

# Exhibiting Africans like animals in Norway's Human Zoo

April 25, 2014 — Next month in Norway a 'human zoo' will open, a re-enactment of the voyeurist exhibitions of Africans that took place during the colonial era. The organizers aim to spark discussions on the legacy of racism and colonialism, but have they overlooked the pain and humiliation this may bring to Africans worldwide, and the danger of the resurgence of racial stereotyping?



*At the Human Zoo in Oslo's Frogneparken, 1914*

As part of mammoth celebrations of the 200th anniversary of Norway's constitution, the

Government of Norway is funding two artists to re-enact a human zoo which will open to the public on May 15. Oslo's original Human Zoo or 'Kongolandsbyen' was central to Norway's World Fair in 1914. The artists claim that the project, which they named '[European Attraction Limited](#)', is meant to provoke a discussion on colonialism and racism in a post-modern world, engaging with Norway's racist past

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in the process. Some anti-racism organisations and commentators have labelled the project offensive and racist. At *This is Africa*, we ask: is there any artistic value in the re-enactment of such a dehumanising spectacle, especially in a world not yet fully healed of racism? Is this an abuse of art? Won't the re-enactment reverse the modest gains of the equality struggles, especially in a world that superficially engages the subject of race?



*Rare footage of the 1914 Kongolandsbyen in Oslo*

Norway's 1914 Human Zoo is not the most widely known historical fact in the country, or the world. But, for five months, eighty people of African origin (Senegalese) lived in 'the Congo Village' in Oslo, surrounded by 'indigenous African artifacts'. More than half of the Norwegian population at the time paid to visit the exhibition and gawp at the 'traditionally dressed Africans', living in palm-roof cabins and going about their daily routine of cooking, eating and making handicrafts. The King of Norway officiated at the opening of the exhibition.



*Senegalese family on display in Oslo, 1914  
(image: Oslo Museum)*

There were several Human Zoos or 'Colonial exhibitions' in Belgium, Germany, France, USA and other western countries at the time, exhibiting Africans and other non-western peoples. These helped in convincing the European public of the necessity of colonisation. Exhibiting

Africans as animals, uncivilised, primitive, animistic made it sound justified to colonise them. It was also a source of entertainment for the European of the time to see how 'backward Africans were'. Indeed after the Norwegian show, *Urd*, a Norwegian magazine concluded; "it's wonderful that we are white". In Belgium, 267 Congolese who were being exhibited died during the show, and were unceremoniously buried in an anonymous common grave. The whole spectacle denied Africans their human dignity. They were treated as animals. The zoos reinforced the feel-good self-congratulatory mood prevalent in Europe then, considering herself as the most advanced society in the world, and othering the rest of the world.

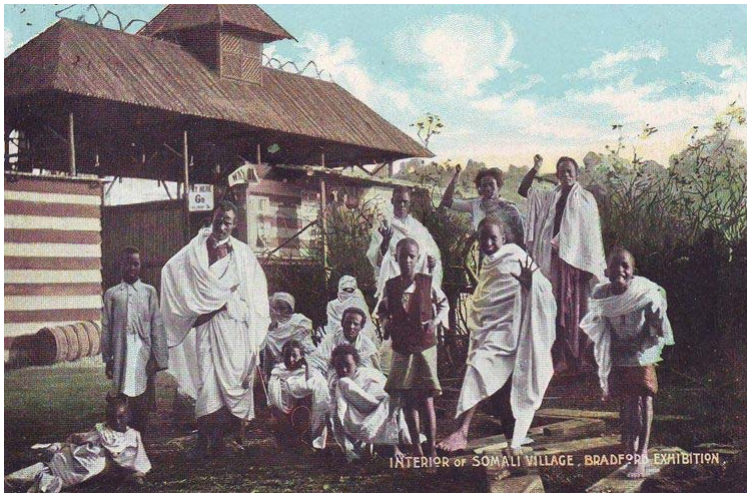


*Lars Cuzner and  
Mohamed Ali Fadlabi  
(photo: Kristine Jærn  
Pilgaard)*

Artists Mohamed Ali  
Fadlabi and Lars Cuzner  
say that the ignorance  
around Norway's racist past  
inspired them to re-create  
the human zoo, as the  
country celebrates the  
200th anniversary of its  
constitution in May. They  
secured funds, to the tune  
of almost one million  
Norwegian Kroner  
[167,000 \$, ed.], to

implement the project. As part of the project, volunteers  
are invited from around the world to come and populate  
the human zoo, but are warned that they will have to  
defend their participation in the project to individuals, the  
media and the world.

The artists situate their project in a discourse on the  
narrative that Norway tells herself regarding tolerance,  
equality and human rights. They argue that the project is  
part of an honest conversation about race and Norway's  
unpleasant past. They held a conference in February in  
which they featured talks about systematic racism, "The  
Terrible Beauty of Hindsight", and "The Origins of the  
'Regime of Goodness'". They legitimately ask: "How do we  
confront a neglected aspect of the past that still  
contributes to our present?"



*Postcard depicting the Somali Village at the Great Bradford Exhibition, UK in 1904*

Muauke B Munfocol, originally from DR Congo and living in Norway, thinks that the project does not “serve as a moment of collective introspection of the still existing but unrecognised racial order and systems of privilege in the country.” She says: “One might wonder why at such a time, rather than putting its efforts to acknowledge the existence of racism, paying reparations, and changing the historical-political and cultural relationship to other non-white countries, the Norwegian government chooses to finance a project that reaffirms their part in a global white domination system where black people are dehumanised spiritually, economically, socially and culturally.”

Muauke’s argument is that the re-enactment of the human zoo exactly as it was presented to the Norwegian public in 1914 means “a re-enactment of the fantasies about exoticism and bestiality that have been historically linked to the black body in the colonial mind.” The re-enactment will be a living reality for her as an African living in Norway.

“Once again, the black body will be prepped, scripted and presented to a white gaze. Africans will once again be subjected to a humiliating and dehumanising racialized public spectacle. Slavery and



*As late as 1958, Africans were exhibited at Expo 58, also known as the Brussels World’s Fair in Belgium.*

colonialism was and still is a show," she says.

Muauke is not alone in her indignation at the show. Rune Berglund, head of Norway's Anti-Racism Centre says that "the only people who will like this are those with racist views. This is something children with African ancestry will hear about and will find degrading. I find it difficult to see how this project could be done in a dignified manner."



*Canadian explorer and entertainer Bill Hunt, aka The Great Farini, at one of his exhibitions displaying people from South Africa in London, 1884.*

Africans are still dealing with attitudes that suggest an inability to solve their problems. Political crises in Africa for example are treated by Western media, civil society and governments as evidence of Africa's primitive nature, and need for Western intervention (read: civilisation). This is evident in the way, for example, the 2011 Libyan crisis was handled by the American and French governments, with their allies. There is always an urge to protect Africans from killing each other. A similar crisis – in many ways – in Syria was

not responded to similarly. The crisis between Ukraine and Russia wasn't either. The racial superiority complex of the European mind is not a thing of the past. It is a present reality. The Norwegian Human Zoo is thus not necessarily a mere re-enactment of the past. It is real at many levels.

Fadlabi's and Cuzner's goals may be noble. But will their project lead to the type of conversations they claim they want it to be part of? Or is it contributing towards the maintenance and resurgence of racist ideologies in the world? Theirs is not the first shocking "artistic product" in the last three years to present Africans on the same footing as animals. Just a few weeks ago, a Belgian newspaper printed a 'satirical' article and photos that compared United States President, Barrack Obama to an ape. The editors claimed it was mere satire.



In 2012, a Swedish artist made an 'artistic' cake installation of a black woman, being cut into, allegedly to provoke discussions around Female Genital Mutilation. A high-ranking politician indeed cut into the black cake, with a human black-painted screaming face. There was laughter and cheers. The discussion on Female Genital Mutilation did not happen. If it did, it was too low-key. The discussion turned onto the representation of Black in a world claiming to be liberal.

Art is not innocent. As W.E.B. Du Bois wrote, all art is propaganda. In the Cake and Human Zoo re-enactment incidents, the artists do not deny that their art is not pure. They all lay claim to 'noble' causes. They want to create and participate in discussions; discussions of race, oppression, colonialism and the ills of yesterday and today as systematic gender and/or racial oppression. Should artists think more about the impact of their work, especially as regards the possible interpretations of the same work? Should governments funding such projects think deeper about all the possible interpretations?

With editors effortlessly comparing a President of a nation to an ape because of his skin-colour and passing it off as a joke, there is certainly no post-racial world yet. Does the re-enactment of an oppressive spectacle as a human zoo have more effects than the artists



*At the Kongolandsby in Oslo, 1914*

intend? If they do, are there substantial means of neutralising these negative effects? For those who still look at Africans as half-animal, how would the re-enactment of the zoo help them to overcome their prejudice? Won't it indeed cement the prejudice?

Fadlabi and Cuzner can't exonerate themselves because they mean well. They must be responsible. Indeed, if they are serious about creating discussions of racism in the post-modern world, they ought to think deeper about the likelihood that their project may entrench the same prejudices they claim to fight.

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May be it is time to open Norwegians-Zoo all over Africa. Eye fo

Reply · Like · 20 · Follow Post · April 27 at 7:03pm

**Sam Insha'Allah Cham** · Follow · CEO & Found

Just tune in to Big Brother...

Reply · Like · 1 · May 2 at 3:50pm

**Eilif Bremer Landsend** · Works at Redhead ProducThen you should check out an Norwegian artist that  
Read more about it here: <https://www.facebook.com/a.301470363203281.94047.241842675832717/875>

Reply · Like · 1 · May 3 at 2:02pm

**Prime Monitor** · University of Ghana, Legonpragmatic critical article. i applaud you. I wonder if the norwegia  
Jews on Display?. I say, racism is so deeply rooted in european  
understatement

Reply · Like · 12 · Follow Post · April 29 at 3:26pm

**Mogga SJ** · Stavanger, NorwayJust disgusting as this exhibition will bring more painful memorie  
now feel proud of their past doing bad things to some other diffe

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**Greenstuff**

"Until the lion finds its voice, Africa will be defined by the hunter"

Reply · Like · 8 · Follow Post · April 28 at 9:30am

**Joseph Korir Biwott**Whites or any other race other than Africans are the most inferio  
and at one time or another still wish they could be exterminated

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**Angeline Peters**You could not have said it better.. I am so tired of ho  
and races. It is only skin colour. People.. Wake up...

Reply · Like · 5 · April 28 at 5:29pm

**Aaron Glen Hagedon** · Works at Freelancer and Au"Whites or any other race other than Africans are the  
Whites or any other race including blacks, are not in  
humans.

Reply · Like · 3 · April 30 at 6:52am

**Akintunde Akapo** · University of La Verne

White man propaganda we are descendant of kings and queens

Reply · Like · 7 · Follow Post · April 26 at 10:10pm

**Owolabi Ogunlana** · UxbridgeWhen u allow them to define who u are thats what h  
teach them how to build, live but they betrayed our t



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I see nothing wrong with this display which I will assume will not be permanent. There is no harm in reminding people of the past, there are thousands of Jewish museums that speak to the holocaust how come no one takes issue with that?

Also if this is art, it falls in the category of conceptual art whose purpose is self-reflexivity, by which the work of art is turned on itself, and ultimately on the very notion of art, art that questions its own nature and stature, rejects the cult of the artists hand and uniqueness of the art object as fetishized in the West, as well as problematizing the desire for coherence and narrative consistency. Provocation is the whole point! TIA you are failing to justify whether this show will bring any harm to anyone at all except for enlighten them on the past, quoting people like Du Bois does not mean a thing wasn't he inspired by Otto von Bismarck in everything including a dress sense? And is there not an African artist involved in this whole thing? Pssh

[7](#) ^ | ▾ · [Reply](#) · [Share](#) ▸**lastwomanstanding**  **Guest**  
· 6 months ago

Well Dre Mule, Jewish exhibitions of the Holocaust are different, in my opinion to the "African Human Zoo"...because...the world has pretty much agreed that "the Holocaust was a terrible thing, it was genocide and

