Photography exhibition investigates colonial violence in the Congo

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An Autograph ABP exhibition

‘When Harmony Went to Hell’
Congo Dialogues: Alice Seeley-Harris and Sammy Baloji

16 January – 22 March 2014
Rivington Place, London
EC2A 3BA
Free

Autograph ABP presents a rarely seen archive dating from 1904, created by English missionary Alice Seeley Harris in the Congo Free State. These pioneering photographs publicly exposed the violent consequences of human rights abuses at the turn of the century, and are exhibited alongside newly commissioned work from acclaimed artist Sammy Baloji.

In the early 1900s, the missionary Alice Seeley-Harris produced what was probably the first photographic campaign in support of human rights. She exposed the atrocities that underpinned King Leopold II’s regime in the Congo Free State, bringing to public attention the plight of the Congolese people under a violent and oppressive regime.

These photographs fundamentally shifted public awareness of the deep-rooted hypocrisy of King Leopold II’s promise of colonial benevolence, and caused an outcry at the time of their publication in Europe and America.

Over 100 years later, these issues remain of primary concern to Congolese citizen and activist Sammy Baloji. Like Harris, Baloji uses photography as a medium to interrogate current political concerns with reference to the past.

This newly commissioned work investigates the consequences of Belgian state-controlled violence in the Congo, exposing the fractured histories that haunt contemporary Congo politics.

Congo Dialogues represents a rare opportunity to see both historical and contemporary works interrogating this colonial legacy. A highlight is the Alice Seeley-Harris archive, which was last shown to the public 110 years ago. This will also be the first major presentation of Baloji’s work in the UK.

Congo Dialogues marks the 175th anniversary of Anti-Slavery International and the invention of photography. Alice Seeley Harris was a founding member of Anti-Slavery International in 1839.

What’s in the exhibition
Project Space 1 (ground floor)
New works by Sammy Baloji, commissioned by Autograph ABP.

Project Space 2 (first floor)
The Harris Lantern Slide Collection, produced in 1904. This room will present prints, rare lantern slides, and ephemera.

About Alice Seeley Harris & Sammy Baloji
Alice Seeley Harris
Harris was born in Frome, UK in 1870. In 1898 she married the missionary and anti-slavery campaigner John Hobbis Harris. In the early 1900s, they travelled to the Congo Free State as Christian missionaries. With the aid of her husband, Harris photographed the atrocities committed in the Congo by King Leopold II’s regime and agents. Harris’ photographs circulated widely, in the press and were reproduced as lantern slides illustrating lectures by the Congo Reform Society. This exposure resulted in international political pressure on King Leopold II, eventually forcing him to relinquish absolute rule over the Congo Free State in 1908.

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Sammy Baloji
An acclaimed contemporary artist, Sammy Baloji was born in 1978 in Lubumbashi, in the mineral-rich Katanga province of Democratic Republic of Congo. Baloji uses photography, montage, film, and archives to understand and reconnect the Congo's colonial past and political present. Baloji has exhibited internationally, notably at the Musée du quai Branly, Paris; the Royal Museum for Central Africa, Tervuren, Belgium; Mois de la Photo, Montreal, Canada (2009); and Dilston Grove, London (2010).

Congo Dialogues is produced in partnership with
Anti Slavery International and the International Slavery Museum, Liverpool

Anti-Slavery International works at local, national and international levels to eliminate all forms of slavery around the world. The Harris Lantern Slide Collection is owned by Anti-Slavery International, and currently managed by Autograph ABP. We have been working together since 2009 to share this important archive with a wider audience.

The International Slavery Museum explores historical and contemporary aspects of slavery. The museum will present a partnering exhibition in Liverpool, to coincide with Congo Dialogues at Rivington Place:

Exposure: Conflict in the Congo
24 January – September 2014
International Slavery Museum
Dock Traffic Office
Albert Dock, Liverpool Waterfront
Liverpool L3 4AX

About Autograph ABP
Established in 1988 with the mission of advocating the inclusion of historically marginalised photographic practices, Autograph ABP is a charity that works internationally in photography, cultural identity, race, representation and human rights.

Part of Autograph ABP's ongoing Congo research
Autograph ABP has been researching issues around human rights, photography and the Democratic Republic of Congo since 2009. Outcomes of this work include our Sammy Baloji commission (2010), The Republic of the Congo newspaper (2010), Sammy Baloji: Mémoire exhibition at Dilston Grove (2010), the digitization of the Harris Lantern Slide Collection (2013), and the forthcoming exhibitions 'When Harmony Went to Hell' Congo Dialogues: Alice Seeley Harris and Sammy Baloji at Rivington Place, London (2014), and Brutal Exposure: Conflict in the Congo exhibition at the International Slavery Museum, Liverpool (2014).

Congo Dialogues is curated by
This exhibition has been researched and curated by Mark Sealy MBE at Autograph ABP. Sealy is the Director of Autograph ABP. He is currently a PhD candidate at Durham University; his research focuses on photography and cultural violence.

Image credit
Alice Seeley Harris, Manacled members of a chain gang at Bauliri. A common punishment for not paying taxes, Congo Free State, c. 1904. Courtesy Anti-Slavery International/Autograph ABP

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