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ArtReview

2024 Venice Biennale pavilions: your go-to list [updated]

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The latest update sees Nigeria announce its national Pavilion at the exhibition's 60th edition

The 60th Venice Biennale, set to run from 20 April – 24 November 2024, will be curated by Adriano Pedrosa – and some countries have already announced the artists who will exhibit in their national pavilions. *ArtReview* will keep a running tally as they come:

The Nigerian Pavilion will be represented by eight artists: **Yinka Shonibare**, **Tunji Adeniyi-Jones**, **Ndidi Dike**, **Onyeka Igwe**, **Toyin Ojih Odutola**, **Abraham Oghobase**, **Precious Okoyomon** and **Fatimah Tuggar**. This, the nation's second presentation at Venice Biennale, will be curated by **Aindrea Emelife**, curator of Modern and Contemporary at the Museum of West African Art, Benin City. Under the title *Nigeria Imaginary*, the pavilion will 'explore different perspectives and constructed ideas, memories of and nostalgia for Nigeria, with a scope that is cross-generational and inter-geographic'.

ARTFORUM

FILM

COUNTER MOVES

Onyeka Igwe's anticolonial kinetics

July 14, 2023 • **Yasmina Price**

Onyeka Igwe, *Specialised Technique*, 2018, HD video, black-and-white, sound, 6 minutes 36 seconds.

"PULSE, PULSE, PULSE, PULSE, hold, and pause," a voice-over evenly calls out as monochrome footage rapidly intercuts between a black woman alone on a stretch of grass—arms out and angular, the top of her body pulling toward the ground and her legs partially bent—and stick-figure notations of her dance. Minutes later, a clip of women swirling the voluminous white clothes tied at their waists unfolds, instead, at a mesmerizing and unsettling molasses pace. This archival footage is punctuated with intertitles: "What happened when you looked down the lens? Or did they tell you not to?" "I want to make the camera move too. At the same time." These words appear as white text on a plain black screen, episodes of visual pause and verbal emphasis in the stunning assemblage of *Specialised Technique* (2018). The video is by Onyeka Igwe, a London-based artist whose practice is shaped around challenges to visual domination and an enduring desire for movement. Grounded in black women's embodiment, her exhibition "A Repertoire of Protest (No Dance, No Palaver)," currently on view at MoMA PS1 in New York, reclaims a feminist inheritance of anticolonial resistance in Nigeria through reimagined choreographies of liberation. Igwe does not look at the archive, she sways and speaks with it, resurrecting what has long been sealed away in forgotten documents and dusty storage rooms.

Curated by Kari Rittenbach, the exhibition is composed of the new animation *Notes on dancing with the archive* (2023) and a triad of videos: *Her Name in My Mouth* (2017), *Sitting on a Man* (2018), and the aforementioned *Specialised Technique*. The three shorts are displayed, respectively, on a floor-bound TV monitor, a suspended three-channel installation, and a large projection which takes up the entirety of the back wall. Igwe's cycle of three films has been shown in full twice before: at the Alchemy Film and Moving Image Festival in Scotland, in 2018, and at the MUNTREF Museum of Immigration in Buenos Aires the following year. The evolving reassembly of these three pieces enacts a process of ongoing, open-ended revision that mimics Igwe's insurgent approach toward history: studying dominant colonial forms and producing alternatives both invented and rooted in epistemologies that precede colonization.

View of "Onyeka Igwe: A Repertoire of Protest (No Dance, No Palaver), 2023, MoMA PS1, New York. Photo: Steven Paneccasio.

The polymorphic nature of Igwe's work presses on a cyclical and vacuous preoccupation with classification and legibility that circumscribes the reception of many black artists, particularly women, whose aesthetic grammars intentionally evade containment by received categories of artistic expression. A productive, if still inadequate, framing is that of "expanded cinema." This slippery term—which emerged in the mid-1960s to describe experimental practices that cannot be accommodated by the medium's conventional exhibition model and that incorporate multimedia elements, restructure spectatorship toward participation, and trouble the framework of the filmic experience—is an apt one for an Igwe's art, which shifts between cinematic and museum protocols.

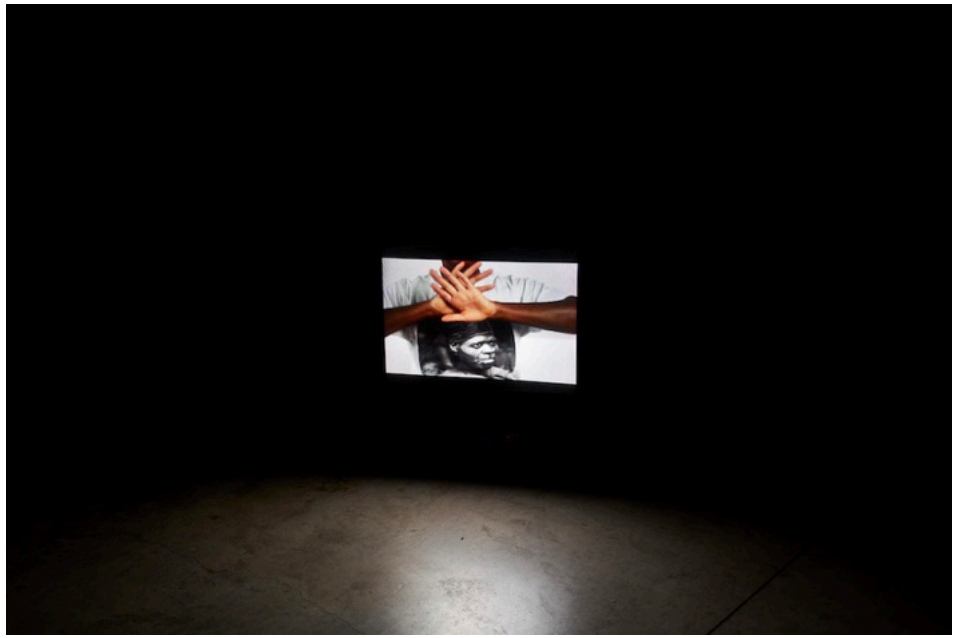
The three videos play sequentially (simultaneity would have produced an unhappy cacophony, and headphones would have meant sacrificing the potent effects of sonic immersion). In between, the fragmentary *Notes on dancing with the archive* (2023) takes over every screen, a riff on a countdown which also acts as a palate cleanser. During this seven-second video, animated stick figures act out the polyrhythmic dance notation developed by Nigerian playwright and choreographer Felix A. Akinsipe, infusing the show with a sense of playfulness and offering a perfect description of Igwe's practice: *dancing with the archive*. The MoMA PS1 opening coincided with an evening of screenings for the museum's Modern Mondays, including *a so-called archive* (2020). That video concludes with Igwe's solo dance party in an empty warehouse of the Bristol Museums and Bristol Archives, where she was auditing material from the British Empire and Commonwealth Collection—the contents of which are scattered across the show at PS1.

View of "Onyeka Igwe: A Repertoire of Protest (No Dance, No Palaver), 2023, MoMA PS1, New York. Photo: Marissa Alper.

At the heart of the exhibition's historical intervention is the 1929 Aba "Women's War" in Igboland (Southeastern Nigeria), which the artist first learned of through her uncle's memoir. The Women's War was an early anticolonial uprising against the taxation and administration systems of British occupying forces. Within the larger framework of militant histories, which are frequently and inaccurately masculinized, Igwe's resurfacing of this insurrection honors cultures of resistance that were women-led. These women rebelled not only against economic subjugation, but against the desacralization of Indigenous knowledge and annihilation of the very lifeways anchoring their sense of womanhood, which involved not only reproductive and domestic labors but also agricultural production and their central roles in sociopolitical activity. Essential to this struggle was the mobilization of precolonial customs: The Women's War involved chanting, dancing, mocking, breaking out prisoners, burning buildings, and testifying to generate public demands for autonomy. These gestural and vocal manifestations rerouted the social practice of "sitting on a man," an assertion of women's collective power involving song, dance, grievances, and insults communally expressed against a target of ire—conventionally, a man, in this case the (certainly patriarchal) British colonial system.

The 1929 uprising was never committed to film, and so the artist grafts, recites, and detourns archival footage taken by the British Colonial Film Unit (CFU), established a decade later. The early cinematic representation of what came to be called Nigeria is inextricable from the propagandistic educational films made by the CFU for African audiences. Igwe's critical fabulations challenge precisely these historical regimes of colonial visual control and their perniciously enduring afterimages. In *Specialised Technique*, she grounds her unruly formalism historically by situating it against what African film scholar Manthia Diawara has referred to as the "colonizer's technological paternalism," which involved the production of cultural objects presumed to be universally intelligible for people they viewed as incapable of cinematic literacy. Refusing to cede to these stagnant, falsely neutral visual codes, Igwe's moving images become conjoined, across time, to a long arc of Igbo women's anticolonial consciousness.

Her Name in My Mouth extends the artist's attention to embodiment as an archiving modality and telluric layering of history. We open on a close-up of Igwe's hands leafing through a stack of cloth, then cut to the British state's documentation of the "Women's War": a thick folder titled "NIGERIA: REPORT OF THE ABA COMMISSION OF INQUIRY." The artist appears throughout the video, wearing a white T-shirt imprinted with a close-up portrait of one of the women documented in the repurposed CFU footage, one of the cloths from the opening shot tied around her waist as a *pagne*. Igwe makes a similar maneuver in *Specialised Technique*, when a colonial archival clip of a dancer is projected onto her leather-skirted midriff, literalizing the corpus of history as her body becomes an undulating screen for a past that will not be still nor silent. The unorthodox projection unsettles the hierarchy between the projected image and the material screen, breaking the separation between Igwe and the women pictured as she physically involves herself with the archival footage—again, dancing with them. The ethics and self-implication of the artist resonate with those of the late Senegalese filmmaker Safi Faye, whose anticolonial subversion of ethnographic documentaries in the 1970s can be seen as precedent for her work. The voice in the video, belonging to Igwe's mother, performs Igbo sayings and songs that the protesting women in 1929 may have deployed. Igwe uses a strategy of speculative reenactment, made intimate by her mother's participation in the vocal recording, to honor the Women's War.



View of "Onyeka Igwe: A Repertoire of Protest (No Dance, No Palaver)," 2023, MoMA PS1, New York. Photo: Steven Paneccasio.

Onyeka Igwe, *Sitting on a Man*, 2018, 3-channel HD video, black-and-white and color, sound, 6 minutes 41 seconds.

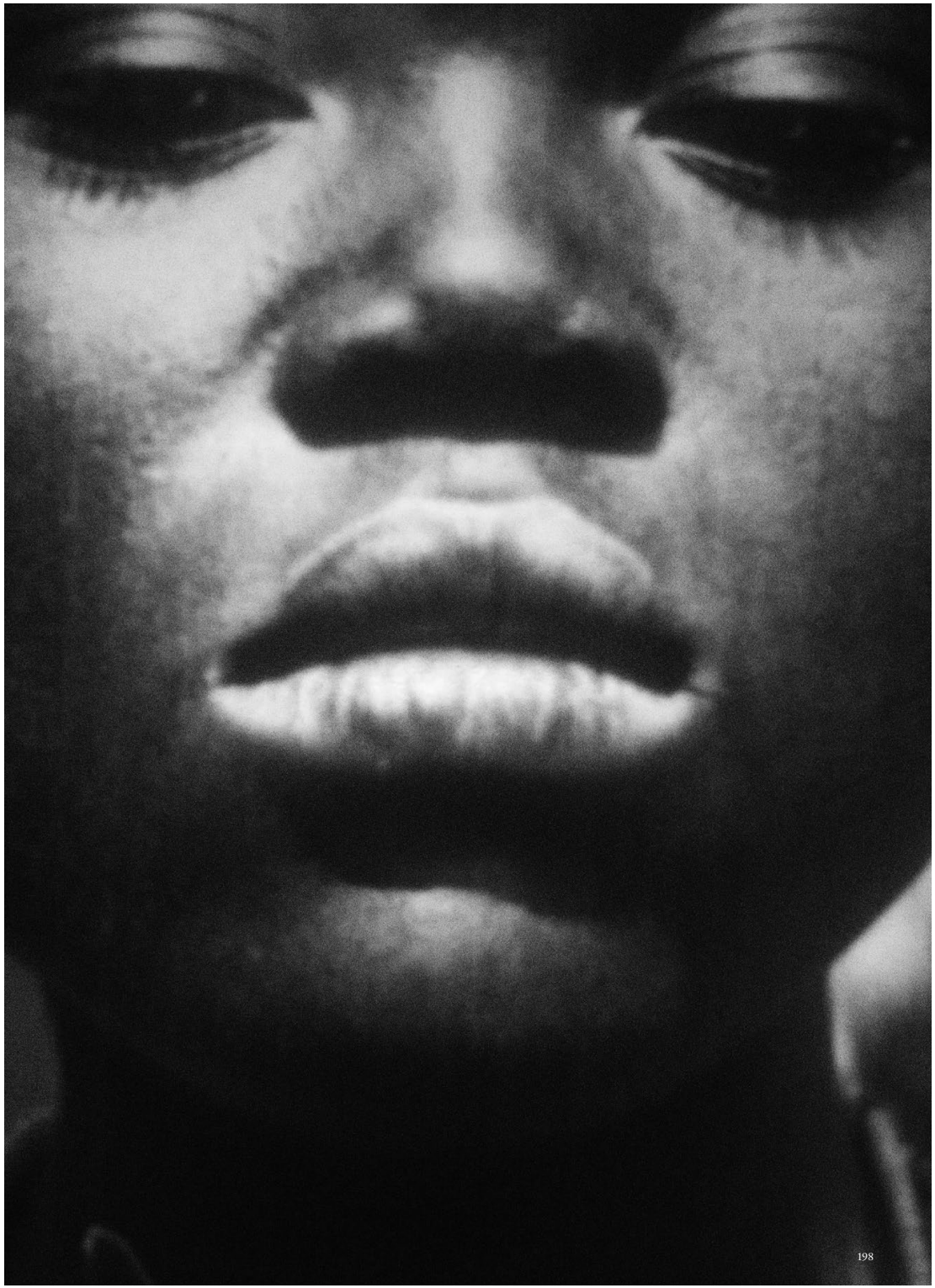
Drawing on the eponymous Igbo women's practice, Igwe's *Sitting on a Man* is a three-channel video featuring dancers Emmanuella Idris and Amarnath Amuludun, shot in color and in black-and-white, respectively. The work's three rear-projected screens are suspended from the ceiling and arranged with the right and left angled slightly toward the middle, suggesting the hospitality of a dance circle left ajar. The two-sided screens act as mirrors of one another, creating a phantasmatic circuitry of doublings in the dark cavern of the gallery. Exalting, sensuous close-ups of Idris and Amuludun are intercut with those of the women in the archival footage, issuing a formal challenge to coloniality's visual lexicon of informational extraction and cold documentation. Deft visual rhymes ricochet within this work and beyond it, such as a moment when Idris and women in the older footage enact a similar jumping motion, as though they are dancing together, or another when Amuludun, rubbing her abdomen, recalls Igwe's own swaying midriff in *Specialised Technique*. Sound is another avenue of critical play in *Sitting on a Man*, which includes a polyvocal recitation of a desiccated anthropological treatise on Nigerian women, the ethnographic authority of the text bending under the reading's wayward repetitions and lags.

In a way, *Specialised Technique* is the most straightforward piece in the show: a montage of clips of dances shot by the CFU, as well as for newsreels and Christian missions, in Nigeria, Sudan, and Tanzania between 1930 and 1956, written over with short captions that also appear as white text on a black screen. The text simultaneously underscores and denaturalizes the images, amplifying their violently inscribed legitimacy, as if the sneaky fine print were blown up to become unmissable. The captions switch confusingly between "you" and "I" in a way that cannot be coherently mapped but productively unsettles the power differential those two positions signify on either side of the camera.

Onyeka Igwe, *Her Name in My Mouth*, 2017, video, color, sound, 5 minutes 51 seconds.

Igwe ultimately holds an ambivalent relationship to colonial archival materials. She selectively integrates them into her work with a sense of active friction and dynamic recontextualization, never overlooking the structures of power that produced them or neutralizing their representational harm. At times, she deliberately turns away from the aesthetic markers and memorializing vehicles of the colonial apparatus. *Her Name in My Mouth* is in fact structured around such an absence. Although Igwe did find collected verbal testimonies from the women involved in the "Women's War," she chose not to use them in the film because she felt they were too tightly regulated by bureaucratic documentation, having been translated, not just linguistically into English, but formally into the rhetoric of British colonial administration. While this is certainly also true of many of the moving images in Igwe's arsenal, these carry for the artist an insubordinate intensity and material surplus that, although never innocent, exceed the discursive capture of governmentality and domination. In the film's closing seconds, we find two elderly women engaged in domestic tasks. The first woman sits on a low stool, stirring and tending to an array of pots and bowls arranged in front of her in a semicircle. The second is bent at the waist, her back perfectly horizonal, vigorously scrubbing a wet tangle of washing, so quickly that it appears as though the footage had been lightly sped up. She looks up and stares directly at the camera, continuing to move, carrying out her prosaic choreography as the viewer becomes caught in her gaze.

— *Yasmina Price*



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Danced Insurgencies: Onyeka Igwe
by KJ Abudu

198 Onyeka Igwe, *Her Name in My Mouth* (still) (detail), 2017. Courtesy: the artist
201 Onyeka Igwe, *Specialised Technique* (stills), 2018. Courtesy: the artist and BFI National Archive
202 Onyeka Igwe, *Specialised Technique*, 2018, *Onyeka Igwe: A Repertoire of Protest (No Dance, No Palaver)* installation views at MoMA PS1, New York, 2023. Courtesy: the artist. Photo: Steven Paneccasio
203 Onyeka Igwe, *Sitting on a Man* (stills), 2018. Courtesy: the artist

Southeastern Nigeria, 1929: thousands of rural women from various provinces have gathered to protest their diminished economic and political status under British indirect rule. Incited by the colonial state's planned imposition of direct taxation on women, which had no historical precedent and would erode already-declining trading gains; its installment of pseudo-indigenized governing bodies such as warrant chiefs; and its inculcation of Christian, Victorian notions of female domesticity and genteelness, these Igbo, Ibibio, Ogoni, and Andoni women decided that the time had come to organize an insurrection against a social order corroded by the "coloniality of gender."[1] The women employed numerous militant tactics, for instance, locking factories, setting "native" courts ablaze, and releasing prisoners from colonial jails. They drew sensorial attention to their resistant acts via foot stamping, symbolic dress, and opprobrious, clamorous chants—all anti-patriarchal performative rituals known as "sitting" or "making war" on a man. Now famously historicized as the Aba Women's Protest, this insurgency injects oft-abstracted notions of dissent with the enfleshed materiality and sensoria of the racially gendered bodies that performed or experienced said dissent, thus pointing to the inseparability of politics and aesthetics.

Onyeka Igwe amplifies and revivifies the traces of this early twentieth-century anti-colonial revolt—a notable prelude to the era of male-dominated African nationalisms in the 1960s and 1970s—in a trilogy of film works presented as *A Repertoire of Protest (No Dance, No Palaver)*, currently showing at MoMA PS1, New York. Extracts of colonial films produced in the late 1920s in various parts of Western and Central Africa appear as temporal and geographical proxies, becoming animating material sites for Igwe's body-oriented historiographic interventions. Combined with spectral sound scores, the incorporated archival films also serve as points of departure for Igwe's affective and semiotic de/re-compositions of racial, colonial visual regimes.

In *Her Name in My Mouth* (2017), Igwe flips through the patinaed pages of an archived folio. This document contains the report of a 1930 inquiry by the British government investigating the causes of the 1929 uprisings. Close-ups of penned signatures, official stamps, and typewritten text appear in quick succession, giving form to elusive, transnational systems of bureaucratized control and their historical and ongoing deployment in surveilling and disabling the self-determination of the global majority. Igwe's explorative fingers come across an "Igwi" while scanning an appendix of meetings and witnesses, leading one to wonder whether she has encountered the trace of an ancestor—after all, the British were fond of misspelling the names of African people and places. Soon after sifting through these documents, Igwe directs the camera's gaze onto her body. She wraps a textile around her waist and wears a T-shirt bearing the appropriated image of a woman from one of the colonial film excerpts. In coupling these garments with background voicings of Igbo idiomatic phrases (which the protesting women might have sung or spoken) and Igwe's own choreographed gesticulations (which the women might have performed), *Her Name in My Mouth* reorients the cinematic apparatus away from its colonial instrumentalization in subaltern capture and negation and toward embodied, ritualistic practices of female ancestral invocation.

If "sitting on a man" offered aggrieved women a means of calling forth the power and presence of female ancestors, Igwe's invocational film works "sit" on the camera (or on their audiences). *Sitting on a Man* (2018), as the title suggests, leads precisely with this logic. Across three channels, two women dancers enact rhythmized choreographies

interpreting those of the dancing African women captured by the ethnographic gaze of 1920s colonial film. Igwe orchestrates visual syncopations between the multiple screens, translating into cinematic terms the alternating vigorous and fluid gestures of these historical and contemporary women, and the oft-dismissed knowledges embedded in their corporeal movements.

Through their disidentificatory engagements with colonial films, Igwe's works ask whether the racialized logics that condition the cinematic field, and which transfigure Black femme beings into consumptive visual spectacles, can be evaded or exceeded. *Specialized Technique* (2018), the third piece in Igwe's trilogy, intensely probes these questions via formal and textual *détournements* of colonial visual fragments. In the work, which recalls the early slide-tape experiments of the Black Audio Film Collective, visual archival excerpts appear alongside questions posed by Igwe, which are either addressed to or speculatively voiced by the depicted colonial subjects, most of whom are involved in dance performances. The captioned questions do not merely illuminate the uneven relations, libidinal economies, and coercive conditions that led to the production of many of these films, but additionally seize on the figures' minor exercises of agency, such as their refusal to return the camera's gaze. Igwe also subjects these films to meticulous aesthetic manipulations by slowing them down, speeding them up, and digitally drawing on them. These techniques vibrate and dissolve, however momentarily, the colonial chains of signification that ideologically cohere these moving images, and in turn unleash the irreducible, fugitive vitality of Black movement and rhythm.

The films that populate Igwe's works are largely drawn from the Colonial Film Unit, an arm of the British government that produced short propagandistic films on health and education that were in turn exhibited to West African audiences in mobile cinema vans—cinematic technology therefore being historically indispensable in manufacturing, disseminating, and mediating racial difference.[2] Igwe interrogates the remains of the CFU in *a so-called archive* (2020), oscillating between two abandoned buildings in Lagos and Bristol. We observe piles of rotting celluloid film, and peek into a room with an analog projector playing a colonial film for an absent audience.

Not merely concerned with the representational problematics of the filmic image, Igwe's works reflect on the materiality of the film apparatus itself, unveiling the racially dispossessive means by which it came to be.

1 See María Lugones, "Heterosexualism and the Colonial/Modern Gender System," *Hypatia* 22, no. 1 (Winter 2007): 186–209; Oyèrónké Oyěwùmí, *The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1997); Ifi Amadiume, *Male Daughters, Female Husbands: Gender and Sex in an African Society* (London: Zed, 1987).

2 KJ Abudu, "Ciné-chronotones: Decolonial Temporal Critique in Contemporary Moving Image Practice," in *Clocking Out: Time Beyond Management*, (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art, 2023).

ONYEKA IGWE

(b. 1986, London) lives and works in London. She studied politics before working in activist filmmaking and then studying documentary film at Goldsmiths University in 2012. From 2016 to 2020, Igwe undertook a practice-based PhD at the University of Arts London on the British Colonial Film Unit, producing a body of film work beginning with *Her Name in My Mouth*, which premiered at the International Film Festival of Rotterdam in 2018. In 2018, Igwe joined Black Obsidian Sound System (BOSS), a collective that brings together queer, trans, and nonbinary people of color involved in art, sound, and radical activism. BOSS's film *Collective Hum* (2019) was commissioned for Second Sight, a national film tour exploring the legacy, methods, aesthetic strategies, and histories of the UK's Black Film Workshop Movement. BOSS had a solo exhibition at FACT Liverpool as part of the Liverpool Biennial for Contemporary Art, *The Only Good System Is a Sound System* (2021), and was nominated for the 2021 Turner Prize. Since 2020, Igwe has been a member of Counter Encounters, a curatorial and research collective working with the themes of anti- and alter-ethnographies. She is currently working on a solo exhibition at Bonington Gallery, Nottingham, around her new film, *A Radical Duet*, a dual-timeline experimental narrative based in the social milieu of 1940s anti-colonial Black London, commissioned by Film London Artists' Moving Image Network.

KJ ABUDU

is a critic and curator based between London, Lagos, and New York. Informed by anti/post/de-colonial theory, queer theory, African philosophy, and Black radical thought, his writings and exhibitions focus on critical art and intellectual practices from the Global South (particularly Africa and its diasporas) that respond to the world historical conditions produced by colonial modernity. Abudu recently curated *Living with Ghosts* (2022), which appeared at Pace Gallery, London, and Wallach Art Gallery, New York. He is the editor of *Living with Ghosts: A Reader* (Pace, 2022). His exhibition *Clocking Out: Time Beyond Management* opened at Artists Space, New York, in May 2023, and he will curate *Traces of Ecstasy* at the 4th Lagos Biennial in 2024.

EBONY

CULTURE , **THE ARTS**

ARTIST ONYEKA IGWE BRINGS THE NIGERIAN ABA WOMEN'S WAR OF 1929 TO LIGHT

Artist Onyeka Igwe, "A Repertoire of Protest'"(No Dance, No Palaver), at MoMA PS1. Image: courtesy MoMA PS1. Image: Marissa Alper.

By Team EBONY | April 14, 2023

Filmmaker and artist Onyeka Igwe revisits a little-known moment in history in her first solo museum exhibition on display at MoMA PS1 in New York City. *A Repertoire of Protest (No Dance, No Palaver)* brings together three of her films inspired by the origin and outcome of the Aba Women's War of 1929, where thousands of Igbo women in southeastern Nigeria protested against taxation and restricted roles for women in the government.

"Their methods were the same ones women used when there was a conflict with men in the community. Coined 'Sitting on a Man' by anthropologists, this type of protest involved the women singing, dancing and wearing palm fronds over bare chests while gathering outside of the man in question's house until he made amends," London-born Igwe explains. "They performed these types of protests outside of district offices, courthouses and colonial buildings." While the outcome was a bloody one, this brave act of protest is considered one of the first anti-colonial uprisings in Nigeria.

Igwe's exhibition blends choreography on-and-off the screen, creating an immersive, expanded cinematic environment. By conceptually recovering the repressed history of this collective act of resistance, the artist finds new meaning for understanding the present.

Here the artist shares a little more about her exhibit and the motivation behind her work.

EBONY: How did you approach researching the Igbo women and their uprising?

Onyeka Igwe: There isn't any visual documentation of the Aba Women's War so I used films from the British colonial archives shot across sub-Saharan Africa. Sometimes I sensed defiance or hostility from the women, and sometimes they were playing with the camera. Movement and gesture became the ways in which I communicated and learned about people in the films. This was significant because the Aba Women's War was protested with movement, voice and gesture. I wanted to continue this language through my films.

Where did you learn about the Aba Women's War?

I learned about it through my half-uncle's self-published biography. He was trying to date his birth and said he was born a few years after the protests. I had never heard of it despite it happening in the part of Nigeria that my family is from and it being significant enough for people to record its history.

Sitting on a Man (video still). 2018. Image: courtesy of Onyeka Igwe.

How long did it take you to shoot your three films and bring them together for an expanded show?

I made them in 2017 to 2018 and always conceived of them as a series of three films. I wanted to think about these protests through a series of cinematic experiments. The first film, *Her Name in My Mouth,* focuses on the report on the Aba Women's War and the women's testimonies through gestures, textiles and Igbo songs. *Sitting on a Man*, the second film, is a three-screen work that features contemporary Nigerian diasporic dancers who reenact the protests alongside archival film of women dancing from 1930s Nigeria. The final film, *Specialised Technique,* uses only archival films of African women dancing to question the ways in which we look at these types of films.

What themes about life and the Black experience have you discovered through these cultural dances?

I read a text by Rizvana Bradley, *Black Cinematic Gesture and the Aesthetics of Contagion*, that describes gesture as migratory: traveling from Africa across the diaspora as an evocation of Black sociality. One of the women dancing at the beginning of *Specialised Technique* stopped me in my tracks when I watched her. She reminded me of the way my grandmother, my mum and I danced. It felt like there was a direct line extending from the women in the film dancing to me in the present. So I have discovered a way to communicate and connect to the past and my own cultural history through my body and through dancing.

What motivates your artistic expression and what feelings do you want to convey to viewers?

I am trying to figure things out and answer historical and political questions, things that bother me or I think would be helpful to understand, and I am trying to answer these questions in as many ways as possible, offering multiple truths. I want my viewers to be invited to contribute to this questioning, for the films to start and continue a conversation. I want to learn from these experiences, lives and opinions, and art seems to be a good way to elicit that.

You are animated by the question—*how do we live together*? What have you discovered in that search?

That there are many different ways to answer that question and that may be the most important thing, the possibility and existence of multiplicity.

***A Repertoire of Protest (No Dance, No Palaver)* runs at MoMA PS1 through August 21, 2023.**

fantômas

The Miracle on George Green (2022)

Build treehouses

The Visite festival places a tree house in Het Bos. At least The Miracle on George Green *by Onyeka Igwe does that in images. Her reflection on collective protest fits into a festival edition that focuses on collective dynamics in and through film.*

16.11.2022 | BJORN GABRIELS

In *The Miracle on George Green*artist Onyeka Igwe departs during the 1990s protests against the construction of the M11 link road in Hackney, East London (where Igwe lives), to reflect on collective resistance. One of the strategies at the time was to build a hut in a tree – in George Green Park – which was to be felled. As part of the occupation protest, the tree house was recognized as a domicile, including a post box in which local residents and activists from outside the area deposited letters. Igwe has three different 'authors' read a letter in voice-over, albeit written by her from her own personal memories, archival research and conversations with people involved in all sorts of protests, not just the resistance to the M11 road that vaguely crossed Igwe's path during her youth in East London.

Such politically and poetically charged voice-over texts with a clearly 'written' character are reminiscent of the work of Black Audio Film Collective, which, from their first film *Handsworth Songs* (1986), included several layers of image and sound, as well as 'the word'. their expression and reflection on the position of (second generation) migrant communities in England. Lyrics also enter The Miracle on George Green through songs sung in canon, at the beginning and the end: a variation of "O Christmas Tree" sung during the M11 protests and a song from the seventeenth-century Diggers movement that uses communal lands *(* 'commons') advocated.

Both songs are accompanied by montage sequences with archive material – photos and television reports about the resistance against the M11 – which in their video aesthetic again evoke the work of Black Audio Film Collective, among others. Between these 'historical' bookends in form and content, Igwe films in static shots – the standard formal choice of more contemporary audiovisual art – the trees in the park and the construction of a new wooden house. This structure is transparent, so that the park and its surroundings remain visible at all times. Through this new construction, Igwe not only takes her film to the extra-cinematic world, she also questions the legacy of the 'treehouse protest' of the 1990s (and the much longer tradition to which it appeals).*The Miracle on George Green* at the end – with a partly overlapping montage of collective song and video aesthetics – expresses a simultaneity that brings together protests about community building from the seventeenth century to today. As a result, Igwe seeks out a field of tension between returning and looking ahead, between nostalgia and utopia.

Collectivity is one of the common denominators of Igwe's political and aesthetic strategies. She already said that the core question of her artistic work – " *how do we live together?* " – has been asked before, but that does not prevent her from asking it again, or revisiting the questions and answers from the past. The tenth edition of Visite also undertakes an exercise in collectivity, by collaborating again with, among others, kitchen collective Otark for a Sunday breakfast, but also in a significant part of the works on display and on

Profile

Onyeka Igwe

Amy Budd on the British filmmaker's work towards the restitution of her family's Nigerian history, which she attempts through a critical reworking of material unearthed in colonial-era archives, the aesthetics of Nollywood, and through song and dance.

By her own admission, Onyeka Igwe's relationship to the archive is 'a complicated one'. Since 2017 the artist has created experimental essay-films, exploring the dialectic tension between the sensuous materiality and visual trauma of images and materials documenting the history of British colonialism in West Africa, motivated by the question: what happens when I go looking for myself in the archive? Born and raised in London to Nigerian parents, Igwe began immersing herself in the windowless reading rooms of historic collections to build knowledge of her Igbo heritage when faced with the generational amnesia of her family, who, since relocating to the UK, could only loosely recall the inherited oral histories of their ancestors. Her research has taken her to the National Archives, British Empire and Commonwealth Museum, Pitt Rivers Museum and British Film Institute, to name a few, where she has mined archival films, state documents, diaries and administrative reports to 'eke out a taste, a touch, a morsel of what had gone before'. Her appetite for gleaning tangible affects and sensory knowledge of the past has resulted in a rich body of work in which Igwe traces her subjective, partial and highly personal encounters with the racial imaginary of the colonial archive through a distinctly embodied approach to filmmaking, where silvery black-and-white footage of her Igbo ancestors is manipulated and collaged with her own kind of auto-fictional response to the partial histories of the British Empire via text, voice, sound, gesture and dance.

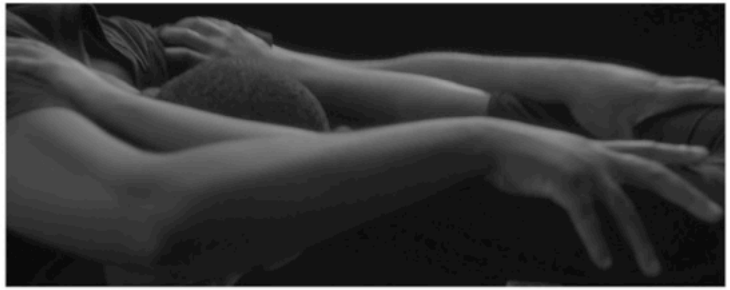
No Archive Can Restore You, 2020, video

the names have changed, including my own and truths have been altered, 2019, video

Fields of anthropology, ethnography and early cinema, all progressive disciplines of the early 20th century, merge in the work of the Colonial Film Unit of Nigeria, a state-sponsored visual propaganda engine that produced films of the British colonies between 1932 and 1955. Images and documents produced by the CFU reappear throughout Igwe's work, specifically infusing her trilogy of short films *No Dance, No Palaver*, 2017–18, developed during her FLAMIN Fellowship, which uses the historical event of the Aba Women's War of 1929 to explore films of Igbo people fixed by the colonial gaze. Largely considered to be the first major anti-colonial uprising in Nigeria and led almost exclusively by women, Igwe unearthed this historic feminist protest by reading her great uncle's autobiography (he locates his date of birth around the time of the conflict), where women rioted against tax collection by the British state through remarkable tactics of song and dance. The Aba women's performative protest shaped Igwe's embodied response to viewing colonial archival images, with the first chapter, *Her Name in My Mouth*, combining grainy clips of Igbo people with scenes of Igwe's own hands enacting gestures of refusal – taking cues from Nollywood films and the physical expressions of family members – against a soundtrack of her mother speaking her native Igbo. *Sitting On A Man*, 2018, the second instalment, similarly experiments with dance through collaboration, in a nod to the collective structure of the women's war, with the artist inviting dancers to speculate on what the direct action of 'sitting on a man' (Igbo women protested against the behaviour of men by sitting on them or dancing and singing outside their home) might look like if enacted today, and captures their choreographed performances in the film against a backdrop of Igbo dance sequences documented by the CFU.

Igwe critically renegotiates the objective stance imposed by the CFU footage on native people, whose legibility was fixed as specimens of race and culture rather than individual subjects, by privileging her own embodied response to the spectre of the colonial gaze. She describes how adopting a strategy of 'critical proximity' allows her to create an ethical framework for engaging with the moving images of 'those enshrined in celluloid by the colonial gaze' her films reproduce, attuning herself to the tangible effects of the images and speaking 'with' rather than 'for' the bodies on screen in order to be 'close to, with or amongst, the visual trauma of the colonial archive to transform the way in which we know the people it contains'. The knowledge produced by both observing and performing dance (a frequent occurrence when watching colonial films of West Africa) registers as an act of recognition; she says 'watching these women dance on my screen put me in my place'. In a lecture in Athens, Igwe describes working intensively at the British Empire and Commonwealth Museum with a friend and taking a break to dance spontaneously in an empty room in the building 'to let go of, to forget ourselves … our somatic bodies desired a replication of what we had seen'.

Dance ends up being 'how I worked through things' in her earlier films and continues to channel an expression of place specifically in relation to her Nigerian hometown in *the names have changed, including my own and truths have been altered*, 2019. In the film, which won last year's Berwick New Cinema Award, Igwe blurs the authority of the archive by composing a visual palimpsest of archival CFU footage previously seen in *No Dance, No Palaver* collaged with filmed footage of her



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first solo trip to her family's hometown, VHS videotapes of a Nollywood TV series dramatising the first published Igbo novel and episodic dance scenes. The work's metafictional title coyly reveals the conceit of its making because it is essentially 'the same story told in four different ways' accompanied by three asymmetric yet interconnected spoken-word narratives: a folktale of two brothers originating from her hometown of Arondizuogu, extracts from her diary entries written while shooting on location in Lagos and the story of a family patriarch retold through conversations with her father. Igwe structures the film with an ambiguous cyclical logic, avoiding any definitive beginning or ending, to invite viewers to follow the meandering thread and associatively construct meaning from one sequence to the next. Refusing a singular, totalising narrative voice allows Igwe to brush against the grain of history and construct a quasi-fictional counter-narrative to the 'truth' produced and perpetuated by colonial knowledge. Using her own voice in the role of storyteller, she spins divergent narratives conjured from a personal archive of fiction and fact, elevating 'illegitimate' forms of knowledge, including familiar oral traditions, folktales, anecdotes and dance, to reimagine the legacies of her Igbo heritage and exploit the 'transparency of sources', such as institutional (and arguably colonial or eurocentric) archives, as 'fictions of history'.

The authority of names and various acts of naming recur as a critical theme in both the titles of her films but also in her visual tracing of names similar to her own within the margins of the archive. In *Her Name In My Mouth*, 2017, the artist's index finger points out 'Igwi' listed in the printed pages of a British report inquiring into the Aba women's uprising. Igwe uses the fictional figure of Omenuko Igwuegbe to atone for Igwegbe Odum – a man who enslaved people. The surname is reminiscent of the artist's and is recalled by her father in *the names have changed*. Igwe's father also corrects her pronunciation of Omenuko, and elsewhere the voice of her mother is borrowed to accurately recite Igbo names, using the capacious qualities of sound and moving image to transform her own experience of having 'a name that got stuck in people's mouths' and imprinting a non-native knowledge of Igbo on her own tongue.

More recently, Igwe has moved away from recalibrating racially infused images of the colonial archive to instead explore the physical ruins the British Empire left behind. In *No Archive Can Restore You*, 2020, Igwe journeyed to Lagos to coolly depict the legacy of the CFU through a distinctly architectural lens by documenting the spatial configuration of the Nigerian Film Unit building, an outpost of the British visual propaganda engine. The NFU exhibited health and educational films to local audiences across West Africa through its fleet of mobile cinema vans, producing newsreels and short documentaries depicting celebrations and colonial achievements for domestic and overseas audiences. But in present-day post-independence Nigeria, the pedagogical film archive of the NFU is now obsolete. Igwe's short film comprises a floating camera panning the sun-drenched rooms of the NFU building, where vertiginous piles of yellowing paper stand encrusted with dust alongside rusting stacks of film cans leaking rotting spools of celluloid onto the floor. It is an archetypal scene of decay, an abandoned interior cloaked in cobwebs and frozen in time. Unlike previous films, the artist's body does not appear on screen, instead the camera drifts through the building as if navigating a crime scene, juxtaposed with distinctive soundscapes of Lagos's street noise, traffic, the sound of ticking projectors, birdsong, voices and choirs, creaking doors and the blowing of dust.

Shaped by an emerging interest in sound design (Igwe is also a member of the audio collective Black Obsidian Sound System, or BOSS), *No Archive Can Restore You* offers a visual representation of the archive and a spectrum of disembodied noises as a substitute for the 'lost' films from the archive, which contain images we cannot, will not or choose not to see. Igwe often translates her sensory encounters with historical archives by physically representing their tactile and often displeasing materiality by either presenting her hands imprinted with traces of dust from the materials she is handling or, as in *No Archive Can Restore You*, using macro lenses to zoom in and virtually push the viewer's nose into the abject textures and residues of decay of these instruments of colonialism. By exploring the minor traces of her Nigerian heritage through her personal catalogue of unofficial sources, Igwe's films reveal how institutional systems of thought are intimately bound up in the British colonial project; she counters its singular perspective and totalising effects by experimenting with visual grammar of multiplicity in order to 'tell a truth in as many ways as possible'.

Onyeka Igwe's latest film *So-called* will be presented online and at KW Institute of Contemporary Art, Berlin in December.

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