

C & x Académie des Traces

Narratives and the Restitution of Colonial Artifacts: When Symbolism Takes Over History Through Law

What happens when a restituted artifact never actually belonged to the person it commemorates? Aliénor Brittmann examines how law, symbolism, and uncertain provenance converge in the return of a 19th-century saber to Senegal — revealing how political gestures can rewrite history as much as they aim to repair it.



Sabre attributed to El Hadj Omar Tall, Museum of Black Civilisations, Dakar, Senegal. © Paris – Musée de l'Armée, Dist. GrandPalaisRmn / Anne-Sylvaine Marre-Noël. Use subject to conditions: an additional authorization must be obtained from the Documentation Centre of the Musée de l'Armée.

By Aliénor Brittmann
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Restitutions of cultural artifacts are not mere material returns; they carry with them plural and sometimes contradictory narratives. One such narrative I would like to share concerns the return to Senegal by France of a saber taken in the 19th century by French troops. It is attributed to El Hadj Oumar Tall, a spiritual, military and political African leader. This story is of particular interest for two reasons: on the one hand, it is about a saber that was taken from an anti-colonial historical figure; on the other hand, it is also about a saber that may never have belonged to him.

El Hadj Oumar Tall, Muslim scholar, religious leader and military chief, was the founder of the Toucouleur Empire. During the second half of the 19th century, it extended across several modern territories: Mali, Guinea and Senegal, with its capital in Segou, situated in present-day Mali. El Hadj Oumar Tall is a complex figure: a spiritual leader for some, a controversial and even violent personality for others. He died in 1864, during the battle of Bandiagara (Mali). His empire was then ruled by his son Ahmadou Tall, until the capture of Segou by French troops led by Colonel Louis Archinard in 1890. The soldiers plundered a number of items, including jewels and books belonging to El Hadj Oumar Tall – collectively still referred to today as the “treasure of Segou”.

In 1909, Colonel Archinard donated the saber to the Musée de l'Armée, while other items, stored elsewhere, were rediscovered by the descendants of El Hadj Oumar Tall. These artifacts were found at the Musée du Quai Branly and even at the Natural History Museum in Le Havre – Archinard's hometown – which had made the donations. For one day, on July 29, 2011, the city exhibited the items taken by Archinard during the colonial conquest wars in the region.

El Hadj Oumar Tall's saber was loaned to the Musée des Civilisations Noires in Dakar on several occasions: in 1998 to commemorate the bicentenary of the Toucouleur leader's birth at the Institut fondamental d'Afrique noire (IFAN); in 2008 during the summit of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation at the Musée Théodore Monod and in 2018 for a one-year loan for the opening of the Musée des civilisations noires de Dakar.

In 2019, while the saber was still on display in Dakar, Senegal officially requested its restitution, emphasizing that the object was “one of the museum's [Dakar] most popular attractions, due to its emotional and historical significance”. The French government accepted the request, in line with the commitment made in 2017 in Ouagadougou by President Emmanuel Macron to return African heritage to the continent. However, this step was taken even before any restitution had been enacted by law. This was necessary due to the principle of the inalienability regarding public collections in France; once they integrate French public collections, they cannot be removed: items are deemed to belong to the French people, and form part of what is known in France as the “public domain” (domaine public). When they are part of the national collections, the only way to remove them is to go through parliament and pass a law explaining why the item to be removed from the national collections no longer meets the requirements of historical, archaeological, aesthetic or scientific interest. Suffice it to say that this is a cumbersome and complex process, with little chance of success... not to mention that the parliament must first be called upon.

Nevertheless, the saber was returned to Senegal in 2019, one year before the restitution law was passed, in the form of a five-year loan.

Yet, the ceremony had all the hallmarks of an official restitution. French Prime Minister Edouard Philippe – who was the mayor of Le Havre when the above-mentioned one-day exhibition took place – even delivered a speech, referring to the saber as that of “[...] a scholar who traveled widely to deepen his knowledge, particularly in theology, [...] It belongs right here, in the heart of the ancient Toucouleur empire, close to the peoples who once formed it”. A historically inaccurate claim, as Dakar was never part of the Toucouleur Empire. He continues: this saber is important for the states that emerged from the former Toucouleur empire, but it also served as a bridge between French and African cultures. Forged in France, in an Alsatian village where King Louis XV had established a sword factory, the saber is said to symbolize an encounter between two metallurgical traditions: that of France and that of Africa – although the origins of African metallurgy are historically linked to the Middle East. The saber thus becomes a centerpiece in a renewed Senegalese national narrative, adapted to contemporary expectations. Yet, as we shall see, this saber has become an object imbued with meaning for the Senegalese.

Is the French Prime Minister's speech an excellent introduction to the symbolism behind such a political act of return/restitution, or the invocation of an unproven – potentially fictitious – provenance serving as a diplomatic tool?

This is the second dimension of this narrative: could an infantry saber of Alsatian origin truly symbolize a religious and military leader who fought against French colonization? The dialectics of history sometimes produce ironic and complex narratives. The saber's provenance had already been called into question, particularly regarding its attribution to El Hadj Oumar Tall. Research – including by the Musée de l'Armée (Paris) – suggested that it may in fact have belonged to his son, Amadou El Tall, who is said to have received it as a gift from the French colonial army. If that is the case, the saber never belonged to El Hadj Oumar Tall, and there is no clear evidence that he ever actually owned such a weapon. Thus, when France passed the law for the restitution of this object in 2020, it specified that it was “attributed” to El Hadj Oumar Tall – a standard legal formula used when the origin of an item is uncertain, as can be seen, for example, with paintings “attributed” to certain artists when the actual author is not clearly identified.

What stands out in the Prime Minister's speech is the erasure of the saber's origin: the symbolism of this restitution lies not in attributing the artefact to someone who never owned it, but in emphasizing the historical ties between France and Africa. The gaps in provenance are not denied, but instead repurposed to support a narrative aimed at weaving together Franco-Senegalese history. As French Senator Pierre Ouzoulias pointed out during the preparatory work for the 2020 restitution law, the French nation returned a French object to Senegal even though it could just as well have been returned to Mali. He raised doubts about Senegal's involvement in the selection of the object. In fact, the heirs of El Hadj Oumar Tall had requested the manuscripts held at the Bibliothèque nationale de France in Paris, which were not even part of the discussion.

“The first work to be ‘returned’ to Africa is a European object”. That is how French historian François Simonis summarized the situation in 2019. So why should France restitute an object that never belonged to this historical figure? A few possible explanations: first, because the Senegalese state officially requested it. Second, for its symbolic value as a gesture of reparation for past wrongs – especially in a context of growing political and public pressure following President Macron's 2017 speech. Something needed to happen. The preliminary work on the law, including parliamentary debates, supports this idea, although the emphasis in those discussions was placed on creating new postcolonial relationships. As French MP Yannick Kerlogot explained it: “It is impossible to rewrite history, but choosing to acknowledge its darkest and least glorious chapters is part of the effort to rethink our relationships with others, especially with those we once oppressed in the asymmetrical context of colonial domination [...]. Repentance alone is not enough to move forward”.

By “attributing” the saber, this law restitutes an object for its historical, cultural and symbolic value, while legally acknowledging the issue of provenance. It is attributed to El Hadj Oumar Tall, though it never belonged to him. The desire for restitution and the search for common ground toward a peaceful future are channeled through the legal ratification of a compromise with history.

In Senegal, the restitution of the saber is seen as the return of an unjustly taken object. For the religious community following in the footsteps of Oumar Tall and his descendants, the restitution of the saber is welcome news: France is returning what was stolen from them, and they hope that other items will follow. This is also the position of Senegalese President Macky Sall: the “historic restitution” of this saber – described as a “mythical symbol of the resistance of a great scholar” – is important because it paves the way for the return of other African heritage items. By contrast, the question of what will become of the Segou treasure, items of particular historical importance – remains unanswered. The disciples and family of Omar Tall are hopeful it will be repatriated, especially the manuscripts, which hold deep religious significance within the community.

In Senegal, the saber's uncertain origin has not drawn much attention; the symbolic return of the artifact by France outweighs the factual accuracy of its provenance, contributing instead to the construction of new relationships based on a shared rewritten narrative.

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Aliénor Brittmann is a doctoral candidate in law at the ISP, Ecole Normale Supérieure Paris-Saclay. She has received fellowships from the Académie française, the Italian government, the Ecole française de Rome, and the Fondation pour la mémoire de la Shoah (Paris). She was a visiting researcher at the Università degli Studi in Milan and is currently affiliated with the Marc Bloch Zentrum in Berlin. Her research focuses on the legal uses of the past, the construction of testimony, the emergence of responsibility, the relationship between history and trials, photography as a form of evidence, and the treatment of human remains as cultural property. Her dissertation is titled “Repairing the wrongs of History. Post-Shoah and post-colonization experiences in restitution of cultural property in France and Italy since 1970”.

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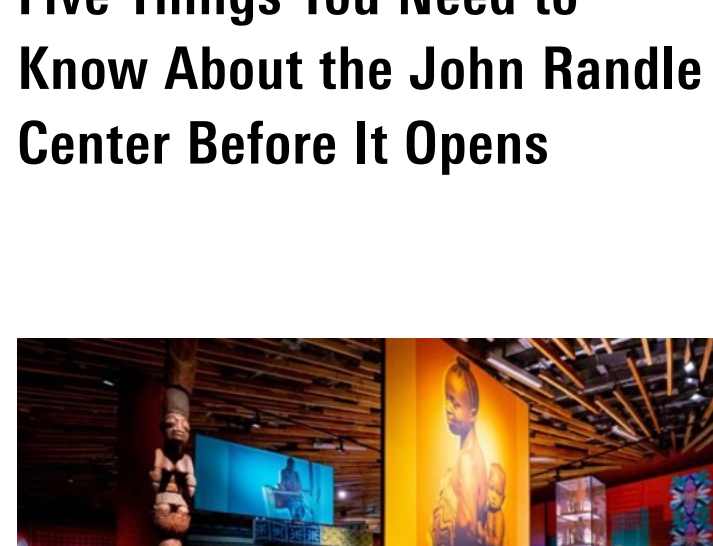
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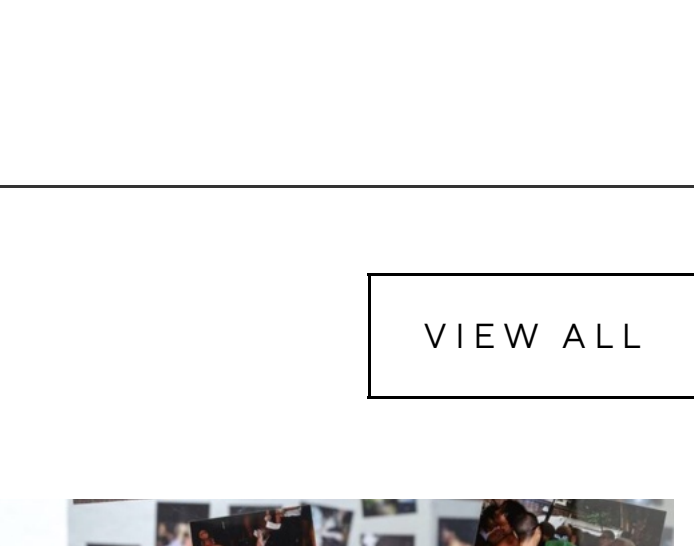
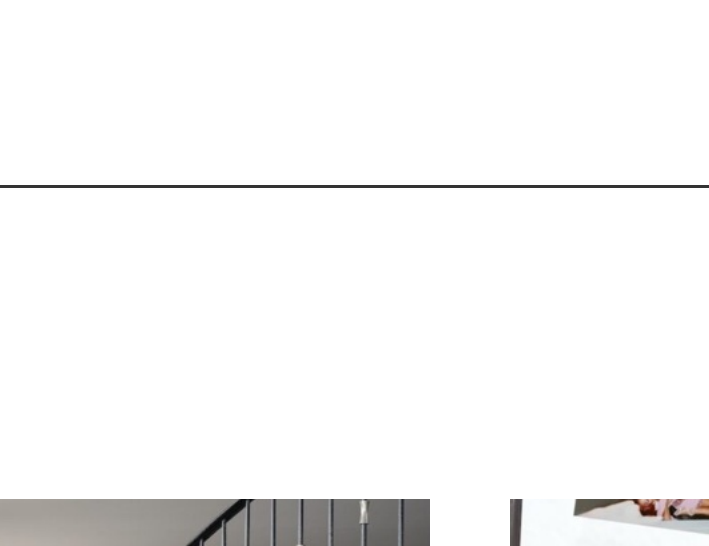
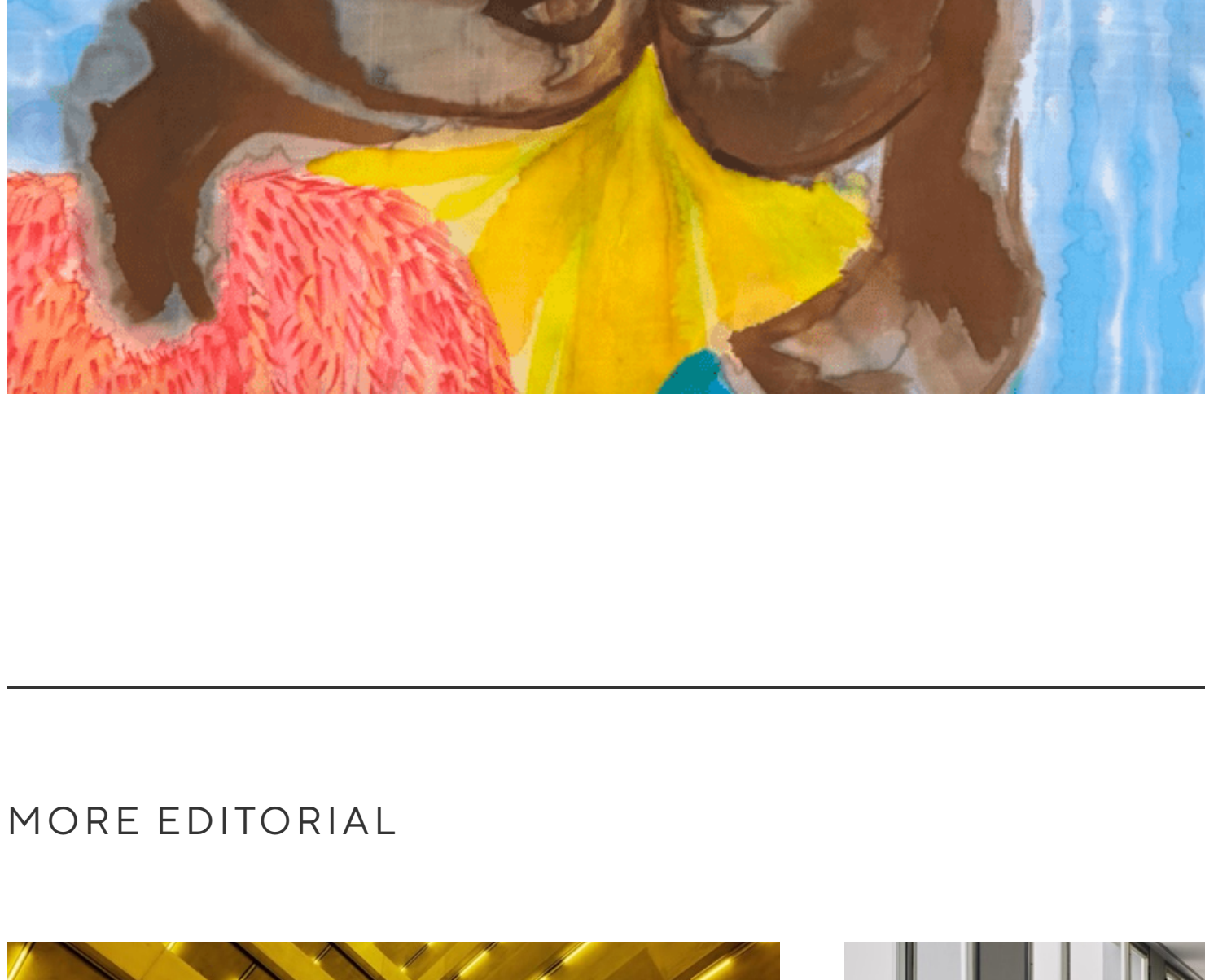
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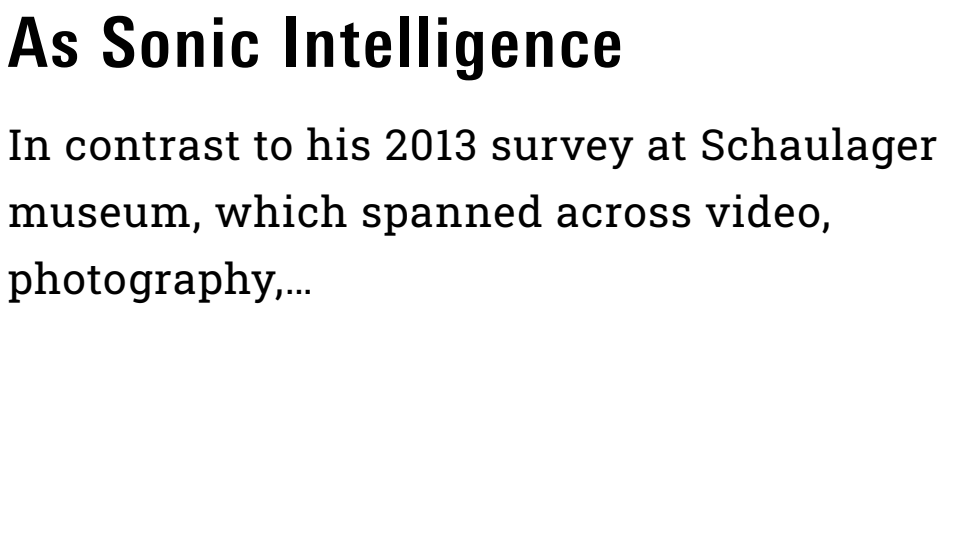
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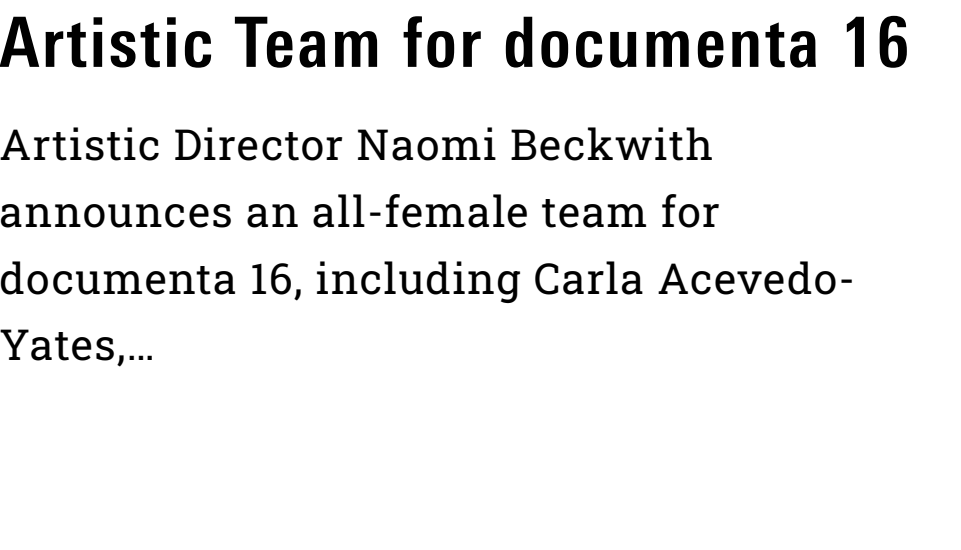


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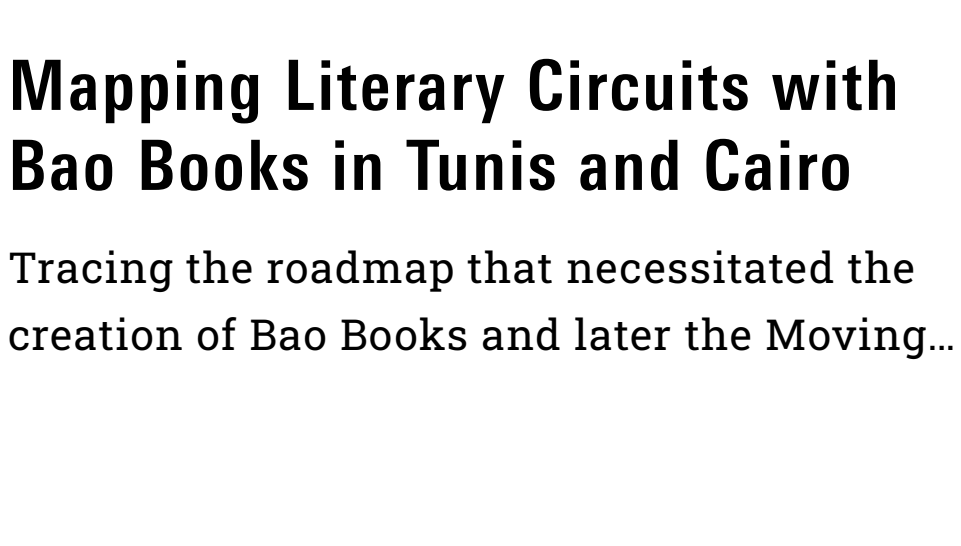
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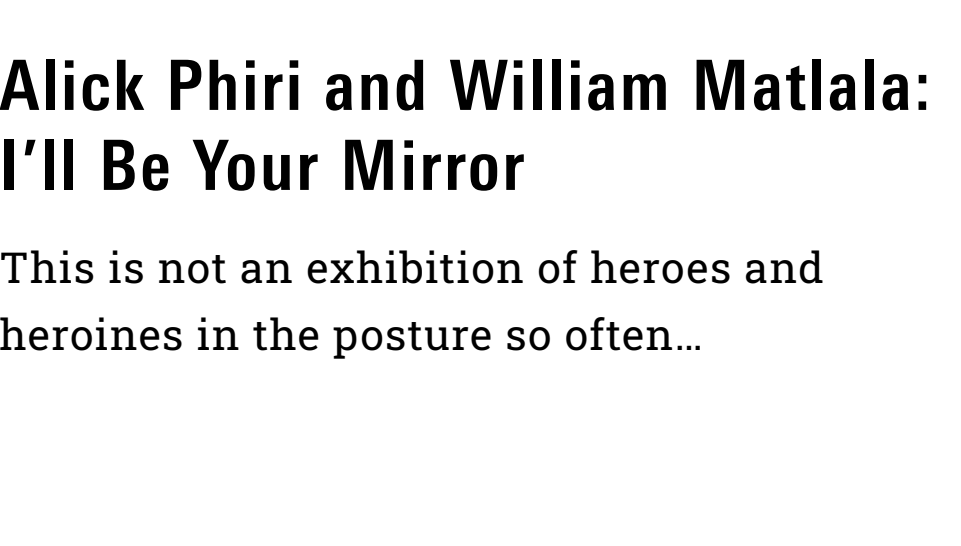
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