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Not out of context: Eric Magassa's *The Lost Series*

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Who or what is lost in these photographs?

The Lost is the title and hashtag multi-disciplinary artist Eric Magassa adds to a series of pictures on his Instagram account. Initially I assume that the title refers to the figure that returns, if never quite as the same, in every single photograph. Here it is, in yellow trousers and colourful garb, standing beneath an underpass; here it is again, like a bed sheet ghost in orange, a strangely solemn apparition in front of an industrial estate. Every time, the figure wears a cardboard mask, leading to a double act of combined disappearance and appearance: We do not see who is hidden behind the masks and clothes, yet the figure is not hidden at all. On the contrary, the multi-coloured patchwork of the dress and the bright paint on individual masks – orange ‘noses’, yellow ‘cheeks’, pink, blue and red shapes – make the masked being firmly stand out against the environment.

This double act of appearance and disappearance brings two meanings of ‘lost’ into play. At first glance, the figures seem lost in their surroundings. However, I would like to suggest that someone is ‘lost’ in the figures instead. The mask and the clothes make a specific shape appear at the same time as whoever wears them becomes hidden. Importantly, though, we see that the shape is neither without substance nor intended to be invisible. Clearly, someone is in costume. Unlike most realist acting styles which aim to conceal the difference between actor and character – trying to make us believe in the unity of an undivided being (we are supposed to see Hamlet, not an actor playing Hamlet) – the apparition in Magassa’s photographs is divided. We see a masked figure, but we also perceive someone else behind the mask even though we do not actually see him or her.

The mask also mirrors what has often been described as the ‘masquerading’ effect of photography. In his seminal *Camera Lucida*, for instance, Roland Barthes argues that having one’s picture taken transforms our ‘light, divided, dispersed’ selves into a ‘heavy, motionless, stubborn’ image. The photograph, even though a trace of ourselves, ‘masks’ us. While Barthes is interested in what he understands as an essential quality of the medium, others – like Cindy Sherman – use actual masquerade in their practice. For performance scholar Laura Levin, Sherman’s famous self-portraits in the ‘masks’ of female stereotypes ‘drive a wedge between self and picture’. By employing actual masquerade, Sherman lays bare the

transformation of 'self' into image and exposes the patriarchal production of woman-as-image.

Like Sherman, Magassa creates self-portraits in costume: It is usually the artist himself who puts on the mask in his photographs. As in Sherman's case, the masked figure is divided and thus 'self' (portrait) and 'other' (mask) at the same time, destabilizing the alleged binary of self and other. Last but not least, both Sherman's and Magassa's photographs can be said to counteract dominant practices of image production. While her work refers to the glamour industry's fabrication of female stereotypes, I would like to suggest that Magassa's *The Lost* series can be understood against the background of colonial history and contemporary legacies of colonial practice. At first glance, his masked figures might remind us of rituals, of African sculpture, of tribal objects, and of their appropriation by Western artists.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, colonialism's economic exploitation of the Americas, Africa and Oceania – the forced extraction of peoples and goods – found a parallel in Western ethnographic and artistic practice. Through processes of detachment and decontextualisation, tribal objects, masks and sculptures were taken out of their living cultural environment and shown in ethnographic museums, where they were supposed to represent the allegedly 'primitive' cultures of the colonised. There, these objects were 'discovered' and appropriated by Western artists like Picasso who famously includes tribal masks in his *Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J. R. M.)* (1907). For the historical avant-gardes, non-Western artistic and cultural practices – including African sculpture – became a sign of what they desired to be more 'primitive' modes of artistic expression. Removing these practices from their cultural context, they exploited them in search of the 'authentic' beyond the restraints of civilisation.

Magassa's images thus recall stereotypical Western images of an 'exotic' Africa on the one hand, as well as artistic and cultural practices within African traditions on the other. Born in 1972 to a Swedish mother and French father of Senegalese and Malian descent, Magassa understands the *Lost* series as a 'way of exploring my own identity' through 'the experience and the notion of "the other"'. Taken in and around Sweden's second-largest city, Gothenburg, the artist's masked self-portraits stage what he calls 'the meeting of the totally strange and the known'. Importantly, though, Magassa already finds the 'strange' in the urban landscape; it is not introduced – only heightened – by the presence of the masked figure.

The urban landscape entails the ‘strange’ for two reasons. First, all of Magassa’s backgrounds are places to which it seems difficult to belong. Even the housing estates – curtained off and relegated to the background – are not inviting despite an occasional flowerpot. While they are homes, they do not seem homelike in the photographs. Instead, they become what anthropologist Marc Augé calls ‘non-places’: places to be passed through rather than to be lived in. From this perspective, maybe the buildings and motorways are ‘the lost’, whereas the figures – in spite of their constant displacement (from one photograph to the next) – could be at home in themselves.

Second, Magassa’s backgrounds seem to be chosen on account of ‘irregularities’ within an otherwise utilitarian framework. This becomes even more apparent when looking at Magassa’s photographs that, even though not part of *The Lost*, are distributed alongside this series on the artist’s Instagram account. Taken in Gothenburg, New York, Paris, Accra, Addis Ababa and other places around the world, no human being appears in these pictures of walls, buildings, cars and industrial structures. Nevertheless, there is a similar relationship between figure and background as in the *Lost* series. For instance, the photographer finds a yellow shed amongst greyish ruins and dark green bushes, a black square on a blue wall, a strange green hedge in front of a red brick house. Like the masked figure, these elements stand out from their surroundings and take on a sculptural quality through the act of being photographed. Throughout the *Lost* series, these ruptures of the familiar return as the irregularities mentioned earlier: a flowerpot, graffiti, unusual combinations of colour, etc.

Magassa’s masked figures are never isolated from their surroundings. Even though costume and mask seem out of context, the photographs refuse decontextualisation. In contrast, many Modernist practices like the so-called ‘ethnographic studies’ of fashion photographer Irving Penn, for instance, separated subject and environment. Penn removed indigenous people from their surroundings – say, a village in Cameroon – by means of a portable studio-tent. Through this act, and regardless of his intentions, the white man dictated the terms of his encounter with the alleged ‘other’. The neutral background of the studio-tent took people out of time, as if their cultures and lives did not consist of daily practices but were always already transfixed, belonging to a timeless past and a vague notion of ‘elsewhere’.

The problematic legacies of such thinking are still with us, for instance whenever people of colour are asked ‘where they are *really* from’, wrongly assuming that they must be from elsewhere or that this would matter and ultimately suggesting that they are not ‘at home’ in their daily lived environment. Magassa’s work destabilises such notions of

displacement due to its dynamic relationship between figure and environment, strange and known, other and self. Instead of being 'lost', the masked figures might be 'at home' anywhere in the world, a quality emphasised by their medium of distribution. Rather than photographs hung in a museum, as in Modernist practice, they are ephemeral images on the World Wide Web.

Magassa's 'meeting' between the 'strange' and the 'known' shakes things up. Through masking and photographing himself, Magassa troubles the subject-object relation of photographer and sitter. The emergence of 'the lost' – of being out of place yet belonging everywhere – disrupts a coherent yet nostalgic narrative of belonging where everyone and everything is at its right place, never allowed to leave or challenge the normative structures of this alleged being at home. This is where Magassa's art becomes political: The masked figure is not the self as the other in a mimicry of the colonial gaze, though it might be, or a search for African roots, though it might be, or the strange in a familiar environment, though it might be; the figure is not lost to be found nor on its way to find a 'proper' place. It is right where it belongs, a constant rupture in the practices of the everyday.