Åsa Sonjasdotter’s 2019 video *Cultivated Abundance* examines the historical provenance, as well as the ideological underpinnings and problematics of monocultural farming. It shows how, from the nineteenth century onwards, developments in the agricultural sciences, driven by the exigencies of the capitalist market, have worked in tandem with legislative measures to achieve dominance for strains of plants (the video focuses on grain) with almost no internal genetic variation. *Cultivated Abundance* follows plant scientist Hans Larsson, who vocalises his concerns about homogeneity in the contemporary and globalised agricultural industry, and introduces the Allkorn initiative, which is dedicated to the cultivation and preservation of grain species that would otherwise likely be lost to history. In Sonjasdotter’s video, biological and societal understandings of the term ‘culture’ prove deeply interrelated and interdependent. It is appropriate, then, that *Cultivated Abundance* was the first work that visitors to M HKA’s large-scale group exhibition ‘MONOCULTURE: A Recent History’ encountered, for to focus on the subject of monoculture is inevitably to consider the dangerous muddling of the natural and the historical, which it has been the traditional task of critical thought to disambiguate.

As the curatorial text that accompanied the show argues, debates concerning the notion of multiculturalism almost invariably seem to assume the existence of more or less unified and internally consistent cultures that would precede multicultural encounters or amalgamations. The exhibition therefore strove to offer a better understanding of monoculture, here defined as ‘the homogeneous expression of the culture of a single social or ethnic group’. And a better understanding of monoculture, the show intimated, essentially means a more complex, more *ambiguous* understanding. A certain tension was thus generated between the supposed homogeneity of monoculture and this insistence on complexity and ambiguity in the exhibition.

‘MONOCULTURE’ combined works by over twenty artists from the past hundred or so years with archival material such as political (propaganda) posters, as well as audiovisual documentation narrating major socio-historical developments. Offering little to nothing in the way of punchlines or straightforward takeaways concerning monoculture, and plenty of examples of monoculture that

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would seem to contradict one another, the exhibition therefore constantly threatened to dissolve into incoherence. That it never did so, however, is because the tension that animated the entire exhibition, the tension between supposed monocultural homogeneity, on the one hand, and ambiguity, on the other, was made productive time and again. Occasionally, this did lead to moments of brilliance.

An example: at a certain point in the show, one encountered Kerry James Marshall’s monumental twelve-panel woodcut piece *Untitled* (1998–1999) opposite Lynette Yiadom-Boakye’s oil portraits *Nourish the Talented* (2003) and *A Head for Poison* (2011), and David Blandy’s video piece *From the Underground* (2001). In *Untitled*, as in Marshall’s oeuvre as a whole, black sociability is the great theme. And giving this theme pride of place in, but also in enduring opposition to, art institutions, as well as established art historical narratives, is what Marshall’s history painting is programmatically committed to. In Yiadom-Boakye’s more modestly sized works, by contrast, painterly genre and subject matter are differently and much less stringently interlocked. ‘For the artist’, the exhibition text explained, these ‘paintings have never been specifically about foregrounding race.’ And so Yiadom-Boakye’s two paintings, with almost a decade between them, could be said to have been selected mainly to show the evolution in the artist’s work and to foreground her contribution to portrait painting as such.

In Blandy’s *From the Underground*, we find Blandy filming himself as he literally descends into the London Underground system and enters a tube train, all while lip-synching the lyrics to the Wu-Tang Clan song ‘Bring da Ruckus’, which could be heard throughout the entire room. Through his earnest yet overtly appropriative delivery, Blandy manages simultaneously to problematise his own whiteness and to question the mechanisms that would allow cultural expressions (like rap music) to be seen as exclusively proper or proprietary to a single group of
people. His choice of song is also highly to the point; ‘Bring da Ruckus’ opens with a sound sample taken from a Kung Fu movie, and is exemplary of the Wu-Tang Clan’s own practices of intercultural marauding. Taken together as a constellation, these works offer a rich and intricate reflection on blackness and/as representation. If one was attentive to the way they were conversant with one another, what one encountered was the opportunity to learn more about strategic essentialism – about both its necessity and its limitations, about its inevitability in our current world and the poverty that would ensue from a wholesale acceptance of that inevitability – than could ever be gathered from theoretical reflections on the subject alone.2

The Benjaminian term ‘constellation’ is highly useful for describing and critically appreciating the organisational logic and the rhetorics of ‘MONOCULTURE’ as a whole. There is an interesting, and telling, discrepancy between the exhibition’s representation in the catalogue and the way it unfolded spatially and experientially at M HKA. While the former proceeds more or less didactically, subsuming different documents and artists’ contributions under clear-cut themes or sections – ranging from ‘Agriculture’ to ‘Universalism’ – no such hard discursive delimitations were applied in the exhibition itself. ‘MONOCULTURE’ manifested first and foremost as a succession of constellations or clusters of works, the boundaries of which were porous and fluid. This meant, for instance, that while Nicoline van Harskamp’s video PDGV (2016) – set in a post-apocalyptic near-future and which entirely employs a form of pidgin English newly created by the actresses in the video – may be nominally ‘about’ universalism, according to the catalogue, in the actual exhibition itself it appeared as part of a constellation specifically about language. Other works in this constellation included Mladen Stilinović’s well-known banner An Artist Who Cannot Speak English Is No Artist (1992), and Matti Braun’s installation Bunta Garbo (2002), which addresses Ido, an artificial language derived from Esperanto.

Similarly, Haseeb Ahmed’s installation Ummah HQ (2020), categorised in the catalogue under the ‘Religion’ section, could be found alongside a range of other pieces collected under the header of ‘universalism’. Here, it was particularly evident that the curatorial decision was to privilege formal resonances over discursive cohesiveness based on shared subject matter. But because the particular understanding of form that underlies this decision is as rigorous as it is expansive, formal resonance here became a kind of discursive cohesiveness all of its own. This meant that while Ahmed’s work thematises the Ummah,3 its placement in the exhibition adjacent to minimalist and serial works like Rasheed Araeen’s Nine (1968), Charlotte Posenenske’s Vierkantohre Serie DW (1967)

2 The term is, of course, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s, who has herself disavowed (certain overly monocultural uses of) the term; see Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Other Asias, Blackwell, Malden, Massachusetts, p 260. Consider, also, Stefano Harney and Fred Moten riffing on the theme of strategic essentialism (and its translations into policy). The consultant’s capture and redeployment of strategic essentialism is faithless and lonely. It exudes the sovereign religiosity of the nonbeliever. Let me tell you what we need or don’t need, it says, always doubting down on you whenever it says ‘we’ with a heavy, I/thou imposition, a charismatic boom that somehow both belies and confirms its sadness in the serial de-animation of its personal relationships, which is felt by us as the toxic solace of being spoken to and of by the one who is supposed to know. So maybe it’s just a matter of where strategic essentialism, strategic universalism, or the concept, in general, are coming from. Unremitting predication bears a boogie-woogie rumble, where deferred dream turns to victorious rendezvous. Down here underground, where the kingdom of God is overthrown and out of hand and hand to hand, there’s a general griot going on.’ Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, ‘Base Faith’, e-flux Journal #86, November 2017 https://www.e-flux.com/journal/86/162888/base-faith/

3 The description of the work in the exhibition catalogue explains the Ummah as ‘the global community of Muslims that supposedly once existed and remains present, but never actually has’; the catalogue also asserts that the work references traditional Islamic architecture to ‘give place to this imaginary in all its ambivalence’ (‘Haseeb Ahmed, Ummah HQ, 2020’, in Nav Haq, ed, Monoculture: A Recent History, op cit, p 292)
and Jos de Gruyter and Harald Thys’s neo-conceptualist pencil-on-paper composition *White Suprematism* (2016), served to emphasise the modularity of the installation’s building blocks more than anything. Formal qualities like seriality or modularity in this constellation turn out to be *tropes*, which is to say that they exceed form in its narrow and merely artistic sense to raise questions highly pertinent to the topic of monoculture – questions concerning identity and difference, resonance and dissonance, and the relation of the part to the whole in aesthetic and social composition alike.

Some of the historical case studies included in ‘MONOCULTURE’ would appear to be ripe with potential for controversy. What does it mean, for instance, that not only Nazism and the Soviet Union but also the Négritude movement were posited by the exhibition as illustrations of monoculture? Before approaching this question, however, it is important to note that the emphatic use of the singular in the exhibition’s title notwithstanding, ‘MONOCULTURE’ did, in fact, distinguish between different conceptions of monoculture, as well as between different practical and political approaches to monocultural formation. Hence, in the section on Négritude, the anti-colonial and anti-racist thrust of this literary, artistic and political movement was certainly evident, but the emphasis was very much on how such oppositionality was achieved through a predominantly positive or constructive cultivation and celebration of diasporic cultures and identities. Papa Ibra Tall’s tapestry *La semeuse d’étoiles* (ca 1970), and Matti Braun’s installation *Pierre Pierre* (2010) on the poet Léopold Sédar Sengor, who became Senegal’s first elected president after decolonisation in 1960, are both testament to this, as were all the historical documents included in
this part of the show.

The section on Nazism, by contrast, underscored how the Third Reich’s monocultural self-understanding was premised primarily on the phobic and violent expulsion of cultural elements – and, indeed, of the populations they were associated with – considered impure and improper to German culture. Hence, we encountered not Leni Riefenstahl’s _Triumph des Willens_ or sculptures by Arno Breker but a sampling of some of the cultural expressions that Nazism needed to ‘immunise’ itself from in order to uphold its idealised self-image, including ‘entartete Kunst’, or ‘degenerate’ art (represented through paintings by Lovis Corinth, George Grosz and Karl Hofer), and jazz music.

The exhibition’s rendering of the Soviet Union, it must be noted, was rather idiosyncratic. While some attention was understandably paid to Soviet propaganda and Socialist Realism (which became the artistic and literary doctrine under Stalin in the 1930s), an almost equally sizeable portion of this section was dedicated to the ‘corn campaign’ that Nikita Khrushchev introduced in the late 1950s and early 1960s in an attempt to increase agricultural productivity through monocultural corn farming. This was not only a reprise of the theme of the Sonjasdotter video the exhibition started with, but also a means of demonstrating how the nominally homogenous cultural identity of the Soviet Union was deeply contingent on that of its double in American free-market capitalism (and vice versa). Khrushchev’s inspiration for the corn campaign came from a visit he made to the United States in the 1950s.

The intertwining of nation-building (the always-contradictory process of actualising and giving concrete shape to what Benedict Anderson called ‘imagined communities’) and migration was another issue ‘MONOCULTURE’ examined in some depth. Sille Stohrile’s video _The Stonewall Nation_ (2014) can be considered paradigmatic in this regard. Centred around a re-enactment of a conversation with gay activist Don Jackson, Stohrile’s work addresses the ambivalent legacy of Jackson’s plans for establishing a secessionist ‘gay nation’ in Alpine County, California, in the early 1970s. Since, at the time, the county only had 367 registered voters, Jackson speculated about creating a political majority by moving a community of at least 368 gay people to Alpine and starting a society organised entirely around what he understood as a specifically gay lifestyle and culture – whereupon he imagined most of the original residents would simply disappear. Significantly, Stohrile’s short video keeps intact something of the original utopian impulse underlying Jackson’s project and does justice to the historical oppression of the non-heteronormative sexual and gender identities which drove it, while also questioning the settler-colonialist assumptions of Jackson’s proposals for a Stonewall nation. Complete with country music and ‘Wild West’ frontier imagery, _The Stonewall Nation_ is not only a minor and quirky historical account of one individual’s attempt at realising an imagined community but it is also telling of the complex interrelations between nation, cultural identity and migration more generally.

Usefully, of all the artworks in the exhibition, the constellation of works in ‘MONOCULTURE’ that dealt with colonialism were most grounded in local history and context. Ibrahim Mahama’s sculpture _On Monumental Silences_ (2018) is the outcome of a workshop the artist organised on the legacies of colonialism and their visibility in public space in Antwerp. The work itself is a 1:1 copy
of a 1904 statue of the Christian missionary Constant De Deken, which remains on view in the suburb of Wilrijk to this day despite increasing criticisms and calls for its removal. Unlike the bronze original, Mahama’s *On Monumental Silences* is executed entirely in rubber, the raw material extracted in enormous quantities from Leopold II’s private colony of Congo Free State at the time De Deken was stationed there. The Belgian Institute for World Affairs’s *Declaration of Dependence* (1989) documents the jocularly ritualistic performance in which the ‘Institute’ – a mock organisation – unilaterally declared Belgium a dependent of Zaire. After a faux-Fluxus performance in Antwerp, that seems to have involved boiling water from the river Scheldt in front of a small and rather impassive audience, the declaration was presented at and immediately rejected by the consulate of Zaire in Belgium.

Vincent Meessen’s contribution to ‘MONOCULTURE’ consisted of two interrelated works. The 2005 video *The Intruder* shows the artist, clad entirely in a costume fabricated of unprocessed cotton, strolling through various neighbourhoods in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso. Like Mahama’s work, *The Intruder* addresses the pilfering of raw materials in colonialism, while also documenting
the bewildered responses of the Ouagadougou residents to the spectral, all-white intruder. This older video of Meessen’s is accompanied by an essay, printed in four languages (Arabic, Dutch, English and French) on a series of banners, and titled *How to Spin a Bad Yarn* in English (2020). Speaking in the imaginary voice of the cotton-clad character in *The Intruder*, the text is centred around some controversial statements made by Herman de Bode, a businessman and Flemish nationalist politician (and currently head of M HKA’s board of directors). Concluding with a militant call to action addressed to the museum’s visitors, *How to Spin a Bad Yarn* was not only a localised but also a site-specific intervention, an institutional critique which intimated that the entire ‘MONOCULTURE’ exhibition could be read as a lateral, if not necessarily subtle, response to the deeply and problematically monocultural identity politics of Flemish nationalism.

This lateral approach to the issue of Flemish nationalism – which upon closer inspection turns out to be, in fact, an incisive critique – is characteristic of the political thrust and ‘methodology’ that could be encountered throughout the exhibition as a whole. As stated previously, ‘MONOCULTURE’ steered clear of sloganesque statements and grand gestures alike. Rather than critically deconstructing the idea of monoculture as such, the exhibition proceeded by demonstrating the forcefulness with which the fantasy of monoculture flares up time and again, in radically different historical settings and contexts, and with wildly different political valences in each instance. This was not, then, an exhibition intent on settling once and for all on a single proposition on or position towards the topic of monoculture, but was, rather, a concentrated and careful attempt at scrutinising it in a manner as unconstrained as possible by received notions. Of course, the exhibition’s insistence on (and valorisation of) complexity and ambiguity did have strategic disadvantages. This was an outspokenly ‘weak’ approach, especially when compared to the strong stories – the sweeping cognitive and explanatory models – that monocultures themselves tend to offer, and as such a lot of responsibility was placed on the viewers. But for those patient enough to stick with the show’s efforts at perpetually keeping the issue of monoculture in a kind of studious suspension, ‘MONOCULTURE’ did prove to be all the more powerful for those weaknesses.

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*While it is not possible, in this context, to do full justice to the Baroque nature of the political situation in Belgium, it is nonetheless worth noting that the country’s biggest political party has for some time been the right wing, separatist and Flemish nationalist NVA (New Flemish Alliance). Even though they have never participated in government on a federal level, the NVA is the largest and most influential party in the current regional government of Flanders (and for additional couleur locale it is significant that Bart de Wever, the party’s long-time president and strongman, is the mayor of Antwerp). As education and culture in Belgium fall under regional rather than federal jurisdiction, the party has been particularly eager in recent years to make its influence felt in these areas. In education, this has included a controversial push to compile a ‘Flemish canon’ that would consist of historical events and cultural expressions crucial to the formation of so-called Flemish identity, and which would be taught in primary and secondary education. In culture, after many decades of a broadly liberal laissses-foire approach to policymaking and public arts funding, there have been similar efforts at political instrumentalisation (as well as, of course, budget cuts).*