wife taught her to crochet. She talks about this with an emotion I rarely get to see. And in that emotion, I can see the young woman who went from her parents' house caring for siblings to her husband's house caring for everyone, but in that one moment, learning something for herself.
When I miss home, I take out the crochet hook and I just crochet and unravel a line, as though to write and rewrite histories.

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[50] Verlaine, Paul. "Il pleure dans mon coeur." Romances sans paroles, 1874.
[51] ibid
[52] Hugo, Victor. "Demain, dès l'aube…" Les Contemplations, 1856.
[53] Corneille, Pierre. 1636. *Le Cid.* Act I, Scene 4.

Chapter III: Finding a home

In this section, I would like to spend some time on the decision-making around the exhibition space. The artworks and practices are not the only thing that make a show. There are many moments and forks in the road which have shaped the end result.
Why did I choose not to show my work in the Kuvan Kevät exhibition? Why show specifically at the Museum of Impossible Forms? And what did these decisions look like in practice? How does one practice community? Or care? ?How to make sure that these are not just empty words lost within our contemporary art lexicon?

Can a school be a home?

The Academy of Fine Arts hosts a graduation show for second year masters students every year, titled Kuvan Kevät (the spring of art). Most, if not all the students who pass through the school show their works there. It is a large event where collectors and museums go to see the "next generation of artists."[54] The option to exhibit outside of the school is given but taken up by few, the prestige of the event too great to pass up, especially for Finnish students.

There are many reasons I chose not to participate in Kuvan Kevät. First, I did not feel ideologically aligned with the institution and felt that my work could not fit within its specific context. Second, I saw the exhibition as a kind of survey show, where everyone's work ends up being diluted, and I wanted to be able to host people in a way that would be more authentic to my practice and my way of life. Lastly, I am hyper aware of my position as a person of color in a predominantly white institution (PWI) and I wanted to avoid feeling tokenized within that space.

In one of our early meetings, my supervisor Dana Whabira told me I should let go of seeking support from the institution. She could see I was struggling to try and shape the place into what I thought it *ought* to be, and I was bumping into walls left and right. She recognized that feeling, having experienced navigating institutional racism in the UK for over two decades. (in education, employment and various spheres of public life).

In a conversation with curator and artistic director of the Museum of Impossible Forms, Giovanna Yussuf Esposito, she asked me what I expected from including a critique in this thesis. Is it simply to complain or did I want to be part of the solution?[55] She also reminded me that no place is perfect, and perhaps the most important thing is not to idealize.
With these words in mind, I want to say that no place, institution, person is perfect. I know that and I do not ask for perfection. Above all, I present this critique as an act of love. Love for education, and love for what could be if we try to dismantle the systems that contribute to oppression and inequality. Even as I followed the advice to let go of seeking the institution's

[54] Phrase borrowed from posters marketing the 2024 Kuvan Kevät exhibition
[55] Conversation with Giovanna Yusuf Esposito. July 30th 2024

support, I do not think I can let go of the dream of an institution that can offer care and support. So I offer these words in the hope that they will resonate.

An encounter with a bus driver

When I first arrived in Helsinki, on January 6th 2023, after spending an uncomfortable night in the Istanbul airport, I was prepared to start this new chapter of my life. My first step was to go pick up the keys to my new place at the HOAS office. I had exchanged with one of their counselors, and highlighted the day I would be arriving. Unfortunately, January 6th is a holiday, something I did not know, as it had never been celebrated in any of the places I had lived.
I arrived at the airport in the morning and was interrogated quite thoroughly by the border control, and was the last person from my flight to arrive at the baggage claim, which was rather empty at that point. I bought a SIM card at the first little shop I saw and called the HOAS office, only to hear an out-of-office message. Surrounded by the two 23 kg suitcases I had managed to shove my life into, I took a moment and found a hostel near the place I was supposed to be moving into. I made my way there and dropped off my luggage, hoping that if I found the building, I could ring the bell and speak to my new roommate.
I walked down to the bus stop, wading through snow and slush, already questioning the choice of moving to Finland in January.
The bus arrived and I got on.
“How much is it?” I asked the driver.
A simple look from him showed me that I was asking the wrong question.
“No, you have to buy a ticket beforehand,” he said bemused.
Beat.
“You can come on,” he reacted to my crestfallen face. “But if an inspector comes on, it’s your responsibility and it’s an €80 fine.”
I thanked him and got off the bus.

I often use this story – my first day in Finland – to illustrate how things work here and how easy it is to feel alone and isolated. In some way, everyone is telling you, “you can come on but I will not go out of my way to help you.” The bus driver was the first one to say it, but the Fine Arts Academy has certainly emphasized it. From the very first moments in the school, it became clear that there was no system in place to welcome and help international students get settled. I would soon find out that the structures of the school were not aiming to support the students.

My friend and classmate Eeti Piiroinen made *GAPS, or; Reproducing Exclusion*[56] (2024), an essay-film about white supremacy and ableism within the University of the Arts, as part of their thesis work. They interviewed many students, including myself, to write an essay which I feel voices many of the complaints my peers and I have had about the institution.
When I started being open about my critiques of the institution, I heard a phrase repeated to me by many students who had spent more time in the school than I had: “I thought it was just me.”

[56] Piiroinen, Eeti. “Gaps, or; Reproducing Exclusion (the essay film),” 2024. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i2-WdJnf2wE.

Perhaps, I mention and quote Piiroinen's work to provide myself the comfort I was able to give those other students, to show that I am not alone, and that the concerns I share here are not mine alone.

There is a false narrative of equality – not limited to Uniarts, this can be observed in many aspects of Finnish society – which does not account for different experiences or for challenges that may arise for those not born in Finland, or those whose citizenship status does not protect from being othered.

It is important to stress that, while I may speak to encounters with individuals, I choose to emphasize the structural and institutional aspect of these interactions. I cannot blame the representative of the study office for their ignorance, but I can speak about the system that encourages them not to reflect on said ignorance. I can speak about a school which claims to be "characterised by its wellbeing, international appeal and lack of discrimination,"[57] but does little in the way of making this vision a reality.

One specific example is the Finland Scholarship which is the academy's selling point to prospective applicants from outside the European Union, who are liable to pay tuition fees. The scholarship covers the first year of tuition, as well as relocation expenses to Finland.[58] When it is awarded for the first year of the Master program, there is a suggestion that it is possible to get a 100% waiver for the second year. "In principle, students who are liable to pay the annual tuition fee have the possibility to apply for 50% or 100% tuition fee waivers within the target graduation times defined in the Universities Act."[59]

Hanna Björksten – Specialist, University of the Arts Helsinki study affairs[60] – after receiving several questions about the tuition fee waiver wrote this in an email to the first year non-EU Masters students: "Currently, there is still officially an option for someone to receive a 100% waiver, but basically it has been quite impossible to get, if the other students have received a 50% waiver…"[61]

After a few more exchanges with different members of staff, Marjo Kaartinen, Vice-rector of Uniarts Helsinki writes "the criteria for 100% waiver require that students' studies must progress exceptionally quickly, which in practice means more than 60 credit/ academic year."[62]

This news was a surprise, and came just a few weeks before the application deadline for tuition fee waivers for the following year.

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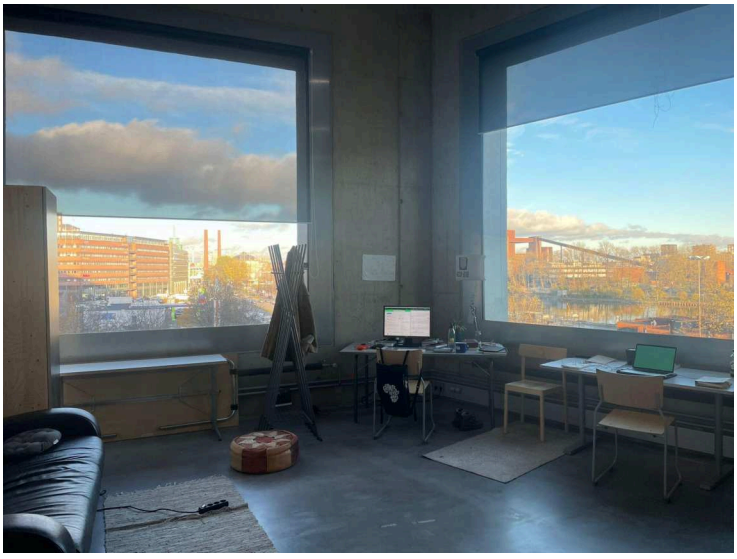
[57] Piiroinen, Eeti. "Gaps, or; Reproducing Exclusion (text for the essay film)," 2024, p. 6
[58] mastersportals.com. "University of the Arts Helsinki - Finland Scholarships," n.d. https://www.mastersportal.com/scholarships/3089/university-of-the-arts-helsinki-finland-scholarships.html#:~:text=The%20Finland%20scholarship%20is%20worth,cover%20relocation%20and%20other%20expenses
[59] Uniarts Helsinki admission letter, November 9, 2022
[60] There is much to be said about administrative positions and vague titles within the University of the Arts but that is perhaps for another text.
[61] Quoted from an email by Hanna Björksten, Specialist at the University of the Arts, May 26 2023
[62] Quoted from an email by Marjo Kaartinen, Vice-rector of Uniarts Helsinki, to the tuition-paying international students, October 10 2023

There are many moments of miscommunication and vague communication, but I bring this up because it illustrates a lack of understanding or care for students' circumstances. Students who have left lives and employment opportunities behind hoping they could build a future in Finland. Students who had to face the Finnish job market which they were essentially shut out of because of the language.[6364] Students who had to adapt to a new reality and realize over and over again that they were alone. Students who had to find different ways of raising funds not just for their survival but to pay for an education. This situation will be almost prohibitive in the future, as the tuition fees are rising from 5000 euros to 12000 for the next class.[65]

The Corner Office

After a summer spent traveling and reflecting on my first semester, my second semester at Kuva had a clear goal: community building. I announced it to anyone who would listen. I had identified a need and I was going to do something about it.
I had already signed up as a student tutor, hoping that welcoming new students would help make their arrival smoother than mine had been. I had also contacted the Student Union about reviving the Kuva-jaosto, a student committee which had served to host events but had been inactive for several years. Our first action was to have an open meeting, where we invited all of the student body (and one curious technician) to discuss what they felt was missing, and how we could foster community within the academy. This was a fruitful meeting, and we had many people attend and share food and ideas with us. It was a good way to involve students in student life, by taking the lead which intimidated many of them, and announcing what we would need help with, which made it more manageable for them.



At the beginning of the second semester, I started sharing a larger studio space, dubbed The Corner Office, with two of my classmates. This led to a year-long project in hospitality and an exploration of what the studio space could be. I was lucky enough to be able to create a space with two people who shared my ideas of hosting and welcoming others. We did this in various ways, by having a perpetually-filled snack cupboard, a selection of teas and coffee, and a sofa which all of our classmates had an open invitation to nap on. In short, we

[63] Yle News. "200 Applications and 3 Interviews: Foreign Grads Struggle to Get Jobs." *News*, January 8, 2024. https://yle.fi/a/74-20068332
[64] D'souza, Priya Ramachandran. "'It Feels Like Mission Impossible': Jobseekers in Finland Battle a Ruthless Job Market." *News*, June 23, 2024. https://yle.fi/a/74-20095742
[65] "Tuition Fees | Uniarts Helsinki." 2024. Uniarts Helsinki. September 16, 2024. https://www.uniarts.fi/en/general-info/tuition-fees/

kept an open door. The Corner Office quickly became a space for gathering, for sharing food, for discussion or just to spend time in silence.

The department, Time and Space Arts (tilis), has a clear divide through the format of the seminar. The seminar is a course where students of a specific department meet once every two weeks, to discuss their practices and see what the others are working on. We had been split into an English-speaking seminar and a Finnish-speaking seminar. As a result, the international students felt quite isolated from their Finnish classmates, and there was no space for students to discuss their projects and practices, and learn from each other. This led me to organizing evening sessions in my studio, where we could come together, regardless of language, and share about the work we were doing. We had two of these evenings, before the stress of the thesis show took over. I found them quite inspiring, as people shared more than just what they were working on, books and reading lists were exchanged as we all realized how much we had in common, and how we could contribute to each other's knowledge base. These meetings also led to some of my classmates meeting separately to discuss their work and share ideas.

Another event I organized was a welcome party for the new first-year Masters students in tilis. I had met most of the first years as a tutor, but I realized that there had been no moment for them to meet the other people in the department. I stocked up on snacks and (non-alcoholic) drinks, and invited everyone to The Corner Office one evening in January. We spent some time introducing ourselves before splintering into several groups and discussions across the room. This was also a moment to introduce the space to the new students and the exchange students, who were then able to stop by throughout the semester for a snack or when they had questions. One of my proudest moments was when two exchange students came in to ask me a question about a technical issue they were having. The fact that they knew they could just come in and that they would be welcome made me feel like I had reached a goal.

The question of tuition fees was quite overwhelming for many international students who had trouble finding employment in Finland. I suggested we could start an international café: we would cook or bake and sell our products to raise funds for the tuition fees. We inaugurated this idea at the annual Christmas Market, organized by the Kuva-jaosto. Over the three days of the Market, about six students prepared sweet treats and two to three students handled the selling of goods. We made a profit of 1615,37 euros, which we shared equally among six people. This format is a work-in-progress, an enterprise we have tried a few times afterwards, and we have been invited to cater events a few times since then, but I still wonder how we can improve upon it.

I have many critiques towards Kuva, but perhaps the one that can encompass all of the ones I have and will bring up here, is that the systems of the school make abstraction of the student body. They govern without seeing the individuals. They claim to be a community without putting in the work that would actually make it so. The structures hold up an 'us vs. them' narrative, placing students and staff at odds, "barring student key card access to the school's

management area,"[66] for example. I have heard several times from staff, faculty and even students that Kuva students just do not want to get involved, that they want to know how the school runs, that they are not interested in being part of a community. This is a sentiment I have echoed myself, but I have seen that it is not true. The students want nothing more than to be involved if they are given a chance, if they are brought in rather than shut out.

Another encounter with a bus driver

In August of 2023, I was part of a group of master students from Kuva who went on a class trip to Liverpool to visit the Liverpool Biennial.
It was my first time in the UK and I decided to take the opportunity to go to London for the day. I took the train from Liverpool and planned to take an overnight bus back.

I walked up to the bus at London Victoria Bus Station, and showed the driver my ticket on a phone that was close to dying.
He tried scanning the ticket and it did not work, so he asked me to stand to the side, while the other passengers boarded. Once he got back to me, I realized that I had booked a ticket for October rather than the August date. He told me that he could let me on if I gave him £20. I did not have cash on me, and certainly not pounds, but he indicated an ATM in the station.

"Will you wait for me?" I asked
"I'll wait." he assured me.
"Are you sure?" I insisted.
"I'll wait," he said.
So I ran into the station looking for an ATM. I found one but it was not working. I ran back towards the bus in time to see it pulling out of the station.
I had to book a ticket for a bus at seven the next morning, eight hours away.

It was a rather long night spent fighting sleep and swiveling between various emotions. I had had enough travel mishaps to simply accept my fate but part of me was quite frustrated at my mistake. Another part of me was questioning all of the choices I had made that culminated in this moment: specifically a life in art, spent interrogating structures but remaining tied to them. Naturally, my mind wandered to the Fine Arts Academy I had enrolled in at the beginning of the year. During the course of one semester, I had found many reasons to be disillusioned by the way things were run. My friends joked about making me a shirt with the phrase that was becoming my refrain: "Who's in charge?" I felt that people were often shirking responsibility or ignoring problems until the person bringing them up simply went away. Or that person eventually became "the location of the problem,"[67] made to feel that any structural problem they might be perceiving are theirs and theirs alone.

[66] Guttu, Ane Hjort. "The End of Art Education as We Know It - Kunstkritikk." Kunstkritikk, September 3, 2020. https://kunstkritikk.com/the-end-of-art-education-as-we-know-it/
[67] Ahmed, Sara. Complaint! Duke University Press, 2021, p. 3

In short, I found myself questioning the ways in which this institution was functioning and how they conflicted with my own practice and principles.
I have stated it elsewhere but it bears repeating that there are things that are non-negotiable for me: I am dedicated to decolonial, anti-capitalist and anti-racist work. I am opposed to discrimination and white supremacy in their many forms. Above all, I find myself opposed to any notion of normalcy/normativity, any idea that "that is simply how things are done," and I do not look too kindly upon people who use positions of power to reinforce a status quo.
Yet, my time at the Fine Arts Academy has led me to confront these beliefs day in, day out. This institution has tested me in many ways, and one question that stayed on my mind during that sleepless night: how can I claim to be studying these principles and still present work in a setting that feels at best indifferent, at worst opposed to them? This is not limited to the Fine Arts Academy. Having worked in the art and culture sectors in Dakar for a few years, these questions were omnipresent, as well as these others:

- How do I make sure to retain my own integrity and not slip into explaining and translating for a white audience?
- How to invite the audience into the work while making it clear that they are guests?
- How to subvert the notions of exhibition-making which feel oppressive and create a comfortable space?
- "How do I invite people into the world of this work and hold it somewhat apart from an art-institutional context? Is that even possible?"[68]

Interlude

In October of 2023, I had dinner with three of my classmates at a restaurant where another classmate was working and had offered us a discount. We started talking about the upcoming show, as it had already begun looming quite large over our lives. We realized that we were aligned in our distrust of the school and wanting to have more control over the curation of our own works. We created a WhatsApp group then and there, and started inviting others we knew would be interested. In a week, through word-of-mouth, we gathered over fifteen members and had our first meeting on October 12th. We discussed the reasons we were each considering showing without the institution. The concerns ranged from the amount of space to show the works of over fifty students in our class, to a need for more agency, to feeling at odds with the school ideologically. We outlined questions and concerns such as the additional labor we would each need to take on for curation, invigilation and logistics. These are questions I had been considering already and I was happy to be involved in discussion with peers who were also pondering them.

On November 8th, our group met with Tuomo Rainio, the curator of the school exhibition Kuvan Kevät 2024 and it became clear that there would be little to no support from the institution if we were to exhibit their works outside of the school. He said that students could not borrow equipment or have access to the budget. The only alternative he could suggest was the use of a neighboring construction site, as he had been in communication with the company who was

[68] Wane, Anna Karima. New Thesis Plan. 2023

preparing to build there. This site became known colloquially and, later on officially, as The Pit. Three of the students in our group would end up presenting their works in The Pit. After this meeting, a few people dropped out and the idea of having an alternative group show seemed less and less plausible. It seemed to simply peter out. Looking back at the group chat, I do not see the moment things ended. Just progressively fewer responses until no news and no more conversation.
So, after this interlude and dreaming of a commoning, I was back where I had started.

Who gets to feel safe?[69]

Around the time we were having the conversation about an alternative Kuvan Kevät, some of us were just starting to engage in another conversation which deeply affected my ability to stand with and within the Fine Arts Academy. I mention in the introduction how much the current situation in Palestine has affected the past year of my life. It has shaken me and made the issue of deciding whether to stand within an institution more urgent than ever.

"***7th October 2023*** *- After 75 years of Israeli occupation of Palestinian territories, the blockade of Gaza, expansion of illegal settlements and rising settler violence, Hamas attacks Israel."*[70]

In the weeks following October 7th, a small group of students gathered to write a letter expressing our support to the Palestinian people and asking the school to take a stand in the same way they had in the face of Russia's attack on Ukraine a few years prior[71], and to examine their relationship with Bezalel Academy in Jerusalem with which they had a partnership. At the time, all we knew about this institution was that their fashion school had a program mending uniforms for the IDF. But they have since made their investment in Zionism and a genocidal state even clearer.[72][73]

We wrote the letter urgently, after one of our classmates brought up the issue to then-dean Hanna Johansson. Johansson suggested that she could share our thoughts at a staff meeting. Unfortunately, Johansson was not able to read the letter at said meeting. In a message to the student she had been speaking to, she apologized and suggested sending the letter to Kuva's extended management team.

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[69] This section elaborates on some of the moments cited in the pamphlet, *Timeline: The Situation in Uniarts Regarding Palestine Solidarity* which I started writing in February of 2024 and has since been updated by others in the Uniarts students for Palestine community.
https://docs.google.com/document/d/10JJNIg1ThdI73h5L1yUGGd5E2MinExZytFZEwakzhfY/edit?usp=sharing

[70] From T*imeline: The Situation in Uniarts Regarding Palestine Solidarity,* produced by the group Uniarts Students for Palestine.
https://docs.google.com/document/d/10JJNIg1ThdI73h5L1yUGGd5E2MinExZytFZEwakzhfY/edit?usp=sharing

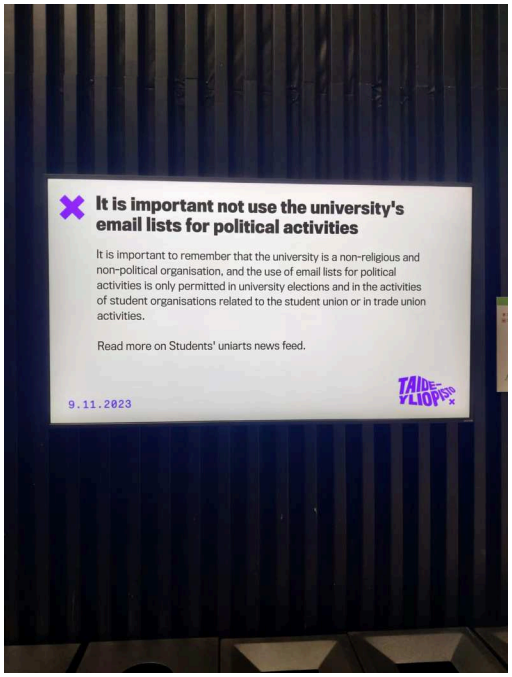
[71] Uniarts Helsinki. "Uniarts Helsinki Condemns Russia's Military Actions in Ukraine | Uniarts Helsinki," February 25, 2022. https://www.uniarts.fi/en/articles/news/uniarts-helsinki-condemns-russias-military-actions-in-ukraine/

[72] As seen on the Arab Students of Bezalel Academy Instagram page.
https://www.instagram.com/arabstudentsofbezalelacademy?utm_source=ig_web_button_share_sheet&igsh=ZDNlZDc0MzIxNw==

[73] Saeed, Zahra. "Israel-Palestine War: Palestinian Students Targeted by Campaign in Israeli Universities." *Middle East Eye*, October 16, 2023.
https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/israel-palestine-war-students-universities-incitement-campaign-targeted.

A week later, after gathering new members from word-of-mouth, and editing parts of the letter, our group shared it with students and faculty across all three academies, and were soon gathering signatures. There was more support than we had imagined.

Days later, an email from the rector Kaarlo Hildén was sent to the whole school: “It is important not use the university’s email lists for political activities.”[74] This email espoused the idea that the university is a neutral space where all students should feel safe. The question popped into my head: “safe for whom?” The question of safety seemed a convenient argument, the question of neutrality entirely imaginary. A Finnish institution funded by the Finnish state is not a neutral space. There are no neutral spaces. Claiming neutrality from his office where he had, in no uncertain terms, condemned Russia’s attacks on Ukraine but ignored Israel’s assault on Palestine, was hypocritical.



Like many other attempts at communicating with the school administration, this conversation could not take root for many reasons. Mostly, a faceless administration which takes no accountability for any decisions made and avoids conflict at any cost.[75]

“***14th November 2023 -*** *Pro-Palestine banners start going up throughout the school. One reads: ‘Be silent when kids are sleeping, not when they are bombed.’*

16th November 2023 - *Kuva dean Hanna Johansson reaches out to a Kuva student asking for a meeting to discuss the banners. A group of six students arrive at the meeting and proceed to have an hour-long conversation with the dean, specifically highlighting the questions of safety and who is allowed to feel safe? and explaining why those banners were important for rendering visible the Palestinian struggle within the institution.*

4th December 2023 - Some of the banners are missing. When asked about it, Hanna Johansson says they needed to ‘clean up the space’.”[76]

On the evening of Wednesday 28 February 2024, the deans of Kuvataideakatemia (Fine Arts Academy) and Teatterikorkeakoulu (Theatre Academy) hosted a discussion event titled “Political

[74] Opiskelijan Uniarts. “When Using Email Lists, It Is Important to Consider the Right of All Recipients to a Safe Learning and Working Environment | Opiskelijan Uniarts,” November 10, 2023. https://student.uniarts.fi/articles/news/when-using-email-lists-it-is-important-to-consider-the-right-of-all-recipients-to-a-safe-learning-and-working-environment/

[75] Guttu, Ane Hjort. “The End of Art Education as We Know It - Kunstkritikk.” Kunstkritikk, September 3, 2020. https://kunstkritikk.com/the-end-of-art-education-as-we-know-it/

[76] From T*imeline: The Situation in Uniarts Regarding Palestine Solidarity,* produced by the group Uniarts Students for Palestine. https://docs.google.com/document/d/10JJNIg1ThdI73h5L1yUGGd5E2MinExZytFZEwakzhfY/edit?usp=sharing

participation and activism within the university."[77] They chose to invite two professors from Helsinki University to speak about student activism in a somewhat abstract manner, not addressing any of the months of conversations with the students at Uniarts.

"*Hanna Johansson is present at the event and students again bring up the Bezalel exchange relationship. Students are told that nobody has been there for years but no clear answer to the question of whether the relationship has been officially cut off was given. Hanna Johansson says that 'it is complicated'.*"[78]

Towards the end of the event, Hannah Wass, a researcher in political science at Helsinki University, asked: "Why do you have to be so confrontational?"

Hanna Wass found the tone of students who had spent months being stonewalled inappropriate in that setting. She expressed that the students were wrongly interpreting the silence of the institution as a violence. She found it appropriate to respond to how people were expressing themselves rather than what they were expressing.
I was baffled that she could ask such a question. We were being confrontational because we had not been heard, because the ways in which we have chosen to respond to an actual genocide unfolding daily on our screens were deemed inappropriate, because people were dying and we felt powerless. The only power we had was to demand action from an institution we were part of.[79]

Both Hannah Wass and Hanna Johannsson contributed in their own ways to the 'us vs. them' narrative. Being aligned with institutions meant they could not answer students' questions in earnest, but their lack of transparency only exacerbated mounting frustrations. They took conflict in the form of questioning the institution's role in limiting student speech and made it out to be an attack, something to fear rather than an opportunity for open discussion.[80] Wass policed the tone of the students through her statement, painting them as unreasonable for expressing an emotional response. Johansson, despite months of receiving questions about the school's relationship to Bezalel Academy, was unable to answer any.

After this discussion, I knew that I could not show my work within the institution. This work – a reflection on colonialism and oppression, on erasure and the silencing of women's stories – felt incompatible with an institution where I had questioned and brought up oppressive structures time and time again, only to be ignored and made to feel that I was the problem.

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[77] Opiskelijan Uniarts. "Political Participation and Activism Within the University - Discussion Event on Wed 28 February at 17.30 | Opiskelijan Uniarts," February 26, 2024. https://student.uniarts.fi/articles/news/political-participation-and-activism-within-the-university-discussion-event-on-wed-28-february-at-17-00/

[78] From T*imeline: The Situation in Uniarts Regarding Palestine Solidarity,* produced by the group Uniarts Students for Palestine

[79] Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions. "Academic Boycott." BDS Movement, n.d. https://bdsmovement.net/academic-boycott

[80] Schulman, Sarah. *Conflict Is Not Abuse: Overstating Harm, Community Responsibility, and the Duty of Repair*. arsenal pulp press, 2016, p. 17

I have many arguments rooted in logic and reason, but the truth is it just did not feel right. It felt like I would be betraying everything I stand for, and for what? To be featured in a large survey show with little to no curatorial line? To stand in as a token of the internationalization and diversity the institution claims to be working towards? To shrink myself into the version that could fit within that space?

I had to give my work a chance.
I had to go at it alone.

Or so I thought. I was never alone and this process has taught me a lot about myself and about my community. From the friends who provided transportation to move the equipment from the school to the gallery and back, to the curator friend who came in to do all the measurements and help put the images on the walls, to those who cooked for the opening event, to the friend who brought me a care package of chocolate and vitamins, to the countless people who supported and held me through this process.

Searching

The search for an alternative location did not come easy. I did not want to trade one oppressive institution for another unsatisfactory situation. And so, I delayed making a decision. I wanted to live in this in-between space where the work did not exist in a time and a place for a little longer, before it needed to be ground in reality.

Realistically, I knew that my options were shrinking by the minute.
During a brief moment, I considered opening up my own home to share this work. I thought of it both as a last resort but also as an option that would allow me to retain creative control and think of a space for sharing work outside of a contemporary art setting.

“Museum of Impossible Forms — MIF is a cultural center and the coming together of communities of art and cultural workers working to build anticolonial, anti patriarchal, and non-fascist commitments and futures… MIF was founded in 2016 by an independent transdisciplinary group of art and cultural workers, researchers, philosophers, and pedagogues united by the common urgency of enabling a platform that would fill gaps in the critical artistic practice and pedagogy for BIPOC artists in Helsinki.”[81]

Before I moved to Helsinki, a friend had told me about the Museum of Impossible Forms and I became very interested in the work they were doing. Seeing them promote workshops with Black Archives Helsinki[82] gave me a lot of hope for the Helsinki art scene which I knew next to nothing about. That hope was soon dispelled but my admiration for MIF and the work they do remains. I went to a few events in their old space in Kontula and I was interested in learning more about their processes. There, I met Christopher Wessels, co-founder of the Museum of Impossible Forms. I wrote to him, and his response was prompt. He needed to check in with the board but his enthusiastic tone gave me a lot of hope.

[81] Museum of Impossible Forms website: https://www.museumofimpossibleforms.org/about
[82] “Museum of Impossible Forms,” n.d. https://www.museumofimpossibleforms.org/event-posts/black.

I received support from Giovanna Esposito Yussif, the artistic director of MIF in putting the show together.

Being able to expand in the space provided and to grow the project with support from like-minded individuals gave me a lot of confidence and allowed me a freedom that I do not think I would have had within an institution like the Fine Arts Academy.

Opening

The opening of the exhibition was a moment of communion and community support for me. An important part of welcoming people into the space was food. I had planned on cooking for my guests. Two weeks before the opening, a friend asked if she could help in any way. I said thank you but did not ask for anything. She did not give up, periodically telling me that she was available to help. Finally, the week before, she came up to me while I was running to something or other and said: “I won’t tell you this again. I am here and I can help you.” At that moment, I let out a breath, let go of this need to do everything myself and asked if she would cook something for the day. She graciously accepted and I had one thing off my shoulder. After that, it was easier to ask others to help in various ways and the menu was born.

Exhibition Opening Menu

Carrot ginger soup - Ramina Habibollah
Homemade Hummus - Elif Erdoğan
Halva (wheat balls) - Elif Erdoğan
Bolo de fubá com goiabada (corn flour cake with guava jam) - Isabela Hueara Carneiro
Bissap (Hibiscus juice) - Anna Karima

Sitting and waiting

a rememory that belongs to somebody else was on view at the Museum of Impossible Forms for about eight days, from 4th May to 12th May 2024. It was the first exhibition they hosted in their new space in Sompasaari.
Apart from the opening on May 4th, I spent some time in the space for seven of those eight days. I would arrive in the morning and start brewing tea to offer my visitors. In Senegal, it is customary to have tea after lunch, and throughout the day.
Ataya: fresh mint and black tea with sugar boiled and poured from pot to glass, glass to pot and glass to pot to create a layer of foam at the top. Ataya is quite bitter and definitely an acquired taste. It gets lighter and less bitter after a few rounds, but also the more North you go. My mother went to university in Morocco, so one afternoon when I was a teenager, she decided to make a softer tea. In her version, the water is boiled first and poured over a bunch of fresh mint, a pinch of jasmine tea and some orange blossoms. This quickly became the go-to tea in my

family for lunch on Saturday afternoons. My mother made it for years but the mantle has been passed on.

That is the tea I made every day as I walked into MIF, putting the water to boil, as I swept the floor in the space, and turned on the monitors, a daily ritual of cleansing both for myself and the space.
That is the tea I proposed to everyone who walked into the space, a way to change the register, to welcome them into the space and create a distinction, a break in the continuity of their day. A way to invite them in and signal that they could get comfortable.

My week in MIF was made up of periods of waiting in between welcoming and hosting the few people who either decided to come or simply walked in off the street.
I had the occasional neighbor coming in to ask what the space was and what was going on. Some were happy to find out about this new space in their neighborhood. Others were simply indifferent.
There were the people who had heard about the exhibition from social media and wandered in with curiosity. There were the people who saw the “Ceasefire Now” sign in the window and came in to talk about what that meant for them over a cup of tea, always.
There were the neighborhood kids who came in to prank me at first: they would remove the rock I had placed to keep the door propped open and run away. After a few times, I was quick enough to catch them outside before they could enact their plan, and we tried to communicate in some amalgamation of Finnish and English. They became my daily visitors and even tried to sit and watch the video a few seconds at a time. Finally, one day, they felt comfortable enough to ask: “Can we play football in here?” and “do you have snacks?” I could only agree to one of those requests (after repeatedly asking if there were any allergies I should be aware of) but I was excited that this space could welcome such interruptions and interactions with the community around it.

There were many moments alone, listening to my own voice fill the silence around me and drinking copious amounts of tea. Moments of reflection, moments of loneliness.

In the end, I am grateful that I was able to show my work in a space that fit around me. This journey was not devoid of challenges but it brought along many moments of growth.

Pause: *Mamima's Tables*

There are many tables in the Mermoz house, many places to gather and talk, and eat together. So many places that, over the 24 years that the family has lived there, have developed their own language and traditions. Everyone knows without needing to discuss what belongs on this table and what does not, and the order in which things go.

There is the kitchen table rarely used to eat on. There is space enough to lay down a basang (straw mat) and tablecloth near it, so that many people can sit around a communal bowl and eat, elbow to elbow. Depending on how many people showed up that day, there will be a second bowl on the table for people whose knees perhaps need extra support. Mamima always sits on the chair closest to the stove facing the door. In front of her, are the pots of food sitting on these very trivets, usually one with the rice and another with sauce, so that she can serve everyone in the house. When I take her place, I cannot bring myself to sit in her seat. I stand, too aware of the important role of keeping her well-oiled system going. On the far end of the table, there is a tray with the utensils and glasses, and water. There are also mismatched table napkins, folded up, for whoever may want to protect their clothes from food stains.

There is the long table in the downstairs sitting room, the one for the guests, where we were rarely allowed as kids. That table is still rarely used but once in a while, on a weekend when a majority of the family is assembled, the seating area will be rearranged to accommodate a communal bowl. The adults eat in the sitting room, and the children in the kitchen. A young one who thinks they should be allowed to eat with the adults will be turned down, but never without an argument.

The table in the upstairs living room is round. It has moved around the room a lot but it now lives in a nook by the door. There are always two thermoses on it, one for hot water and one filled with kinkéliba. Often, in the afternoon, you can find the remains of lunch secreted away for any latecomers.
Mamima likes to sit at this table, and sometimes, you will find her dozing off in her chair, surrounded by pictures of departed loved ones, and her youngest grandchildren running around.

This table, from my living room in Helsinki, is not the same. It cannot live up to the years of building meaning and words and memories, but it can be a beginning for me to write those for myself.

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Conclusion

How do you conclude this? The whole point of this work is that there are no conclusions, only questions. So, this section is composed of questions about this iteration of the work and about its future.

One day, I told my grandmother that I would like to make a film based on the stories she had been telling me about the family, about Aye Touré. “Then I will stop speaking to you,” she responded. A threat she never quite followed through. I kept asking her my questions and she kept answering them. I showed her the documents I found and told her about my plans to visit Kindia, Ariège, Kankan, and to go to the archives in Aix-en-Provence.
I never asked her for permission to tell this story. I am scared that she would not approve, or worse, that she would see me as vain for diving into our ancestry. I have not yet shown her this work and that feels like an important step in continuing this project. I do not know if she will appreciate it but I need her to see it and to know that I am not engaged in some excuse for navel-gazing. I am very curious about my family’s reactions to this work. It is largely a love letter to my grandmother and I cannot help but wonder if she would see it that way.

I still wonder about the exhibition as a format. Would this work have made more sense elsewhere? Or in a different form? What if it had been a book? What if it had been in my home? Or someone else’s home? Would people have more readily sat on the stools then? One question which I had during this process and which I want to continue pondering, is about the strength and symbolism of the contemporary art space. How can we share work in a way that does not feel beholden to the rigid rules that govern the gallery space?

I have two wishes for the future of this work. One, is that I would like to make a book. I already think of the exhibition as a book in a different format. I would like to gather these thoughts in a bound form.

My second wish is to make the film I told my grandmother I wanted to make. I want to go to all these places and write the story of Aye Touré, but also of Fatou Touré, of Bintou Tondut, of Khady Lô, and Maboumba, of all of these women who have shaped these histories and the trajectory of my own life with little to no credit.

I have laid out my reasons for choosing to show my work outside of the Academy of Fine Arts, but I know there is a larger conversation to be had. A conversation about art institutions (whether schools, museums, galleries, etc.) and the way they are engaged in maintaining unethical and exploitative working practices. A conversation about which lines we can draw when. I am entirely too aware of the precarious nature of working in the arts. I am aware that it is not always viable to make a choice based on principles. I wonder how we can survive in a world that asks us to compromise so much. I wonder how I can survive when I have become more uncompromising as the years have gone by. Perhaps by finding the spaces that give me hope.

Epilogue or a Glimmer of Hope

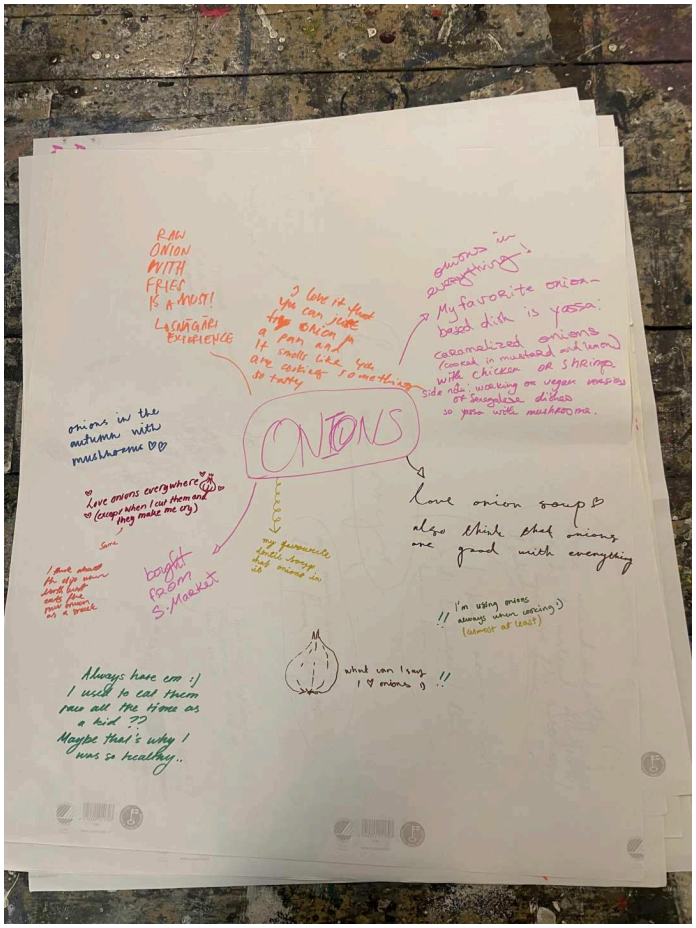
In August and September of 2024, I did a work placement internship at Taidekoulu Maa (Art School Maa). As part of this internship, I taught a class titled *The Journal as an Archive.* It was the first period course for the new first year class, an introduction to their time at Maa. As such, the course had a heavy emphasis on community and the ways we practice it, as these are some of the core questions in the Maa curriculum in general.

I have found a lot of support and a rich community at Maa. This internship has been an important experience for me and has put into perspective many of the issues I bring up in this thesis. In one of my first conversations with H Ouramo, the rector of Taidekoulu Maa, they said: “the goal is to offer an art education that does not require so much unlearning.”[83] Those words resonated deeply with me and helped me in thinking about what my course could be in such a space.

For one of the classes, on September 23, I had asked the students to each bring an ingredient, and we cooked a meal together for our class and everyone else who was in school that day. We started the day by reflecting on the ingredients we each had brought and our experiences with each of them before reconvening in the kitchen and starting the process of creating something from the available materials.
What followed was a two-hour experiment in collaborative, non-hierarchical work. We made our own improvised version of a shakshuka with harissa-seasoned baked potatoes. Everyone picked up something and got to work with very little guidance.

This is a moment I am still processing but I offer it here as a hopeful thought, an idea of what we can create together in a kitchen, a classroom, a school.

[83] Conversation with H Ouramo, March 25, 2024


RAW ONION WITH FRIES IS A MUST!
LAUSANNE EXPERIENCE
I love it that you can taste the ONION in a pan and it smells like you are cooking something so tasty
ONIONS
My favorite onion-based dish is yassa: caramelized onions (cooked in mustard and lemon) with chicken or shrimps
Side note: working on vegan recipes of Senegalese dishes so yassa with mushrooms.
onions in the autumn with mushrooms
Love onions everywhere (except when I cut them and they make me cry)
Love onion soup
also think that onions are good with everything
bought from S.Market
!! I'm using onions always when cooking :) (almost at least)
what can I say I ♡ onions !!
Always have em :) I used to eat them raw all the time as a kid ?? Maybe that's why I was so healthy..

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