

Performing History: Jelili Atiku's performances, Lubaina Himid's and Kimathi Donkor's *Toussaint Louverture*, Steve McQueen's *Carib's Leap* and Yinka Shonibare's *Mr and Mrs Andrews*

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In the chapter on artists mediating history in his *Art and Politics Now*, Anthony Downey highlights the fact that:

Art, and culture in general, has contributed to a process of negotiating the past and coming to terms with it in a way that politics is often less inclined to do. Artists contest the elisions and erasures of a politically determined version of history and in doing so, reveal how current political concerns not only prescribe how we understand the past, but also attempt to dictate future responses to historical events.¹

Downey points out his belief that counter histories – the refraction of history through a lens casting doubt on official historical narratives recognising they are not impartial – enable artists to depict how historical events unfold. I interrogate the didactic, revelatory and thought-provoking works of Jelili Atiku and his peers that engage with weighty moments and revered persons. Excavating the past, each artist dabbles with events and important people from the past, often with a critical slant to invoke traces of memory. I will discuss these works here via two theoretical frameworks: counter-histories and counter-monuments.

The definition of the term 'history' that will be utilised here is Joan Gibbons's formulation, in which she sees it as 'the foundation through which collective memory is formed and figured'.² In her excellent monograph, *Contemporary Art and Memory: Images of Collection and Remembrance*, Gibbons charts the challenging of accepted historical narratives as she points to the work of Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) as well as the propositions of Michel Foucault in his *Archaeology of Knowledge* (1969).³ Both helped to underline the ideological underpinnings of history and contributed to the postmodern notion that all narratives are subjective. Counter-monuments, those works in various media, that extend the range of mnemonic tools not rooted in large

¹ Anthony Downey, *Art and Politics Now*, Thames & Hudson, London, 2014, p 138

² Joan Gibbons, *Contemporary Art and Memory: Images of Collection and Remembrance*, I B Tauris, London, 2007, p 55

³ Edward W Said, *Orientalism*, Penguin Books, London, 1978; Michel Foucault, *Archaeology of Knowledge: And The Discourse on Language*, Vintage, London, 1969

public sculptures are also examined. While this is a distinction that can be porous, juxtaposing monuments with those artists that favour transient or more portable forms functions as a way of determining what is at stake with regards to the various methods of what Susanna Radstone refers to as ‘memory work’.⁴ Art has been deployed over many centuries to prevent the forgetting of victorious soldiers, whether it is sculptures of Admiral Nelson in London’s Trafalgar Square or to serve as memorials for victims – for instance, Berlin’s Holocaust Memorial. What Jelili Atiku and the other artists discussed here do is provide representations that enable recollection and remembrance, often in allegorical ways.

The promises and pitfalls of performance

Jelili Atiku has been engaged in activism over the last two decades. He often escapes the confines of the white cube, usually designing live art performances specific to a site and enabling his body and installations to tell stories of injustices past and present. Believing in somatic connections between people in a space, his performance strategies, often suffused with imagery demonstrating his Yoruba spirituality, are full of metaphors to lead to his audience’s transformation. One such performance, which the present author witnessed, took place at SOAS, University of London, in June 2022.⁵ Atiku, wearing a loose, white cotton costume (white symbolising the innocence of children) with small wooden carvings of children tied around his ankles, first poured flour in the form of a square around him. Then he wrote various statements on pieces of cardboard, outlining an event that had occurred in Nigeria in 1996. To combat a meningitis epidemic in Kano in the northern part of the country, the drug company Pfizer had trialled a drug which led to the death of eleven and left others in a critical condition. The company was sued by the Nigerian government but refused to accept any liability, ordering investigators to find dirt on the chief prosecutor, but after a fifteen-year legal battle did finally give settlements to four of the families. A large cardboard box daubed with ‘Pfizer’, ‘Kano’ and ‘1996’ on various sides was placed upside down on Atiku’s head, obscuring his vision. The performance, titled *Wórowòro, Kóbokòbo*, was organised as part of a symposium to discuss issues raised by a group exhibition ‘In a Pot of Hot Soup: Art and the Articulation of Politics in Nigeria’ at SOAS’s Brunei Gallery. Atiku staggered around the square blindly, weighed down with the carvings on his head and ankles. His precarious position led to some anxiety in the onlookers, and when he stopped there was an audible exhalation from most of the spectators. He explained later that the flour was meant to mark a sacred border for the performance.⁶ Being weighed down and blinded by the cardboard could imply that the pharmaceutical

⁴ See Susan Radstone, ed, *Memory and Methodology*, Routledge, London, 2000, p 10

⁵ See footage of the performance on the ArtoP project website:
<https://artop.bmth.ac.uk/woroworo-kobokobo-jelili-atiku-performance.html>

⁶ See Akin Oladimeji / Jelili Atiku, ‘Shared Memories’, *e-flux*, 12 July 2022,
<https://www.e-flux.com/criticism/479323/shared-memories>

company was affected by neocolonial baggage that made them unable to see African lives as equal to that of Europeans. By refusing to take responsibility for a long period, the company had compounded their negligent behaviour and shown a disregard for the victims. Done in silence, a thing of quiet beauty, the performance was an evanescent event evoking the tangle of thorns that is children's deaths caused by neocolonial negligence.



Jelili Atiku, *Wórowòro, Kóbokòbo*, performance at SOAS, University of London, June 2022, courtesy of the artist, photo by Akin Oladimeji

The thought-provoking performance could fall into both categories of counter-history (rebutting Pfizer's official narrative) and counter-monument – a memorialisation of the victims that does not rely on a conventional public sculpture. A live art piece functioning as a mnemonic device will always be capacious, slipping and sliding between categories. It could also be considered postmemorial art, another subcategory focusing on work that deals with trauma. Marianne Hirsch first asserted, in an article on Art Spiegelman's *Maus*,⁷ that there is a genre of the arts that takes on the mission of revisiting parental trauma. In other words, artists such as Art Spiegelman and Christian Boltanski, in their respective art forms, mine their familial connection to horrific events endured by their parents. Hirsch later expanded the concept to include others, such as Toni Morrison, who are affiliated through empathy with victims.⁸ In Morrison's case, as the descendant of slaves in the United States, she used her fiction to retell their stories and aid

⁷ See 'An Interview with Marianne Hirsch' (undated) on Columbia University Press's website <https://cup.columbia.edu/author-interviews/hirsch-generation-postmemory>

⁸ See Marianne Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Art After the Holocaust*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2012

remembering. Atiku's *Wórowòro, Kóbokòbo* is affiliative as he does not have a direct biological link to the victims. His *In the Red* series, on the other hand, does have a familial root. This was performed between 2008–2017 in various cities across the globe. In each performance, he donned a red fabric, sometimes with balloons strapped to his body, resembling a masquerade and performed various actions – screaming, running, crawling – to enable audiences to cast a backward glance at the Nigerian civil war (1967–1970). His father had died in that war and the body was never recovered by his family, so Atiku utilised the artwork to transmit the knowledge of the war to audiences and bring about their retention of that period. Curators Susannah Greeves and Susan May point out in their opening statement to an exhibition on memory at London's White Cube gallery that 'Artists have an important role in voicing silenced or contested memories, while art's ability to collapse historical time allows us a fresh perspective on the sweep of history'.⁹ Greeves and May's statement highlights the cruciality of art in ensuring buried histories are resurrected. This area of human activity is intimately linked with exposing aspects of the past, and as the curators go on to say, enable 'a resistance to loss'.¹⁰ Jelili Atiku, using his embodied knowledge, invokes in the mind of the audience the theme of violent loss of life, and enables the viewers to consider ways in which to avoid such events from recurring.

Tania Bruguera's performance in *El Peso de la Culpa (The Burden of Guilt, 1997)* tiptoes in from the background to serve as a precursor to Atiku's first *Red* performance.¹¹ With a headless lamb's carcass wrapped around her neck, Bruguera was nude for nearly an hour outside her Cuban home as she ate a mixture of dirt, salt and water. While the latter two elements represented tears, the dirt showed her connection to her land and her empathy with indigenous Cubans who, as legend tells it, literally ate dirt as an act of resistance against the Conquistadors. The lamb might symbolise the native Indians who were slaughtered by the colonialists. Marianne Hirsch, in developing her concept of postmemory, feels identification with the victim is key. The way an artist mediates the trauma of another without appropriating it is a key feature of the idea she explores throughout her 2012 book, *The Generation of Postmemory*.¹² Bruguera's postmemorial performance is a re-enactment, and shows her deep empathy with the victims of colonialist expansion. Likewise, Atiku's project was a decolonial one with its emphasis on features of Yoruba cosmology, as well as metaphors representing the violence indirectly brought about by the colonialists when they formed Nigeria. The Cuban artist's nakedness is a reminder of the vulnerability of the Indians she memorialises, just as Atiku's vulnerability is made more visible with the addition of the balloons that make up his costume. It is useful here to examine two other works that also attempt to counter historical narratives: the paintings of Toussaint Louverture by Kimathi Donkor and Lubaina Himid.

⁹ Susannah Greeves and Susan May, in the brochure accompanying the exhibition at White Cube, London, between 11 July and 2 September, 2018, pp 18–19

¹⁰ Ibid

¹¹ See Magdalena Lopez, 'Socialist Biopolitics: Flesh and Animality in Cuba and Venezuela', *Latin American Research Review*, vol 56, no 2, 2021, pp 417–436

¹² See Marianne Hirsch, 'Projected Memory', in *The Generation of Postmemory*, op cit

Counter-histories

In his essay 'Stranger in a Village', James Baldwin highlights the fact that 'people are trapped in history and history is trapped in them'.¹³ Baldwin's mix of autobiography, and the images of Toussaint Louverture interrogated here complicate narratives around this seminal figure in black diasporic history. Kimathi Donkor's history paintings, a series about the Haitian revolution, serve as a way to counterbalance images of subjugation and serve as an aid to socio-political liberation. Particularly noteworthy is his work titled *Toussaint L'Overture at Bedourete* from 2014. Louverture was a former slave who led the first successful slave rebellion in the world, leading to the first black republic in the West once the French colonisers left. Although he was captured and died in prison, various portraits of him were available after his death, mostly depicting him as a military general. While some (by pro-slavery artists) depicted him in a barbaric manner, others more sympathetic to his cause showed a more dignified figure. There is little consensus on the most accurate likeness of Louverture, as most portraitists, sensitive to commercial concerns, did not often bother to actually meet him but relied on descriptions of those who had. It is known that he suffered a dislocated jaw in battle, giving him a simian appearance, but images that attempt to reflect that are derided for accentuating an animalistic aggressiveness. Donkor's image has a handsome young black man sitting astride a rearing brown horse in the heat of battle. He has a sword in his hand, raised aloft and facing the viewer as if encouraging them to join his campaign. While destruction is all around him with the dead and dying on the floor, his soldiers are depicted firing their guns, while in the foreground, to the left, a man in his army uniform also looks at the viewer, one hand holding a rifle while the other is pointing at Louverture. The effect is that of controlled chaos, with the general seeming to be completely devoid of doubt, resolute and determined to bring about the end of slavery with his men clearly ready to die by his side. Highly atmospheric, it is a haunting work in the vein of battle scenes across the ages, which could be called a work of 'recapturing' – a term coined by Janneke Wesseling to describe works that deliberately echo an antecedent.¹⁴ The painting that is most obviously similar in tone and appearance to Donkor's is Jacques-Louis David's famous portrayal of Napoleon Bonaparte (Louverture's nemesis) traversing the Swiss Alps in 1800.

A fictionalised version of a true event, it has a taller, slimmer version than the true Napoleon Bonaparte was, facing the viewer on a rearing white horse, one hand holding the reins while the other is pointing heavenward. In reality, the general, who normally rode a mule, trudged through the snow in crossing the Alps along with his men. The artist had been instructed by Bonaparte to depict him in a tranquil mode, despite evidently riding a horse in battle. David did this successfully, not only suggesting that Bonaparte had strength and a determination to lead

¹³ See James Baldwin, 'Stranger in a Village', in the essay collection *Notes of a Native Son*, Penguin, London, 1955. The essay was originally published in *Harpers' Magazine* in 1953. A downloadable PDF of the essay is available here: https://blogs.baruch.cuny.edu/eng2150fall2020quintana/files/2020/09/Baldwin_Stranger-in-the-Village.pdf

¹⁴ See Janneke Wesseling, *The Perfect Spectator*, Valiz, Amsterdam, 2015, pp 107–113



Kimathi Donkor, *Toussaint L'Ouverture at Bedourete*, 2004, oil on linen, 136 x 183 cm, courtesy of the artist and Niru Ratnam Gallery, London



Jacques-Louis David, *Napoleon Crossing the Alps*, 1801, oil on canvas, 261 x 221 cm, collection of the Chateau de Malmaison, Rueil-Malmaison, France, image in the public domain

the nation, but inviting comparisons between Bonaparte and famous earlier conquerors. This he did by inscribing ‘Bonaparte’ as well as ‘Karolus Magnus’ and ‘Hannibal’ on the mountain rocks. The implication is that Bonaparte’s legacy will be, as Isabel Williams states, ‘similarly impactful and long-lasting’.¹⁵ The parallels – a young general on a rearing horse, appearing calm and in command of all around him – make it indisputably Donkor’s inspiration. Discussing Donkor, Celeste-Marie Bernier notes: ‘Black agency over and above white atrocity ultimately remains the defining feature of Donkor’s oeuvre in his determination to extrapolate the lived realities of black diasporic subjects, both enslaved and free, and who were themselves engaged – regardless of their subjection to physical, psychological, and imaginative annihilation – in acts and arts of social, political, and artistic liberation.’¹⁶ Fuelled by his anger, fighting against white injustice and filled with art historical knowledge, Donkor wages war with ideologically-propelled images of Louverture and restates the importance of coverage of this seminal moment in world history. The painting’s insistency on the recapturing of David’s masterpiece ensures it creates a space for a heroic period in narratives about transatlantic slavery and makes this available to contemporary audiences.

An artistic ancestor of Donkor’s depiction, Lubaina Himid’s *Toussaint L’Overture* strode into view in 1987. Her life-size version, which is on a wooden background not meant to be hung but placed against a gallery’s wall, has Louverture clutching a gun with one hand while the other is tucked into a pocket. His top half is in a general’s jacket while his lower half is an outline with newspaper headlines placed inside them. Beside the image are captions commenting on one of the headlines, and another that gives a brief biographical note about Louverture. When I asked Himid why the work had not been painted on canvas, she replied: ‘I have a long history of making painted and collaged wooden cut outs. They occupy space in the way furniture does, they become everyday objects and are easy to relate to. Painting on canvas would have been more possible for me later in my career when audiences were more aware of my work, but at the time no one, and I mean no one, except Caribbean historians had any idea who on earth he was.’¹⁷

Part of a series of Himid’s focusing on black heroes struggling ‘for equality and freedom’,¹⁸ Bernier sees the works as counter-historical highlighting ‘missing genealogies of Black artistry and activism’.¹⁹ The significance of the iconographic collage’s subject adopting a casual pose is that it is a depiction of a practice dating back to Ancient Greece, where orators tucked their

¹⁵ See Isabel Williams, ‘Truth, Fiction, and Image: Napoleon Bonaparte and the Changing Tides of Political Imagination’, Young Historians Conference paper, 2018, downloadable PDF here: <https://pdxscholar.library.pdx.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1154&context=younghistorians>, p 4

¹⁶ Celeste-Marie Bernier, ‘Tracing Transatlantic Slavery: In Kimathi Donkor’s *UK Diaspora*’, *Nka: Journal of Contemporary African Art*, no 41, 2017, pp 108–124

¹⁷ Email to the author, March 2023

¹⁸ Celeste Bernier, Alan Rice, Lubaina Himid and Hannah Durkin, *Inside the Invisible: Memorialising Slavery and Freedom in the Life and Works of Lubaina Himid*, Liverpool University Press, Liverpool, 2019, p 71

¹⁹ *Ibid*, p 72



Lubaina Himid, *Toussaint L'Ouverture*, 1987, newspaper and other collage material, acrylic and pencil on wood, 210 x 70 cm, photo by Andy Keate, image courtesy of the artist and Hollybush Gardens, London

hand into their tunic. Bernier notes Louverture was respected for his oratory, without which he would not have been able to mobilise so many to take up arms against their oppressors.²⁰

Linking Louverture to great men from Western civilisation is clearly part of the project to exalt the black general who achieved such remarkable feats and place him within the canon of western portraiture. The newspaper fragments in Himid's depiction making up his lower half highlight the racist policies in the UK seeking to disenfranchise Black British people. This recognises the fact that the socio-cultural work of ensuring diasporic Africans are kept underfoot is an ever-present one. When I asked about the insertion of headlines, Himid elaborated on the fact that 'Newspapers were the way that people understood and consumed the news in the era that this was made, so to maximise engagement I used news stories – headline and image – to capture viewer attention and to make the link between the historical and the contemporary'.²¹ This is akin to Jennifer Higgie's assertion that 'In Himid's work, politics is visualised as an ongoing conversation with the present and the past – a conversation complicated and enhanced by the inclusion of the everyday'.²² By bringing to the foreground the interplay of

²⁰ Ibid, p 82

²¹ Email to the author, March 2023

²² Jennifer Higgie, 'All the World's a Stage', *Tate Etc*, 10 September 2021

www.tate.org.uk/tate-etc/issue-53-autumn-2021/lubaina-himid-jennifer-higgie-all-worlds-stage

past and present politics, Himid enables the audience to see how the contemporary always wears robes from what came before, and how the past is married to the present. What this collage portrait does is signify that *Louverture* may have won wars but the battle for equality carries on to the present day.

Counter-monuments

Maddie Boden sheds light on counter-monuments and outlines the fact that, ‘The power of traditional monuments suggests completeness, or a false sense of closure. That monument suggests that we’ve done what needs to be done; we’ve worked through the issues and they are now in the past’.²³ She cites Jochen Gerz’s *2146 Stones – Monument Against Racism* (1993) as an example of a work that celebrates impermanence, an ephemeral work that, like Atiku’s memorial works, commemorates victims but not by using conventional sculptures, which fail in ensuring the public confront atrocities.

Between 1990 and 1993, Gerz and some art students in Saarbrücken covertly removed 2,146 cobblestones from a square, replacing them with temporary substitutes. They then inscribed the names of desecrated Jewish cemeteries on the original cobblestones, following which they put them back but placing the cobblestones in such a way that the names of the cemeteries were invisible. Although illegal, what Gerz and his collaborators did was later sanctioned by the regional council.²⁴ The face-down cobblestones suggested burial and a clear demonstration of the rejection of traditional methods of commemoration. It echoes James Young’s sentiment that traditional notions of valorising great men by utilising the language of traditional public sculpture have been overtaken by counter-monuments.²⁵ He cites Maya Lin’s *Vietnam Veterans’ Memorial* (1982) in Washington, and Jochen Gerz and Esther Shalev-Gerz’s *Monument for Peace and Against War and Fascism* (1986) as examples of this. In the former, two black polished granite walls, with the dates 1959 and 1973 inscribed on them, are cut into the ground. Viewers are able to see reflections of themselves as they read the names of those US personnel who lost their lives during the Vietnam war.²⁶ In the latter, a pillar, twelve metres high, was clad in lead and installed in Harburg, a borough in Hamburg.²⁷ The artists asked residents to inscribe their names on it. With the addition of names, the monument was gradually lowered into the ground. Currently the top is level with the ground. Young sees these works as ambivalent abstractions

²³ See Maddie Boden, ‘Monuments and Anti-monuments’, FutureLearn.com, undated <https://www.futurelearn.com/info/courses/introducing-art-history-discovering-public-sculpture/0/steps/97688>

²⁴ See Mark Callaghan, ‘Invisible Past, Invisible Future: A German’s alternative response to the Holocaust’, *Art Times*, October 2010, www.arttimesjournal.com/speakout/Nov_Dec_10_Callaghan%20/Nov_Dec_10_Callaghan.html

²⁵ See James E Young, ‘Memory/Monument’, in *Critical Terms for Art History*, Robert S Nelson and Richard Schiff, eds, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2003, pp 234–246

²⁶ See Maya Lin Studio, ‘Vietnam Veterans Memorial, 1982’, undated www.mayalinstudio.com/memory-works/vietnam-veterans-memorial

²⁷ See ‘The Monument Against Fascism, 1986’ on Esther Shalev-Gerz’s website: <https://www.shalev-gerz.net/portfolio/monument-against-fascism/>

that flout multiple conventions regarding monuments. Alice Procter is unsurprised by the upsurge in demands for the tearing down of traditional monuments. She points out that no national monument in the UK commemorates slavery's victims and survivors.²⁸ Noting they were created to foster a sense of national unity, in multicultural Britain critical voices have derided them for facilitating a feeling of exclusion from the national discourse about what is worth remembering and exalting.

Steve McQueen's *Carib's Leap* is another work, which, like *Wórowòro, Kóbokòbo*, exhumes a weighty moment in the past in a bid to re-examine its interpretation. It consists of dual screens: one depicting a normal Caribbean beach scene of children playing and people fraternising. The camera depicts all that, before slowly panning over to a morgue in which there are coffins. On the second screen is a twelve-minute video of the silhouettes of bodies dropping in slow motion. Sedate is the setting, slowed down is the falling. The work's title is a reference to an incident in 1651 in which indigenous people of a Caribbean island committed suicide by jumping to their deaths rather than be massacred by European invaders. McQueen refutes the notion that the act was borne out of desperation. Rather, it was a hopeful decision. Focusing on a number of his lens-based works, Naomi Vogt sees Steve McQueen's practice as consisting of historian Sylvie Lyndeperg's notion of 'portable sites of memory'.²⁹ These are films that speak to historical events in a way that has spawned widespread apprehension of such events. Vogt also uses the term 'small monuments' to describe *Carib's Leap* and other works by McQueen, noting 'the work is always installed for a limited period of time, its dimensions shifting according to location. It bespeaks alternative ways of subsisting in the present: not with words carved in stone, but fleetingly, serendipitously and non-verbally. McQueen's works, which elicit memory and are material but mutable manifestations of past events, approximate postmodern monuments.'³⁰ They are neither 'comprehensive dramas, nor objective, corroborating records, but rather sweeping devices in which the viewer takes part, slowly "experiencing" a historical event. The lack of guiding voice-over commentaries is a defining feature of this status.'³¹ The work clearly is a demonstration of scepticism towards conventional memorials depicting heroic actions. It is as if McQueen has the same notions espoused by Erika Doss in *Memorial Mania*: the creation of monuments in recent years has become excessive.³² George Young sees counter-monuments as fusing public art and popular culture in a way that can galvanise concrete action. Similarly, McQueen creates a powerfully atmospheric and allegorical work that deconstructs public art and uses the relatively lowbrow medium of film, a pop culture staple. It is both a paradox and has two faces, Janus-like; the work tells a story and does not. Neither a recreation, nor a fiction,

²⁸ See Alice Procter, 'Abolitionists' chapter in *The Whole Picture: The colonial story of the art in our museums & why we need to talk about it*, Cassell, London, 2020, p 130 (Kindle version)

²⁹ See Naomi Vogt, 'Small Monuments: Recording and Forgetting in the Work of Steve McQueen', *Third Text*, vol 29, no 3, 2015, p 139

³⁰ *Ibid*, p 127

³¹ *Ibid*, p 133

³² See Erika Doss, *Memorial Mania: Public Feeling in America*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2010

neither a painting, nor a sculpture, neither a performance, nor a photograph, its multiple meanings float in the viewer's mind.

Lastly, the Anglo-Nigerian artist Yinka Shonibare toils in the same fields as Atiku. His *Victorian Philanthropist's Parlour* (1996–1997) constantly collides with time, converging the past and present. It invokes the period room found in museums, with velvet ropes preventing the public from entering. Shonibare's signature Dutch wax cloth (connoting 'cultural hybridity at work in the period of imperialism')³³ covers the space from floor to ceiling and on it are images of black footballers. Hanging on the walls are framed prints of a typical gentleman's leisure pursuits: hunting, falconry, collectible items. There is also a bust of Queen Victoria, bound printed books, a pair of chaise longues and other props underlining the stage-like setting of the installation. Shonibare explains that in a colonial context, acts of philanthropy reproduce power dynamics that favour the giver more than the receiver.³⁴ Judith Dolkart argues the inclusion of the footballers signifies the fact that without British colonisation, the sport might not have become globally popular, and she highlights the ongoing racism footballers undergo as teams become more multicultural.³⁵ She suggests that footballers are like colonial subjects: just as a coloniser can change subjects' lives on a whim, footballers can be traded by their teams' owners whenever necessary. Jeffrey Bussman feels that to read the work, it is necessary to look back at the definition of 'philanthropy'.³⁶ He states that Victorian lords gave money to the working classes in order to launder the money. Sinking it into football clubs (objects of veneration among the working classes) is another way to do so. He agrees that such pseudo-benevolent investments are simply means of achieving dominance.

Joan Gibbons argues that Shonibare doesn't engage in constructing counter-histories so much as using historical signifiers as launch pads for fantastical examinations of identity and social standing, leading to subtexts that are both historical and political.³⁷ She tackles his take on Thomas Gainsborough's *Mr and Mrs Andrews*.³⁸ Prior to discussing this, it is important, however, to take a detour and consider John Berger's interrogation of the original, which he does in his seminal TV series and book of the same name, *Ways of Seeing* (1972).³⁹ Gainsborough's painting depicts a woman sitting in front of a tree on an ornate bench, her husband standing next to her, his left leg crossed in front of his right, a gun in the crook of his right arm and a dog looking up at him. Behind them are cornfields. Berger asserts that Mr Andrews commissioned the portrait to show his dominance over the dog and his property. The proud expression on Andrews's face, the casual way he leans against the tree and the inclusion of rolling fields depict the male

³³ See Paul Wood, Leon Wainwright with Charles Harrison, eds, *Art in Theory: The West in the World* Wiley Blackwell, London, 2021, p 913

³⁴ See Yinka Shonibare, 'Works and Documents', in *Yinka Shonibare MBE: Magic Ladders*, The Barnes Foundation, Philadelphia, 2014, p 26

³⁵ *Ibid*, p 26

³⁶ See Jeffrey Bussmann, 'Yinka Shonibare's *The Victorian Philanthropist's Parlour*', *title*, 17 March 2014

³⁷ Joan Gibbons, *Contemporary Art and Memory*, *op cit*, p 67

³⁸ *Ibid*, pp 68–70

³⁹ John Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, Penguin Random House, London, 1972, p 107

subject's 'proprietary attitude towards his surroundings'.⁴⁰ Berger makes clear the link between oil painting and the perpetuation of society's obsession with property here. He highlights the strict punishments for trespassing and poaching and how the possession of land enabled the couple to enhance their pleasure in it via the commissioning of a portrait showcasing their socio-economic position. Shonibare's iteration has black mannequins in exactly the same pose but with their heads cut off. Gibbons infers that the decapitations are a way of removing power from the landowners and pricking their pomposity.



Yinka Shonibare CBE, *Mr and Mrs Andrews without Their Heads*, 1998, mixed media, image courtesy of the National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, and DACS/Artimage, photo by Stephen White & Co

The mannequins are wearing Dutch wax cloth, and Gibbons suggests that: 'In his version, Shonibare undermines their power and status simply by removing their heads and raises questions concerning the socio-economic system they inhabit by dressing them in fabrics that allude, albeit obliquely, to the dependency of that system on the exploitation of other cultures and peoples.'⁴¹ The work is, for her, a kind of counter-memory, as the artist 'not only sends us back to the past but demands that we make our own critical, and potentially creative, leaps between the contexts and artefacts that he brings together'.⁴² This is a very convincing deconstruction of the piece. Shonibare, in a sophisticated, subtle and singular way, recaptures a famous work in a bid to bring about awareness of the socio-economic contexts from which the

⁴⁰ Ibid

⁴¹ Joan Gibbons, *Contemporary Art and Memory*, op cit, p 70

⁴² Ibid, pp 70–71

wealth of the Andrews sprang. The tactics deployed are revisionist and signify globalisation's exploitation of subalterns, for without a powerless underclass in the colonies, such wealth would have been much harder to come by. The works by Shonibare discussed here are forms of activism that insist, in an indirect manner, in ever-shifting installations, on the ubiquity of neo-colonialism and its discontents. Shalon Webber-Heffernan,⁴³ writing about artists engaged in counter-monumental interventions, insists they facilitate 'decolonial imaginings' by challenging monuments that serve as an ode to past and present colonial domination. This equally applies to the artists discussed here.

What is at stake with such work is the prevention of forgetting. Paul Gilroy examines what is gained with regards to telling stories regarding history, especially the story of the British Empire, through visual art. Gilroy describes the colonial project as 'a litany of exploitation, famine, cruelty and slaughter' and laments the fact that while the descendants of the colonised are in full possession of the violence of this period in history, the modern-day British have a 'deep and abiding ignorance'.⁴⁴ The Museum of British Colonialism's researchers provide evidence, noting that 'The GCSE History module on 'Migration to Britain' includes some coverage of empire, but it is an optional module with minimal uptake. Some teachers say they are reticent about addressing the topic, given the challenging nature of the content, and do not feel equipped to confront such things'.⁴⁵ Current tabloid and broadsheet reactionary comments with regard to efforts by bodies such as museums to decolonise their institutions demonstrate an aversion to truth-telling and to efforts to bring about restitution. This makes the project of Atiku and the memory workers highlighted in this text ever more crucial. They contribute to the crystallisation of events and portraits in such a way that amnesia is impossible.

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⁴³ See Shalon T Webber-Heffernan, 'Performing Monument: Future Warnings', *Performance Matters*, vol 4, no 3, September 2018, pp 76–90 <https://performancematters-thejournal.com/index.php/pm/article/view/153>

⁴⁴ Paul Gilroy, cited in Afua Hirsch, *Empire*, Tate Publishing, London, 2022, pp 22 and 23

⁴⁵ See The Museum of British Colonialism, 'Education' <https://www.museumofbritishcolonialism.org/education>