

'Against Apartheid' at KARST Contemporary Arts, Plymouth

Akin Oladimeji

'Against Apartheid', KARST Contemporary Arts, Plymouth, UK
29 September – 2 December 2023

The climate crisis is the bastard child of the colonial project. That is the message of this impactful group exhibition at KARST Contemporary Arts, a public gallery in Plymouth.¹ The various individuals and groups on display all have a theme – that capitalist-fuelled colonial ventures have always led not only to the exploitation of people but of places as well. Conceived and curated by Ashish Ghadiali, the exhibition draws on a theoretical framework with research undertaken by Ghadiali, along with academics in the US and Europe, which shows how reducing global warming can lower the number of people (mostly in the Global South) who suffer from environmental violence and who bear the brunt of the consequences.²

A lodestone of the research done on this is the concept of climate apartheid, which emphasises how it is the inhabitants of poorer nations who are facing the downsides of the climate crisis. Climate change carries immense implications for human rights, including the right to life, food, housing and water. Philip Alston, UN spokesperson on this issue, reports that '[i]t will also impact democracy as governments struggle to cope with climate consequences and persuade constituents to accept the major social and economic transformations required'.³ A compelling documentary, *Notes on Displacement* (2022) by Khaled Jarrar illustrates this. Over an hour long, it follows a family making its way from Syria to Europe to escape the bombing, the consequence of uprisings sparked in part by the increase in the cost of basic foodstuffs because of global warming. They encounter hostility and dehumanising treatment from officials in the different countries they pass through, despite the fact that the oldest member of the family

¹ 'Against Apartheid' included work by Alarm Phone, Anti-Raids Network, Angela Camacho, Kedisha Coakley, Iman Dattoo, Annalee Davis, Forensic Oceanography, Sylvie Sema Glissant, Ashanti Hare, Khaled Jarrar, Kiluanji Kia Henda, Grada Kilomba, Otis Mensah and Sue Williamson

² See Timothy M Lenton et al, 'Quantifying the human cost of global warming', *Nature Sustainability*, no 6, May 2023, pp 1237–1247, www.nature.com/articles/s41893-023-01132-6

³ See 'World faces "climate apartheid" risk, 120 more million in poverty: UN expert', UN News (www.news.un.org), 25 June 2019 <https://news.un.org/en/story/2019/06/1041261>

is old, frail and has to be transported in her wheelchair. At times, the refugees they travel with stage demonstrations and display agency in such terrible circumstances. Through it all, some remain poetic. When asked by the documentary maker what he lost when leaving his refugee camp, one interviewee said his soul was the first thing to disappear as he was so numb from the trauma he had undergone. The thrust of the documentary is the aftermath and the genesis of forced migrations, the agonies and ecstasies of such journeys, the doings and undoings of borders and their policing, and this it conveys superbly.

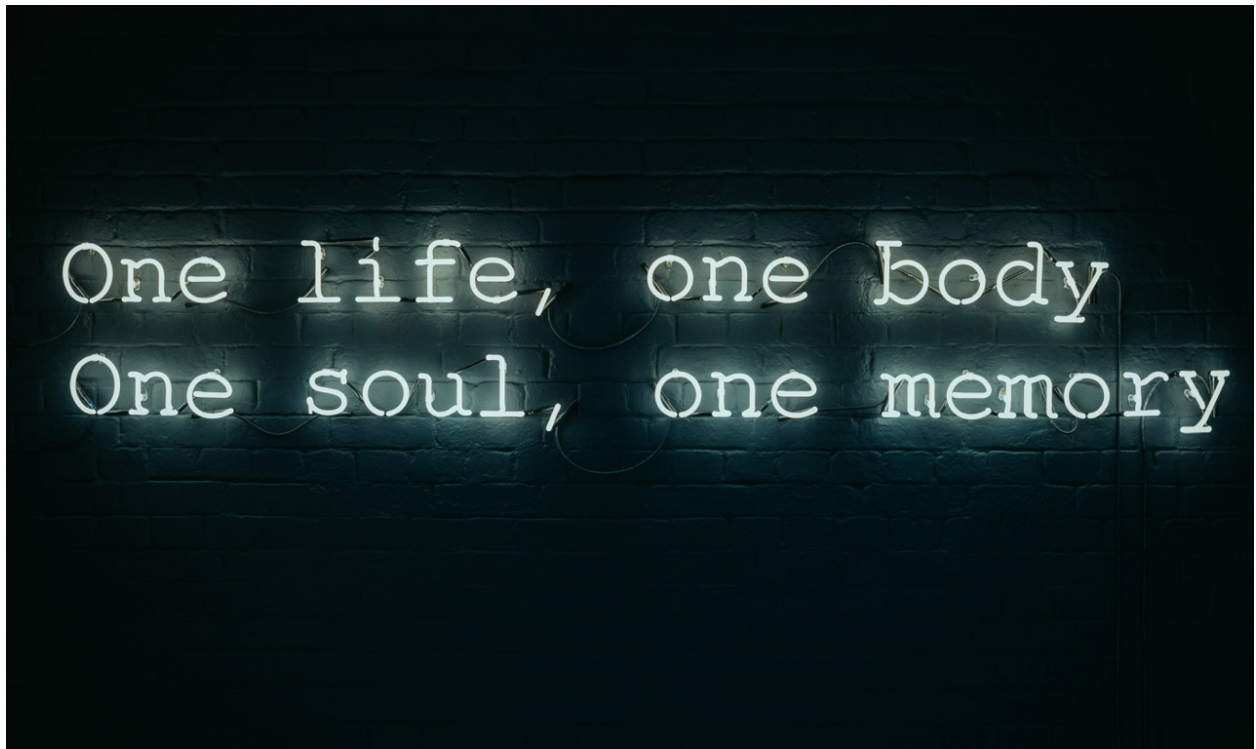


Khaled Jarrar, *Notes On Displacement*, 2022, video, 74 mins, installation view, KARST Contemporary Arts, Plymouth, courtesy of the artist and KARST

Portuguese artist Grada Kilomba contributes a neon work, *One Life, One Body and One Soul, One Memory* (2023). The fact that it is text-heavy reminded me of another of her works, *O Barco/The Boat* (2022), which touched on a horrific chapter in human history and is an essential part of the commemorative landscape of the transatlantic slave trade.⁴ Consisting of 140 burnt blocks of wood in the silhouette of the bottom of a ship where slaves were held, the work also had fragments of poems on it. Commissioned originally as part of the 2021 Biennial of Contemporary Arts in Lisbon, I saw it activated in 2022 in the courtyard of Somerset House (an apt location, given the building's colonial past as home to the Navy Board and Admiralty in the eighteenth/nineteenth centuries). It was a mesmerising performance comprising performers weaving in and out of the blocks while musicians accompanied them. 'I decided to create

⁴ See 'Grada Kilomba: *O Barco/The Boat*', 29 September–20 October, 2022, Somerset House, London www.somersethouse.org.uk/whats-on/grada-kilomba-o-barco-boat

something that mimics the size and scale of the monuments around, but rather than building up I wanted to look down under and make the invisible visible, by showing the belly of the boat. I wanted to work with natural, feminine materials, which is why I chose wood. I didn't want anything hard, or high, elevated or phallic. I wanted the piece to be unnoticed until you entered inside it, like a labyrinth,' explains the artist.⁵ Kathryn Bishop-Sanchez, a specialist in Brazilian and Portuguese studies, interprets Kilomba's performance-installation as a means of dealing with the injustices and legacies of the slave trade that have echoed to the present day.⁶ An anti-monument (public art that presents a marginalised perspective and expresses itself in a medium other than a sculpture on a plinth), it seeks to enable a bodily encounter that triggers deeper consideration of the fate of those on the boats bound for the Americas.⁷ As someone whose knowledge of the perilous journey the enslaved undertook was enhanced by *The Boat*, I appreciated how Kilomba's piece in KARST provided a moment of stasis and a space for contemplation which could serve as a mnemonic device, a reminder to treasure our planet, the only one we have.



Grada Kilomba, *One Life, One Body and One Soul, One Memory*, 2023, neon, courtesy of the artist and KARST, photo by Luke Frost

⁵ See Xanthe Somers, 'Grada Kilomba: The artist discusses her monumental installation in the Somerset House courtyard for I-54 London', *Nataal.com*, 17 October 2022 <https://nataal.com/grada-kilomba>

⁶ See 'Embedded in a History of Imposed Silences: Reclaiming Legitimacy in the Work of Grada Kilomba', a talk by Kathryn Bishop-Sanchez at The Courtauld, London, 12 October 2022 <https://courtauld.ac.uk/whats-on/embedded-in-a-history-of-imposed-silences-reclaiming-legitimacy-in-the-work-of-grada-kilomba/>

⁷ See Akin Oladimeji, 'Performing History: Jelili Atiku's performances, Lubaina Himid's and Kimathi Donkor's *Toussaint L'Ouverture*, Steve McQueen's *Carib's Leap* and Yinka Shonibare's *Mr & Mrs Andrews*', *Third Text Online*, 12 May 2023 www.thirdtext.org/oladimeji-performinghistory

Angolan Kiluanji Kia Henda's *Migrants Who Don't Give a Fuck* (2019) is another highlight. The artist's typical humour permeates the work, a series of prints depicting pink flamingos in nature with the title superimposed across them. A precedent, *The Fortress* (2014), photos of which are on display in Tate Modern's exhibition 'A World in Common: Contemporary African Photography' is another work by Kia Henda that addresses the topic of migration. He highlights, in the Tate exhibition's catalogue, that architecture and the desert both fascinate him, so it is no surprise that the structure is made of aluminium and coated glass and built in Jordan's Al-Araz desert. The sculpture interrogated 'the invisible walls faced by those seeking to find a home',⁸ resulting in disappointment and dashed dreams. The work serves as a metaphorical means of convincingly conveying the fate of thousands of people flocking abroad to escape their deprivation. The defiance of *Migrants Who Don't Give a Fuck* might be a way of subverting the notion of descendants of colonial subjects as abject supplicants in Europe. The work is striking, with its traditional nature imagery juxtaposed with the rude language.



Kiluanji Kia Henda, *Migrants Who Don't Give a Fuck*, 2019, six framed images on silk screen, courtesy of the artist and KARST, photo by Luke Frost

Affect in contemporary art is the condition of being empathetic in relation to traumatic events portrayed by an artist, even when the artist comes from a different cultural context to the spectator. Gilles Deleuze created the term *the encountered sign* to refer to the artwork that serves as a trigger for affect, 'encounters which force us to interpret, expressions which force us to think'.⁹ Naturally, artists such as Doris Salcedo, Jelili Atiku and Marina Abramović, who have created deeply personal performances and installations that embody sensation and touch the audience, are from postcolonial environments. Sue Williamson provides three videos set in South Africa wrapped around the legacies of apartheid. In *What is this thing called freedom* (2016), three women representing different generations of the same family engage in conversation about apartheid's impact on them. In *That particular morning* (2019), a young South African, Siyah Mgoduka, and

⁸ *A World in Common: Contemporary African Photography*, exhibition catalogue, Tate Publications, 2023, p 186

⁹ Gilles Deleuze, *Proust and Signs*, Richard Howard, trans, George Braziller, New York, 1972 [1964], p 161

Doreen, his mother, discuss the day his father was killed by an Afrikaner terrorist attempting to uphold the colonial regime, and the ways in which that has affected them both. I had a visceral reaction, an affective quality, at one point, when watching the third piece, *It's a pleasure to meet you* (2016). Here, Candice Mama and Siyah from the previous conversation talk about their fathers' deaths and the day they met the respective killers. While Candice is compassionate towards the man that ended her father's life, Siyah mentions how, outside the courtroom during the Truth and Reconciliation Commission hearings, his father's murderer looks at his younger self, sticks his tongue out and shows his disdain for the entire process. This chilled me, as I imagined what it must have felt like to be in that child's place, the confusion and impotent anger he must have felt. Earlier work by Williamson is in a similar mode. *There's something I must tell you* (2013) is another powerful work in which six women who experienced apartheid South Africa discuss their past with six younger women, some of whom are related to them, whose experience of that period is mediated through historians and firsthand accounts. It is a multi-screen video installation, with Williamson choosing the interview format as she feels it is more likely to yield revelations than any other method.¹⁰ The bizarre and dehumanising aspects of apartheid, with its requirements for blacks to carry a pass everywhere, even when going to a local shop for groceries, are laid bare and lead to anger and bewilderment in the viewer who is left unable to fathom how a regime could have been devised and enforced for such a long period by a minority group.



Sue Williamson, *It's a pleasure to meet you*, 2016, dual channel video, 20 mins, courtesy of the artist and KARST

¹⁰ See 'Sue Williamson | There's something I must tell you', Axis Gallery <https://axis.gallery/artists/sue-williamson/theres-something>

It was refreshing not to have to exit through a gift shop. After a significant show like this, wandering into a retail space with all sorts of notebooks, scarves, t-shirts and other assorted merchandise would have cheapened the endeavour. I know museums make a significant amount from such commercial enterprises but after a serious exhibition, seeing such goods would have felt trite. This space in Plymouth doesn't seem to have a café either, which is even more surprising. I will admit I was unsure while walking through the exhibition that the disparate works should all share the same space, and about the curious curatorial methodology. It might be to do with what I tend to encounter in the average public or commercial gallery where work is solely metaphorical or literal, not a mishmash of both. There are documentaries, a sound installation with a poem composed and read by Otis Mensah, and wallpaper from the non-profit organisation Globaia, among other works. Was the mixture of various languages not too cacophonous? Had the art historian in me not been expecting purely metaphorical representations of the theme? However, a conversation with Ghadiali convinced me that the crisis needs a multiplicity of visual languages to encourage the audience to truly ponder the issue at hand. Literal depictions of the consequences of the climate emergency can work productively, with purely artistic portrayals to forge a wider knowledge and deeper understanding. It is akin to Zanele Muholi's 2020/21 exhibition at Tate Modern, where her creative photography projects went hand in hand with documentaries to enable the audience to gain a kaleidoscopic understanding of issues facing queer people in contemporary South Africa.¹¹ The Tate show was memorable probably due to this multivalent approach. There are a number of reasons a person might go to an exhibition, and 'Against Apartheid' runs the gamut from entertaining to illuminating. It is apt that Plymouth is the setting, as it is from here that the English Pilgrims set off on the journey that culminated in the colonial project that is North America, with Native Americans enduring a litany of woes that carry on into the present. The voices in the exhibition echo and amplify each other's message, engage in a conversation in a multitude of tongues, reminding you, as I said above, that the climate crisis is the bastard child of the colonial project. Whether the questions posed will ever be answered remains to be seen.

Akin Oladimeji is a writer, critic and lecturer in Visual Culture at the London College of Contemporary Arts (an associate college of the University for the Creative Arts), and a regular contributor to *eflux.com*. His interview with Jelili Atiku was published in the Spring 2023 issue of *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art*.

¹¹ 'Zanele Muholi', Tate Modern, London, 5 November 2020 – 7 March 2021; the Tate is preparing a major survey of Zanele Muholi's work in 2024/25: see www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-modern/zanele-muholi