

The Slave Trade and Contemporary Art in the Museum. 'Uncomfortable Truths' at the V&A

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As noted by scholar of Caribbean history David Lambert, the first decade of the millennium saw an 'increasing popular and academic attention given to the Atlantic world'. In parallel to then new books that 'followed path-breaking work by Paul Gilroy and Joseph Roach', the author mentions a series of commemorative events that nurtured this growing interest in Black Atlantic cultures. Indeed, 2004 saw the bicentenary of Haiti's independence from France, and 2008 that of the outlawing of the slave trade in the United States of America. As for the UK, 2007 marked the commemoration of the Abolition of the 1807 slave trade act.¹ As part of the wealth of initiative to commemorate this event, the V&A hosted 'Uncomfortable Truths. The Shadow of Slave Trading on Contemporary Art and Design', curated by Zoe Whitley. In fact, this represented the contemporary side of the V&A's larger project for the bicentenary, Whitley's show being paralleled with 'Traces of the Trade: Discovery Trails Exploring the Links between Art, Design, and the Transatlantic Slave Trade. Exploring Links Between Art, Design and the Transatlantic Slave Trade'², which through five trails across the museum's galleries, sought to address 'how art and design were linked into the transatlantic slave trade', highlighting how objects in its collections recalled 'the legacies of the slave trade that remain in Britain today' and how it 'continue to shape our society'.³

This particular juncture in British intellectual and cultural life also coincided with a broader national imperative of a duty and right to memory supported and enacted by the government, then under Labour party Tony Blair's premiership. Indeed, the same year the National Lottery Heritage Fund supported the creation of the International Slavery Museum in Liverpool and alone funded more than 290 projects related to the history of slavery.⁴ In this regard, 'Uncomfortable Truths' was made possible and operated in a matrix within which the commemoration of slavery aligned with state rationality, and as an expression of and enacted through legal discourse. This is exemplified, for instance, by French politician and former Minister of Justice Christiane Taubira writing on the 'memory' of the slave trade as 'a matter of national cohesion', for whom, quoting Hannah Arendt, 'The right to memory is not a category right. It is not the plunder of the victims, their relatives or their descendants. This right is universal, in that it concerns and involves the whole of society. Memory is therefore an eminently political subject in the sense that "politics originates in the intermediate space and is constituted as a relationship"'.⁵

It is within this epochal, national and institutional frame that 'Uncomfortable Truths' took shape and must be understood, and with it that it negotiated, curatorially, its take on the history, aesthetics and politics of the transatlantic trade. Presenting works by eleven artists from the three continents of the Atlantic world and from diverse generations – El Anatsui, Anissa-Jane, Michael Paul Britto, Tapfuma Gutsa, Romuald Hazoumé, Lubaina Himid, Christine Meisner, Keith Piper, Yinka Shonibare MBE, Julien Sinzogan, and Fred Wilson – the exhibition addressed several issues to which, Whitley wrote, 'there may be no definitive answers: why is slavery so often discussed as something disconnected from the present? Why is transatlantic slavery seen as a black issue rather than a human one, by blacks as well as whites? Why does it take arbitrary anniversaries to bring these issues to the fore? How do we understand the roles of the perpetrators and the victims from our standpoint in the present? What can we learn from the history of resistance to slavery? How has slavery contributed to the benefit – and detriment – of the world we live in now? And, how has this institution, like many others, profited from the wealth generated through slave trading?'.⁶



El Anatsui, Akua's Surviving Children, 1996, found wood and tempera, height 165 cm, dimensions variable, V&A Installation: Uncomfortable Truths the Shadow of Slave Trading on Contemporary Art and Design. Photograph: Jonathan Greet. © the October Gallery. Courtesy the October Gallery

The exhibition consisted of pre-existing works selected by Whitley, and of new commissions. The former included El Anatsui, Akua's Surviving Children (1996), a group of tropical hardwood and tempera anthropomorphic sculptures originally produced for the Danish slavery project; Anissa-Jane presented four works, including *The Spirit of Lucy Negro* (2004), which all used brown paper – in the word of the artist, 'a metaphor for my skin'⁷ – testing its materiality and transforming it into sculpture; Britto's video *I'm a slave 4 U* (2005) featuring Black actors in slave costumes dancing to Britney Spears' eponymous song; sculptor Tapfuma Gutsa showed three works expressing his interest in 'slavery' as a phenomenon that 'has been part of human history forever, even to the present day';⁸ Lubaina Himid selected eleven figures from *Naming the Money* (2004), dispersed across three levels of the V&A galleries, colourful cut-out figures that tell 'the story of the slave/servant but also of the emigre and the asylum seeker', each figure having 'a real name' and being 'able to say who they actually are [while] each one lives with their new name and their new unpaid occupation attempting somehow to reconcile the two';⁹ German artist Christine Meisner showed the 'video tale' *Recovery of an Image* along with *Quilombolisation* and *Portraits of Personalities from Recife, Pernambuco* (all 2005) 'two series of delicate and powerful pencil drawings, excavating the experiences of Afro-Brazilian communities descended from slaves';¹⁰ finally was Fred Wilson's *Regina Atra* (2006). Meaning 'Black Queen' in Latin, Wilson recreated a crown made for the Queen on George IV's coronation in 1821, reversing its chromatic composition to obtain a Black diamonds crown, placed on a white cushion. By appropriating one of the symbols of British imperial power and injecting it with a different metaphorical charge, *Regina Atra* triggers new associations between Blackness, power, its semiotics and performance.

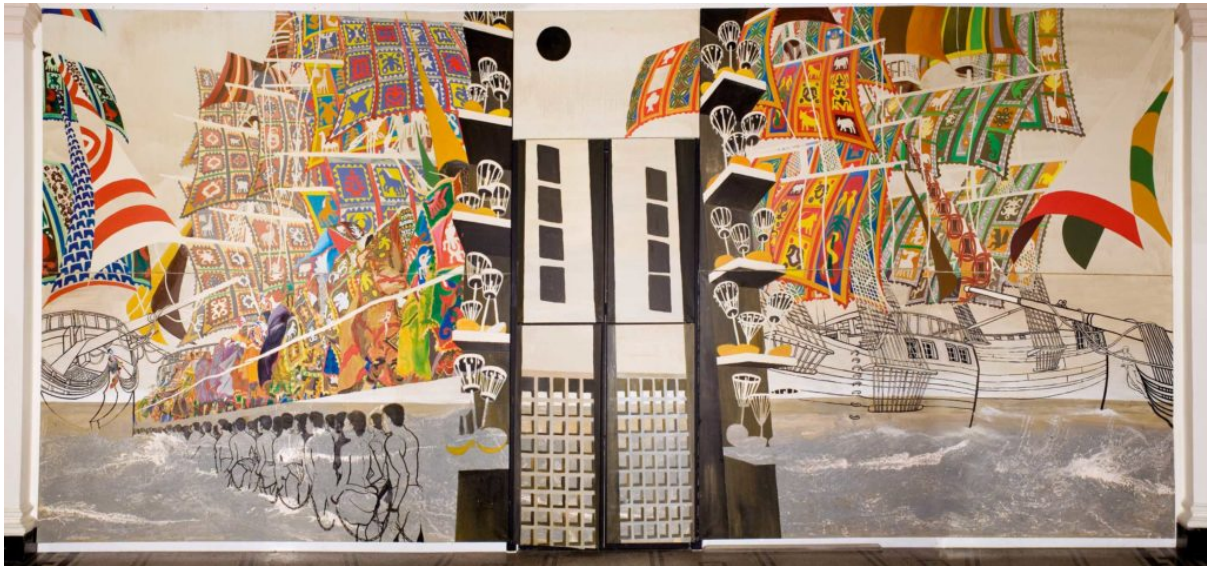
Among the works commissioned specially for 'Uncomfortable Truths' was Romuald Hazoumè's Dan Ayido-Huedo (Rainbow Serpent) (2007), exhibited outdoors in the John Madejski Gardens. A 'symbol of perpetuity' according to the work's French title, Hazoumè produced an ouroboros from disused jerrycans. Less directly concerned with the history of the Transatlantic trade, Hazoumè's monumental installation being sited in a crowded area of the V&A (nearby the museum's café) can be seen as an attempt to engage the audience with a set of connected themes and understand the issues addressed by 'Uncomfortable Truths' in an expanded sense. Indeed, the artist's idiosyncratic take on the strategy of récupération initiated in the 1980s brings attention to the harmful economy surrounding the transportation of fuel, the assemblage of jerrycans into a 4-metre high sculpture whose weariness and physicality come to signal to the visitors of the V&A another, contemporary, form of bloody trade. As Hazoumè puts it, 'I send back to the West that which belongs to them, that is to say, the refuse of consumer society that invades us every day', thereby articulating the analogy between the circularity of his work and of the displacement and reproduction of forms of human and economic exploitation.¹¹



Romuald Hazoumè, Dan Ayido Houedo (Rainbow Serpent) , 2007, height 4 m, V&A Installation: Uncomfortable Truths the Shadow of Slave Trading on Contemporary Art and Design. Photograph: Romuald Hazoumè. © the October Gallery. Courtesy the October Gallery

Keith Piper's Lost Vitrines (2007) were exhibited in a room of the British Galleries dedicated to the Eighteenth century. Based on conversations with V&A conservators and thorough research on the museological and display conventions of these galleries, Piper produced books and artefacts replicating the style and language of those usually exhibited there, but with content and imagery exposing the violence of slavery. Composing Lost Vitrines were, for instance, pages illustrating 'A Gentlemen's guide to the restraint of Negroes' or a box containing a colour palette titled 'The Coloured's Codex. An Overseers' Guide to Comparative Complexion'. Plainly or humorously dark, Piper's strategies of detournement were intended, in his own words, to 'open a dialogue around systems of encoding the memory of a historical epoch within the established archive, and the extent to which alternative and counter narratives of an epoch can be strategically absented'.¹²

Sir Foster Cunliffe Playing (2007) by Yinka Shonibare MBE represented the grandson of Foster Cunliffe, Liverpool's biggest slave trader, reproduced as 'a headless archer dressed in period costume made of African textiles – a comment on the leisure classes who benefited most from the slave trade'.¹³ The combination of the acephalous figure with the use of batik for the design of the period costume contributed to estrange this figuration of Cunliffe. In a review of the exhibition, art historian Michael White points out that 'While we now consider batik a characteristic West African product, it was originally a British export to Africa, derived from the Dutch appropriation of Indonesian printing techniques. It became extremely popular in Africa and favoured over traditional costume as a sign of social prestige.' According to White, what Shonibare intended 'By dressing Cunliffe this way' is to reveal 'the intertwining of the constructions of "African" and "British" identities through exchange; Britain traded textiles for slaves many of whom were used to produce cotton which was then brought back to Britain to supply the textile industry'.¹⁴



Julien Sinzogan, *Gates of Return*, 2007, 4.65 x 10 m, V&A Installation: *Uncomfortable Truths the Shadow of Slave Trading on Contemporary Art and Design*. Photograph: Jonathan Greet. © the October Gallery. Courtesy the October Gallery

Finally, the last work commissioned by Whitley and the V&A was Julien Sinzogan's *Gates of Return*, 2007. The artist's practice is mostly concerned with the history and contemporary aftermaths of the slave trade. Like Hazoumé, from Benin, formerly Dahomey, one of the major West African slave-trading ports, the title of Sinzogan's commission for the V&A suggest a reversal of the location's association with departure to the other side of the Atlantic. Made of four panels hung on two doors of the museum's Grand Entrance, *Gates of Return* depicts colourful slave ships returning from the Americas. These bright elements are in contrast with the representation of those who depart whose contours only are painted, creating an effect of transparency and disappearance. *Gates of Return* proposes both an act of not-forgetting those who left as well as those who exploited them, Westerners and African kings alike, as well as the closure of this painful historical chapter. However, for the artist, 'the real crime perpetrated was the loss, to the communities that remained, of the protective "spirits" of those who never returned.' To follow his thinking on this point, one must understand what Wole Soyinka, describes as the 'cyclical reality of the Yoruba world-view'.¹⁵

The works brought together by Whitley constellated practices operating across various mediums, multiple localities – including artists from the Global South, a curatorial feature that was triggered not long before with Catherine David's *documenta X* in 1997 and Okwui Enwezor's *documenta11* in 2002 – and engaging with the Transatlantic trade and the Black Atlantic from several different perspectives, generating an experience that 'may inspire

visitors to think critically about the history and memory of slavery'. The same author noted that the works being 'scattered throughout the museum [...] The experience at the V&A is profound, but some may find it overwhelming.'¹⁶ If for this reviewer, Lynn M. Hudson, a scholar of African-American history, the exhibition proved stimulating, her hint at its display strategy – that of creating trails across the museum – was a source of criticism in much of the public reception.¹⁷ This possible tension created by the trails was also addressed by art historian Caroline Jacobs, writing that while 'intended to catch the public's attention and disturb its expectations and usual view of the institution', such mode of display would likely generate 'varied reactions: enthusiasm for its boldness, or hostility due to the disturbance of the galleries' usual display'.¹⁸ In this regard, 'Uncomfortable Truths' raised questions about what Bruno Latour has termed *Gedankenaustellung*, namely exhibitions that expose problems and make conceptual and epistemological points, and the exhibition-form itself.¹⁹

If 'Uncomfortable Truths' and its associated trail 'Traces of the Trade: Discovery Trails Exploring the Links between Art, Design, and the Transatlantic Slave Trade' were an integral part of the HLF-funded V&A project "Capacity Building & Cultural Ownership", whose aim was to 'develop a wider audience for the museum by "rediscovering and reinterpreting the past, through research into hidden histories of relevance to the African Diaspora, which are currently embedded in the V&A's collections"', the form of the trail was also a potent one.²⁰ Indeed, we can make the case that, by disrupting, and therefore inviting to reimagine the relationships between thought, critique and exhibition-form, it also ultimately addressed the museum – and the potentiality of a Black Atlantic Museum – as the adequate medium for the exploration of traumatic histories, advanced towards the construction of emancipatory horizons. A possible direction is given by one of the participating artists, Fred Wilson. Synthetising the two genealogies of Institutional Critique – the appropriation of a Duchampian exhibitionary sensibility towards the gallery as a method to reveal art's nominalist condition, and its more explicitly politicised orientation inherited from the anti-Vietnam war protests of the 60s and other US civic rights movements – the spatiality of museums and the trails they make possible have been at the heart of some of his projects. Retracing a work at the Maryland Historical Society in an interview with art historian Martha Buskirk, Wilson commented:

This museum, like the Metropolitan, and all museums that have general collections of art from around the world, have all jumped into saying that they're multicultural. And to me, they're about as multicultural as the British Empire: all the cultures are there, but who decides what they have to say, what's next to what, and what's important? So I decided to look at it in terms of how history is created in the linear nature of the floor plan of the museum, which takes you from the ancient world, Egypt, Greece, and Rome, through Medieval Europe, Renaissance, and so on, until you end up in twentieth-century American art.²¹

In this regard, the critical-poetics of trails conceived for 'Uncomfortable Truths' can be seen as performing and expanding similar strategies of Institutional Critique. In creating confusion, generating polyphonies and producing cuts across Victorian galleries, it also staged an encounter between Institutional Critique and Black thought, articulating what theorist Katherine McKittrick calls 'spatial acts', namely, the inextricable combination of 'real-imagined geographies' generated 'to argue that the poetics of landscape, whether expressed through theoretical, fictional, poetic, musical, or dramatic texts, can also be understood as real responses to real spatial inequalities'.²² Finally, against the linearity of the museum and its conventions, 'Uncomfortable Truths' can also be interpreted as unfolding through the 'oral episteme' of African thought, where 'dramatisation' (Mamoussé Diagne) competes with history and performs a 'Politics of Transfiguration' (Gilroy after Seyla Benhabib), a politics that 'exists on a lower frequency where it is played, danced, and acted, as well as sung and sung about', and we may add, exhibited.²³

1. David Lambert, 'Review essay: An Atlantic world – modernity, colonialism and slavery', *Cultural Geographies*, no.15 (2), 2008, p.271–72. The 1807 Abolition of the slave trade act did not mean, however, the end of slavery, with many managing to avoid restrictions. It is not until the slavery Abolition act in 1833 that the practice became entirely illegal across the British empire. Historian Dave Gosse has shown how the 1807 act was passed thanks to a discursive economy fed by moral and humanitarian values while those who championed it clearly understood the benefits of reforming slavery for economic reasons. See Dave Gosse, 'The Politics of Morality: The Debate Surrounding the 1807 Abolition of the Slave Trade', *Caribbean Quarterly*, vol.56, no.1/2, March–June 2010, pp.127–38.
2. Henceforth, 'Uncomfortable Truths' will refer to the contemporary art exhibition curated by Zoe Whitley. When referring to the other show, its full name will be used.
3. 'Uncomfortable Truths. The Shadow and of Slave Trading on Contemporary Art and Design', V&A, London, 20 February–17 June 2007.
4. 'Uncomfortable Truths. The Shadow and of Slave Trading on Contemporary Art and Design', V&A, London, 20 February–17 June 2007.
5. Christiane Taubira, 'Le droit à la mémoire', *Cités*, vol. 25, no. 1, 2006, pp.164-66. Although this statement concerns the question of commemorating the history of slavery in France, it is telling of the connection between actions and events taking place to such ends and state rationality, and of how the latter mobilises them, more broadly.
6. Zoe Whitley, "Uncomfortable Truths", installation by various artists', V&A [website], <http://www.vam.ac.uk/content/articles/u/uncomfortable-truths> (link unavailable at time of writing).
7. Anissa-Jane, 'Interview with Anissa-Jane', V&A [website], [h2p://www.vam.ac.uk/content/articles/i/interview-with-anissa-jane-artist](http://www.vam.ac.uk/content/articles/i/interview-with-anissa-jane-artist) (link unavailable at time of writing).
8. Tapfuma Gutsa, 'Interview with Tapfuma Gutsa', V&A [website], [h2p://www.vam.ac.uk/content/articles/i/interview-with-tapfuma-gutsa-artist](http://www.vam.ac.uk/content/articles/i/interview-with-tapfuma-gutsa-artist) (link unavailable at time of writing).
9. Lubaina Himid, 'Naming the Money', Lubaina Himid [personal website], available at <https://lubainahimid.uk/portfolio/naming-the-money/> (last accessed on 16 October 2022).
10. 'Christine Meisner', V&A [website], <http://www.vam.ac.uk/content/articles/u/uncomfortable-truths> (link unavailable at time of writing).
11. 'Romuald Hazoumé', The Jean Pigozzi African Art Collection [website], available at <http://www.caacart.com/artiste/hazoum-romuald/> (last accessed on 19 October 2022). Récupération, as noted by art historian Dana Liljegren, 'despite unsurprising comparisons to the Duchampian readymade [...] in Senegal bears a specific and politicised history'. D. Liljegren, 'Waste Not: Ndary Lô, Récupération, and the Lives of Things', *Afterall*, Issue 50, Autumn–Winter 2020, pp.150–53. A widespread strategy in Senegal, récupération has also been widely developed in Benin, Hazoumé's country, where he is acknowledged as one of its major representatives, Liljegren's remark also seems valid. For an overview of récupérateurs in Benin see: David Gnonhouevi, 'La Récupération dans l'Art Contemporain Béninois de 1990 à 2012', in Hannah Baader (ed.), *From Traditional to Contemporary Aesthetic Practices in West Africa, Benin and Togo*. The Art Histories and Aesthetic Practices Blog [online publication], August 2016, available at <https://medium.com/from-traditional-to-contemporary-aesthetic/lar-c3%A9cup-c3%A9ration-dans-l-art-contemporain-b-c3%A9ninois-de-1990-%C3%A0-2012-8c3ebed3bb67#h4xezrozg> (last accessed on 18 October 2022).
12. Keith Piper, 'Lost Vitrines', Keith Piper [artist's website], 2012, available at <http://www.keithpiper.info/lostvitrines.html> (last accessed on 18 October 2022).
13. 'Uncomfortable Truths – the shadow of slave trading on contemporary art and design' [press release], available at https://media.vam.ac.uk/media/documents/legacy_documents/press_release/32156_press_release.pdf (last accessed on 19 October 2022).
14. Michael White, "Uncomfortable truths": the intervention of the past at the Victoria and Albert, 1807 Commemorated. The abolition of the slave trade [project website], 2007, available at <https://archives.history.ac.uk/1807commemorated/exhibitions/art/uncomfortable.html> (last accessed on 19 October 2022).
15. October Gallery, 'Gates of Return, Julien Sinzogan', V&A [website], <http://www.vam.ac.uk/content/articles/g/gates-of-return-julien> (link unavailable at time of writing).
16. Lynn M. Hudson, "Inhuman Traffic: The Business of the Slave Trade." "Portraits, People, and Abolition." "Uncomfortable Truths: The Shadow of Slave Trading on Contemporary Art and Design"; and "Traces of the Trade: Discovery Trails Exploring the Links between Art, Design, and the Transatlantic Slave Trade.", *Journal of American History*, Vol.94, Issue 3, December 2007, pp.888.
17. Critical reactions or even dismissal of the trails as a modality of public address came as much from the alternative left-wing press – 'The uncomfortable truth is this is hardly an exhibition [...] If you're an ordinary worker in 2007, use what little spare time you have to do something more interesting. The only real thing in favour of this non-exhibition is that there's no mention of William Wilberforce.' (*Worker* Liberty. Reason in Revolt) – as from mainstream art and design media – 'a piecemeal display of objects and commissioned pieces of art or sculpture' (*FX Magazine*). The conservative press, expectedly, lambasted the exhibition, with varying degrees of racism injected into their 'cultural commentary' – 'All those taking part in the exhibition are of African or Caribbean origin which send an unwelcome message' (*The Independent*) writers note – this statement is incorrect since the show included Christine Meisner; 'The twaddle, jargon and political correctness of what must be the feeblest exhibition I have ever seen must make the sane man rage' (*Evening Standard*).
18. Caroline Jacobs, "Uncomfortable Truths: The Shadow of Slave Trading on Contemporary Art and Design", *African Arts*, vol.41, no.2, summer 2008, p.92.
19. See Bruno Latour and Tomás Sánchez-Criado, 'Making the "Res Publica"', *Ephemera. Theory and Politics in Organisation*, vol.7(2), 2007, pp.364–71.
20. 'Display Proposal, 3. Purpose and Justification', V&A Archives, EXH 7/14/2; B19/3, V&A Museum, London.
21. Martha Buskirk, 'Interviews with Sherrie Levine, Louise Lawler, and Fred Wilson', *October*, vol.70 'The Duchamp Effect', 1994, p.112.
22. Katherine McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle*, Minneapolis and London: Duke University Press, 2006, p.xxiii.
23. See Mamoussé Diagne, 'Logic of the Written Word and Oral Logic: Conflict at the Heart of the Archive', *Afterall*, no.53 'Medium/Metaphor/Milieu', pp.116–23; Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic. Modernity and Double Consciousness*, London: Verso, p.37.