

When in 2017 the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam opened the exhibition *Goede Hoop. Zuid-Afrika en Nederland vanaf 1600* (Good Hope. South Africa and the Netherlands from 1600), various critics soon pointed out the museum's failure to involve significant South African perspectives – specifically Black perspectives – in its overall conceptualization, resulting in an overly Eurocentric presentation that emanated white institutional culture. In the absence of any recognition that colonization is both a historical crime and a violent process, the museum's cultural authority can become a normative force that threatens to naturalize the historical relationship between the Netherlands and South Africa. In national newspapers, heritage scholars argued that the *Goede Hoop* exhibition focused too much on a canonical past, while South African society today is permanently haunted by unsettled issues and the weight of its own history<sup>1</sup>. Though especially in recent years, the country has also been undergoing much change, which leads the authors to refer to the present as the era of 'post-post-apartheid,' with the example of the student-led #RhodesMustFall-movement which in 2015 initiated a process of decolonizing South Africa's educational institutions. In their critique of the tendency to think of history as consisting of a series of distinct events, South African students have emphasized heritage as something that lives on. Social relations of the past reproduce themselves today, often in new forms and disguises, and often come to determine the contemporary moment. From this perspective, the failure of *Goede Hoop* has everything to do with questions around (the representation of) history.

In an attempt to navigate new readings of the past in our present, two documents that were on display in the *Goede Hoop* exhibition are of particular interest as they embody the beginning of colonial bureaucracy in South Africa. One document bears the 1651 instructions by the Dutch East India Company (VOC) for Jan van Riebeeck to command a settlement at the Cape, with the purpose to provide provisions for the fleets of their trade empire sailing between the Dutch Republic and Batavia (present-day Jakarta) in the Dutch East Indies<sup>2</sup>. The other testifies of the land purchase of the Cape Peninsula by VOC commander IJsbrand Godske, signed in 1672 along with two captains of the indigenous Khoekhoe community, 'Schagger' (Prince Manckkhagou) and 'Kuiper' (Superior Dackkgij, guardian of the minor Prince Dhouw).<sup>3</sup> This purchase not only enabled European settlers to lay claim to supposed 'empty lands', thus dismissing any indigenous relations to living with the land, but it importantly also formalized the settler colony in legal mechanisms to which they often had exclusive access. Over time, this legal bureaucracy – backed by armed force – would lead to an institutional regime of systemic oppression and domination of white settlers over black life. As David Graeber plainly put it: *police are bureaucrats with weapons*.<sup>4</sup>

In *Bureaucracy and Race*, Ivan Evans provides a historical analysis of the administrative emergence of apartheid, arguing that racial domination was based not just on coercion, but also on institutionalization and socialization<sup>5</sup>. It wouldn't be a stretch to observe that also the longer history of routinized oppression in South Africa – genocidal war, subjugation of the indigenous populations, racist sciences, slavery and Inboekstelsel indentured labor, racial administration under the apartheid regime – simply cannot be considered without state and corporate bookkeeping, laws and regulations, and the economic interests of careerist profiteers. In the definition of Katharina Pistor, law is the code of capital, and the basic institutions of capitalism are property, credit, and the joint-stock company—which are all historically tethered to the colonial project. In 1602, the VOC issued tradable shares on the Amsterdam Stock Exchange, soon to be traded across the capitals of Europe; today, the Global North's financial institutions (IMF, World Bank) have indebted great swathes of the Global South through imperialist strategies, most notably structural adjustment programs. Where they haven't, these conceptions of dominance and dependency were often internalized and served as a template for governments to implement similar neoliberal policy, as was the case with South Africa's 'Growth, Employment and Redistribution' (GEAR) program introduced by Mandela's democratic government in 1996.

While a large part of the global anti-apartheid movement in the second half of the twentieth century opposed the policies of South Africa's apartheid system on moral grounds, there were also those who recognized that apartheid is a highly profitable system and that in order to fight apartheid, the underlying economic order needs to be dismantled. They organized their solidarity with the struggle of South Africans using socialist ideas that included a range of strategies, from boycotts of products to violent direct actions against companies that refused to give up their financial interest in South Africa. In the Netherlands in the 1980s, the Revolutionary Anti-Racist Action (RARA) targeted several Dutch companies that were profiting from racism, exploitation and oppression, such as Shell and retail firm Makro. Makro was doing business in South Africa under the apartheid regime, and after RARA burned down four Makro warehouses in the Netherlands, the anonymous collective had forced parent company SHV to pull out of South Africa and sell off its six branches. The apathetic letter written by CEO Paul Fentener van Vlissingen to his shareholders two days after the first arson perfectly illustrates the double standards of modern corporate business and its reproduction of imperialist legacy: "As a company, SHV has no political judgment on any state in the world. Barring war situations, SHV uses the company's economic potential as a benchmark for its actions. SHV is against apartheid, because it means bad business for our Makros, now and in the future."<sup>6</sup>

Pieter Paul Pothoven's work ZAAK no. 2108/85 is part of a six-year research project into RARA, for which the artist collaborated with several activists involved at the time of its actions. The artwork consists of a series of photographic prints that recall RARA's first attack on a Makro warehouse in the Amsterdam suburb of Duivendrecht, on September 17, 1985. The prints' images are characterized by a

high-contrast, grainy photocopy quality, indicative of a kind of paper bureaucracy; they are in fact reproduced pages from the police file on the arson, which Pothoven obtained. This forensic report shows exteriors, interiors, and various objects placed next to rulers for scale reference, including remains of the incendiary device and warehouse inventory that was lost to the flames. In its production ZAAK no. 2108/85 carefully incorporates materials that each carry their own historical weight, deliberately recycling colonial artifacts that were used in the Dutch trade empire. Recalling the start of colonial bureaucracy in South Africa, the prints come in two sizes that are modelled after the 1651 and 1672 documents displayed in *Goede Hoop*: 22 by 33 centimeters and 39 by 58 centimeters. The silver compounds used in the photographic printing process were extracted from zilveren ridders, silver trade coins minted by the VOC in the 18th century Dutch Republic, which circulated throughout its imperial trade network. The prints are framed in reworked teak and ebony wood, derived from dismantling wooden shipping chests that once contained the private belongings and commodities of VOC administrators.

With pragmatically repurposing similar cultural artifacts in earlier works, such as with the installation *facade suspended* (2018), Pothoven still left visual markers of historical import unscathed, including the VOC monogram, as to leave no doubt about the imperialist institutions that the artworks were meant to implicate. In ZAAK no. 2108/85, however, such visual presence is sublimated into the overall material substrate and support. Moreover, contexts of mercantile capitalism and the modern corporation are actively extended into the artwork's own commercial context of gallery representation, in which ZAAK no. 2108/85 finds its first (and perhaps prime) audience—an artistic strategy that was similarly embraced for Pothoven's earlier work *Consignor Consignee* (2021). As an artistic model, destroying antiques of Dutch colonial history enables a new political framework from which to reconsider these cultural artifacts – typically misused to glorify the nation state's histories of global domination – and flip their narration to tell stories of resistance against the ongoing legacy of Dutch colonial violence. In doing so, the forensic images' initial function as evidence of crime is transformed into a commemoration of resistance—a useful act in times of persistent police repression, increased state surveillance, and the extractive colonial economies that are still rampant today.

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Text by Timo Demollin, visual artist.

<sup>1</sup> 'Goede Hoop na #RhodesMustFall,' Nick Shepherd and Christian Ersten, *NRC Handelsblad*, March 30, 2017.

<sup>2</sup> 'Instructie van de VOC voor het stichten van een verseringsstation aan de Kaap, 25 maart 1651,' Nationaal Archief, Den Haag, inv.no. 1.04.02 no. 102 folia 258-261.

<sup>3</sup> 'Purchase document of the Cape Peninsula,' National Library of South Africa, Cape Town, inv. no. G.13b45(4.2). The indigenous signers' actual names and title are retrieved from: 'Die grond-transaksies van 1672 tussen die Hollanders en

die Skiereilandse Khoikhoi,' *Kronos: Journal of Cape History*, Volume 2, Issue 1, Jan 1980.

<sup>4</sup> David Graeber, *The Utopia of Rules: On Technology, Stupidity, and the Secret Joys of Bureaucracy*, London, Melville House, 2015.

<sup>5</sup> Ivan Evans, *Bureaucracy and Race: Native Administration in South Africa*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1997.

<sup>6</sup> Archive of Zuidelijk Afrika Komitee, International Institute of Social History, Amsterdam, inv.no. ARCHO4654 (formerly: Het Staatsarchief, SAVRZ054, Doos 001 Map 1.11).