

**Stranger in the Village
Reflecting on Racism
with James Baldwin
3.9.2023 – 7.1.2024**

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Pierre Koralnik, *Stranger in the Village*, 1962



Sasha Huber, *The Firsts – James Baldwin (1924–1987)*, Leukerbad 2018

Awareness is important to us

This exhibition discusses sensitive topics. Should you experience or witness any form of discrimination during your visit, please contact our staff or write an e-mail to: kunsthhaus@ag.ch mentioning the word "Awareness" in the subject line.

Room 1 Stranger in the Village

In the early 1950s, the U.S. American author James Baldwin (1924–1987) spent a few months in Leukerbad (Valais). This is where he finished his debut novel, *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, which would earn him worldwide fame. The residents received him with "astonishment, curiosity, amusement and outrage". As he describes, he was greeted as a "living wonder" or called a "N*". The local populations' reactions made him realise that people of African descent could still unjustly be treated as discoveries. This reminded him of the violent history of his African ancestors that were trafficked across the Atlantic and held in slavery for centuries. And this is how the Afro-American and homosexual intellectual was made into a "stranger". He processes this experience in his essay *Stranger*

in the Village (1953), analysing the everyday racism he encountered.

To this day, Baldwin's words serve as an inspiration for many artists. In 1962, the filmmaker Pierre Koralnik adapted the essay for television in Western Switzerland RTS. With the snowed-in village as a backdrop, Baldwin plays his own role. His thoughts hold up a mirror to us as a society and have lost none of their relevance. How do we react to Baldwin's words today? How can racism be questioned through art?

Based on Baldwin's text, this exhibition focuses on Anti-Black racism in particular.

The awareness for other experiences of racism and forms of discrimination and how they overlap (intersectionality) is part of this project as well.

The exhibition was designed by our mostly privileged museum team who has no direct experience with racism. With the goal of bringing in more knowledge, dialogue and diversity, we collaborated with an advisory board.

Room 2 James Baldwin in the "Village"

"These people [from the mountain village] cannot be, from the point of view of power, strangers anywhere in the world; they have made the modern world, in effect, even if they do not know it. The most illiterate among them is related, in a way that I am not, to Dante, Shakespeare, Michelangelo, Aeschylus, Da Vinci, Rembrandt, and Racine."

James Baldwin, *Stranger in the Village*, 1953

For James Baldwin, a village in the Swiss Alps serves as the background for *Stranger in the Village*, where the entire country can recognize itself. In this way, the village of Leukerbad, allows him to show the contrast between the (social) White environment and his position as a stranger. Baldwin could hardly have been the first Black person ever to visit this famous spa town. He certainly knew that the image of the remote village belonged to a nationalistic imagination that dated back to the 19th century. Surrounded by mountains of dizzying heights, Leukerbad provides the ideal backdrop for Baldwin to illustrate his argument: Racism not only works in the actions of an individual but also through societal and cultural norms; we all are responsible. This experience leads Baldwin to a more comprehensive reflection

on racist discrimination in his home country, the United States of America. Ten years before Martin Luther King's famous speech *I Have a Dream* (1963), Baldwin, in his essay, denounces the notion of white supremacy and the power relations in Western countries associated with it.

During his life, Baldwin associated with various artists, such as the photographer Richard Avedon, his schoolmate, with whom he published the book *Nothing Personal* (1964). In the 1960s, one of his plays achieved great success in Zürich. Today, Marlene Dumas and Sasha Huber create portraits of Baldwin while Glenn Ligon transposes the essay *Stranger in the Village* onto large dark canvases. A question arises: Isn't racism something that we have all learned collectively, either consciously or unconsciously?



James Bantone, *Child's Play 01*, 2022



Vincent O. Carter, *Ohne Titel*, 1979



Denise Bertschi, *Neutrality as an Agent. Please ensure the gate is properly closed.*, 2018

Room 3 Exclusion/Belonging

"[I]t is one of the ironies of black-white relations that, by means of what the white man imagines the black man to be, the black man is enabled to know who the white man is."

James Baldwin, *Stranger in the Village*, 1953

This devaluation of the "other" or the so-called othering takes place within a power structure where the "own" (look, culture, behaviour) is considered to be the norm and the constructed "other" is seen as foreign and of lesser value because it deviates from the prevailing reference points.

The Swiss artist James Bantone processes his personal experience with racism in the form of immersive installations and intentionally disturbing images. What at first glance reminds us of fashion photography, are portraits of people fitted with prostheses of "laughing" dentures. In *Fool of the Month* and *Polite Lies*, this laughter is not an expression of joy but of unease. Bantone represents laughter as a defense mechanism in a mostly White society. The distorted faces and bodies he creates express this unease in the face of the violence of racism. The mirrors echo Baldwin's question: Isn't everyone you're looking at also you?

Room 4 Racism in everyday life

"No one, after all, can be liked whose human weight and complexity cannot be, or has not been, admitted."

James Baldwin, *Stranger in the Village*, 1953

Racism reveals itself in the experience of everyday discrimination: micro-aggressions, debasing comments, verbal and sometimes physical violence. James Baldwin's observations in *Stranger in the Village* are not exclusively a part of the past. They are still present. Racism continues to be a regular feature of society.

In the three stylized video portraits by Sirah Nying, Josephine (16), Joel (28) and Nurudeen (60) recount their experiences with racism and the emotions they trigger. The artist herself asks: How does racism feel?

Room 5 Human Being

"The black man insists, by whatever means he finds at his disposal, that the white man cease to regard him as an exotic rarity and recognize him as a human being."

James Baldwin, *Stranger in the Village*, 1953

To be recognized as human is a basic right that James Baldwin defended during the entire course of his life. He kept pointing out that love was more important than skin color. Love was a central part of the politics in the civil rights movement. Baldwin viewed it as the only way to build a society on the foundation of equality and respect. He examined the role that love—or its absence—played as the ordering principle of society.

Like James Baldwin, other writers, and artists who have experienced racism and came to Switzerland discussed the question of humanity in the face of racism as well. One example is the Afro-American Vincent O. Carter, author of *The Bern Book: A Record of a Voyage of the Mind* who also recorded a large number of expressive faces in his drawings. As part of her series *The Firsts*, Sasha Huber created a portrait of Carter with staples, intending to question memory and belonging. Irony as well as seriousness are elements of the Afro-American artist Martine Syms' fictitious

maxim of life that could make survival in a cruel society possible. The painter Omar Ba explores the repercussions of the spirit of domination during post-colonialism with a monumental work that was especially produced for this exhibition. How is humanity expressed in art?

Room 6 Trapped in history

"People are trapped in history and history is trapped in them."

James Baldwin, *Stranger in the Village*, 1953

During his time in the Swiss Alps, Baldwin realises that racism is omnipresent in the objects and habits of everyday life. A charity box with a caricature of a Black person serves to collect money to "buy" people in Africa; the carnival offers fun with black-facing, etc. To this day, colonial history has left deep marks. On a daily basis, we consume colonial goods (sugar, coffee, chocolate, cotton, etc.), items that through the slave trade and with Black people held as slaves have been shipped to Europe since the 16th century. Even today, the production of these items is characterized by an unequal power relation. While Switzerland did not have any colonies, it actively contributed to colonial exploitation through its economy, military, science, and culture.



Sasha Huber, *Rentyhorn*, 2008

For the sculpture entitled *Schokokuss* (Chocolate Kiss), Vincent Kohler uses the technique of enlargement, bringing into question the unease regarding the candy's original name (M*head)—which is sometimes used even today. In her series on the Swiss Club in Cape Town, Denise Bertschi highlights the contradictions of a country that upholds “neutrality” while at the same time contributing to a colonial system. For his part, Uriel Orlow shows how we inherit the name of a plant coined by colonial powers. How does colonial history still influence our social relationships to this day?

What do we collect?

With more than 20,000 works, the Aargauer Kunsthau has the most comprehensive public collection of Art from Switzerland from the 18th century to the present. The exploration of the topic of racism and colonial entanglements in this exhibition motivates us to take a critical look at our collection: Which artists are represented in the Aargauer Kunsthau? What are we collecting and what not (yet)? What works require placement in a critical context? What works require provenance research? How can we decolonize our view and recognize sensitive content?

In a multi-year process, we are using resources to work on the following subjects:

Provenance research

Like any museum doing its due diligence, the Aargauer Kunsthau researches the provenance of the works in its collection. Special attention is paid to the context in which the art was acquired. To this day, for example, we review works by artists who during the Nazi regime were considered “degenerate”.

Problematic titles

Individual titles of works in the collection, whether given by the artists or not, may contain discriminating or racist terms. A few years ago, we began to analyze them and to change them, if possible.

Representation of the “Other”

The collection of the Aargauer Kunsthau contains works that are evidence of an exoticizing, Eurocentric view. We search for solutions to show these works without reproducing violent stereotypes. One possibility is to add texts that put the works in a larger context.

Room 8 Describe, control

““[T]he root function of language is to control the universe by describing it.”

James Baldwin, *Stranger in the Village*, 1953

The biological “race” was pseudo-scientifically created in the course of imperial and colonial rule. Modern science refutes it: The concept of human “race” is unfounded and irrational and therefore we know that there are no different races of humans. But this has not always been the case: From the 18th to the 20th century, some scientists tried to classify humankind and divide it into hierarchically sorted “races”. The Swiss glaciologist and racist Louis Agassiz (1807-1873) was one of the biggest promoters of “race theories”. On Earth, Mars, and the Moon, nearly 80 places are named after him, such as the Agassizhorn between the Bern and Valais Alps. Names of places have to do with power relations and continue to give a platform to people who incite racial hatred.

The artist and activist Sasha Huber dedicated several works to this issue, among them the video *Rentyhorn*, where she symbolically renames the Agassizhorn after the enslaved Congolese Renty. In spite of the petition that failed on a political level in 2010, the artist, in an attempt at reparations, advocates for recognition of the suffering endured

by the victims of slavery and racism. Today racism is expressed, among other things, through criminalisation, micro-aggressions, and police violence, also in Switzerland. This topic appears in Sasha Huber’s works *Shooting Stars* as well, while Gianni Motti ironically reflects on potential solutions, such as meditation for law enforcement. Stories of oppression are always linked to stories of resistance and empowerment. Sabian Baumann uses portraits of African American writer and activist Audre Lorde and others to address the struggle and exhaustion that come with activism. During his lifetime, James Baldwin asked: How much time is necessary to achieve progress?



Marlene Dumas, *Indifference*, 1993-1994

Room 9 Never white again

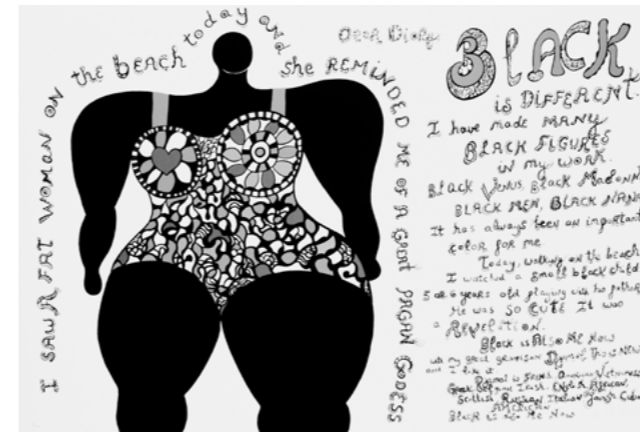
“This world is white no longer, and it will never be white again.”

James Baldwin, *Stranger in the Village*, 1953

“Race” is not a biological reality, but a centuries-old social construction whereby hierarchisation between people creates inequalities and discrimination. This is why it is so important to challenge *being* White and white supremacy. James Baldwin concludes *Stranger in the Village* with the topic of being white. Identifying as White makes us realise that it should not be the standard norm from which all “others” deviate. White supremacy is forced to face its own absurdity: Since the world is neither White nor Black—as Baldwin pointed out—we must challenge the structures that determine our world to this day—starting with the norm of the white cube for art museums.

Unlearning white supremacy goes hand in hand with admitting white fragility. Luc Andrié, in his series *Der weisse Mann hat keine Haut mehr* [The White man no longer has skin], shows grimaces expressing unease or madness. The tapestry by Igshaan Adams brings together materials from the mercantile trade in Capetown, South Africa, where the artist grew up in a segregated environment shaped by race. The painting

Indifference by Marlene Dumas is confronted by the colorful wall of sequins by Olga Titus. Against the background of her multi-cultural biography with influences from Switzerland, India, and Malaysia, Titus combines the pictorial cosmos of folklore, Bollywood exoticism, advertising, and computer game aesthetics into sparkling compositions that reflect the complexity of cultural forms of expressions. According to the artist and psychologist Grada Kilomba, the question is not: “Am I racist?”, but rather, “How can I deconstruct my own racism?”



Niki de Saint Phalle, *Californian Diary, Black is different*, 1993-1995

Room 10 Who speaks?

“But there is a great difference between being the first white man to be seen by Africans and being the first black man to be seen by whites. The white man takes the astonishment as tribute, for he arrives to conquer and to convert the natives, whose inferiority in relation to himself is not even to be questioned “[...]”

James Baldwin, *Stranger in the Village*, 1953

James Baldwin points out the significance of perspective: a reaction (compliment, astonishment, question) has different meanings depending on the identity, history, and social status of the sender and the receiver. Likewise, a work of art is perceived and interpreted differently depending on the situation of the artists and the audience (social context, personal history, privileges, etc.). The use of words or images meant as a compliment can be a form of racism.

The numerous *Black Nanas* by Niki de Saint Phalle were created as a homage to Black women who were doubly disadvantaged—as women and as Black people (intersectionality). The artist wanted to use her art to show solidarity with all those who are marginalized by society and the law. Apart from the artist’s honest intentions, the cheerful exoticism of her works must also be brought



Jonathan Horowitz, *Power*, 2019

into question. Judith Albert’s video *La Noire et la Blanche* can be understood as a deconstruction of this mechanism: the reproduction of a 1913 painting by Félix Vallotton is cut up loudly, leading to a new, symbolic freedom for the two figures.

These works remind us how important it is to consider the context, but to also use different voices and, above all, the perspective of those affected to create a dialogue. Who is speaking and from what perspective?

Room 11 Voices

This exhibition is an attempt at showing many voices. We would like to conclude with the voices from the curatorial team and our advisory board. Resonating with James Baldwin and *Stranger in the Village*, we reflect on art’s potential, racism, and perspectives for the future..

James Baldwin	1965	On 25 June, his play <i>The Amen Corner</i> premieres to thundering applause during the Zürich June Festival. The play is sold out on all three evenings.	Artists in the Exhibition	Marlene Dumas (*1953, Capetown. Lives in Amsterdam)	Senam Okudzeto (*1972, Chicago. Lives in Basel)
James Baldwin is one of the most important U.S. American writers of the 20th century and known far beyond the borders of the United States. He is an icon of equality for all people.	1970	He moves permanently to Saint-Paul-de-Vence in France.	Igshaan Adams (*1982, Capetown. Lives in Cape Town)	Tatjana Erpen (*1980, Leuggern. Lives in Basel and Luzern)	Uriel Orlow (*1973, Zürich. Lives in Lisboa, London and Zürich)
1924 James Baldwin is born on 2 August in Harlem, New York. He grows up in poverty with his mother, a cook, and his stepfather, a pastor. His talent is recognized early, and he starts publishing his own articles as a teenager.	1987	He dies on 1 December in Saint-Paul-de-Vence. His artist friends included Beauford Delaney as well as Richard Avedon, Romare Bearden, Sedat Pakay, Marlon Brando, Ingmar Bergman and Engin Cezzar. His writings inspired a generation of younger authors, such as Teju Cole and Toni Morrison, and many artists like Ja'Tovia Gary, Glenn Ligon, Steve McQueen and Kara Walker.	Judith Albert (*1969, Sarnen. Lives in Zürich)	Hanny Fries (Zürich 1918–2009 Zürich)	Frida Orupabo (*1986, Sarpsborg. Lives in Oslo)
1940 He meets the Afro-American painter Beauford Delaney who paints several portraits of him. From this point on, Baldwin focuses exclusively on literature.			Joshua Amissah (*1995, Winterthur. Lives in Berlin)	Klaus Hennch (Mainz 1924–2005 Eglisau)	Ceylan Öztrük (*1984, Ankara. Lives in Zürich)
1948 He leaves New York, where the racist climate is particularly dangerous for Black people like him. He settles in Paris.			Luc Andrié (*1954, Pretoria. Lives in La Russille)	Jonathan Horowitz (*1966, New York. Lives in Los Angeles)	Markus Raetz (Bern 1941–2020 Bern)
1951 During the summer, he travels to Leukerbad for the first time, together with his Swiss friend, the painter Lucien Happersberger, whose family owns a chalet in the village.			Kader Attia (*1970, Paris. Lives in Berlin and Paris)	Sasha Huber (*1975, Uster. Lives in Helsinki)	Petri Saarikko (*1973, Helsinki. Lives in Helsinki)
1952 He spends three months in Leukerbad during the winter to work on his book <i>Go Tell It on the Mountain</i> . He describes and analyzes the everyday racism he experiences during this time in the essay <i>Stranger in the Village</i> .			Maria Auxiliadora da Silva (Campo Belo 1935–1974 São Paulo)	Hans Josephsohn (Kaliningrad 1920–2012 Zürich)	Niki de Saint Phalle (Neuilly-sur-Seine 1930–2002 San Diego)
1953 <i>Stranger in the Village</i> is published in the October edition of <i>Harper's Magazine</i> . His debut novel is published and brings him worldwide fame.			Omar Ba (*1977, Dakar. Lives in Genève and Dakar)	Laura Arminda Kingsley (*1984, Ohio. Lives in Dübendorf)	Lorna Simpson (*1960, New York. Lives in New York)
1955 <i>Stranger in the Village</i> appears in <i>Notes of a Native Son</i> , a collection of ten essays.			James Bantone (*1992, Genève. Lives in Genève and Zürich)	Vincent Kohler (*1977, Nyon. Lives in Lausanne)	Martine Syms (*1988, Los Angeles. Lives in Los Angeles)
1956 He publishes the novel <i>Giovanni's Room</i> in which he explores the topic of homosexuality and the courage to be oneself. The novel becomes a classic.			Sabian Baumann (*1962, Zug. Lives in Zürich)	Pierre Koralnik (*1937, Paris. Lives in Zürich)	Olga Titus (*1977, Glarus. Lives in Winterthur)
1957 He returns to his home country to fight for civil rights alongside Martin Luther King and Malcolm X.			Denise Bertschi (*1983, Aarau. Lives in Zürich)	Namsa Leuba (*1982, La grande Béroche. Lives in Talence)	Carrie Mae Weems (*1953, Portland. Lives in New York)
1962 He returns to Leukerbad to make the film <i>Stranger in the Village</i> with the Swiss director Pierre Koralnik for RTS, the Western Swiss television station.			Balthasar Burkhard (Bern 1944–2010 Bern)	Glenn Ligon (*1960, New York. Lives in New York)	
			Notta Caflisch (*1979, Bern. Lives in Winterthur)	André M'Bon (Beampo 1935–2019 Point-Noire)	
			Vincent O. Carter (Kansas City 1924–1983 Bern)	Gianni Motti (*1958, Sondrio. Lives in Genève)	
			Ishita Chakraborty (*1989, Kolkata. Lives in Möriken)	Sirah Nying (*1998, Zürich. Lives in Zürich)	

Publication

Stranger in the Village. Rassismus im Spiegel von James Baldwin / Le racisme au miroir de James Baldwin (2024), German/French, publisher: Scheidegger & Spiess, graphics design: Bonbon, Zürich

A publication in German and French will be released to coincide with the closing ceremony of the exhibition and the centenary of James Baldwin's birth (1924–1987). Besides numerous images of the works, the catalogue contains a reprint of *Stranger in the Village* and a Graphic Novel by Melanie Grauer (illustrator, Zürich). Also included in the publication are a discussion between Sasha Huber, artist, and Dr. Céline Eidenbenz, curator, as well as essays and contributions for further reading by Dr. Rich Blint (scientist, author, curator, New York), Bill Kouélany (artist and author, Brazzaville, Congo), Nayansaku Mufwankolo (Delegate of Diversity & Inclusion, HEAD, Geneva), and Dr. Henri-Michel Yéré (historian and poet, University of Basel).

Curator

Dr. Céline Eidenbenz, in dialogue with the Advisory Board

Assistant Curator

Sarah Mühlebach

Mediation

Laura Arminda Kingsley

Advisory Board

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Sasha Huber, artist, Helsinki
Laura Arminda Kingsley, artist and mediator, Dübendorf
Nayansaku Mufwankolo, Delegate of Diversity & Inclusion, Lecturer for Cultural Studies and Critical Theory, Haute école d'art et de design (HEAD), Genf

With the advice of CARAH, Collective for Anti-Racist Art History, University Zürich, Kunsthistorisches Institut

Open House

Sunday, 3.9.2023, 10 am – 5 pm

Sunday, 10.12.2023, 10 am – 5 pm

Free admission

Every Thursday Evening

Admission to the museum is free on Thursday evenings between 5 pm and 8 pm. This applies to the entire duration of the exhibition *Stranger in the Village* (2.9.2023 – 7.1.2024).

Finissage, Exhibition Closing

Sunday, 7.1.2024 starting at 2 pm

In collaboration with Bühne Aarau, Freier Film Aarau Cinema, and local institutions, such as Integration Aarau, Peter and Paul Parish in Aarau, and the Regional Integration Office Aarau, we are setting up a diverse accompanying programme in the Aargauer Kunsthhaus and elsewhere.

To view the entire programme of related events, visit www.aargauerkunsthhaus.ch

Appreciation

Sponsorship: Kanton Aargau [Canton of Aargau], Aargauischer Kunstverein [Aargau Art Association]

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Opening Hours

Tuesdays—Sundays 10 am–5 pm

Thursdays 10 am–8 pm

Closed Mondays

Opening Hours on Public Holidays

Open 10 am – 5 pm

Boxing Day 26.12.2023

New Year's Eve 31.12.2023

New Year's Day 1.1.2024

Closed

Christmas Eve 24.12.2023

Christmas 25.12.2023

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