

Sch ... : on curating the unspoken and the unspeakable

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SCH...

On Curating the Unspoken and the Unspeaking

Text and pictures: *Kadiatou Diallo*

Pro Helvetia's call for curators from Southern Africa «interested in immersing themselves in the Swiss art scene» was not a call I initially felt compelled to respond to. A key concern in my work has been to resist mediated singular narratives (outsider perspectives) and instead to facilitate spaces for a multitude of narratives told by people (artists) on their own behalf. Switzerland, to me, was unchartered territory. What value could or should an outsider gaze, «a take» from the South offer? And to whom?

Fast-forward to late 2016 when I embarked on my 5-months residency as guest curator at the Ausstellungsraum Klingental in Basel.¹ A way of negotiating this novel (outsider) positioning was to rely on the tested strategy of extensive exchanges within a diverse network of practitioners, including numerous new contacts in Switzerland, in identifying common bases for collaborative interrogations: Where and how are issues of representation, racism and historical erasure addressed and dealt with?

I found an invaluable treasure in Patricia Purtschert, Barbara Lüthi and Francesca Falk's *Postkoloniale Schweiz* (2012). The essays featured in this volume provided critical insights into Switzerland's (unofficial) colonial past and the extent to which colonial attitudes and manifestations persist, largely unchallenged. It rendered entanglements more tangible; not just of specific colonial and postcolonial connections between Switzerland and the African continent. (Gold trade and refining being a case in point, a subject exquisitely

dissected by the Swiss art collective knowbotiq). More fundamentally though, it highlights the convergence of a global postcolonial condition and raises questions about a divergence of decolonising strategies at the same time. In other words, whereas the imprints of the colonial project remain systematically laced throughout societies in the South and North alike, efforts to decolonise – point out and rectify the wrong – differ radically between the (formerly) colonized and the (former) colonizer, not surprisingly.

Context matters. A curatorial project about exclusion, racism and erasures won't look the same in (South) Africa and in Switzerland. It will be fitted to its setting and its audience(s). The question is how to facilitate actual engagement, especially with an audience that might not necessarily feel that they have a stake in the matter.

In a recent interview for the podcast series *Artists on Africa*, South African performance artist, Lerato Shadi, whose work centres around the black female body and experience, pointed out that she did not want to deal with the stereotypes by putting them on show and saying this was problematic. I agree that a mere representation of stereotypes, even if intended as a form of critique, bears the danger of affirming or even reinforcing the very power dynamics and mindsets in question. Then again, another South African and Bern-based performer, Ntando Cele, has taken stereotyping to another level. Two highly inflated, caricatured alter egos – the white-faced charmingly racist settler descendant

¹ SCH was presented between 27 November 2016 and 1 January 2017 at the Ausstellungsraum Klingental Basel.

Bianca White and the ultimate angry and provocatively sexy black woman Vera Black – shamelessly needle the audience out of their comfort zones by mirroring the tacit prejudices that people of darker skin tone remain exposed to.

A natural starting point in identifying collaborators for the project was to meet the Swiss and non-Swiss (artists) who, like Ntando, lived and worked in Switzerland but whose skin colour and/or, for lack of a better word, genetic and cultural backgrounds exclude them as unquestioned members of society («Where are you really from?», «Do you have identification?»). But this was the starting point only. The idea was not to simply provide a platform for the «underrepresented» to have their say but rather to invite a series of encounters with a diverse group of allies open to experimenting with these questions in different ways and from different perspectives.

A central theme that emerged in the numerous conversations that were had throughout the process was silence: silenced voices and histories, strategic silencing of anything that challenges hegemonic power structures or the neutrality that Switzerland prides itself in, but also silence as resistance. The deliberately cryptic title of the project, *SCH*, is a play on the sound made to quiet someone. S, C and H are also the first three letters in the German words for Switzerland (*Schweiz*), silence (*Schweigen*), black (*schwarz*), scream (*schreien*), protecting (*schützen*), being ashamed (*schämen*). The list continues (**Image 1**).

SCH was decidedly not an exhibition but an experiment in motion. Only one physical work remained in the space throughout, an installation by Egyptian artist and writer, Youssef Limoud. Inspired by ruins, Limoud uses found materials, collected objects, maquettes and sand to create carefully composed site-specific miniature landscapes, several square metres in size. *Geometry of the Passing* spanned large sections of the gallery floor, forcing visitors as well as the other participating artists to circumnavigate the work. The installation was «the elephant in the room», that which is neglected, denied even, but which remains very present; patiently, consistently demanding attention. Limoud has lived in Basel for over 25 years. His work is internationally renowned, he has won awards (most recently, in 2016, the Léopold Senghor Grand Prix at Dak'Art), yet he had gone undetected by the local art scene (**Images 2, 3, 4**).

The first works by spoken word artist, Amina Abdulkadir, that I came across were her love poems. It seemed defiant for her not to talk about skin colour, origin or racism, not to explain herself. For *SCH*, however, she wanted to give vent to some of her anger – in four acts: s[CH]til I, II, III and IV: The black female artist is object and orchestrator at once. Her physical self is crouching in a corner, while her recorded voice

informs the audience that unless they reveal to her, in writing on the paper and pens provided, the racisms that sully this country, she will remain in her «cage». Hesitantly, one by one, the audience obliges. The artist, collection of papers in hand, moves to a chair. She still does not speak. What she types on the laptop on her lap appears as projection behind her: questions and provocations that dig deep into the core of our subconscious prejudices, denial and helplessness. A Q&A between her and those in attendance, teasing out everyday racisms and what we do or don't do about them. It's personal. One audience member commented: «She opened a black hole».

Ntando Cele, also in an interview conducted for the *Artists on Africa* podcast, said that the people who go to the theatre think that they are the ones who are doing the right thing in society. But what if the «converted» turn out to be the most resistant to self-reflection and critique? When we assume that an opinion («I am not a racist») automatically translates into corresponding behaviour («I don't display any racist behaviour»)? When we convince ourselves that racism happens elsewhere (like in Emmental as one audience member suggested) but not here? A number of (male) activists and fellow travellers attended s[CH]til II. At some point in the performance, well-intentioned participation turned into a ping pong of short lectures between two of the male colleagues, which diverted all attention away from the black female artist who thus remained silenced in her cage. S[CH]til III and IV took a different, more playful form with a very vocal Abdulkadir as a gameshow host (**Images 5, 6, 7**).

In his lecture performance *Geraniums are never red* the Swiss artist, Uriel Orlow, also played a host, a white male authority, sharing the findings of his ongoing research in South Africa about the botanical world as witness and agent in human history. In a dry tone he spoke about indigenous and foreign, politics of invasion, early detection and immediate action. The presentation was informative and at times fantastically humorous in pointing to some of postcolonial history's equally fantastical absurdities (**Image 8**).

A more personal account of what it means to be considered foreign in Switzerland was offered by the entangled biographies of the Bernese social anthropologist and activist, Rohit Jain, and Said Adrus – a visual artist born in Uganda into a South Asian family that was forced into exile during the violent regime of Idi Amin in the 1970ies. The family settled in Gyrischachen, Burgdorf. Adrus later moved to London where he still lives. A recreated living room offered an intimate gaze into their personal memories, archives and politics. *Straight Outta Gyri* is a re-enactment of old and new histories, an attempt out of postcolonial amnesia (**Image 9**).

The intervention by the *Bureau for Post-Bureaucracy* was somewhat more ambiguous in the context of this project. It highlighted a pervasive silencing/exclusion mechanism: Bureaucracy. Red tape is a means of control. Language an expression of power. Denial is deliberate forgetting. The anonymous collective established a fully-functioning (and ongoing!) help centre for those with boxes full of unopened bills, tax returns, eviction notices, applications for naturalisation, migration cases etc.; for those who feel oppressed, overwhelmed and paralysed by the silencing power bureaucracy (**Image 10**).

Maybe ironically, *SCH* featured only one performance that did entirely without words, that happened in silence. In *Hiding_Wings*, oversized black wings move through the gallery, beneath it hides Zurich-based performance artist Olivia Wiederkehr. The wings are bulky, made from thick foam. Yet the figure moves gingerly through the space, displacing not a single grain of Limoud's sand, creating swooshing sounds as it moves the air and chafing noises against the wall. The wing is a protective space, physically and mentally. It negotiates the boundaries between self and the other and the inner conflict of seeking space and proximity at the same time (**Images 11, 12, 13**).

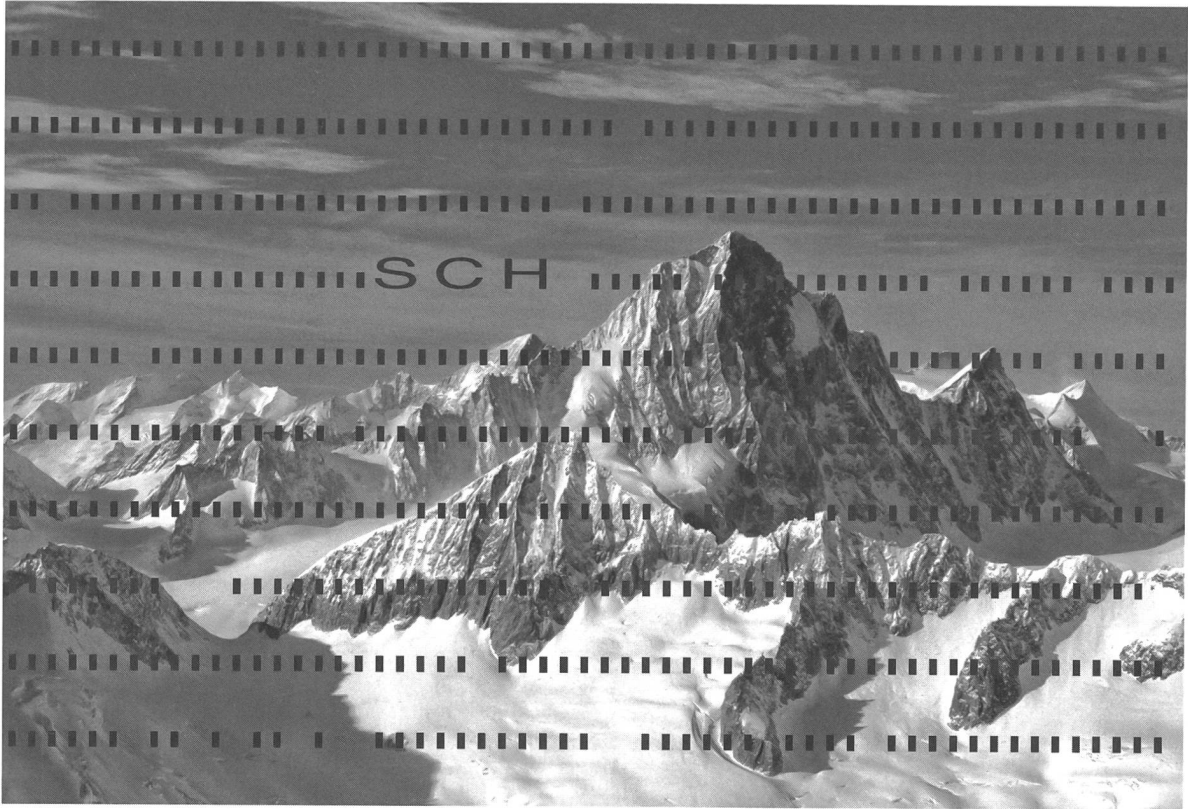
Ivorian poet and historian, Henri-Michel Yéré, has lived in Basel for 15 years. In 2016, he was «naturalised». In *the night, the poet*, accompanied by musician Kelvin Bullen, was a moving poetry reading from his collections *La nuit était notre seule arme* (2015a) and *Mil neuf cent quatre-vingt-dix* (2015b), together with some yet unpublished works. It was also an ode to the gifts that are born out of darkness (post political independence and personal) and to the emotional power of words through melody and sometimes beyond meaning (**Image 14**).

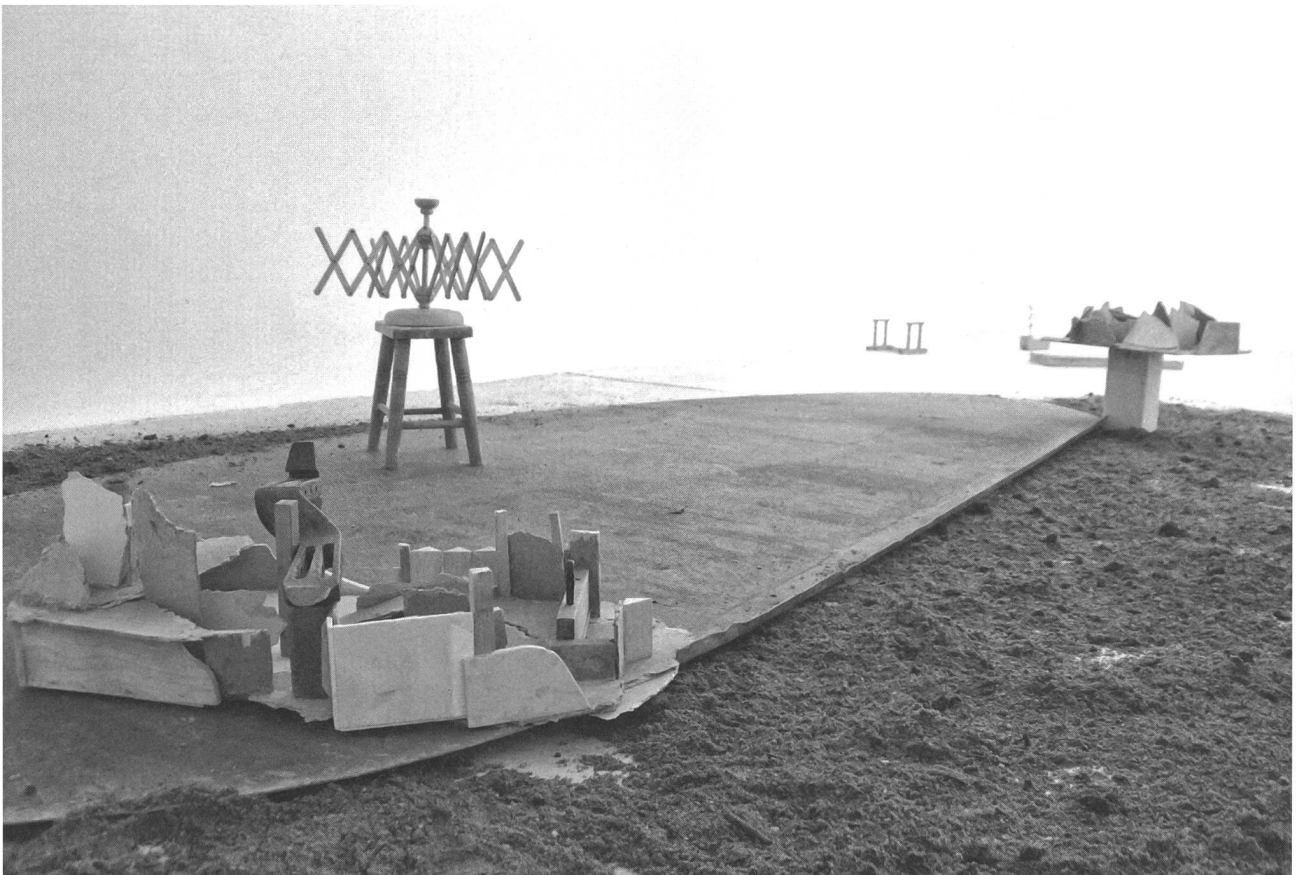
Zurich-based sonic researcher, Fred Hystère, offered a closure for *SCH* with a performative DJ set: an invitation to listen, even to what we might not like to hear, to sit with discomfort – silence as active listening (**Image 15**).

As an experiment, *SCH* could have taken all kinds of possible forms but it seems no coincidence that performance became central. It provides an immediacy and proximity, a physical experience (here I include the stage that Limoud's landscape sets), that invites a more affective engagement with uncomfortable issues for which we have oftentimes already prepared a «correct» opinion or position. Without personal investment, however, such opinions are no more than the soap bubbles in Abdulkadir's gameshow.

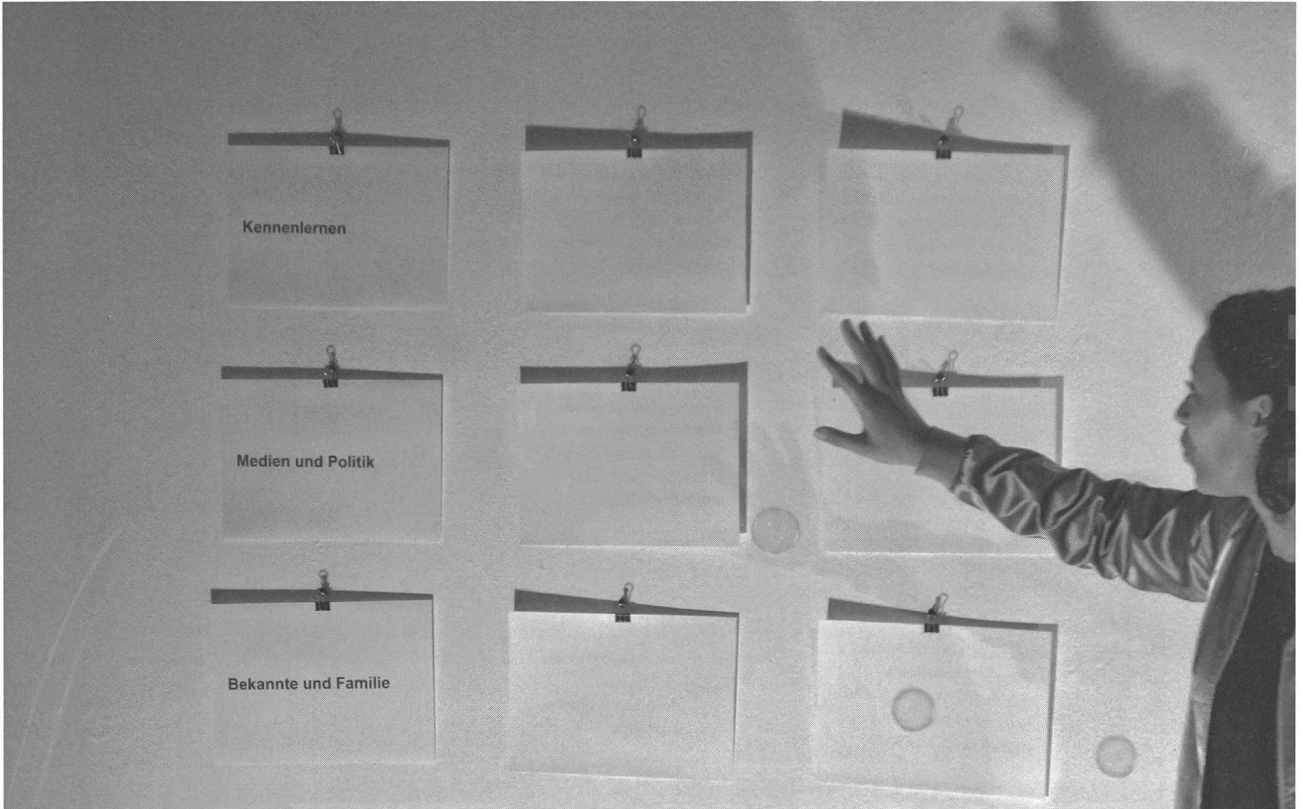
For the South African students who took to the streets in March 2015 in the *#rhodesmustfall* movement, demanding the removal of the statue depicting the British imperialist Cecil

John Rhodes at the University of Cape Town and leading to wider calls to transform education across South Africa, decolonisation is no buzz word but a personal necessity. But what is in it for the growing number of establishments in Switzerland making decolonisation of art institutions the subject of discussion? As a purely intellectual exercise, it might result in an extension of reading lists or more programmatic inclusions of «underrepresented or marginalised» artists and curators (from outside) and in more conferences, without affecting the existing power structures, without conceding any privileges. To decolonise, anywhere, means to fundamentally dismantle power and it also implies a process of internal restoration. The difference is in what we stand to gain or to lose.

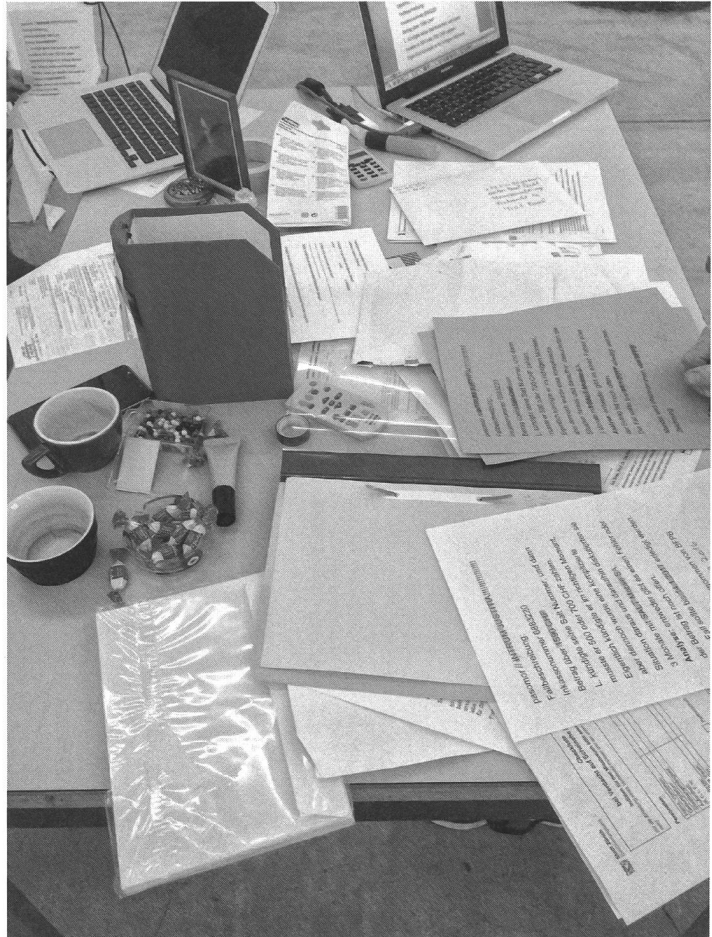
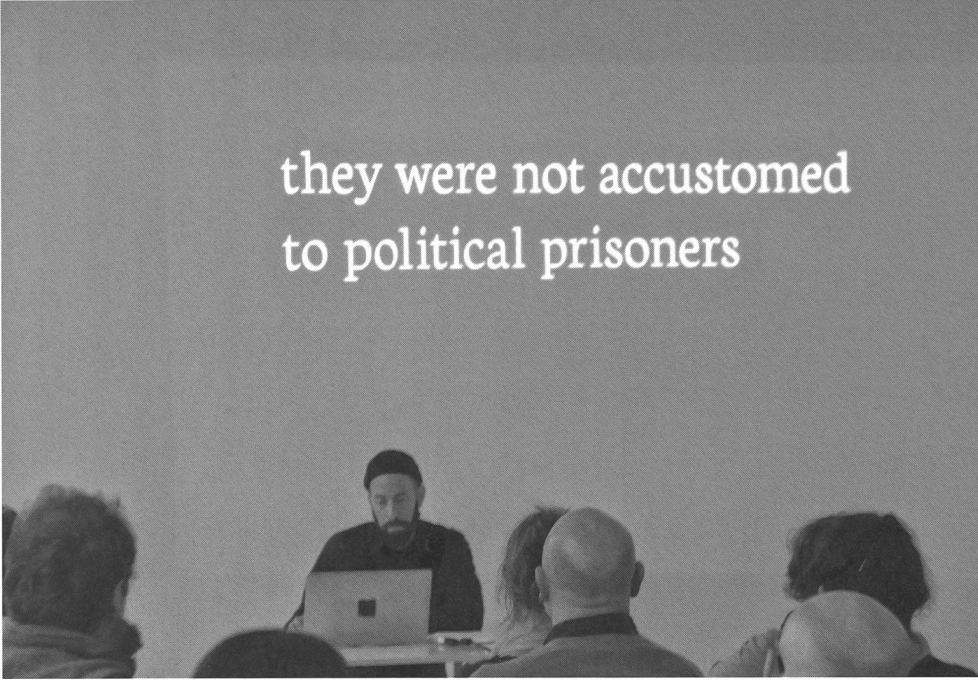


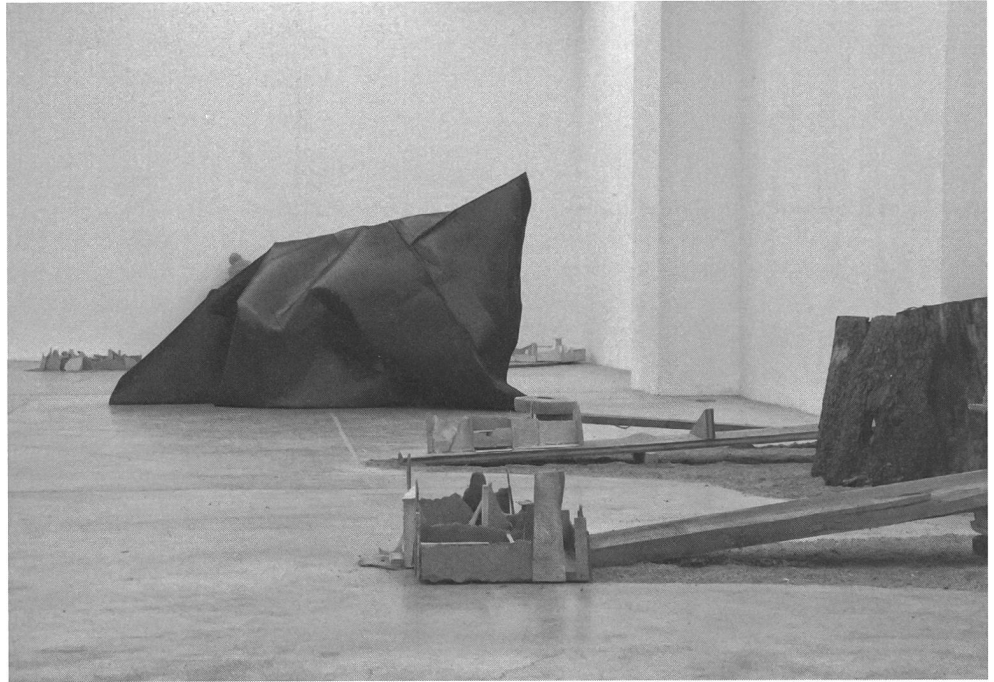


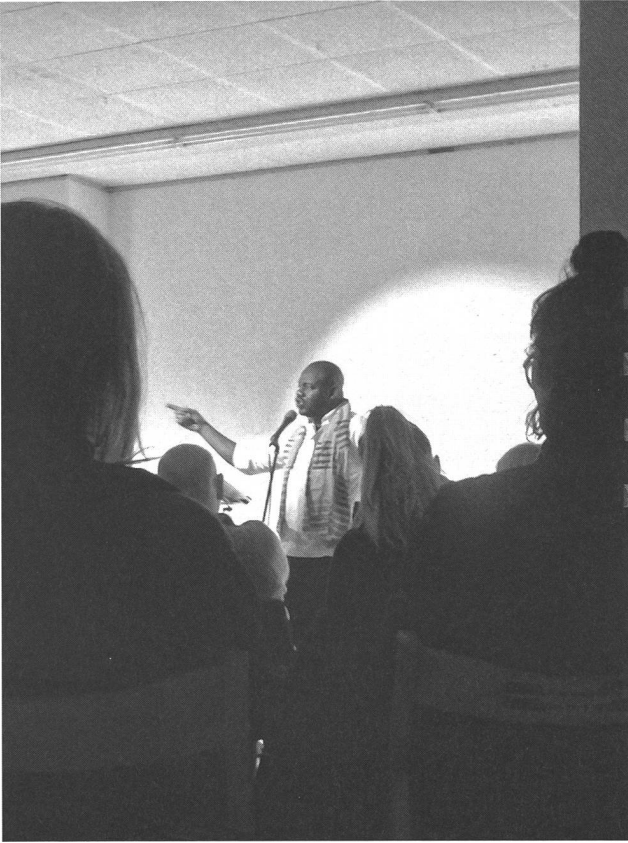




they were not accustomed
to political prisoners







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