

Still *Hemmed-In?* – Hew Locke, *The Procession*, and History

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1,150 Words

“*If I wasn’t an artist, I would have been a historian*”

Hew Locke in an interview for CRAFTS magazine ⁱ

1.

While recently re-reading a collection titled *Institutional Critique and After* ⁱⁱ, I repeatedly came across the names of Daniel Buren, Hans Haacke, Dan Graham, and Michael Asher, then Andrea Fraser and Nicolas Bourriaud’s *Relational Aesthetics*. Unlike the relatively conceptual strategies deployed by those artists, Hew Locke brings a more lavish materiality to bear on *his* form of institutional critique, dressing his contributions in a purposeful abundance. We might say that Hew Locke critiques the institution physically, culturally, dynamically, engaging directly with its architecture, filling its spaces, testing its possibilities and constraints. Ultimately his interventions implicate the institution’s own sense of time and history, along with that of the audience.

The first work that I saw installed by Hew Locke at Tate was *King Creole*, (2005).

This large-scale, gargoyle-like emblem hovered over Tate Britain’s Millbank entrance, its bold placement suggesting that the institution may have been re-branded by the artist. It featured a crown and crossed bone-like objects that in turn

invoked a skull-like form and thus appeared to constitute a warning to visitors about what they might encounter within ⁱⁱⁱ . Given Hew Locke's increasingly recognisable language of materials, processes and forms, I discerned in *King Creole* affinities with *Hemmed-In Two* (2000), an earlier work made by the artist. Those affinities include what I think of as a special 'historical' quality in Hew's work.

Crossed bones and crowns are not modern or 'contemporary' objects but come freighted with history. They tell us that history can be both grim and glorious but is invariably serious, drawing us into a responsible relationship with passing time, providing a kind of 'traction' with otherwise ephemeral events. History allows us to extract meaning from scars, marks and traces that can thereby give form to an otherwise formless, abstract or metaphysical time through which we inexorably pass

iv.



Hew Locke
King Creole Installation on facade of Tate Britain.
Photo Mark Heathcote © Tate, London 2005
2004, 6.3 X 4.8m Steel frame , plastic flowers, tinsel, plastic ties.



Hew Locke
Hemmed-In Two Victoria & Albert Museum, 2000
Cardboard, acrylic, marker pen, wood, found objects
Length 7.5 m, width 6 m, height 4 m

2.

In 2000 I wrote about *Hemmed-In Two*^v in which a Moorish-looking fantasy ship, made of cut and painted cardboard seemed to have wedged itself between the pillars of the Victoria & Albert Museum's entrance hall. This paradoxical gesture, simultaneously noble and Quixotic, seemed to deliver the art to the institution while undoing itself in the process. The piece thus became an image of liminality and suspense, of something dynamic and adventurous caught between a grand intention and a thwarted resolution.

The Procession (2022), Hew Locke's current work at Tate Britain, seems to have reversed the trajectory of *Hemmed-In Two*. *The Procession* now emerges from within the heart of Tate's Duveen galleries and strides towards the museum's exit, albeit once again subject to a certain sense of arrest, as if caught in the act of trying to leave. Its frozen motion invokes a tradition of snapshots or tableaux as much as a tradition of sculpture or installation.



Hew Locke
The Procession, 2022
Tate Britain, Duveen Hall Commission



The Wine Dark Sea
2016, Hew Locke: *The Wine Dark Sea*
February 24 – April 13, 2016
Edward Tyler Nahem Fine Art, L.L.C
New York. Selection of up to 34 boats, either hanging or on stands, ranging from 23 to 183 cms in length

Comparing these suspenseful works (and we could include others, such as *Wine Dark Sea* [2016] here ^{vi}) might raise a question about the artist's relationship with institutions and how that relationship may have evolved between 2000 and 2022. Has the artist, in 2022, perhaps 'been there' and 'done' his institutional critique, and is therefore able, perhaps even keen to escape institutions altogether? Or do these works reveal the artist as unavoidably attracted to but inevitably arrested by the institution, caught, as it were, in a 'tractor beam' of institutionalism?

3.

Of course, the liminal limbo described above might be the fate of *all and any* art whose value is determined by a relationship with institutions, but having raised this question we can explore the possible relevance – to art and to history – of that frozen motion discernible in *Hemmed-In Two*, in *The Procession*, and also in *Wine Dark Sea*.

There is of course an inherent contradiction in art's unending search to find adequate and appropriate ways and means to represent our mobile and mercurial life in the world. Our experience changes even as we represent it and is changed by our representation of it. A long history of technologies, including painting, sculpture, drawing and photography, as well as the tableau tradition mentioned above, have sought to perform the perverse act, or folly perhaps, of representing our temporal and multi-sensory experience using *still* images. Meanwhile, theatre, dance, music, cinema, literature, and now VR, digital animation etc. have all used relatively mobile

means to do the same. And yet none can ever hope to represent experience fully and accurately, or completely close the so-called 'gap between art and life'.

It may seem surprising that Hew Locke, who has explored and mixed so many media has to-date made only one moving-image work ^{vii}, however, the special sense of arrested motion in *Hemmed-In Two*, *The Procession*, and *Wine Dark Sea* might be said not only to *critique* the institution but to import a special temporality into the institution— that of the artist and his art. This temporality has then a power to enchant as much as it critiques, changing the institution from a formidable taxonomic organisation, notorious for its tendency to capture and arrest, into a more fairy-tale-like realm where time can be suspended by the artist.



Thomas Struth
Pergamon Museum I, Berlin, 2001

Like those figures in Thomas Struth's museum photographs (figures who are, of course, ourselves), on encountering *Hemmed-In Two*, *The Procession*, or *Wine Dark Sea*, and experiencing their demonstrative interaction with institutional architecture, we soon find ourselves not only participating in an artist's conceptual critique of a particular space or place, but becoming newly conscious of our own physicality, our relative motion and stillness, and thus more aware our involvement in time, and ultimately more conscious of our relationship with history.

END

BIO

Dr. Paul O’Kane is an artist, writer and senior lecturer in critical studies at Central Saint Martins college UAL. His most recent book is *History in Contemporary Art & Culture* (Routledge, 2022) (featuring a chapter on Hew Locke). Paul completed an MA in Visual Cultures (2001) and a PhD in History (2009), both at Goldsmiths college London. He writes for numerous catalogues, magazines and refereed journals, including *Third Text* and *Art Monthly*. Paul is a founder member of *eeodo* artists’ publishing and an international member of the Association of International Art Critics, for whom he gives regular papers to international congresses. Paul’s most recent articles have focused on monuments and masks, carnivals and class.

ⁱ <https://www.craftscouncil.org.uk/stories/hew-locke-if-i-wasnt-an-artist-i-would-have-been-a-historian>

ⁱⁱ Edited by J. Welchman and published by SoCCAS Southern California Consortium of art Schools (2006)

ⁱⁱⁱ *Coats of Arms*, Installation on facade of Tate Britain. Photo Mark Heathcote © Tate, London 2005.
King Creole. 2004, 6.3 X 4.8m, Steel frame , plastic flowers, tinsel, plastic ties. Public Artwork. Commissioned by the BBC. <http://www.hewlocke.net/kingcreole.html>

^{iv} Here it might be worth considering the WW2 bomb-blasted walls of Tate Britain's West façade.

^v A review for Third Text journal, published by Taylor & Francis
10th east international Ajamu's tail - bogus or realistic? Paul O'Kane (2000)
Third Text, Volume 14, 2000 - Issue 53, pp.106 - 110
<https://doi.org/10.1080/09528820108576893>

^{vi} Where boats 'float', literally suspended, reminding us of pandemic-quarantined cruise ships, or boats whose journeys were arrested by the recently blocked Suez canal.

^{vii} <https://www.seditionart.com/hew-locke/sovereign-state>
(*Sovereign State* [2016])