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**Sometimes It Was Beautiful**  
with **Christian Nyampeta**  
Premiering **24.11 2018** Folkets Hus in Hallstavik  
Screening **28.11 2018** Stockholm's Museum of Ethnography  
as a part of **Sites of the Future**

**Norra Sidan**

# Tensta konsthall

**Premiering Saturday 24.11 2018 16:00  
at Folkets Hus in Hallstavig  
Screening Wednesday 28.11 2018 17:30  
at Stockholm's Museum of Ethnography**

Artist Christian Nyampeta's new film *Sometimes It Was Beautiful* is premiering at Folkets Hus in Hallstavig, one of the locations in the film. The film relates to a meeting between improbable friends, gathered to review *I fetischmannens spår* (In the Footsteps of the Witch Doctor), the first of six films by the Swedish cinematographer Sven Nykvist (1922-2006) that he made in Congo between 1948 and 1952. Common to these unlikely friends is their past visit to Stockholm's Museum of Ethnography, where an archive of Sven Nykvist's parents is kept, documenting their life in Congo as Swedish missionaries, alongside the artefacts they brought back to Sweden.

The strange friends include politician Yasser Arafat, postcolonial theorist Leela Gandhi, human rights activist Rigoberta Menchú, politician Robert Mugabe, playwright Wole Soyinka and Crown Princess Victoria of Sweden. Other colleagues of Sven Nykvist from both sides of the grave also attend the screening: film director Andrei Tarkovsky shows up and activist and politician Winnie Mandela has something on her mind, while the 14th Dalai Lama is rumoured to be nearby. In the meantime, a dance is staged as a prologue, an intermission and an epilogue.

The cast of the film was developed in meetings of the artist's own circle and at Tensta konsthall, the Museum of Ethnography, People's Houses and Parks, and the Local Heritage Association. These gatherings arose from shared interests and concerns, through group discussions and activity that, despite the diverse outlooks at hand, engendered an affective community. The members of the cast have differing approaches in addressing the slow violence effected by the pursuit of knowledge, the conservation of heritage and the imposition of culture. In *Sometimes It Was Beautiful*, the oscillation between gossip and po-

lemics is a permissive hosting structure in which the invocation of characters supplies a ludic and perhaps protective shield that may allow the protagonists to navigate through the corrosive wastelands of histories.

In the film, the intertwined grace and toxicity of such encounters include the historical contexts of annexation and domination that account for the beautiful and yet subjugating imagery authored by the likes of Sven Nykvist in similar conditions. This visual violence may still be actual. For some members of the cast, even adorning the armature of a character remains insufficient in minimising the sorrow imputed by visiting the artistic, spiritual and cultural possessions captured then and collected now within the light and sound of such images, as well as within the hold of cultural spaces, as exemplified in this film by the Local Heritage Association and the Museum of Ethnography. In the film, this transmission of identity and power is further evoked through glimpses of the production of paper.

*Sometimes It Was Beautiful* was filmed at the Häverö-Edebo Local Heritage Association, the Holmen paper mill in Hallstavig, the Museum of Ethnography, Tensta konsthall, and Sipsjöbanan/MK Orion Motorcross in Hallstavig. The cast includes Francine Agbodjalou, Sasha Bonet, Makda Embaie, Primo Gillick Lind, Samuel Girma, Dale Harding, Malin Hüber, Mourad Kouri, Ashraf Marefi, James Munene, Christian Nyampeta, Jonelle Twum, Kim West, Ellen Wettmark, and Emil Ytterberg.

With cinematography by Joshua Aylett, assisted by Francisco Imoda. Sound recorded by Jonas Goldmann, soundtrack composed by Julien Simbi. Commissioned by Tensta konsthall, coordinated by Makda Embaie, and produced by Malin Hüber, with the assistance of Michael Barrett, Maria Dahlström, Karolin Grahn, Ingrid Inglander and Theo Fick, Bianca Leidi, Håkan Lundén and Per-Anders Wikström. Nyampeta's film is part of *Sites of the Future*, a collaborative project involv-

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ing People's Houses and Parks, the Stockholm County Museum and Tensta konsthall. The project focuses on the parallels that can be drawn between the suburbs and rural communities in present-day Sweden. Despite the apparent differences, rural communities and urban suburbs share many common denominators today, for example the closure of schools and social services, the disappearance of job opportunities, and the increasing entrenchment of structural subordination. The parallel conditions between the suburbs and the countryside is also mirrored in a more concentrated form by different areas within the county of Stockholm.

Sites of the Future presents context-sensitive art in Hallstavik, Rågsved, Sorunda and Tensta throughout 2018. Alongside Nyampeta, the participating artists are Anne Low at The People's House in Sorunda; Suki Seokyeong Kang at Rågsved People's House and the local heritage association Lerkrogen in Älvsjö, and Joar Nango at Tensta and Nälsta gård (Spånga local history and heritage Association).

## Self-presentation

Christian Nyampeta is a Rwandan-born, Dutch artist. In 2017, he had a solo exhibition *Words after the World* at Camden Arts Centre, London, and his work was included in *TOXIC ASSETS: Frontier Imaginaries Ed.No3* at e-flux and Columbia University in New York. This year, ongoing exhibitions include *Penser l'Afrique* at Slought in Philadelphia and the Biennial of Contemporary African Art Dak'art. Nyampeta convenes the Nyanza Working Group of Another Roadmap School Africa Cluster. He also runs Radius, an online and occasionally inhabitable radio station, and is completing a PhD thesis at the Visual Cultures Department at Goldsmiths, University of London.

## A conversation between Christian Nyampeta and Maria Lind

**Maria Lind:** How would you describe your new film *Sometimes It Was Beautiful* to someone who is not yet familiar with your work?

**Christian Nyampeta:** Actually I think that this new film stands on its own and in a sense, I hope that there is no need to go back to my previous work to make sense of it. I also think it's actually more free, liberated or gratuitous than most other works before. And hopefully more amusing too... But I do think that it's in a particular dialogue with two other films, namely *Life after Life*, about a deceased man who gets buried in the wrong grave and as a result wakes up in the wrong haven; and *From Left to Night* about an unnamed poet who dies at the battlefield to stop the Rwandan Genocide, but is put to trial in "After-Africa" for supposedly having abandoned art and deciding to fight, even if it was for a good cause.

**ML:** You have often made work in collaboration with various groups, whether communities around a library as in the permanent mural *How to Live Together: A Blackboard* installed at Church Street Public Library, produced by The Show-

room in London in 2015, or students at a school in Nyanza in your 2017 film *Words After the World*, produced by Camden Art Centre in London. For the latter you also formed a “scriptorium.” You have described this as “a working group of multi-lingual individuals translating French texts authored by historical Rwandan philosophers into English for the first time. This collective structure led to the production of the script for this fictional film, in which an author tries to write a novella while words are subject to copyright. At the same time, a group of athletic students attempts to negotiate the terms of their training within increasingly conflicting conditions.” Can you please tell me about the method in *Sometimes it Was Beautiful*?

**CN:** In the past I worked a lot with the format of the “workshop.” I found it to be a useful way of working together and hosting divergent and sometimes even antagonistic institutions and individuals, and channeling our forces towards one common cause. Previously, most of the outcomes of these workshops have been material. We made beer, bread, dye, soap, but also sandals, notebooks, curtains, musical instruments; and we even once attempted to make a church bell using melted coins! All of this made sense because I was actually living in the places I was working. At the moment I don’t work only where I live. But also conceptually, I was then interested in “material knowledge” and now maybe I am more attracted to “forms of knowledge.” And in this case, although these “forms of knowledge” may remain where they were produced, they also tend to have relevance and importance elsewhere. These “forms of knowledge” don’t necessarily have to be material. A film is an example, not only in how it is made, but also in how it can circulate far away from where it was made. A film like *Sometimes It Was Beautiful* involves an incredible amount of negotiations, collaborations, cooperation, expertise, and patience, to say the least. I think the film emerges from my time alone working at home, in the libraries and in Hallstavik, and the time spent with old

and new friends, fellows and colleagues in and around Stockholm and Hallstavik.

**ML:** To begin with, the new film will be screened at Folkets Hus in Hallstavik, and then it will be shown at Stockholm’s Museum of Ethnography. What do these contexts add to the film itself?

**CN:** Folkets Hus is the central location of the film. As a community house, it exemplifies a beautiful cultural history particular to Sweden, which is hard to imagine taking place today. It’s easier to imagine a shopping mall being opened than it is to imagine a cultural house like the Folkets Hus. So on the one hand, the film pays tribute to this history, while also lamenting its demise. Similarly, the Stockholm Museum of Ethnography is a location in the film. In a crudely affirmative and negative way, you could say that, like all museums of that kind, it is a graveyard of cultural history, in the sense that it is a depository in which many of the possessions that are held there belonged to cultural practices that might have long been decimated, either during the processes used at the time of the acquisition of the possessions, or through any other change in society, violent or otherwise. For these reasons, the Museum of Ethnography functions as corridor towards the past and perhaps also the future, in particular because the real or the fictional visit to the Museum is what unites the characters in the film.

**ML:** A question that has permeated your work for a while is “How to live with those with whom we don’t share a rhythm?” Can you please elaborate on that in relation to the early films by cinematographer Sven Nykvist, which take on a central role in *Sometimes It Was Beautiful*?

**CN:** These early films testify to an asymmetrical history on the part of Swedish religious and administrative missionaries overseas during the colonial era. While Sven Nykvist was himself a victim of missionary work, in the sense that he had to live far away from his parents at a boarding school, his films nevertheless

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seem to reinforce the stereotypes of the Africa as a place shrouded in darkness. Sadly, this misconception prevails to this day. In terms of rhythm, it remains a challenge, and I have no answer. In the film, dancing seems to be one of the answers... But besides this, I actually think the film is not about Sven Nykvist's films as such. Formally, certainly, but conceptually the film is worried about what role, or rather, what options and choices do artists have and take in the face of large scale historical injustices. The film sets up a structure in which historical figures are addressed as living today, so that we may see and hear them bearing witness to their own shortcomings and difficulties, which they might not have seen in their time as problems. So, the film is really asking: what are we failing to address now? If someone as gifted as Sven Nykvist "failed" to render justice through his work during a red hour of his time, at least in the eyes of some protagonists in the film, what and who are we failing now – we who are possibly less gifted than Sven Nykvist? Ultimately the film is really about myself, as a human being alive at this historical moment. I am constantly asking myself what to do and how to intervene in our history so that in the future when I am gone, new, fellow artists will convoke me – not really for asking me difficult questions but for dancing together!

**ML:** The production of paper is featured in *Sometimes It Was Beautiful*. It would be interesting to hear your thoughts on why you wanted to include that.

**CN:** In *Sometimes It Was Beautiful*, there are glimpses of how paper is made today at Holmen paper mill in Hallstavik. I think that as a commodity, paper exemplifies the profound beauty but also the undeniable insanity of the human kind. Paper is made by turning a rooted, colorful, wet and round living organism into a seemingly colorless, flat, mobile and inert invention. For this transformation to happen, grass, metal, stones, sand, water, glass, oils, gas and an endless list of resources have to be mobilized, rearranged and organized in an incredibly synchronized operation

that involves trucks, boats, and airplanes to supply the chain and to make deliveries, just so that we can write down our desires towards each other. In this way, the introduction of paper into places that didn't have a culture of textual writing marks a cultural break that came with extreme forms of oppression. The benefits of paper are ample and obvious. But on the other hand, it's hard to imagine the introduction of bureaucratic subjugation, for example by the parents of Sven Nykvist and their fellow missionaries in Congo, without the introduction of paper work. On a more localized note, the city of Hallstavik was founded because Holmen paper mill established itself there. So the history of the Folkets Hus and Hallstavik itself is intertwined with paper, paper making and the paper mill.

**ML:** *Woman of Aeroplanes* is a wondrous and magical novel from 1988 by Kojo Laing set in two villages in Ghana and Scotland, where, in order to survive, the inhabitants have accepted traditions other than their own. I remember you referring to this novel when we began to discuss a commission for the one-year project *Sites of the Future*. How is it present in the commissioned film?

**CN:** Yes, it's an extraordinary novel, populated with numerous characters, which are not necessarily human or even alive. The writing is extraordinary. In summary, it is the story of the immortal inhabitants of Tukwan, a town in Ghana that is invisible to the world, who travel to their equally invisible sister town Levensdale in Scotland. In the film, the opening and the closing narration is largely based on some of the events in the novel. I borrow some of their words, and this is also a way of inviting others into the conversation. Initially, a year ago, I had wanted to make more explicit reference to the novel, but ultimately this wasn't necessary.

Maria Lind is the director of Tensta konsthall.

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Sites of the Future is a joint project carried out by Folkets Hus och Parker (people's houses and parks), Stockholms läns museum/Stockholm County Museum and Tensta konsthall. The project also includes Hallstavik Folkets Hus (people's house in Hallstavik) and Häverö-Edebo Hembygdsförening (local heritage association in Hälveröd; Rågsveds Folkets Hus (people's house in Rågsved) and Brännkyrka hembygdsförening (local heritage association in Brännkyrka); Sorunda Folkets Hus (people's house in Sorunda), Sorunda hembygdsförening (local heritage association in Sorunda) and Sorunda Hemslöjdsvänner (friend of handicraft in Sorunda); as well as Spånga Fornminnes och Hembygds-gille (Spånga local history and heritage association) and Etnografiska museet/ Museum of Ethnography.

Stockholm County Museum  
[www.stockholmslansmuseum.se](http://www.stockholmslansmuseum.se)  
08-586 194 10

Folkets Hus och Parker  
[www.folketshusochparker.se](http://www.folketshusochparker.se)  
08-452 25 00

Tensta konsthall  
[www.tenstakonsthall.se/en](http://www.tenstakonsthall.se/en)



STOCKHOLMS  
LÄNS  
MUSEUM



#### Tensta konsthall staff

**Ailin Moaf Mirlashari**  
host  
**Didem Yildirim**  
production coordinator  
**Fahyma Alnablsi**  
reception and Language Café  
**Fredda Berg**  
host  
**Hanna Nordell**  
producer  
**Henny Josefsson**  
host  
**Isabella Tjäder**  
communication  
**Makda Embaie**  
assistant  
**Maria Lind**  
director  
**Muna Al Yaqoobi**  
assistant Womens Café  
**Nawroz Zakholy**  
assistant  
**Nina Svensson**  
mediation  
**Paulina Sokolow**  
communication and press  
**Rasmus Sjöbeck**  
host

#### Interns:

**Cecilia Harrison**  
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**Leila Taalbi**  
**Ockie Basgül Dogan**  
**Sonja Hedenstrand**  
**Viktoria Andersson**

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