

***Flota Nfumu:***

**Rethinking Art, Archives and Pedagogy in the case of Copito de Nieve**

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In memory of Dr. Jordi Sabater Pi

In the year 2006, I began an artistic project—*Flota Nfumu*—addressing questions of cultural memory, and more specifically the history and myth of the albino gorilla from Equatorial Guinea that had come to be christened as ‘Snowflake’: Copito de Nieve in *castellano*, Floquet de Neu in *catalán*, and Nfumu in *fang*. I had two starting points for my investigation: the Barcelona Zoo, where Snowflake had been held captive for over forty years, and the Sabater Pi Collection, housed in the Barcelona Science Park. Snowflake was brought to the Barcelona Zoo in 1966, and remained his habitat until his death in 2003. I was interested in memories, souvenirs, anecdotes, drawings, photographs, and other visual records of his life. The Education Department and the Research Unit from the Barcelona Zoo explained to me that the *Copito file* had not yet been archived and was therefore not accessible. The only information they could provide when I first arrived was a commercial DVD on Snowflake’s life, and the DVD entitled, in Catalan, *Els nens dibuixen en Floquet* [Children’s drawings of Snowflake]. Additional information could be found at the Gorilla Space, a visitor interpretation center open to the public. The permanent

exhibition at the Gorilla Space was built and inaugurated in 2003, and explained Snowflake's history as well as the life, natural habitats, and behavioral patterns of lowland gorillas. It was an attractive, well-documented multi-media center aiming "to inform the visitors about the world of gorillas, a species that shares around 98% of its DNA with humans, and which is in imminent danger of disappearing."<sup>1</sup>

In the last months of Snowflake's life, the Barcelona Zoo orchestrated a publicity campaign and homage to its most famous resident. As part of this homage, children were entitled to a free entrance ticket to the zoo in exchange for a drawing dedicated to the albino gorilla. The zoo did not keep the original drawings; both the physical collection per se and traces of identity of the child artists were lost and erased from the archives. However, in a small but significant 'media' shift, digital versions were archived in the form of the DVD, *Els nens dibuixen en Floquet*, which contains a rather repetitive slideshow of the drawings, accompanied by the sound of African percussion. As a visual artist, I was curious to consider what new perspectives this collection of children's drawings might provide on several issues: the relation between Barcelona and the albino gorilla, the human-animal relations in a Western setting, and the perceptions of zoological institutes in the twenty-first century, in sum, questions of nature and conservation. It was important for me, too, to rethink the significance of the choice of a digital (rather than a material) archive by the zoo.

The Sabater Pi Collection, housed at the University of Barcelona, includes among its holdings a very large collection of books, journals, drawings and watercolors of fauna and flora, with some particularly valuable and exclusive material relating to primates and—above all—extensive research relating to Snowflake.<sup>2</sup> Born in Barcelona, Jordi Sabater Pi (1922-2009) had worked in Equatorial Guinea from 1940 until 1969, and from 1959 onwards led the Centro Ikunde in Bata, an adaptation

and acclimatization station for animals and plants being sent to the botanical garden and to the zoo in Barcelona. Jordi Sabater Pi purchased the baby gorilla in 1966 from the farmer Benito Manié, who had called the gorilla *Nfumu*, which means ‘White’ in Esangui Fang. This name was still being used when the gorilla arrived in the Barcelona zoo, although—despite Sabater Pi’s letters of protestation—it was soon replaced by ‘Copito de Nieve.’ Ever since his installation in the Barcelona zoo, Snowflake became one of the most photographed animals in the world: the *National Geographic* ran a story in March 1967 with the headline “Snowflake, the Animal Kingdom’s Newest Celebrity,” and the photographic mania soon swept up *Life*, *Paris-Match*, *The New York Times*, *Der Spiegel*, and other periodicals. Having purchased the albino gorilla for 11,500 pesetas, Sabater Pi received, within months, a telegram from the organizers of the Expo ‘67 in Montreal offering the figure of one million dollars.

In the Sabater Pi Collection, I was particularly interested in the drawings made in the research area of Equatorial Guinea; then-emeritus professor Sabater Pi and shared reflections on the concepts of drawing, observation, perception, projection and imagination. I simultaneously worked on the other contemporary form of archivization: I started to capture the images from the DVD *Els nens dibuixen en Floquet*, reprinting the collection and re-documenting the information, in search of a more appropriate form for cultural memory. In this search, I started with several reflections: How might it be possible to reconsider the pattern of ‘consumption’ in the Barcelona Zoo, and contemporary practices of digital archiving as forms of cultural remembrance? How might the fragile ecosystems of Equatorial Guinea, explored in the zoo’s Gorilla Space, be experienced by local communities living in the region? And finally, what, in the end, was the most appropriate response to Snowflake’s

death? Public debate focused on the rather sterile questions of whether the albino gorilla should be stuffed into the Museum of Natural History, in Barcelona, and displayed for future generations, and whether the city should organize a funeral procession for an honorary citizen, or arrange for repatriation to the country of origin, as Frank Westerman proposes in his book *El negro en ik* [The negro and me], comparing the widely-debated case of El Negro de Banyoles with that of Snowflake. In the end, some genetic materials from hair and bone samples were donated for scientific purposes—another prominent form of archiving today. Also, microscopic samples of the *tyrosinase* gene were carefully transferred to the GENBANK, to be ready for an eventual cloning of the albino gorilla.<sup>3</sup>

I had little interest in the monuments, public sculptures, and street names dedicated to an animal whose myth had been created in Europe, and matters of bioethics were not my area of expertise. Instead, my approach was shaped by my interest in pedagogical efforts being made in relation to conservation, heritage, patrimony sites, and my experience working in community arts projects in public spaces. I began to question how to rethink memory through—and from—Snowflake’s country of origin. It was in this spirit that I conceived the *Flota Nfumu* project: a project that would involve drawing, but this time with children from Equatorial Guinea itself. In contrast with the collection of drawings of Snowflake by Spanish children attending the Barcelona zoo, I wanted to generate a project that would investigate the perception and artistic projection of children in Bata (from which region Nfumu originally came), as well as their own relation towards environment and habitat. Retracing the steps of Jordi Sabater Pi, the project would have its main focus on drawing. But more than creating artistic residues, the strength of this *in situ* intervention would derive from experiences and shared social

interactions during the workshops, juxtaposing my contemporary art practice with a larger pedagogical project.

In June 2008, the drawing project *El bosque y la imaginación* was set up in Bata.<sup>4</sup> It was undertaken in collaboration with the performance artist and choreographer Barbara Pereyra, experienced in the field of dance, theatre, contemporary movements and community arts in Europe and Latin America. The two of us worked jointly in the Escuela Nana Mangue and in the rural school Nco Antoma—both located in Bata—with a total of 275 local students involved, of ages ranging between 5 and 14 years old. The students were encouraged to make drawings of fauna and flora in their surroundings. They could draw different plants, trees, birds, insects, flowers, animals, clouds and other natural phenomena of their pleasing. We assured them that this was not a test, so that the exercise would generate the most genuine and spontaneous forms of expression. The drawings were then temporally exhibited at the Centro Cultural Español in Bata, and afterwards returned to the students who authored them, but also high-resolution scans of each child's drawing in Bata were made, in order to create a second digital archive.

The *Flota Nfumu* project is concerned, on one level, with re-interpreting the content, form, and meaning of an archive. The two digital collections—*El bosque y la imaginación*, from Bata, and *Els nens dibuixen en Floquet*, from Barcelona— have been reprinted with inkjet (*gliclée*) technology on an acid free, archival paper: a total of 4,583 drawings, each a high-quality fine art reproduction, they are exhibited in archival boxes where visitors can easily flip through the drawings.<sup>5</sup> The two cabinets (as archival systems) are displayed side by side, next to each other, and the collection is accompanied with a proportional maquette designed to question the form and the scale of what an archive can be, or how an archive can be approached from different

perspectives, levels, and situations. However, the archive created through our interventions in Bata, in contrast with the archive created by the Barcelona Zoo, has not been conceived as the terminal point of the project. *Flota Nfumu* aims, rather, to generate new opportunities and possibilities for combining artistic approaches and playful educational formats within a pedagogical frame and—not least—to make information accessible to new generations in Bata and Equatorial Guinea.

This pedagogical approach of the drawing class was similar to others I had earlier adopted with youngsters in Brussels, Berlin or Novosibirsk. Working personally with the children in their classroom, and in small groups, gave us the opportunity to interact intensively with the students, encouraging them to unleash their artistic creativity while explaining the project. We displayed to the children in Bata some botanical drawings from the Sabater Pi Collection, and some drawings made by a group of botanists and artists in the Monte Alén National Park.<sup>6</sup> We displayed samples of different drawing techniques executed with different media. We then retold the story of *Nfumu Ngi* [White Gorilla], too remote in time to be remembered by these children. A number of origami paper boats depicting the Spanish children's drawings of Snowflake (which I had previously photographed by the beach in Barcelona in order to publicize the project) were used as a starting point in Bata, a tangible means of visualization in re-telling the story of Nfumu Ngi. The paper boats were given to the students. Along with images of the children's drawings in Spain, we also displayed pictures of the gorillas and the facilities they inhabited in the Barcelona Zoo. But most thought provoking where the discussions we had on the European concept of zoological gardens and zoos.<sup>7</sup> The concept per se is not self-evident in the context of the contemporary urban situation in Bata. The zoo being an essentially nineteenth-century Western configuration, "the first uniformed institution

in a globalized world,” as Van Reybrouck puts it, there is neither a zoo in Bata nor any visitor interpretation center about its own fragile and simultaneously rich and diverse environment. European zoos on the other hand provide plentiful information about the fragile endangered environments of species in Africa and elsewhere, but local communities, nearly living in and around these environments have radically different conceptions, uses, and interpretations for them.

At the end of the drawing project the teachers continued to address the differences between zoos and the natural environment of animals. A brief introduction about the *Flota Nfumu* project and a pedagogical file—including books with drawings, photographs and catalogues—had been provided to all children and teachers. It is my believe that developing ongoing artistic/creative projects in the school curriculum can play a very important role in the introducing of new themes and catalyzing learning processes. The enthusiastic reception of the workshops, on the part of teachers and students, is a promising sign for the future development of artistic interventions in classrooms concerning environmental issues. In the context of Equatorial Guinea, one concrete future objective of such interventions will be to organize periodic school trips to the National Park of Monte Alén, and to give children the opportunity to develop alternative understandings of matters of diversity, the environment, and the endless possibilities for archiving.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Information about the center is available at the official Barcelona Zoo’s web site:

<http://www.floquetdeneu.es>

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<sup>2</sup> Further details of the Sabater Pi Collection can be found at the official web site:

<http://www.pcb.ub.es/homePCB/live/en/p1451.asp>

<sup>3</sup> ” Rosa Martínez-Arias et al., “The Tyrosinase Gene in Gorillas and the Albinism of ‘Snowflake’ (2000).

<sup>4</sup> I would like to acknowledge here the local logistical support provided to this project by the Centro Cultural Español de Bata.

<sup>5</sup> Solo exhibition entitled *Flota Nfumu*, by Filip Van Dingenen, Network Centre for Contemporary Art, Aalst (Belgium ), 2009. See web page: <http://www.network-art.be/en/activities/exhibitions/377>

<sup>6</sup>For a sample of this work on the National Park see some of the compilations by Manuel Merino in *Monte Alén. Guinea Ecuatorial* (2002).

<sup>7</sup> For a politico-ideological interpretation of the zoo from an archival theoretical angle, see Benita Sampedro Vizcaya’s article entitled “Rethinking the Archive and the Colonial Library. Equatorial Guinea.”

<sup>8</sup> Further details on the *Flota Nfumu* project can be found at: <http://www.flota-nfumu.blogspot.com/>

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