**THE TRUE SIZE OF AFRICA**

November 9th 2024 – August 17th 2025

World Heritage Völklinger Hütte

“Here rests in God my dear N\*\*\*\* I Chim Bebe I died in 1912 at the age of 26.” This inscription on the grave of a man born in the West African colony of Togo, found in the old cemetery in Saarlouis, reveals Africa’s close proximity—even here in Saarland.

Although we all have our origins in Africa and Egyptian culture still shapes us today, while the Roman Empire’s granaries were in North Africa and powerful African kingdoms flourished during the Middle Ages, Africa has been portrayed on world maps since the days of Mercator as smaller than its actual size and the continent continues to be underestimated in both its geographic scope and its significance for world history, despite its prehistorical role as the birthplace of humankind. THE TRUE SIZE OF AFRICA signifies all of this, in addition to the global reach of the African diaspora, wrought by the transatlantic slave trade and the forced displacement of African people worldwide, with lasting impacts to this day.

Exactly 140 years ago, in November 1884, the Congo Conference was opened in Berlin, which divided up Africa among the colonial powers without any African participation: Reason enough to take a different look in 2024 at this huge continent and the people who come from it. THE TRUE SIZE OF AFRICA tests approaches that identify traditions of thought, prejudices and stereotypes and enable new perspectives — by means of cultural history and contemporary art, through constant changes of perspective and artistic polyphony. "We want to be an eye-opener, not just a feast for the eyes. We want to move and inspire in equal measure," says Dr Ralf Beil, General Director of the World Heritage Völklinger Hütte and curator of the exhibition.

While a MUSEUM OF MEMORABILITY reflects on Africa's past and present from the perspective of colonial Europe, African sculptures and objects from private collections in Saarland enter into a dialogue with the machines and flywheels of the historic blower hall. "The central idea of this exhibition structure is a methodical reversal of perspective. Industrial modernity, which has repeatedly darkened Europe, meets a multifaceted, illuminating African culture," says curator Dr Ralf Beil.

Major artworks from recent decades are paired with numerous sound and spatial installations realised especially for the show by artists from Africa and the global diaspora, all making THE TRUE SIZE OF AFRICA tangible. For the first time, this exhibition route, reflecting the vastness of the subject, extends from the Pump house through the Blower hall, the Compressor hall, and the Sintering plant, all the way to the Ore shed.

“We are presenting new stories from Africa to counter the grand, often idealized narrative of Western civilization — stories that offer us a mirror for self-examination and self-awareness,” Ralf Beil notes, explaining the ideas behind the exhibition.

One powerful symbol for this intention is Emeka Ogboh’s sound installation “The Land Remembers,” created specifically for THE TRUE SIZE OF AFRICA. Visitors are welcomed by this beautiful, yet irritating sound piece in the Pump house before they even reach the main exhibition in the Blower hall. Each voice has its own speaker, producing a unique soundscape in the space — an unusual kind of a cappella concert. The song heard here is the “Steigerlied” (a traditional miners’ song), sung in Oshivambo, a Namibian language, and recorded by the African Vocals in Windhoek with new lyrics by Emeka Ogboh. The text tells of colonial land seizures, exploitation, wounds, and rebirth. In this way, an element of Germany’s intangible heritage becomes an African song, reflecting a shared past.

THE MUSEUM OF MEMORABILITY

As visitors first enter the Blower hall, the exhibition programmatically bridges the history of humanity from its origins to the present day. The thematic clusters comprising this unique museum are titled:

Beyond the Mercator Map / Africa, Cradle of Humankind / Ancient Egypt, Religion, and Culture / Medieval Kingdoms in Africa / Black in the Eighteenth Century / Early Colonialism: Missionaries and Military / Congo Conference in Berlin, 1884/85 / First Pan-African Conference in London 1900 / Colonial Germany / Colonial Saarland / Politics of Memory and Monuments: Dar es Salaam, Hamburg, Cape Town, Bristol / Colonial Heroes/Criminals / After World War I: The Black Horror on the Saar / Before World War II: Colonial Renaissance in Germany / Pathways of Pan-Africanism: Marcus Garvey, Haile Selassie, Bob Marley / 1960, Year of Independence / Structural Racism: James Baldwin, Angela Davis / Migration in the Line of Fire: Samuel Yeboah / Greetings from Africa / Queer Culture / Afroglobal Music and Dance.

After the MUSEUM OF MEMORABILITY, visitors encounter the works and installations of 26 contemporary artists invited to exhibit in the Blower hall, the Compression hall, the Sintering plant, and the Ore shed.

THE ARTISTS

Dele Adeyemo (Kaduna, Nigeria / London, England / Lagos, Nigeria), John Akomfrah (Accra, Ghana / London, England), James Gregory Atkinson (Frankfurt, Germany / Seattle, USA), Sammy Baloji (Lubumbashi, RD Congo / Brussels, Belgium), Arébénor Basséne (Dakar, Senegal), Memory Biwa (Windhoek, Namibia), María Magdalena Campos-Pons (Matanzas, Cuba / Nashville, USA), CATPC (Lusanga, DR Congo), Omar Victor Diop (Dakar, Senegal / Paris, France), Sokari Douglas Camp (Buguma, Nigeria / London, England), William Kentridge (Johannesburg, South Africa), Kongo Astronauts (Kinshasa, DR Congo), Susana Pilar Delahante Matienzo (Havana, Cuba / Enschede, Netherlands), Roméo Mivekannin (Bouaké, Ivory Coast / Toulouse, France), Zanele Muholi (Kapstadt, South Africa / Umlazi, South Africa), Josèfa Ntjam (Metz, France), Kaloki Nyamai (Nairobi, Kenya), Emeka Ogboh (Lagos, Nigeria / Berlin, Germany), Zineb Sedira (Algiers, Algeria / Paris, France / London, England), Sandra Seghir (Lomé, Togo / Dakar, Senegal), Yinka Shonibare (London, England), The Singh Twins (Richmond, England), Géraldine Tobe (Kinshasa, DR Congo), Kara Walker (New York, USA) and Carrie Mae Weems (Syracuse, USA).

WORKS CREATED SPECIFICALLY FOR THE TRUE SIZE OF AFRICA

Among the many artists who have created works specifically for the exhibition are painters Sandra Seghir and Arébénor Basséne in Dakar and Kaloki Nyamai in Nairobi. Nyamai produced two of the six canvases now stretched like giant sails across the large exhibition floor in the Blower hall expressly for THE TRUE SIZE OF AFRICA. Together with pieces from his series “Dining in Chaos,” the works create an evocative, richly meaningful installation.

Zineb Sedira visited flea markets in London and Paris to source numerous pieces of furniture and accessories for her newly assembled installation “Standing Here Wondering Which Way to Go.” This work, typically displayed as a solo exhibition, is being shown in Germany for the first time—as are John Akomfrah’s three-part video installation “Four Nocturnes” and many other works and installations.

In Amsterdam, three chocolate sculptures by CATPC were specially recast for THE TRUE SIZE OF AFRICA, as the original set of pieces is still on display in the Netherlands Pavilion at this year’s Venice Biennale. Zanele Muholi’s and Omar Victor Diop’s photographic works, meanwhile, are being presented on large banners created especially for THE TRUE SIZE OF AFRICA, powerfully displayed along the walkways flanking the Blower hall.

SITE-SPECIFIC WORKS IN THE EXHIBITION

Four African artists worked directly at the Völklinger Hütte, engaging with the complex and its significance as an industrial UNESCO World Heritage site marked by an ambivalent historical legacy. Emeka Ogboh contributed three new works: in addition to his subversive version of the “Steigerlied,” he created an African German “Rost” (Rust) beer that symbolically alludes, as the label notes, to “the corrosive impact of colonialism on both the colonizer and the colonized.” Near the Suspension railway workshop, his “Chorus of the Abandoned” features five hanging carts swinging back and forth, squeaking and creaking like a mechanical hourglass to evoke the industrial work formerly done at the site. In the Sintering plant, Géraldine Tobe has created a monument to the workers who once toiled at the Hütte, expanded into a memorial for humanity, animals, and the environment as a whole. Her medium is fire, while her paintings emerge from traces of smoke—powerful emblems of transience and persistence.

Memory Biwa connects the red sinter dust from the Hütte with the red dust of Namibia’s desert—hardly a coincidence, as Africa was a key source of raw materials for the Völklinger Hütte in the years after World War II. Extracted from many different African countries, this ore was transported to destinations that included Saarland. Memory Biwa has installed her material- and sound-based installation, “Ozerandu,” in one of the Blower hall’s underground levels. Sand cakes formed by hand and an evocative soundscape speak to the proximity and distance of these two starkly different places, connected by red hues of the dust that gives its color to both.

For their installation, the Kongo Astronauts—Eléonore Hellio and Pisko Crâne —created their distinctive astronaut suits on site and filmed videos in and around the Hütte, presented here on the large exhibition floor alongside their Afrofuturistic full-body masks. This video installation combines footage of the Hütte seen through the astronauts’ eyes with film sequences from the Congo.

For the Kongo Astronauts, the history of the Hütte and the exploitation of both human beings and nature are directly bound up with electronic waste from Europe in Kinshasa, where cobalt mined in the Congo is returned to its origins as the discarded waste of civilization. “In times like these,” says Ralf Beil, “it is crucial to make visible the global links that shape all of our lives, whether we like it or not.”

ECHOES OF THE MUSEUM—EXHIBITION CONTENTS

The MUSEUM OF MEMORABILITY is intricately linked with the artists’ works and installations through various resonant connections and echoes. Arébénor Basséne’s abstract, yet map-like painting “A Deep Sahelian Paradise” is an artistic response to the 1375 Catalan world atlas found in the thematic cluster “Medieval Kingdoms in Africa.” Sokari Douglas Camp reinterprets William Blake’s eighteenth-century engraving with her sculpture “Europe Supported by Africa and America.”

The seminal work by civil rights leader and early Pan-Africanist W. E. B. Du Bois from 1903 serves as the foundation for Roméo Mivekannin’s sixty-eight portraits on cloth, where figures from Josephine Baker to Kamala Harris seem to emerge from the book’s pages. Mivekannin’s installation “The Souls of Black Folk” is thus a double tribute to Du Bois and to activists descended from Africans around the world.

While the MUSEUM OF MEMORABILITY presents the toppled monument of colonial criminal Hermann von Wissmann lying inside a shipping crate, James Gregory Atkinson sets the bronze Askari from the memorial upright, restoring its dignity beyond any position of servitude.

Exploring the legacy of Pan-Africanism during the years of independence, Zineb Sedira’s installation examines the events surrounding the 1969 Algiers Film Festival. It stands within view of Carrie Mae Weems’s photo series “The Push, The Call, The Scream, The Dream,” which visualizes protests against segregation and racism in early 1960s America, as trenchantly analyzed by Angela Davis and James Baldwin in the MUSEUM OF MEMORABILITY.

In her film installation “Prince McVeigh and the Turner Blasphemies,” Kara Walker uses elements of fairy tales to confront viewers with the brutal and ongoing reality of racism today. Queer culture—a fraught facet of life in Africa since colonial times—is at the heart of Zanele Muholi’s self-portrait series “Somnyama Ngonyama,” while the power that music holds for political liberation, illustrated by Fela Kuti and Miriam Makeba, is central to Sandra Seghir’s two large-scale paintings.

John Akomfrah and Omar Victor Diop address another key issue of our time and future with their contrasting works, focusing on the relationship between climate, nature, animals, and human beings. For Akomfrah, this theme is also linked to migration as another critical issue for Africa and the world.

“The question of Africa is a global question. Whether the concern is climate, migration, or democracy—in and with Africa, the decisive question is raised how we might treat our planet, animals, people, and nature, now and in the future. THE TRUE SIZE OF AFRICA programmatically links cultural history with contemporary art, politics and aesthetics, creating an immersive journey of experiences for the mind and the senses that raises precisely these questions,” says Ralf Beil.

THE MEDIAGUIDE

The media guide provides in-depth information about the exhibition, the Museum of Memorability as well as on all artists, works and installations in the show. In addition, it also provides the soundtracks for numerous videos and film projections in the exhibition.

Media guide and headphones to borrow are included in the admission price. You are welcome to bring your own headphones with cable (3.5 mm jack plug).

THE CATALOGUE

A richly illustrated catalogue in English has been published by Hirmer Verlag edited by Ralf Beil, Markus Messling and Christiane Solte-Gresser, with contributions from Ralf Beil, Elara Bertho, Souleymane Bachir Diagne, Till Förster, Franck Hofmann, Nadia Yala Kisukidi, Markus Messling and Christiane Solte-Gresser.

A documentation of the Museum of Memorability, text-image inserts on all artists and works in the exhibition as well as literary-philosophical source texts from Chinua Achebe, Johannes Leo Africanus, James Baldwin and Josephine Baker to Teju Cole, Olaudah Equiano, Patrice Lumumba, Wole Soyinka, Binyavanga Wainaina and many more make this book a veritable compendium of THE TRUE SIZE OF AFRICA.

In cooperation with the Käte Hamburger Centre for Cultural Practices of Reparation CURE at Saarland University

THE PROGRAMME

An extensive supporting programme accompanies the exhibition with film screenings, panel discussions, workshops, readings and lectures. Cooperation partners include the Käte Hamburger Centre for Cultural Practices of Reparation CURE at Saarland University, Aktion 3. Welt Saar, the Filmhaus Saarbrücken, the Haus Afrika association, the achteinhalb cinema and the Kassiopeia art school.

You can find the daily updated programme up to the finissage on 17 August 2025 at: www.voelklinger-huette.org