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Yinka Shonibare MBE



# Yinka Shonibare MBE

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# Yinka Shonibare MBE: The Politics of Representation

*Robert Hobbs*

Although I speak Yoruba very well, I think in English sometimes and it's rather strange, you know. You move from one way of thinking. Then you think in Yoruba: sometimes you think in English and you dream in English sometimes. It's that kind of existence that in a way my work tries to talk about ... my work is actually not about the representation of politics but the politics of representation. Yinka Shonibare MBE in John Picton, 'Laughing at Ourselves', 2004

The art of London-based, Nigerian-expatriate Yinka Shonibare MBE has been ratified as belonging to the contemporary canon. In the past 20 years it has been included in 108 group shows and has been the focus of 33 solo museum and gallery exhibitions; and in the last six years it has been featured on the covers of *Art News* (2002), *Artforum* (2003), *Sculpture* (2006) and *Art in America* (2008), as well as an elaborate *New York Times Style Magazine* spread (2005). With all this coverage, plus becoming a finalist for the UK's prestigious Turner prize in 2004 and being made in 2005 a Member of the Order of the British Empire (MBE), a government-initiated honorific for his services to art, one would think the most relevant questions about Shonibare's work have been posed and answered. This is not the case. In the many perceptive responses to his work, the overall emphasis, with few exceptions, has been focused rather than panoramic. It has looked at distinct bodies of work rather than considered how this artist's work builds on such larger aesthetic issues as excess and beauty and such broad-based political concerns as imperialism, postcolonialism, and globalism. In order to appreciate Shonibare's remarkable contributions to recent art in particular and art's increasing awareness of its own contributions to knowledge in general, it is essential to consider the contrapuntal nature of this work that keeps dialectics open rather than allowing its meanings to be closed off. This work is notable not only for those high art and popular cultural elements that it privileges, but also for those western aspects of the artist's Yoruba background that it reconsiders from an international point of view.

Instead of looking at Shonibare's work as comprised of discrete and autonomous objects, I will use a wide-angle lens to consider the perspectives that it permits and enhances as well as those it precludes. This approach assumes an understanding of aspects

of French theorist Michel Foucault's definition of the author's function as the point of entry to a socially ratified discourse, which in turn depends on French linguist Émile Benveniste's theory of enunciation, pertaining to the position that subjects must assume within language if their information is to be construed as knowledge. In addition, I will emphasise the ways that Shonibare relies on Jacques Derrida's theory of deconstruction. In doing so he employs 'excessive beauty in his work', as well as evades the limits of established thinking—concepts derived from the French theorist Georges Bataille—as a means for undermining and redirecting such polarities as past and present, high and popular art, and First and Third World cultural conventions.

Even though Shonibare's family and early development have had an impact on the overall direction of his work, there has been little appreciation of the important role that his traditional Yoruba background plays in his art, an approach that will be discussed at the end of this essay. This lacuna no doubt results in part from a commendable deference to the artist's insistence that his British citizenship has been the major influence on his work:

Geographically and contextually I'm British now. I pay British taxes, I'm subject to the same weather, I watch the same telly.

I'm absolutely certain that the way my work looks has very particularly to do with its London context. It wouldn't have developed in the same way anywhere else. It reflects a multiculturalism that's unique to London—you won't even find it in New York, because it's far more ghettoized than London.<sup>1</sup>

This critical nod to Shonibare's British affiliations has been buttressed in recent years by his insistence on adding the initials MBE to his name when it is used professionally, signifying his membership in the Order of the British Empire. Speaking of this distinction, Shonibare has reminisced, 'some of my friends were shocked that ... I accepted it, though not half as shocked as they were when they found out that I was going to make it part of my artistic identity ... But I like that contradiction.'<sup>2</sup>

Despite Shonibare's wholesale ironic embrace of his London address and MBE status, he remains proud of his Yoruba heritage and his international upbringing in Lagos. He has recalled his descent from the renowned nineteenth-century Yoruba King Kosoko of the Lagos tribe, even though he has admitted that this chief, like many others at the time, was regrettably a slave owner. This is not surprising when one considers that Lagos was a major centre for the slave trade from the early eighteenth century to the middle of the nineteenth century. More pertinent to his artistic practice; his grandfather was a tailor. In the late 1950s and '60s his parents were part of a new Nigerian elite, which benefited from the country's independence in 1960 and continued membership in the British Commonwealth. About the same time that this country's sovereignty was becoming a reality, the Shonibares moved to London to prepare for leadership positions in Nigeria. Shonibare's father became a successful corporate lawyer and worked with companies going into receivership, while his mother was employed briefly as an executive secretary before becoming a full-time parent. Yinka, the couple's third child, was born in 1962 in London; when he was three years old, the family moved to Lagos, then Nigeria's capital. Because his parents, like many other expatriate students, had the forethought and funds to purchase a London townhouse while living there, the family regularly summered in this house when Yinka was growing up. His father could afford to send the three children to excellent western schools in Lagos where only English was spoken. And while his father wore business suits and spoke English during the day, at home he changed into African robes—sure signs of national pride—and spoke Yoruba. Like their father, Yinka and his siblings were divided between European and Nigerian cultures, albeit in different ways. They spoke Yoruba at home; however, instead of embracing traditional African dress, they preferred wearing only western clothes, and in their free time they relished mixing First and Third World popular culture. According to Shonibare:

We mixed listening to local Yoruba music, watching Yoruba drama on television, and watching *Hawaii 5-0*

and programs coming from the U.S. I drank Coca-Cola like everybody else. In my home, my father reads *National Geographic*, *The Economist*, and *Time*. It was totally natural for a modern African. That's how I evolved as a child. There was nothing about my upbringing that was traditionally African, if you can put it that way.<sup>3</sup>

In addition to immersing himself in mainstream and Nigerian pop culture, Shonibare began to be interested in art while still in elementary school. He took classes at the Lagos Museum, which focused on western-style painting even though the Museum featured collections of tribal objects.<sup>4</sup> During this time he was intrigued by comic book graphics such as those appearing in *Spiderman*, *Captain America*, and *Asterix*. He also would buy art instruction manuals, so that he learned the conventional ways of drawing flowers, for example, or painting seascapes. As he grew older, he copied paintings by Cézanne and read Vincent van Gogh's letters.

In 1978 Shonibare's parents decided to send him to an elite English boarding school for his last two years of preparatory school. He was sixteen at the time and was astonished by the influx of impoverished Yoruba expatriates, who were moving to the UK for jobs. 'I was actually surprised when I came to England', Shonibare later recalled, 'and found out that there was this notion that if you were black you were somehow disadvantaged—I thought that was hilarious. But then you either dwell on those issues or turn them to your advantage.'<sup>5</sup> In his study of Yoruba living in the UK, African studies specialist B. Akintunde Oyètádé notes that from 1960 to the early 1990s, 'the population of Nigerian residents in the UK has grown from less than 1,000 to almost 300,000, of whom 80 percent are Yoruba',<sup>6</sup> and points out, 'it is impossible to avoid hearing conversation in Yorùbá in places like ... Brixton market',<sup>7</sup> where they are only partially assimilated. Shonibare later did turn the new face of the Yoruba in London to his advantage when he began purchasing African-print fabric for his art from a Portuguese merchant's shop in Brixton.

In 1981, three years after moving to London and during his first year at art school, Shonibare contracted a viral infection leading to the rare neurological disorder known as transverse myelitis, which results in inflammation and permanent damage to the spinal cord. Because of this condition, he was completely paralysed for a month and remained hospitalised for an entire year. After being confined to a wheelchair for three years, he

was once again able to walk, even though his overall mobility and use of his left side have remained impaired. Recalling his slow convalescence, Shonibare explained, 'I had to learn to do everything again—to dress myself, feed myself ... everything ...' and added, 'But as things got better ... I figured the only way I could really carry on was to get back into art school and pick up where I left off'.<sup>8</sup> Two decades later Shonibare summarised the overall impact of his illness on him and his work:

It's certainly affected my method ... I've become very good at delegating and have a number of people who facilitate my priorities. Also ... I wouldn't want to be presumptuous—but I think the experience may have made me more acutely aware of my mortality than most. That's why I view pleasure as so important, and use it in my work as an intellectual basis for questioning a lot of things I believe very deeply.<sup>9</sup>

As one might expect, the journey from suffering a severe physical setback to assuming a philosophic stance toward it and then later recognising the value of enjoyment was long and demanding. Shonibare's attitude shortly after his illness when he was studying at the Byam Shaw School of Painting and Drawing in London is revealed by his response to an instructor who questioned his use of *perestroika* in his art. In the mid-1980s, the General Secretary of the Soviet Communist Party, Mikhail Gorbachev, initiated a sweeping reform of the USSR's policy of centralised economic planning by encouraging both groups and individuals to embrace aspects of western capitalism. Tentatively approached during the years 1985-87 and then mandated into law in 1987, *perestroika* not only provided opportunities to open up the Soviet Union and its satellites to foreign capital, but it also led to the Soviet Union's dissolution. Shonibare may have been struck by the idea that in many respects this transformation of the Soviet Union encapsulates, in a remarkably short time, the type of transitions that had taken place earlier in the century and over a period of several decades when European empires were being broken up. In a tutorial the Byam Shaw instructor asked Shonibare, 'Why are you making art about Russia? Why don't you produce authentic African art?'<sup>10</sup> At first Shonibare viewed these queries as exclusionary and prejudicial because of the implicit assumption that Africans should need to declare their ethnicity in their work. Fortunately, he was not prepared to make this concession. As he thought about his professor's queries, he recognised how much they hinged on residual imperialist views of authenticity.

Shonibare's realisation was in sync with a then full-scale debate about the status of so-called 'primitive' art. *Artforum* editor Tom McEvilley initiated this conversation when he severely criticised the treatment of Third World art included in the blockbuster exhibition *Primitivism in 20th Century Art*, which curators William Rubin and Kirk Varnedoe opened in 1984 at New York's Museum of Modern Art (MoMA). McEvilley's response to this exhibition became the focus of exchanges between the two parties, published in the February and May 1985 issues of *Artforum*. McEvilley's approach was largely endorsed by curators, art historians, anthropologists and artists around the world intent on separating lingering modern assumptions about art from postmodern goals.

For McEvilley and others, the exhibition wrongfully perpetuated an out-of-date imperialist approach since it regarded tribal objects only as sources of inspiration for vanguard artists. Rubin, in particular, in the modernist section of the exhibition attempted to achieve parity between tribal and western objects even as he relegated the latter to a universal category unconcerned with differences between cultures, individual artists, and dates. Despite Rubin's attempt to characterise the relationships between tribal and western objects as affinities, the exhibition presented them in the supportive role of de-contextualised foundations for modern artists' inspiration. Rubin ignored postmodernism's foundational premise that art's meaning must be subject to ongoing and open-ended debates between different parties and dissimilar points of view.<sup>11</sup> In one of his rejoinders to Rubin and Varnedoe, McEvilley summarised this postmodern approach in language that anticipates aspects of Shonibare's mature work:

What we must learn is to see a doubleness, the two aspects at once, simultaneously feeling these objects as art, which is our way of appreciation, and maintaining a sharp and constant awareness of the fact that the people of their own culture did not so feel them. This keen awareness of cultural relativity and of the arbitrariness of one's own horizon is simply the necessary step in maturation for our culture.<sup>12</sup>

Years after MoMA's exhibition attempted to demonstrate the controversy regarding the exhibition of tribal objects in museums devoted to contemporary art, it continued to elicit strong reactions from curators and scholars. The catalogue for *Yoruba: Nine Centuries of African Art and Thought*, a 1989 exhibition at the Center for African Art, New York, included an Egungun mask that made fun of a European male, thus presenting an

African point of view. One of the exhibition's goals was 'to dispel the notion of a fictional, timeless, 'ethnographic present' by illustrating continuities and/or changes over several centuries in 'shapes of time' and thought'.<sup>13</sup> In 1992 British art historian Sidney Littlefield Kasfir, writing in *African Arts*, characterised the controversies generated by *Primitivism* and the Centre Georges Pompidou's 1989 *Magiciennes de la Terre* as a 'debate about African art ... concern[ing] its role as a mirror of western colonial history'. The exhibition attempts 'to demonstrate the 'affinities' between 'the tribal and the modern', Third World and First World', while 'postmodern critics have used these exhibitions ... to comment upon the intellectual appropriation of African and other Third World art by Western museums ...'.<sup>14</sup>

Kasfir ties the issue of the authenticity of African art—a topical subject in the late 1980s and early 1990s—to the commodity culture of dealers and art collectors, who decide which objects will be considered as legitimate. She dryly concludes, 'The Western connoisseur is the essential missing factor that transforms artifact into art.'<sup>15</sup> The criteria for this person's judgment, she notes, depend on viewing African artists as anonymous and eternally unchanging screens on which their tribe's essential ethos is projected.<sup>16</sup> This quest for authenticity has necessitated removing from contemporary photographs and films of African peoples evidence of non-African cultural connections that Shonibare and his peers in Lagos and other parts of Nigeria had enjoyed when growing up.

This reactionary view of traditional African art, which was packaged as 'tribal art', and regarded as the only authentic African art, was increasingly lambasted in the 1980s. Shonibare's approach was anticipated by the critical attitude toward modern art that was the subject of work being made in the '80s by the New York East Village commodity artists—Ashley Bickerton, Peter Halley, Jeff Koons, Haim Steinbach, and Meyer Vaisman—whose work was known collectively as Neo-Geo. Their effort to evaluate commodification's effects without being co-opted by its spurious values was a delicate balance that sometimes worked and just as often made these artists, particularly Koons with his seemingly generous acceptance of kitsch, appear to be colluders rather than critics. In addition to artists questioning the excesses of commodity culture, market researchers, who were similarly influenced during the 1980s by French theorist Jean Baudrillard's reworking of Marxist production in terms of late capitalist consumption, were looking at the ways consumers were acquiring signs and symbolic power when purchasing goods and thereby ratifying distinct social meanings while doing so. Their

emphasis on consumption as a mode of ratifying particular sign systems and on interactions between shopping rituals and fine art protocols as a way of setting up meaningful situations was to have an enormous impact on Shonibare's work, which focuses on the different ways of approaching the commercial product, African-print fabrics. But, before we look at the polyvalent role commodification plays in his art, it helps to consider briefly the overall cultural phenomenon of Afrocentrism because Shonibare's art plays with the expectations and attitudes of this broad-based informal movement that first achieved an international following in the 1980s.

Afrocentrism, also known as 'nativism', revives aspects of 1930s-era Pan-Africanism and Negritude, which had largely been confined to artists and intellectuals, and dilutes the program of Black Power nationalism, which had appealed in the '60s to a relatively small number of political radicals. Like these movements, Afrocentrism is predicated on a discourse of authenticity. In the 1980s it became a largely middle-class movement in both the UK and the US. For blacks wishing to support a cultural heritage based on race and self-esteem, Afrocentrism played an important role. In her capacity as the curator of the Studio Museum in Harlem, Thelma Golden characterised Afrocentrism's hold on the black middle class. Although she described a situation in the US, her remarks also apply to the UK version that the worldwide hip-hop phenomenon helped to catalyse and perpetuate. Golden writes:

Afrocentrism had entered the mainstream of black American life, and its influence could be felt everywhere: in the lyrics of conscious hip-hop, in the dubious, growing popularity of Kwanzaa (an 'African' holiday invented by the black nationalist Maulana Karenga), in the fact that we now called ourselves African American rather than black. (The 'African' in African American represented a desire as much as a fact, a reaffirmation of a bond that history had severed.) This Afrocentrism had a distinctly commercial bent. African Americans proudly bought and collected African artifacts, tangible symbols of their cultural ancestry. There was a hope in this hunger for symbols, hope that the erasure of our heritage—symbolised most vividly by the 'X' in Malcolm's name—could be reversed by patient, determined effort, by a kind of cultural renaissance. African Americans wrapped themselves in all things African, and, in the process, often imagined a place that bore little resemblance to



the real Africa ... constructing a spiritual homeland that was pure, authentic, and almost as imaginary as the Dark continent in the writings of Eurocentrism, but also, strangely enough, its mirror image.<sup>17</sup>

African-Americans as well as Afro-English youth signaled their Afrocentrism by wearing shirts, robes, head scarves, and caftans made of the intensely patterned African-styled cotton fabrics that had been embraced two to three decades earlier by African nationalists. Even though these textiles connoted African solidarity, they were, until recently, designed and mostly manufactured in Europe.

Shonibare's education at Goldsmiths College, University of London, where he enrolled in 1989, put him in a position to demonstrate how this African-style fabric might serve as a sliding signifier of authenticity and simulation. He entered the College the same year Damien Hirst graduated, and he has subsequently exhibited with the group of artists around Hirst known as YBAs (Young British Artists) in a number of shows, most notably Charles Saatchi's controversial *Sensation* exhibition at the Royal Academy. But he has never been considered one of its members, probably because his advocacy of excessive beauty and ironic, polite restraint differs from their shock tactics. As he later explained:

Yes, okay, I am here to protest, but I am going to do it like a gentleman. It is going to look very nice. You are not even going to realise that I am protesting, you are going to invite me to your museum because the work is nice ...<sup>18</sup>

Because Goldsmiths' students focused on conceptual art strategies and held feminist theory in high regard, Shonibare soon became acquainted with the work of the American artists Jenny Holzer, Barbara Kruger, Cindy Sherman and Nancy Spero. Their work empowered him to view racist stereotypes as subjects that his art could probe and critique. 'I realised', Shonibare reflected, 'that I didn't have to accept my designation as some sort of doomed other, I could challenge my relationship to authority with humour and parody in mimicking and mirroring'.<sup>19</sup> His familiarisation with their work also enabled him to look at the ways identity can be constructed and, at the same time, undermined through using African-print fabrics.

Since most of Shonibare's art after 1992, with the notable exception of his photographic cycles *Diary of a Victorian Dandy*

(1998) and *Portrait of Dorian Gray* (2001), has incorporated African-print fabric in paintings, sculptures, installations and photographs, it is crucial to understand the complex and at times little understood background of the material that affects the way it is read. African-print fabric has been as important to Shonibare's art as automotive parts have been to John Chamberlain since both types of materials furnish ongoing and off-stage sets of signs that impact the work these two artists have made. The meaning of African-print fabric in Shonibare's work is in part predicated on its history, the process by which it is manufactured and merchandised, and the way it has been traditionally used in Africa as well as more recently in the UK and US, where it has become a sign of Afrocentricism. Before looking at this product's history, a brief view of the product names used for this material helps, in part, to explain why its references to authenticity and place of manufacture have proven such a rich resource for Shonibare. Standard names generally used for this fabric are the same ones employed by the Dutch manufacturer Vlisco Company, the producer of the finest versions of African-print textile since 1846, and the fabrics that Shonibare utilises for his work. These names are 'Super Wax', which Vlisco inaugurated in 1973, and 'Real Dutch Wax', or 'Veritable Wax Hollandaise Vlisco' (for French-speaking Africans), which this company introduced in 1980 when it was printed on the fabric's selvage to signify its origin.<sup>20</sup> As one might expect, there are a number of permutations of these brand names, testifying to their importance, in addition to such generic references as 'industrial batik' and 'African-print fabric'.

The history of the distribution of European and South-East Asian printed cottons in sub-Saharan West and Central Africa is at best sketchy. According to Kevin Matthews of the UCLA African Studies Center, 'European and Indian-produced textiles ... served as exchange currency in the gold, ivory and slave trades'.<sup>21</sup> The distribution of these fabrics began in the late sixteenth century when the Portuguese sold Indian cotton textiles; late in the nineteenth century French merchants exported 'guinea cloth' to this region. In order to compete with Indian fabrics, particularly calicoes from Calcutta, which were often traded for African slaves, European manufacturers in the mid-nineteenth century began improving on the designs commonly used for Yoruba resist-dyed textiles and other regional fabrics. When the Dutch recruited West African mercenaries over the extraordinarily long period of 1837-1872 to help take back Indonesia, these soldiers returned home with Eastern batiks, which were already known in West Africa through trade, and this nineteenth-century influx further

enhanced the popularity of the batiks already familiar to sub-Saharan Africans.

An often-told story is that Dutch manufacturers began producing batiks in the nineteenth century to compete with the Indonesian market's indigenous producers. When the Dutch product failed to meet the high standards of the Indonesian markets it was pawned off on less discerning West and Central African buyers. This new market was supposedly delighted with the veining and spotting that developed as a result of the dying used instead of the traditional wax batik method. But this narrative is inconsistent with Vlisco's historical account,<sup>22</sup> even though it is apparently true of such other companies as the Belgian Previnaire & Co.<sup>23</sup> According to Vlisco, which was known as PF van Vlissingen & Co. before 1964, completely hand-printed textiles were produced until about 1910-11, when the company introduced its first wax printing machine. Vlisco had begun exporting its completely hand-printed wax batiks to the Dutch East Indies in 1852 and only started introducing its designs in Africa in 1876. Problems with the Dutch East Indian market began in 1900 when Indonesians developed stamps, which lowered production costs, and when the Indonesian Dutch government protected local productions by imposing stiff tariffs, thus forcing Vlisco and other Dutch companies to develop markets elsewhere, including Africa, which became Vlisco's major focus.

In 1932 the director of Vlisco visited West Africa and discovered ways his products could appeal even more to local preferences, with the result that the company was ultimately able to dominate the West African market. In the 1950s, as independent countries emerged in Africa, enterprising business people in West Africa began building printing mills, thus undermining all European factories except for the ones owned by Vlisco and ABC, based in Hyde, Cheshire, just outside Manchester. In 1966 Vlisco began taking steps to cut down on the labour-intensive process of hand-printing, which involved as many as 27 steps, and stopped producing hand-printed designs at its main site in 1993, although it apparently still continues to employ hand-blockers at its subsidiary Ghana Textile Printing.<sup>24</sup> This company estimated in 2006 that 75 per cent of all wax fabric sold in Africa used Vlisco designs, but noted that their patterns were being illegally produced by a number of Asian and African companies.

While Vlisco's innovative designs number in the thousands and are thus ubiquitous in sub-Saharan West and Central Africa, and

the quality of its production has outdistanced its competitors, its continued imperial approach to its African market may be another reason why Shonibare employs this material for his work. The company does not hire African designers, though it did regularly solicit the opinions of African wholesalers until the 1970s.<sup>25</sup> Producing on average about 150 new designs each year, the company sends its designers, who, according to the company's head of design Frans van Rood, 'must have a keen interest in the exotic', into the field in Africa every two to three years to talk to Vlisco distributors, wholesalers, and people frequenting the marketplaces. In 2000 van Rood characterised the firm's product in anachronistically imperialistic terms. Noting, 'most Africans appreciate innovations that come from abroad, not those that come from within', he pointed out that Vlisco's textiles are only African in inspiration:

We interpret what we see in the African streets, and we see what our own imagination comes up with. We mix the two, and that provides for a constant process of creation and innovation that wouldn't happen otherwise.

These popular simulacra are considered effective in providing contemporary Africans with a more compelling image of themselves than their own designers could. The situation resembles the tantalisingly obtuse circularity outlined by Kobena Mercer, a cultural studies specialist focusing on modes of representation in the African Diaspora. He pointedly asks, 'What happens when ethnics appropriate others' appropriations of ethnicity?'<sup>26</sup> Van Rood elaborates on this same situation by subscribing to the long over-worked authenticity ideology that continues to encumber Africans and others with conventional thinking:

In our view, African designers are too dependent on traditions. From olden days, African artists have been, first and foremost, the people to [give] voice to the traditions. In many societies, they are the keepers of history ... [T]hey are craftsmen rather than artists.

Consistent with their view that they can provide their African market with an exoticism its artists do not have the aesthetic distance to discern, Vlisco designers have found ways to improve on the art of the 'perfect imperfection':

If we use lines or a raster of lines, instead of putting them at exact geometrical angles, we give the lines a

slightly odd angle, sometimes hardly visible with the bare eye. The effect is that the screen, instead of being stable, is unstable and much more lively. It dances in front of your eyes.

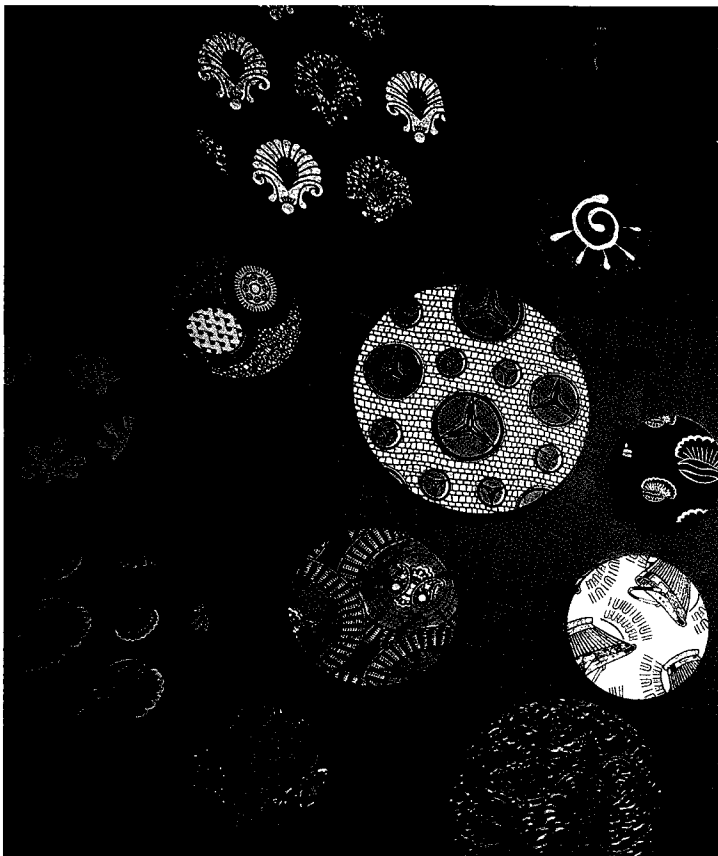
Relying on the highly artificial simulacra of African tastes, Shonibare's use of Vlisco fabrics enables him to avoid modern art's quest for essentials as he puns the different levels of fabrication involved in the creation, marketing, and use of these textiles. Not only do these textiles result from an involved fabrication based on a combination of local needs and international business interests, but they are also concerned with constructing shorthand signs for the local narratives that take the form of letters, depicted and written proverbs, pictures of rulers and visiting dignitaries, as well as emblems of government authority, political parties, wealth, status, and timely issues, thus enabling people wearing this cloth to demonstrate physically through their dress an allegiance to different facets of the social and political fabric constituting their cultural universe. In addition to serving as a visual/verbal pun, Shonibare's African-print cloth, with its assumptions of a constructed Africaness, is a readymade with the built-in joke of authenticity that even Marcel Duchamp would have appreciated, even though others might argue from a Wittgensteinian perspective that applied use, rather than a product's origin, is a function of meaning.<sup>27</sup> Apropos this line of reasoning, African art specialist John Picton has recalled seeing groups of people in West Africa attending political and family celebrations all dressed in the same African-print fabric.<sup>28</sup> And in his exploration of the Yoruba in London, Oyètádè has noted the prevalence of these African prints during the summer and at such special events as house warmings, weddings and naming ceremonies where they appeared to epitomise the subject of Yorubaland, since he and others were under the mistaken impression that the shops in Brixton had imported all these fabrics from Nigeria.<sup>29</sup>

Because there is a great difference in the quality and consequent price of African-print textiles that range from the least expensive screenprints to moderately priced resin-resist-dyed fabrics with hand-blocked colours and the relatively costly wax-dyed fabrics, responses to the significance of this fabric in Shonibare's art have ranged from discussions of its working-class affiliations to estimations of the considerable price that purchasing six-metre lengths of Vlisco textiles (the quantity required for a traditional woman's dress and headscarf) would entail. West Africans have been known to invest in the best

products as hedges against inflation since Real Dutch Wax and Super Wax, along with gold and diamonds, have held their value during times of financial insecurity. As an example of the relative values separating high- from low-end markets, in 2000 journalist Matt Steinglass compared Real Dutch Wax, which then sold for about US \$90 for a six-metre length in Togo, to an Asian knock-off that was deceptively referred to as 'Real Wax—Printed as [sic.] Holland', which sold for one tenth of this amount.<sup>30</sup> Since the average Togan yearly income was then around \$350, one can readily appreciate the type of luxury product Vlisco's textiles represent. The differences between low and high grades stem not just from the printing techniques employed, but are also apparent in the stability of the fabric's dyes after repeated washings. As one might expect, the cheapest materials fade after one washing while the best retain their quality after repeated use.

From this discussion, one can conclude that when Shonibare uses Real Dutch Wax or Super Wax for his sculptures, he is not so much mixing low and high elements, similar to Neo-Geo artists like Koons, as he is employing an identifiable polyvalent sign of colonialism, nationalism, and globalism. He does so in order to reference the luxury and expense of both European imperial powers and colonised elites, whose combined wealth during imperialism was derived from the political trajectories that they had set on their course and perpetuated. Considered in this way, Shonibare's work connects the aristocracy of Europe with the colonised wealthy class, which benefited from western educations and international connections. Regarding the aristocracy and their role in his work, Shonibare has pointed out, 'I'm not moralistic about the aristocracy ... I crave the trappings of wealth like anyone else, but politically I do question the means by which that is achieved.'<sup>31</sup> In addition, when Shonibare has his figures constructed, he elides strict differences in skin tones so as to avoid racial tagging and also to indicate complicity between both groups. In this way, his assessment is double-edged, demonstrating the necessary collusion—one of his main yet still unappreciated subjects—that supports the wealth and power of both groups.

Shonibare's first exhibited work to incorporate African-print fabric is *Installation*, which was a finalist in the 1992 Barclays Bank annual Young Artist Award exhibition, featuring work by recent London art school graduates. Since this exhibition was held from February 7 to March 8, 1992 at the Serpentine Gallery, a highly visible and respected London venue for cutting-edge work, and since Shonibare's piece was the subject of an *African Arts* three-



I.



II.

page review that concludes with the artist speculating about 'what might happen when he takes his kind of art to Nigeria',<sup>32</sup> the dialectics between mainstream and formerly colonised venues that MoMA's curators had totally ignored eight years earlier are now duly noted. *Installation* is comprised of 23 randomly placed and differently sized rectangles of stretched fabric: some were painted with hardware-store paint to resemble monochromes, while others remained densely patterned. Situated on two perpendicular white walls, the unpainted pieces of cloth present a range of subjects, including soccer players, flowers, alphabet letters, images of playing cards, cosmic diagrams and tribal symbols. Both this fabric and its subject-matter sustain Shonibare's earlier goal to connect Africa with the modern world in his art. Following the example of the 1980s New York commodity artist Haim Steinbach, Shonibare's works of the late 1980s and early 1990s juxtaposed images of tribal artifacts found in the British Museum with modern home appliances selected from an Argos catalogue. These include such pairings as an Ife head with a coffee maker as well as a Lega stool with a telephone, which he titled *Caryatid Figures Rafia Colour Motif with Viscount from British Telecom*. These unusual combinations also perpetuated Victor Shklovsky's early twentieth-century Russian Formalist ideal of distancing images from familiar contexts so that they might be seen afresh.<sup>33</sup>

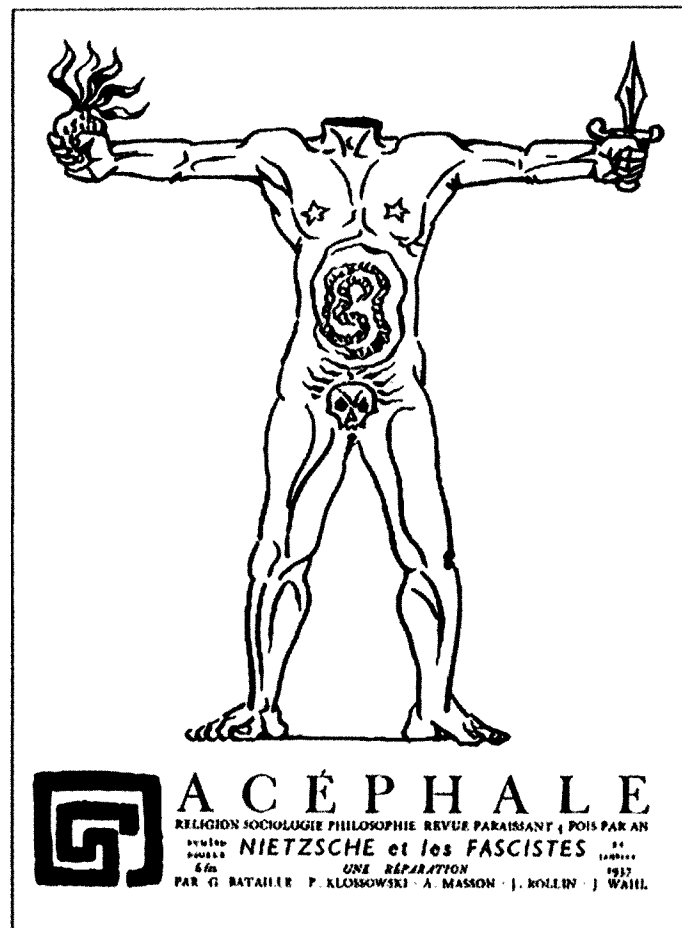
After creating *Installation*, Shonibare continued attaching stretched African-prints to small square stretchers, which he could physically handle with ease, and then over-painted some of them with emulsion and house paint. At this stage in his development, his conceptual grounding in feminism enabled him to regard painting as a means of signifying the subjects of African-print fabrics as popular culture phenomena rather than as a set of personally generated symbols. This turn enabled him to subvert the idea of universality that is part of the modern tradition. 'What I started to do when I began to use African fabric in my work', he later reminisced slyly, 'was to contaminate the modernist idea of painting'.<sup>34</sup> During this period he was intrigued with the work of the 1980s New York postmodern abstract painter Jonathan Lasker, who cast different abstract styles within the same painting as distinct protagonists in the non-objective theatre he was creating.<sup>35</sup> Shonibare's approach to African-print fabric in *Installation* led to the grid-like assembly of small rectangles against an intense pink wall in *Double Dutch* (1997); the randomly sized circles against an indigo background in *Maxa* (2003); and the giant black splatter representing oil, which is superimposed with overlapping roundels of African-print fabric and hung on a white wall, in *Black Gold I and II* (2006).

In 1995 Shonibare began using African-print fabric for Victorian clothing in *Five Undergarments and Much More*. In this piece he plays on the fact that Great Britain's then Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher had extolled the Victorian era as a time when bedrock British values were developed and thus advocated returning to them.<sup>36</sup> He has noted that this era was also the peak period of British imperialism and a time when Africa was being divvied up by various European powers, an act he later solemnised in *Scramble for Africa* (2003). In regards to Victorian values, Shonibare had this to say:

'Of course I realised, as an African, that Victorian values for me, were very draconian.... The Victorians colonised Africa. Basically the Victorians made Africans work to produce a great empire. So Victorian values[,] to me, were values of repression, values of making me feel inferior'.<sup>37</sup>

In addition to constructing individual Victorian garments in African prints so that they would serve as a synecdoche for the artist's act of undressing and revealing imperialism's chameleon-like nature and could be read by turns as European, African, and also Diasporic (as his *Cha Cha Cha* (1997), which its Latin theme clearly indicates), Shonibare began to present his African-print fabric Victorian costumes on dressmakers' dummies in *How Does a Girl Like You Get to be a Girl Like You?* (1995). This work repeats as its title the famous line Cary Grant's character Roger O. Thornhill made to the spy Eve Dendall, played by Eva Marie Saint in Alfred Hitchcock's *North by Northwest* (1959). In my opinion, Shonibare's dressmakers' dummies should be considered elaborate puns on the mindless acts of historic players (dummies), who are not so much active forces as unthinking participants whose lives provide ready and willing screens on which historical events are projected. Two years later Shonibare continued subscribing to this common dressmaker's model in *Dressing Down*, but only began creating his painted and sculpted headless mannequins the following year (1998) when he conceived *Mr and Mrs Andrews Without Their Heads*, a three-dimensional play on a famous early Thomas Gainsborough painting of c.1750 in London's National Gallery, which commemorated the marriage of Robert Andrews and Frances Carter by situating them before their combined property.

Published writings on Shonibare's work have readily adopted his explanation for using headless figures in his work. His most complete explanation reads as follows:



iii.

During the French Revolution, the heads of the aristocrats were chopped off using the guillotine. Basically, it started as a joke ... It's witty in a knowing sort of way. It adds more ambivalence.<sup>38</sup>

When one compares his statement with the phrase, 'Without Their Heads', which was part of Shonibare's title for his three-dimensional riff on Gainsborough's painting, cited above, the joke is an obvious reference to the symbolic killing of aristocrats, even those living more than forty years before the Reign of Terror like Robert Andrews and his fiancée and in England where such extreme measures never took place. Because Shonibare's headless figures are dressed so ostentatiously in variegated overlays of usually three different African-print patterns, one is encouraged to move almost immediately from his guillotine joke to his statement about the political roles that excess and seduction play in his work:

This is my own way of dealing with ideology. The use of excess, seduction, and pleasure in my work always remains political but without preaching politics, which is a different thing. I'm never moralistic. Instead it's a question of working through political issues as well as being seduced by the actual form, a question of provoking and seducing.<sup>39</sup>

Although this statement connects politics with excess and seduction, it suggests a far more complex relationship between these different elements than is usually attributed to them and makes one wonder about a common source for them.

And there certainly is a place where excess, seduction and headlessness meet, and that is the thought of the French writer, archivist, librarian, and sometime philosopher and Surrealist Georges Bataille, whose work has assumed increasing importance in art and literary studies over the past two decades and was at its height in the late 1990s. In 1936 Bataille started the magazine *Acéphale*, published in five issues from 1936-39, and a secret society of the same name, which both honoured the beheading of the French King Louis XVI as a fitting symbol of a new non-hierarchical form of life, which celebrated the dispersion of power throughout society. Those individuals associated with either the *Acéphale* publication or the secret society indirectly opposed both the leadership of the high pope of Surrealism, André Breton, and contemporaneous fascist developments in Germany. On each of *Acéphale's* covers there appeared the same headless image, drawn by André Masson,

who had worked out its iconography while he was in close contact with Bataille.

Rather than supporting either Leonardo da Vinci or Robert Fludd's Renaissance-era views of a heroic man ruled by his spirit or mind, *Acéphale* (from the Greek *a-cephalus*, meaning literally 'headless') advocated a new form of anarchy that became the basis for an irreverent theory of sovereignty and nonknowledge, which culminated in the publication of Bataille's 1949 two-volume *The Accursed Share*. In this study Bataille reverses the direction of classical economics as he moves from traditionally conceived 'restrictive' economies, based on scarcity, to 'general' ones characterised by excess. Recognising that successful economies all create excess goods and money that then need to be expended in various forms of waste such as wars, the past times of autonomous rulers, and works of art, Bataille theorises that both sovereign economies and human beings depend on recklessly spending surplus moneys and using up goods in ecstatic and unpremeditated ways.<sup>40</sup> When they do so, they move away from the limitations and distance from life associated with setting goals and cogitating, to living fully in the moment. Embracing life in this fashion, they attain sovereignty. Bataille's thinking about this type of wanton expenditure depends in part on his earlier theory of base materialism as an unsettling form of matter that disrupts high and low polarities by subverting their foundations. An energetic dynamic incapable of being subsumed under opposing individual political views, base materialism is an unwieldy third term that assumes a trickster-like wiliness and bears a surprising resemblance to Derrida's deconstruction.

Bataille's chimerical base materialism functions in Shonibare's work in terms of the African-print fabric that assumes a chameleon-like role since it can be viewed, depending on one's perspective, as African, European, colonial, imperialist, and even global. In Shonibare's works this material in particular and his art in general can be cast in the role of either 'purloined seduction or pretend identity'.<sup>41</sup> This material's changeability, in combination with the ostentatious luxury offered by Vlisco's Real Dutch and Super Wax textile designs, is used to clothe headless figures that outrageously re-enact famous historical paintings by Gainsborough, Fragonard and Raeburn that attempt to take possession of family property, carry on courtships while swinging, and enjoy the personal autonomy afforded by skating. In Shonibare's art, the polarities of signs referring to colonising powers, as well as colonised and post-colonised peoples, are undermined by the excess of their costumes and gestures that

unites them into a totality that partially eradicates the firmly held political positions of any one group.

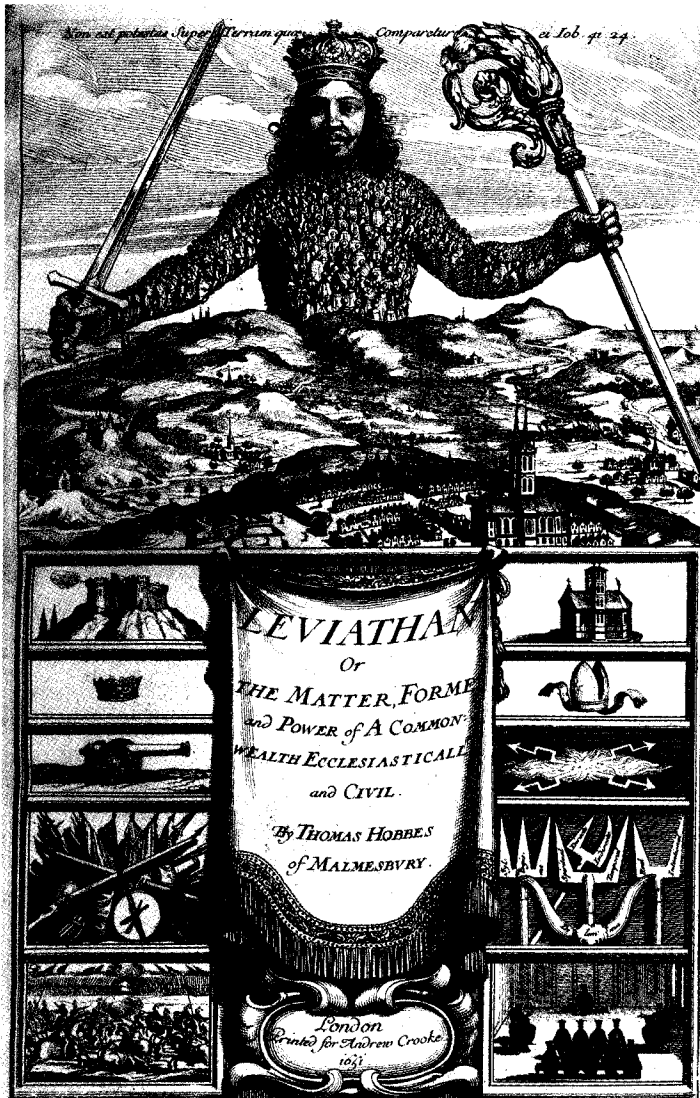
In Bataille's system, then, the sovereign human subject is sacrificed to the dissipation of excess energy that necessarily mindless consumption, he theorises, entails. Similarly, in Shonibare's work the sovereign subject transcends capitalism's limits even as it consumes and consummates itself in doing so. This ultimately transcendent act is a catharsis in which imperialism is deconstructed through the base materialism of Shonibare's elaborate and excessive costumes in African-print fabric that join in the figures' joyous ecstasy (*jouissance*) and sacrifice (their headlessness). Apropos the overall transgressive *jouissance* found in his work, Shonibare has opined, 'Excess is the only legitimate means of subversion ... Hybridisation is a form of disobedience, a parasitic disobedience on the host of the species, an excessive form of libido, it is joyful sex.'<sup>42</sup> The complex process of sovereignty and sacrifice that he constructs is evident in the uncanny eleven life-size headless figures making up *Gallantry and Criminal Conversation* (2002), which, according to the artist, refers to sexual encounters occurring to youths making the Grand Tour.<sup>43</sup> Apropos this type of work, Shonibare has concluded, 'I consider myself a hedonist ... I think that pleasure is king—as well as a very strong basis for being subversive'.<sup>44</sup>

The state of headlessness in Shonibare's work can also be considered a postcolonial refutation of Thomas Hobbes' *Leviathan*, which served as a frontispiece for his mid-seventeenth-century study of political theory bearing the same title. In this engraving, on which Hobbes collaborated with the Parisian printmaker Abraham Bosse, the *Leviathan* takes the form of a giant's upper torso whose body is comprised, like an Arcimboldo, of the citizens sanctioning his power. Although this image is intended to demonstrate the conflicting role of the body politic, which is dependent on this giant that it has helped to create, the mixture of public and private interests representing this composite image of state head and bourgeois citizenry has been extended over the centuries to represent imperial powers and their colonies. Once the body politic is seen without its powerful head, one moves from imperialism to postcolonialism as Shonibare's acephalous figures poignantly suggest.

Viewed in concert with the postmodern tradition that empowered critics of MoMA's *Primitivism in 20th Century Art* exhibition to reflect on the substantially different perspectives

of mainstream modernists, tribal initiates, and well-informed anthropologists, Shonibare's art is predicated on the capacity of his African prints to be viewed from radically different perspectives, depending on whether they are contemplated by mainstream westerners or Yoruba versed in traditional culture. Considered also in terms of Benveniste's theory of enunciation, referred to earlier, Shonibare's dialectical work can be comprehended in terms of both western and traditional Yoruba artistic protocols, which legitimate in different ways their subjects' entries into their own socially authorised perspectives. In the critical writing on Shonibare's headless figures, it is both surprising and unfortunate that the traditional Yoruba outlook has been passed over, particularly since this tribe considers the head to be the seat of the soul and consequently the most important part of the body. According to Nigerian art historian Babatunde Lawal, the head in traditional Yoruba culture is 'the lord of the body' and is 'given pride of place', even in Yoruba art where 'it is almost always the biggest and most elaborately finished part of a typical figure sculpture, often adorned with a crownlike coiffure or headgear'.<sup>45</sup> Because Shonibare's work so obviously veers away from this tradition, one wonders if his refutation of it was a conscious decision or was otherwise motivated. At any rate, the Yoruba's view of the head as enclosing inner and outer parts would predispose tribal members schooled in Yoruba traditions to view Shonibare's headless figures as much more transgressive and alarming than would mainstream audiences. Adding to Shonibare's negation of this tradition is his narrative cycle of photographs on the subject of Dorian Gray, that could be considered a devilish reframing of the Yoruba tradition of inner (spiritual) and outer (secular) heads and the invocation, 'May my inner head not spoil my outer one', that seems to parallel so appropriately Oscar Wilde's tale of an ageless Edwardian dandy with his hidden portrait (his inner head, so to speak) mirroring the effects of his dissolute life. In addition to the importance placed on the head in Yoruba culture, this tribe's view of the past as both readily available and wholly indispensable to the present suggests important resonances with Shonibare's desire to rethink in his art aspects of imperialism and its impact on postcolonialism and contemporary globalism.

In addition, the Yoruba could well view Shonibare's use of African-print cloth as a secular updating of the Yoruba Egungun masquerades, particularly when one considers his memory of seeing them in Lagos while he was growing up.<sup>46</sup> Just as Egungun dancers are completely hidden underneath costumes comprised of multiple layers of cloth that connect



IV.

the Yoruba to the spiritual power of their ancestors, who are capable of affecting their future, so Shonibare's sculptures are defined by their clothing that looks back to imperialism and forward to global networks. The assessment of African scholar John Pemberton III that, 'it is the [Egungun] costume, not the performance, that carries the expressive weight'<sup>47</sup> of the masquerade makes one consider how the Yoruba might regard Shonibare's dramatic use of African-print fabrics to re-posit, in terms of excessive consumption, imperialism's continued legacy. One might also reflect on how Yoruba tribe members, who build shrines in marketplaces to the trickster Eshu, might regard Shonibare's use of commercial fabric to symbolise the conflicted motivations and needs characterising imperial and global networks. Similar to Eshu, who symbolises the impulsive and destabilising forces of commercial transactions, passageways and transitions, and as a pre-eminent trickster, combines light-hearted dancing with fury and unsettling sexuality with inspired moments of intimacy, Shonibare's sculptures bring together conflicting points of view.

In considering the possibility of regarding Shonibare's art from a Yoruba perspective, we might conclude that his work is definitely polyvalent in the dialectical views it permits and global in terms of the different network protocols it elicits. Poised on differences, it can be regarded in multiple ways that accord with postmodernism's eminent hybridity and differ markedly from modernism's univocal generalities. 'Speaking as a self-confessed beauty hugger', Shonibare once explained, 'I would like to add that I have found beauty one of the most radically subversive strategies to counter a Eurocentric hegemony on the use of beauty. The debates on aesthetics cannot be narrowly defined as a modernist concern; the politics of aesthetics is directly related to issues of globalisation ...'.<sup>48</sup>

#### ROBERT HOBBS 2008

Robert Hobbs, Ph.D., holds the Rhoda Thalheimer Endowed Chair in Art History at Virginia Commonwealth University and is a regular visiting professor at Yale University. He has published widely on contemporary art in general and African-American art in particular. In 2002 he served as the US commissioner and curator of *Kara Walker: Slavery! Slavery!* for the São Paulo Biennial.

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1. Hephzibah Anderson, 'Art of Africa', *Evening Standard*, October 14, 2004, [www.thisislondon.co.uk/showbiz/article-140414170-details/Art+of+Africa/article.do](http://www.thisislondon.co.uk/showbiz/article-140414170-details/Art+of+Africa/article.do) (accessed April 2, 2008).
2. Rachel Campbell-Johnson, 'Dandy in the Undergrowth', *The Times*, London, November 28, 2006, [http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts\\_and\\_entertainment/article1088185.ece](http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts_and_entertainment/article1088185.ece) (accessed April 2, 2008).
3. Jan Garden Castro, 'In Art, Anything is Possible: A Conversation with Yinka Shonibare', *Sculpture* 25, No. 6, July/August 2006, p. 25. On other occasions Shonibare has acknowledged watching the Australian program *Skippy the Kangaroo*, the US-originated *Batman and Robin*, and *Soul Train*. Pernilla Holmes, 'The Empire's New Clothes', *Art News*, October 2002, pp. 119-120. In addition to these programs he also watched at different times during his childhood in Lagos *The Muppets* and the BBC Masterpiece Theatre serialised production *Upstairs, Downstairs*. See also Anderson. In 2005 he told critic Ingrid Sischy, 'I grew up with this constant flow between two cultures ... I would listen to the music of Fela Kuti, but I would also play James Brown'. See Sischy, 'The Artist Formally Known for Prints', *New York Times Style Magazine*, Spring 2005, p. 188.
4. Yinka Shonibare, interview with author, New York City, April 12, 2008. This and the following discussion about Shonibare's early schooling in art come from this interview.
5. Holmes, Op.Cit., p. 120.
6. B. Akintúnde Oyètádé, 'The Yorùbá Community in London', *African Languages and Cultures* 6, No. 1, 1993, pp. 76-77.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 73.
8. Holmes, Op.Cit., p. 120.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 119.
10. Sischy, Op.Cit., p. 188.
11. In 1991 British art historian Norman Bryson emphasised the MoMA exhibition's 'elision of cultural differences', which 'conveniently disremembers the brutal era of European colonialism' and chalks up the exhibition's major blind spot to 'the ideology of colonialism, past and present'. Cf. Norman Bryson, 'The Politics of Arbitrariness' in Norman Bryson, Michael Holly, and Keith Moxey, eds. *Visual Theory: Painting and Interpretation*, Icon Edition Harper Collins Publishers, New York, 1991, p. 99.
12. Thomas McEvilley, 'Thomas McEvilley Replies' in 'Letters: On 'Doctor Lawyer Indian Chief: "Primitivism" in 20th Century Art at The Museum of Modern Art in 1984', *Artforum* 23, February 1985, p. 51. McEvilley is guilty of oversimplifying tribal art when he says that its creators and users did not look at their work as art.
13. Henry John Drewal, 'Contested Realities: Inventions of Art and Authenticity' in Philip L. Ravenhill, V.Y. Mudimbe, Henry John Drewal, Sidney Littlefield Kasfir, 'More on African Art and Authenticity', *African Arts* 25, No. 4, October 1992, p. 26.
14. Sidney Littlefield Kasfir, 'African Art and Authenticity: A Text with a Shadow', *African Arts* 25, No. 2, April 1992, p. 41.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 44.
16. *Ibid.*, pp. 41, 44 and 72.
17. Thelma Golden, introduction to *Yinka Shonibare*, ed. Thelma Golden, exhibition catalogue, The Studio Museum in Harlem, New York, 2002, pp. 7-8.
18. Jaap Guldmond and Gabriele Mackert, 'To Entertain and Provoke: Western Influences in the Work of Yinka Shonibare', *Yinka Shonibare: Double Dutch*, exhibition catalogue, Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, Rotterdam and Kunsthalle Wien, with NAI Publishers, Rotterdam, 2004, p. 41.
19. Holmes, Op.Cit., p. 120.
20. <http://www.vlisco.com/Timeline> (accessed June 3, 2008).
21. Kevin Matthews, 'Q&A: Nina Sylvanus', UCLA African Studies Center (April 2007), at <http://www.international.ucla.edu/africa/article.asp?parentid=67940> (accessed April 5, 2008).
22. <http://www.vlisco.com/Timeline> (accessed May 5, 2008).
23. John Picton, 'Laughing at Ourselves', in Guldmond and Mackert, Op.Cit., p. 50.
24. Cathryn Poff, 'Dutch Wax' in 'West African Days: Venturing to Ghana and Beyond...', April 2, 2005, <http://reportersabroad.org/ghana/archives/2005/04/dutchwax.php> (accessed April 5, 2008).
25. Wyger Wentholt, 'The Real Dutch Wax ... The Company that Clothes Africa', *New African*, March 2000, [http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi\\_qa5391/is\\_200003/ai\\_n21452672](http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_qa5391/is_200003/ai_n21452672) (accessed April 5, 2008). The following discussion regarding Vlisco's approach to design relies on information in this essay.
26. Kobena Mercer, 'Art That is Ethnic in Inverted Commas', *Frieze*, No. 25, November-December 1995, <http://www.frieze.com/issue/artthatsethnicinvertedcommas/> (accessed April 5, 2008).
27. Sylvanus actually does make this point. 'I would actually argue', she has stated, 'that it's not the origin of the fabric that designates its capacity to become 'African', but the way an object is used and integrated into a local context'. Matthews, Op.Cit.
28. Picton, Op.Cit., p. 57.
29. Oyètádé, Op.Cit., p. 74.
30. Matt Steinglass, 'Out of Amsterdam', *MetropolisMag.com*, [http://www.metropolismag.com/html/content\\_1200/ent.htm](http://www.metropolismag.com/html/content_1200/ent.htm) (accessed May 5, 2008).
31. Holmes, Op. Cit., p. 119.
32. Elsbeth Court, 'Yinka Shonibare: Finalist, Barclays Young Artist Award', *African Arts* 26, No. 1, January 1993, pp. 79-81.
33. Victor Shklovsky, 'Art as Technique' in *Russian Formalist Criticism: Four Essays*, trans. Lee T. Lemon and Marion J. Reis, University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln and London, 1965, p. 12. Shklovsky writes, 'The technique of art is to make objects 'unfamiliar', to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged'.
34. Suzanne Landau, 'Yinka Shonibare's Garden of Pleasure', in *Yinka Shonibare: Double Dress*, ed. Suzanne Landau, exhibition catalogue, The Israel Museum, Jerusalem, 2002, p. 9.
35. Cf. Robert Hobbs, 'Jonathan Lasker's *Dramatis Personae*' in *Jonathan Lasker: Paintings, Drawings, Studies*, exhibition catalogue, Museo nacional centro de arte Reina Sofia, Madrid in co-production with K20 Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen, Düsseldorf, 2003. This essay can be accessed on <http://roberthobbs.net/>.
36. Holmes, Op. Cit., p. 121.
37. 'Nigerian Artist's Victorian Values', *BBC News*, December 2, 2004, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/4061281> (accessed April 2, 2008).
38. Castro, Op. Cit., p. 26.
39. Lars Bang Larsen, '1000 Words: Yinka Shonibare Talks about *Un Ballo in Maschera*, 2004', *Artforum* 43, No. 5, January 2005, p. 173.
40. In relation to Shonibare's focus on imperialism and the relation of his work to Bataille's general economy of excess, it is worth noting that the philosopher Hannah Arendt assesses imperialism in terms consistent with Bataille's theory. She writes: 'Innocently enough, expansion appeared first as the outlet for excess capital production and offered a remedy, capital export. The tremendously increased wealth produced by capitalist production under a social system based on maldistribution had resulted in 'over saving'—that is, the accumulation of capital which was condemned to idleness within the existing national capacity for production and consumption. This money was actually superfluous, needed by nobody though owned by a growing class of somebodies. The ensuing crises and depressions during the decades preceding the era of imperialism had impressed upon the capitalists the thought that their whole economic system of production depended upon a supply and demand that from now on must come from outside of capitalist society ... [C]apitalists had to decide either to see the whole system collapse or to find new markets, that is, to penetrate new countries which were not yet subject to imperialism and therefore could provide a new noncapitalistic supply and demand'. See Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., New York, 1951, (rpt. 1966), pp. 147-148.
41. Mercer, Op. Cit.
42. Jean Fisher, 'The Outsider Within: Shonibare's Dandy and Parasitic Economy of Exchange' in *Yinka Shonibare Double Dress*, ed. Suzanne Landau, exhibition catalogue, Israel Museum, Jerusalem, 2002, p. 27.
43. Holmes writes, 'The work is based on the artist's study of the Grand Tour, an 18th- and 19th-century English aristocratic rite of passage ... according to Shonibare, the trip turned into an exercise in sexual liberation'. Holmes, Op. Cit., p. 121.
44. Holmes, Op. Cit., p. 119.
45. Babatunde Lawal, 'Àwòrán: Representing the Self and Its Metaphysical Other in Yoruba Art', *The Art Bulletin* 83, No. 3, September 2001, p. 501.
46. Shonibare, interview with author, April 12, 2008.
47. John Pemberton III, 'Egungun Masquerades in the Igbomina Yoruba', *African Arts* 11, No. 3, April 1978, p. 46.
48. Tim Griffin, James Meyer, Francesco Bonami, Catherine David, Okwui Enwezor, Hans-Ulrich Obrist, Martha Rosler, and Yinka Shonibare, 'Global Tendencies: Globalism and the Large-Scale Exhibition', *Artforum* 42, No. 3, November 2003, p. 163.

#### CONTEXTUAL IMAGES

I. Yinka Shonibare MBE *Maxa* 2003

emulsion and acrylic on Dutch wax printed cotton, painted wall. overall 330 x 805 x 5 cm; 75 panels, varying 30, 40, 60 cm diameters. Collection of Melva Bucksbaum and Raymond Leary Photo: Stephen White

II. Yinka Shonibare MBE *Five Under Garments and Much More* 1995

African fabric, Rigilene, fishing line, interlining Tailored by Sian Lewis. circumference 95 x 130 cm each Courtesy Stephen Friedman Gallery, London © the artist

III. Magazine cover to George Bataille, *Acéphale: Religion, Sociologie, Philosophie*, by André Masson. Magazine published from June 1936 – June 1939, 5 issues. Courtesy of ADAGP, Paris and Viscopy, Sydney.

IV. Frontispiece to Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan, or the Matter Form and Power of a Commonwealth, Ecclesiastical and Civil*, by Unknown artist, line engraving, published 1651, 24.1 x 15.6 cm. Courtesy of The Library of Virginia.