
Solar: A Meltdown

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In «allen <Kreisläufen>, in allen Kapitalströmen, Autoströmen, Datenströmen», schreibt Gerburg Treusch-Dieter, bringt sich «das Verdrängte am Verdrängten eben da zur Erscheinung [...], wo nichts mehr fließt, sondern das <System> sich selbst blockiert».¹ Ho Rui Ans Bildstrecke erzählt von solchen Blockierungen in wortwörtlicher Weise, indem sie die Arbeit der Tropen, Techniken und Identitäten vorführt, die am kolonialen Beginn der Globalisierung nötig war, um Zirkulation als universalistische Logik zu installieren.

Die Erzählung beginnt im Amsterdamer Tropenmuseum, das neben ethnologischen Fotografien mittels einer lebensgroßen Puppe auch den *weißen* Mann hinter der Kamera in Szene setzt. Als wäre dessen Präsenz nicht schon ungewöhnlich genug – schließlich imaginiert die koloniale Logik *Weißsein* als Transzendenz jeglicher Materie und als Reflexion von Sonnenlicht –, tritt die in Fotografienpose aufgestellte Figur als arbeitender, schwitzender Körper auf: eine Darstellungsweise, die im kolonialen Bildregime sonst nur indigene und Schwarze Menschen markiert.² Inmitten der durch koloniale Zirkulations- und Aneignungsprozesse ins Museum geratene und dort festgesetzte Dinge steht der Schweiß für die institutionelle Angst, sich kritisch mit der Museums-geschichte auseinanderzusetzen. Ho fragt: «What does it mean to make a museum of colonial sweat?»³ Wenn Sara Ahmed schreibt, «[m]emory hence works through the swelling and sweating of the skin: the memory of another place»,⁴ dann ist der «andere Ort» von dem aus hier an das *solar unconscious* (Ho) der kolonialen Moderne erinnert wird, nicht der Ort musealer Dinge, sondern der von vergeschlechtlichten und rassifizierten Körpern, in denen sich Herrschaft bis heute aufrecht erhält.

Hos Vorgehen lässt sich als eine Art archäologische Mikropolitik beschreiben, in der filmische Imaginationen von *tropical malady* nicht nur an den Globalisierungsimperativ rückgebunden werden, sondern denen auch auf verblüffende Weise bis ins Jetzt gefolgt wird: der schwingende Rock in *The King and I* (1956) geht über in die winkende Hand einer solarbetriebenen Spielzeug-Queen; die Arbeit des *punkawallah* in Britisch-Indien wird als kolonialer Vorgänger des Air-Conditioning erkennbar. Durch den solaren Optimismus heute scheint die Sonne als letztes Territorium überwunden; selbst der Klimawandel, «die Verstopfung»⁵ der Zirkulationswut, kann als solare Energie die globalen Ströme nun einmal mehr in Bewegung setzen – womit sich die koloniale Logik der Zirkulation bis in «grüne Technologien» fortschreibt.

¹ Gerburg Treusch-Dieter: *Blutbande. Nachdenken über Flüssiges und Festes*, in: dies.: *Ausgewählte Schriften*, Wien, Berlin 2014, 239–256, 248.

² Tiffany Lethabo King: *The Black Shoals. Offshore Formations of Black and Native Studies*, Durham, London, 2019, 10.

³ Diesen Satz sagt Ho in seiner gleichnamigen Lecture Performance *Solar: A Meltdown* (2016), aus der auch das Material dieser Bildstrecke stammt.

⁴ Sara Ahmed: *Strange Encounters. Embodied Others in Post-Coloniality*, London, New York 2000, 92.

⁵ Treusch-Dieter: *Blutbande*, 248.



Nederlands-Indië
The Netherlands East Indies

ONTDEKEN EN PENTONSTELLEN

The text on the wall panel is partially obscured by the man's back, but it appears to be a historical account or a list of events related to the discovery and establishment of the Netherlands East Indies.



"Heliography" literally means "sun-writing". This was the telegraphic practice adopted by military men and land surveyors between the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that involved using a small mirror to reflect the rays of the sun. These flashes of sunlight communicated coded messages across large distances, thus enabling the colonial man to at once traverse and reinscribe a punishing terrain through which his body could never pass. By bringing the sun into his hand, the colonial man captured the land.



There is no white whiter than colonial white. The technological power of colonial fashion rechanneled the excesses of the tropical into the tropological, from which emerged the mythical tropes of the shiny white man who has dropped from the skies and the dark native he comes to illuminate. No longer was the colonial man simply holding a heliograph in his hand; he became heliography itself.

Displacing the adulterous presence of the native woman, the white woman in the tropics was a bourgeois hygienic force, cleaning up the colonial home and transforming it into an intimate space of comfort and nourishment, to which the men would return at the end of each hot, sweaty day. Her massive skirt was at once the visual double to the fan she held in her hand and an architectural synecdoche of the expanded, air-conditioned interior of the Global Domestic that would soon come to encompass the world over, finally banishing all senses of the punishing Outside.





Like most solar-powered toys, the Solar Queen absorbs energy from the sun to power the performance of a single movement. Here, it is the royal wave. This is the wave that Elizabeth, the first postcolonial queen, issues to her former subjects in recognition of their existence, marking the shift from a world of imperial control and exploitation to one of global exchange and reciprocity.

But the most curious feature of this toy is where the solar panel is located—not on the back of the Queen where she’s likely to get the most sunlight, but in the bag that hangs on her arm. With the sunlight going straight into her bag, it is no wonder that the Queen never sweats!



The Global Domestic is not a perfect sphere, but contains numerous hidden corners within which sit the true climate workers—the neglected transnational crew of labourers pulling the cords and working the fans so as to keep the cool breeze flowing. While seemingly too dispersed and disenfranchised to assume a legible collectivity, they can in fact be identified anachronistically through the punkawallah, the manual fan operator once employed across the British Raj who would be sweating by the sides to sustain the fantasy of a perfectly ventilated world.

Often, the punkawallah would sit at the very edge of the room where he swung the punka, usually a large screen hung from the ceiling, by pulling an attached cord. It was also at this outermost margin of the colonial house where he would listen in and quietly gather the gossip and intelligence to be disseminated to his fellow workers. His stoic presence in the room was the Outside that could never be fully incorporated, and from which the Inside would begin to unravel.



The solar-powered, supposedly self-sustaining conservatories erected along the skyline of Singapore are the present-day Crystal Palaces to an ecological future. In this vision of solar optimism, encompassment once again stands in for openness, promising a future where the Solar would represent not the punishing Outside but the capacious Inside. Not just the Global Domestic but the Solar Domestic. Utopia unfolds within a supercooled interior like a parallel montage to the meltdown outside. Heliophobia masquerades as heliophilia, hate as love, deferring the recognition of the very sweatiness of our bodies to a time that can only arrive far too late.



I swear I saw her sweaty back.