

Good Form

Andrea Stultiens

Essay – December 10, 2021

As a documentary photographer whose artistic research practice has focussed on historical imaginations of the African continent in relation to the present, for the KABK research project [\[onlineopen.org/framing-and-reframing-archives\]](https://onlineopen.org/framing-and-reframing-archives/) I looked at materials connected to anthropologist Paul Julien located in the Fotomuseum in Rotterdam. I was guided by the desire to activate Julien's legacy through 'collective making' as a contribution to a more nuanced understanding of the depiction of 'others'. Since then, I continue to work on the project supported by an NWO grant. In this essay I consider what eight years of working with the Paul Julien collection amounted to. Since the text was written the project website Reframing PJU has been published in the experimental online journal *Bridging Humanities*. The visuals in this essay are taken from this continuously evolving publication.

*Almost everything [...] is invented.
But it's not a game. It's a form.¹*

Mount Kunon (at a distance)

The Covid-19 pandemic found me in Sierra Leone and extended my stay in the West-African country for a couple of weeks. I had been working with photographs made 86 years earlier in the south-eastern part of the country. Among the photographs was a set related to Mount Kunon. The documentation that accompanied the photographs said Kunon was the highest elevation in this part of the country. En route between the villages of Dambarra and Ngengbema it appeared in the far distance.

In the opening chapter of Campfires Along The Equator (a Dutch bestseller in the mid-twentieth century) its author, the Dutch anthropologist Paul Julien, refers to the mountain as a place inhabited by 'the devils made by God himself'.² Julien presents his attempt to summit Kunon as being impeded by these locals and their leaders and his eventual overcoming of the difficulties as a victory of (European) rationality over (African) superstition.

Time constraints and other priorities combined with an intention to return to the area, prevented me from getting closer to the mountain, but I was told several times that climbing it was, and still is, a hazardous affair, but not in the hyperbolic terms that Julien portrayed it.

Between 1932 and 1962 Paul Julien (NL, 1901–2001) went on many expeditions and took many photographs in various parts of the African continent in order to collect data for the physical anthropological research he conducted, and experiences for the stories he narrated on Dutch national radio. These photographs are now in the care of the Nederlands Fotomuseum in Rotterdam.³ My interest in the collection was initially a side-effect of research into photographs in the East-African country of Uganda.⁴

And eight years later I am only just realising what the main point of it all could be. Jacques Rancière has characterised artistic practices as intervening in the general distribution of 'ways of doing and making' and 'in the relationships they maintain to modes of being and forms of visibility'.⁵ I have been searching for what Tim O'Brien calls 'good form'. This is a form that does justice to the multiplicity of lived experience in relation to a particular chain of events. In O'Brien's book this particular chain of events happens during the Vietnam war. In my research project it is a colonial setting in which a privileged Dutch man generated and appropriated 'visibilities' to fit his aims and projected audiences. This means that the 'good form' in my case has to contextualise the general distribution of 'ways of doing and making' at play in Julien's practice in such a way that they are understandable for a contemporary audience. At the same time this form has to give me space to critique these conventions and to facilitate the reframing of the photographs in the collection with the help of additional perspectives that arise in collaboration with people who are part of African or African diaspora heritage communities.

The imaginations of the African continent presented by Julien are often visually attractive. He used good equipment, understood the technology and knew how to compose his photographs. His words, published in many articles and best-selling books and performed in so-called 'causeries', take the reader or listener along with him. There are moments in these narratives when Julien comes across as a sympathetic figure. This is the case when he expresses a wish to be 'one of them' and seated at 'their campfires'.⁶ Mostly, however, I find the stories and descriptions painful to read. They emphasise difference with a pervasive undercurrent of Western supremacy (white, Christian). From the first moment of working with this collection, I took the position that the photographs may result from a particular European gaze, and their possible meaning and value should not be developed through (yet another) such framing. As Ariella Aïsha Azoulay has convincingly argued, photographs should be considered as 'encounters' and the primarily Western understanding of these encounters needs to be decentred.⁷ Such an understanding lacks a stake in and critical intimacy with the past that is, however fragmentary, presented by the photographs. What, I wondered, could be learned from new encounters with people who do have an intimate understanding of who and what they see when, for instance, a photograph depicts a particular chief or a mask used for certain ceremonies? To what extent might the activation of Julien's photographs through encounters on the African continent contribute to the understanding of the depicted past in relation to the present?

Sharing photographs online and initiating encounters led to partial answers concerning particular photographs.⁸ These partial answers are demonstrated through making in the form of archive activations rather than argued in language. The artistic gesture is, in this case, a direct response to the historical picture and its framing. This response can only appear through an intervention because it includes the 'original' in one way or another.

Negative PJU-1398 Restricted⁹

Posting the picture of 'Mende Jaye devil + helpers, 1934' on Facebook made me a violator of its 'community standards'. I wanted to keep on sharing photographs with nudity that was simply part of life on this 'Social medium', because it allowed me to reach out to diaspora communities and other specialists outside of my existing network. This led to a visual strategy in which a saturated red colour is used to signal what is adjusted to meet community standards. Such adjustments are necessary in the online environment since standards change through time, media and their technologies. Posting this photograph led to the observation that this type of mask had only been described once up to this point but was actually a recurring design. The mask is part of the Njaye society and was remembered as a powerful entity on the ground in Ngembema.

Move the Centre

When captioning or otherwise framing his photographs, Paul Julien leaned towards 'othering' the people who made his encounters possible in the first place and to 'centring' himself. Now, Julien as an actor cannot be negated but has to be recentred to make space for other actors and their insights. The 'centre' of Julien's legacy moves, through these new encounters, away from his 'adventures' and the authorship assigned to him through his canonisation in the collection of the Fotomuseum.¹⁰

Nomoli (Finding Face)

Negative PJU-2374 is captioned 'Nomoli of Moyamba Holland, 1934'. Nomoli are mysterious archaeological artefacts, figurines with unclear provenance.¹¹ They are also for sale along with other souvenirs. Moyamba is a former railway town where Paul Julien spent a day or two. Posting the picture on Facebook led to several comments that this sculpture was 'fake'. One of the commenters, Gary Schulze, worked at the National Museum in Freetown for a while during the 1960s and referred me to a video on his YouTube channel in which he examines the collection of stones at the museum. Historian J. C. Vanja in Moyamba took the stance that this is real – as did numerous other people I showed the photograph to while in Sierra Leone. Few materials are more 'real' than stone and the photograph is crisp and clear. Mr Vanja added a story about how these figurines were of non-human, magical origin. After a delightful conversation, we walked away from his house and several stones on the path stared at me. When I pointed them out to him, Mr Vanja said he saw them too...

Embrace the Unexpected

The 'good form' I have been searching for is informed by encounters resulting from two separate, but sometimes overlapping strategies that I have used to connect to people with an interest in the photographs. Both strategies initiate new encounters from which Julien's frames can be expanded. The first strategy is sharing photographs on social media, particularly using Facebook pages or groups with a specific interest. The second strategy is to take digitised sets of photographs to where they were made. In both strategies, community standards that may differ from mine are at play and have to be considered. This is an opportunity rather than a restriction when taking the first prompt of recentring seriously. It makes it necessary to embrace the particularity of unfamiliar situations.

After Screening in Ngengbema

The most straightforward expansion of context is a positive identification of a person, place, event or object that can be seen on a photograph yet not recognised or identified in the information that accompanies it. This was the case with the portrait of a man accompanied by the information 'Mende Man' in the database with captions at the Nederlands Fotomuseum. In his notebook, Julien mentions that he produced a photograph of Jacob Nali [sic], the Christian chief of 'Negbema' who is 'a short little man with a pleasant grin around his mouth'. 'Nali' is, however, not identified in any of the photographs. The 'Mende Man' seemed a likely candidate. When I hesitatingly made the suggestion on a first visit to the place that one of Nalli's grandsons insists spelling as Ngengbema, my hunch was instantly and forcefully confirmed. This indeed had to be Jacob Nalli, whose son Philip had just passed away three months and a few days before my visit. During the screening for a wider audience a couple of days later, the conversation was heated. It took place in Mende. Nevertheless, it was clear that there was more at stake here than identifying who and what could be seen in the photographs. What white people had done and should be doing for a poor community also had to be addressed. We were not able to resolve this issue.

Expand the Frame

There were moments before and after what we see in each photograph. Things happened outside of their frames. They are a particular kind of reduction of embodied experiences, documented slices of time framed in two-dimensional, usually square or rectangular shapes. In addition, the narrative of 'African imaginations' was, during the early days of anthropological investigations, phrased in an everlasting present that served imperial ambitions and was usually aligned with missionary ethics. Julien's output belongs squarely within these 'generally distributed ways of doing and making' that have been widely criticised for their fixing of peoples in a past from which the anthropologist, colonialist and/or missionary is excluded.¹² Julien documented what was of interest to him, what fit not only in the frame provided by his camera and the moment he decided to expose the light-sensitive film but also what was explicitly in – or outside – of the proverbial framing of his Roman Catholic world-view.

Through the encounters I have orchestrated with people who see the photographs online or on the African continent, other world views enter the frame of Julien's photographs. The use of artistic practices as a research method provides room for speculation. Neither me nor any of the actors involved can be certain of what Julien left out of the frame. Most of us are sure, though, that there is more that can and should be connected to them.

Bundu Girls (I wish they had colour)

In Freetown, I was introduced to retired historian Arthur Abraham. While browsing through the photographs, he sighed, 'how I wish they had colour'. When the educational officer of the museum proposed to do a workshop in relation to the photographs with their Museum Club, I thought we could grant his wish through a bit of an experiment. The children imagined the full-colour past. Afterwards, Prof. Abraham judged their interpretations based on artistic skills and on the pictures' referents as informed by his experience and research. It was a pleasant morning that ended in happy winners of the little contest, the announcement by Air France that my flight was cancelled, and the taking of two breathing photographs. Unfortunately, my half-joking offer to help Prof. Abraham sort out his writings and his library was never realised.

Prof. Abraham died on 12 July 2020 due to the effects on his lungs of the Covid-19 virus. One of the obituaries published online mentioned that this was his birthday. It was also mine. The remarks he made when we met stayed with me and I was looking forward to seeing him again. It is my hope that this article and other future output of my work related to the photographs Paul Julien made in Sierra Leone, will do justice to what he tried to teach me during the brief moments we spent together.

Andrea Stultiens (1974) is a documentary photographer whose artistic research practice has focussed on historical imaginations of the African continent in relation to the present. She is a tutor at the MA Photography & Society at the Royal Academy of Art, The Hague (KABK). For her doctoral research she worked with photographs taken in the East-African country Uganda. For the KABK Research Group, Stultiens looked at materials connected to anthropologist Paul Julien located in the Fotomuseum in Rotterdam, guided by the desire to activate Julien's legacy through 'collective making' as a contribution to a more nuanced understanding of the depiction of 'others'. Since then, she continues to work on the project supported by an NWO grant. In this essay Stultiens considers what eight years of working with the Paul Julien collection amounted to. Since the text was written the project website [Reframing PJJ](#) has been published in the experimental online journal *Bridging Humanities*. The visuals in this essay are taken from this continuously evolving publication.

Footnotes

1. Tim O'Brien, *The Things They Carried*, Boston: Mariner Books / Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1990, p. 171. The quote is taken from the chapter in the book with the same title as this article: 'Good Form'.
2. Paul Julien, *Kampvuren Langs de Evenaar*, Eindhoven: De Pelgrim, 1940, pp. 11–22.
3. For a more in-depth introduction to Julien see this blog post by film historian Nico de Clerk and myself for the Orphans Film Symposium 2020 at wp.nyu.edu. A more comprehensive correspondence on my work with the Paul Julien collection will be published at www.bridginghumanities.com.
4. See Andrea Stultiens, 'Ebifananyi: A Study of Photographs in Uganda in and Through an Artistic Practice', doctoral thesis, Leiden University, 2018, openaccess.leidenuniv.nl.
5. Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, London / New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2004, p. 14.
6. Paul Julien, *Kampvuren Langs de Evenaar*, p. 250.
7. See Ariella Aïsha Azoulay, 'What Is a Photograph, What Is Photography', *Philosophy of Photography*, vol. 1, no. 1, 2010, pp. 9–13.
8. See [my contribution](#) to *Trigger*, the magazine of FoMu Antwerp. For a brief positioning of the idea of 'Collective Making', see the [description of the project](#) as part of the KABK Research Group 2019.
9. The notion of a 'restricted image' is borrowed from Patrick Waterhouse who uses it in a different context, see www.patrickwaterhouse.com.
10. For more about this decolonial gesture see Ngugi Wa Thiong'o, *Moving the Centre*, Oxford: James Currey, 1993.
11. See www.sierraleoneheritage.org.
12. Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1983.

Crosslinks

Framing and Reframing Archives: onlineopen.org/framing-and-reframing-archives

Tags

Image, Open! Academy, Research

This text was downloaded on May 14, 2024 from
Open! Platform for Art, Culture & the Public Domain
onlineopen.org/good-form