

# Württembergischer Kunstverein Stuttgart

Press release

## Peggy Buth. Desire in Representation

September 12 – November 15, 2009

### Press conference

Friday, September 11, 2009, 2 pm



Peggy Buth, Desire in Representation, Photo series, 2004-2009

**An exhibition by**  
Württembergischer Kunstverein

**Curators**  
Hans D. Christ, Iris Dressler

## INTRODUCTION

From September 12 to November 15, 2009 the Württembergischer Kunstverein is showing the first comprehensive solo exhibition of Berlin artist Peggy Buth, conceptualized as an overall installation and designed especially for the Kunstverein space. Of focus here are a series of new works, coproduced by the Kunstverein, that build on previous works by the artist.

### Point of Departure

The point of departure for the exhibition is the two-volume artist's book *Desire in Representation* (2008), which is based on extensive research conducted by the artist on the Royal Museum for Central Africa in Tervuren (near Brussels).

The museum, having opened in 1910, has served as a showcase for Belgian colonial history, which officially began with the Berlin West African Conference of 1884–85, at which the Congo was declared to be the private property of King Leopold II. In accordance with changes in property ownership conditions in the Congo up until its independence, the representational means employed by the Tervuren Museum were likewise modified. Since 2004 the museum has been immersed in a process of spatial and conceptual reorganization that is still going on today.

In the first volume of the book project (*Travelling through the Musée Royale*), Buth presents photographs of various rooms and displays at the museum and points out the ways in which meaning and historicity are created there.

In the second volume (*O, my Kalulu!*) she takes up Henry Morton Stanley's novella *My Kalulu, Prince, King, and Slave* (1874) as well as some of his different travelogues and associates these with book illustrations, historical portrait photographs, additional written sources, and archived material. Stanley, a British-American journalist and explorer of Africa whose personal legacy was bequeathed to the museum and archived, worked on behalf of Leopold II on the cartographic and infrastructural development of the Congo, thus paving the way for its colonial exploitation.

In *Desire in Representation*, Buth explores the narrative techniques applied by the museum and in literature as respects both their colonialist influences and their constructions of historicity, manhood myths, and the "other." The Western projections onto the "other" are known to mirror one's own yearnings and fears. Buth especially calls attention to this by taking recourse to Stanley's novella, exposing its subliminal homoeroticism.

A comprehensive index in the first volume elaborates the contexts of both books.

### The Exhibition

Based on her book project, Buth has developed, specifically for the Stuttgart exhibition, a new narrative spanning eleven rooms. In addition to already existing works, the overall installation is most notably comprised of a series of new works, such as the five-part video installation *O, My Kalulu!*, in which the artist investigates on a filmic-installative level the homoerotic subtext of Stanley's novella.

Each space conceptualized by Buth for the Stuttgart exhibition can be both autonomously interpreted and read in connection with the others. Here it is not a linear narration taking form but rather one that is fragmentary and sundered by repetitions and shifts, which immerses the viewer in a myriad of different scenarios: in a "library" referencing the imaginativeness of nineteenth-century travel and adventure literature with audio works, covers of historical publications, and other elements; in a "fever room" and

a “study room” where museal stagings fathom the transference between research and myth; or in a “laboratory” that ties into the displays dedicated to the experimental sciences. In addition, an “index room” displaying Buth’s photographs of the Tervuren Museum along with a large-format index of texts and images concentrates on the narrative and distancing techniques employed by the museum and simultaneously brings into play the multilayered contexts involved in the project.

Linking the various stations are works, such as for instance the video installation spanning multiple rooms, *O, My Kalulu!*, or a sound installation that seizes upon parts of the video work, or dioramas whose typical scenographies have been disjointed by Buth with irony.

For the Stuttgart exhibition, Buth has devised an array of settings that are equally archival and theatrical, where differentiations between artwork and historical document, exhibit and display, stage and exhibition space, as well as narrative and metanarrative are perpetually shifting. From this arises a narrative that first comes about, in ever-new ways, through a traversal along the various scenarios—tendering a multitude of possible interpretations.

The exhibition is accompanied by a lecture series and a reader, with the catalogue publication to later follow.

### **The Artist**

Peggy Buth, born 1971 in Berlin, studied at the Academy of Visual Arts Leipzig and at Saint Martins College in London. Her works have been shown internationally, including at the Brussels Biennial (2008) and at the exhibition *Made in Germany* in Hanover (2007). She has been the recipient of international scholarships from the Villa Aurora in Los Angeles (2009) and the Jan van Eyck Akademie in Maastricht (2004–2005).

In her artistic work, Buth is neither fixed on a particular medium nor on a narrow artistic concept. She instead explores the representational systems of art, literature, politics, history, and science, with an emphasis on what is being repressed and what unintentionally comes to light in these spheres. In so doing she employs the media of photography and video, uses tar, shellac, or carpet in creating her pictures, works with found materials, language, and sound, produces objects, sculptures, and installations. This versatility in artistic working methods is also reflected in the exhibition *Desire in Representation*.

## EXHIBITION ELEMENTS AND CONTEXTS (Selection)

### ***Desire in Representation, series of 70 photographs, 2004–2009***

In her photo series on the Royal Museum for Central Africa, Buth hones in not only on the museum's zoological and anthropological exhibits but also on its staging elements (fixtures, wall design, lighting), its information and security displays, as well as on transitional situations like the putting up and taking down of exhibits, on temporal contexts or public and non-public areas within the museum. Treated are the museum's artistic staging, classification principles, and distancing tactics. Here Buth focuses less on the grandiose accumulation of big game trophies and more on the gaps and fragmentations in the museal presentation, the nonuniform design of which dates from various epochs. Redevelopment plans, in turn, indicate what the future may hold for the museum, which is to be extensively renovated starting in 2010.

Significant aspects are often to be found off-center in Buth's photographs, at the margin or even positioned partially beyond the periphery, like in an adumbrated diagram causing one to barely realize that it is aiming to show how the phase of colonialism in the Congo was short, relatively speaking—an "aside" that refers to a central conflict faced by the Brussels museum, where a copious, self-critical exploration of Belgium's colonial history still remains absent. Instead, attempts are made to play down this history.

Museums are spaces of exposition under the prohibition of touching. In this way they ban and regulate death, the repressed, and history. They are a pivotal instrument of hegemonic discourse and of the codification of the "other," the subjugation of which they showcase with a high level of theatrical effort. Yet in Buth's photographs the visible traces of change attest that the prohibition of touching has been rescinded. The motif of exhibiting is likewise severed by the fact that we not only frequently find ourselves gazing at empty vitrines, walls, or curtains but that the exhibits, if visible, are only seldom centrally positioned. Through dual motions—by pointing out the museum's authority in governing control and order while at the same time invalidating the same—Buth generates space for that which the museum seeks to conceal.

### ***Index, wall chart, 2008–2009***

In her index, which is viewable in the exhibition as a large wall chart, Buth works with further photographs taken in the Tervuren Museum, which, as opposed to the photo series, also show visitors: for example, visitors taking in the exhibition *Memory of Congo: The Colonial Era* (2005), in which the museum for the first time addressed—though in a very restrained manner—the colonization of the Congo. Other images show instances where the museum has been publicly appropriated being that its majestic façade and park are favored settings for wedding photographs.

In addition to Buth's photos and film stills, the index contains numerous historical documents on Belgian and German colonial history, on the Congo's (successful) struggle for independence and postcolonial contexts, on Henry Morgan Stanley, as well as on his longtime African servant Kalulu and Stanley's Arabian expedition assistant Selim.

Landscape and hunting motifs, ethnological exhibits, or pictures of natives reference the European interpretation of the "other" as "noble" or as a "wild savage." Maps and images of travel routes and factories bring into play the territorial and economic exploitation of Africa. Photographs by Fred Holland Day from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries attest to the interweaving of homoerotic aesthetics with motifs of the exotic. With intimations regarding the author Colette along with the openly lesbian American Natalie Clifford Barney, who founded an academy for women in nineteen-twenties Paris, feminist contexts, cross-gender practices, and questions of female or lesbian representation are introduced.

The images in the index stem from a very diverse range of sources. For instance, there

is a photograph by the contemporary artist Guy Tillim showing a dismantled sculpture of Stanley, which has been placed in a boat that in turn is being urinated on by a black youth. The arrangement of texts, images, and credits in this index only appears to reflect a classical system of archival, a system which is, however, breached by the de- and recontextualization of the material and by its nonlinear structuring.

The visitor is again and again confronted with the material collected here, in respectively altered form, throughout the exhibition.

### ***O, My Kalulu!*, five-part video production, 2009**

Far away from the European homeland not only the foreign in nature and culture could be discovered but sometimes even one's own sexual "otherness": a desire that could potentially ended up being projected onto the "other." In this vein, Henry Morton Stanley, in his novella which stylizes the life of his two subordinates, tells of the intimate, latently homoerotic friendship between the Arabian slave Selim and the African prince Kalulu. As in the second volume of the publication *Desire in Representation*, the video work *O, My Kalulu!* likewise delves into the intertanglement between colonialism, manhood myths, and homoerotic yearnings, between the repressed and its reemergence in the form of the sublime and the uncanny.

Divided into five episodes—*Discovery, Brothers, Hunting, Loss, Salvation*—all of which involve dialogues between Kalulu and Selim, the video work extends across five rooms. The image compositions adopt motifs of "gay aesthetics," such as photographs by Fred Holland Day or James Bidgood's cult film *Pink Narcissus*. The theatrical character of the compositions remains clearly perceptible. The visual and audio planes have been separated. In this work Buth thus not only disrupts the coherent narrative style of cinema but also deconstructs its illusionism.

### **Transference**

Two rooms in the exhibition are devoted to the "discoverer" Henry Morton Stanley, that is, to representations, to the repression and transference capacity of research. In one of these rooms visitors can listen to excerpts from Stanley's diaries, in which the fine line between the experienced and the desired, between empirical knowledge and fiction becomes apparent. Moreover, here a series of collected objects and "trophies" of the adventurer can be viewed—yet these objects of self-expression are represented through works by the artist. By smuggling her own work into the representation of someone else, which has here become an object of study for the artist, Buth is very explicitly referencing the transference capacity of research, thus situating herself at the inside of the unavoidable dilemma respecting the projection of oneself onto the "other." In this way, Buth imbues everything she is presenting here (and throughout the entire exhibition) with her own desires, with that which she'd wish to see. In contrast to the distancing techniques employed by the museum, Buth succeeds in achieving a distance that makes the exhibited assailable.



Peggy Buth, Desire in Representation, Photo series, 2004-2009



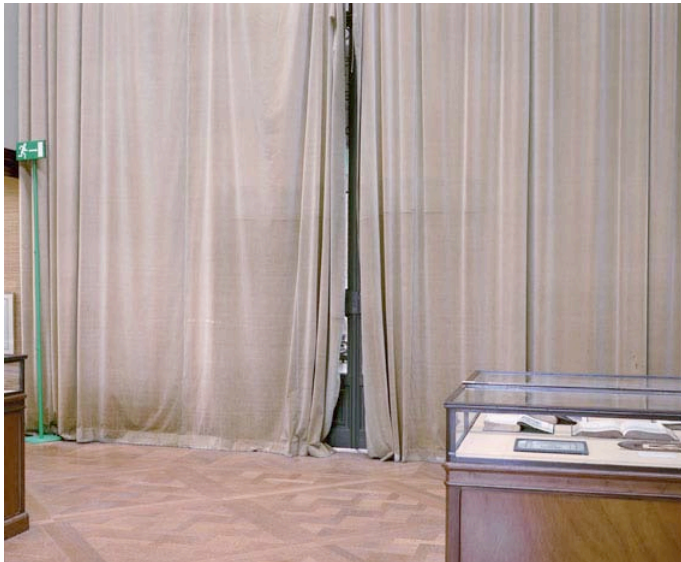
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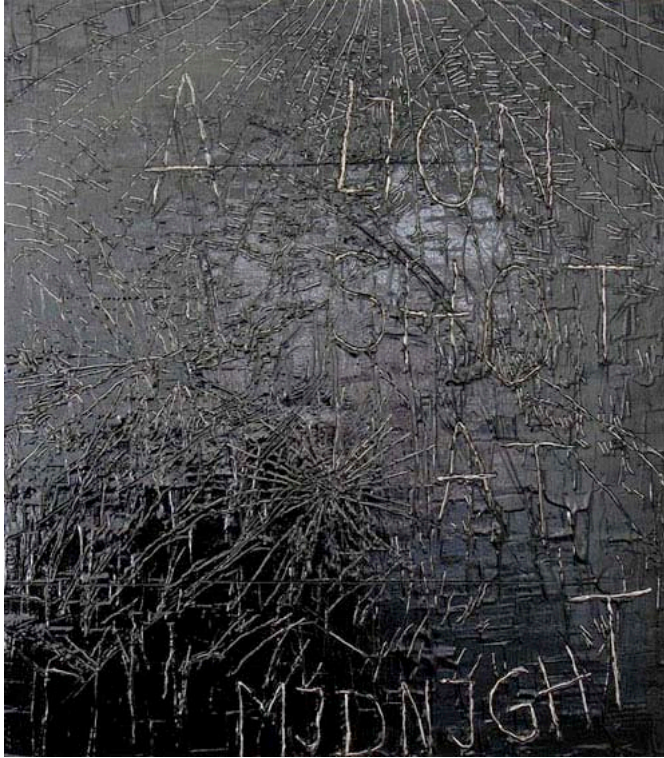
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Peggy Buth, Desire in Representation, Photo series, 2004-2009



Peggy Buth, Desire in Representation, Photo series, 2004-2009



Peggy Buth, A Lion Shot at Midnight, 2005



Peggy Buth, Untitled (Portrait, Portrait, Portrait), 2007



Peggy Buth, Found Footage (Monument), C-Print, 2007

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**Curator**

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**Press conference**

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**Press contact**

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**Pressebilder**

[www.wkv-stuttgart.de/en/press/2009/press-images/peggy-buth](http://www.wkv-stuttgart.de/en/press/2009/press-images/peggy-buth)

**Opening**

Friday, September 11, 2009, 7 pm

**Artist's tour**

Saturday, September 12, 2009, 1 pm

**Lender**

The artist

Galerie Klemm's, Berlin

Private collection, Berlin

Private collection, Celle

Private collection, Stampe

Frac Alsace, Sélestat

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**Hours**

Tue, Thu–Sun: 11 am – 6 pm; Wed: 11 am – 8 pm

**Entrance**

3 Euro / 5 Euro