Heike Behrend (University of Cologne), “Popular Photography, Public Spaces and the ‘Aesthetics of Withdrawal’ along the East African Coast”

Along the cosmopolitan East African coast, since the 1980s and in particular after 9/11, reformed Muslims have increasingly questioned figurative representations in media such as video and photography. Different and opposing attitudes towards images have gained a new religious-political importance and have become intensely debated and contested. In addition, Muslims have actualized a gendered concept of purity ("purdah") that centers on seclusion and concealment and has been extended to prohibit the circulation of pictures of women in the public domain. In my contribution I will discuss what I call the “aesthetics of withdrawal” – various ways and techniques to process the photographic performance as well as the photographic image by veiling, masking and concealing. I will explore various acts of making visible in a particular form that insists on (partial) concealment and connect them to the production of intimate, private and public spaces.