



WITH OPENED MOUTHS

AGNES
ETHERINGTON
ART CENTRE



Language Bears Witness

Language bears witness to the way we see and experience the world and our place within it. For institutions that have colonial legacies, like art museums, the English language is saturated with terms that reinforce domination and hierarchy. Within the museum, language works as a system of classification to determine value and to illustrate who belongs and who does not. Although I work in the English language, I am aware of the ways it can be used as a means of control. I am trying to undo the damage of the language of museums by providing alternative approaches that might lead to the development of a more fluid and inclusive taxonomy.

With Opened Mouths

This exhibition includes “traditional” West African masks, face coverings, hoods, helmets and crests from the Justin and Elisabeth Lang Collection and contemporary works by Nigerian Canadian artist Oluseye. I use the term “traditional” cautiously; like “historical,” it suggests an object that is both temporally and geographically remote. Such an object is stuck in the past and exists in opposition to Western ideas of progress.

Traditional is used here to denote specific kinds of collections or families of objects. The term “family” is used loosely, not to describe kinship based on ancestry but rather to describe a common thread shaped through experience. These are objects whose intended purpose has been distorted through their displacement into an art museum. They have been forced into unfamiliar knowledge-making systems and through these practices have been coerced into telling different kinds of stories.







New Homes, Enduring Bonds

Fractures exist between the structure and system of the art museum and families of “traditional” art. Looking back to its development in the eighteenth century scholars have compared the public art museum to many things: a palace of the people;¹ a temple where rituals are enacted to civilize populations;² a space of self-regulation, similar to a penitentiary;³ and a monument to state power.⁴

I see the art museum today as a highly informed but divided space made up of the Seen and the Unseen. If we think of the museum as a body, then the Seen is its visible head. It is the exhibition space where people encounter museum objects through the lens of curators. This is how objects from Africa become African art. The handling and interpreting of objects by “experts,” the presence of glass display cases, “tombstone” signage, standardized accession numbering and didactic panels all reinforce particular storytelling processes. This is the space where the technologies of display work together to present a cohesive curatorial vision.

The Unseen lies hidden within the bowels of the museum. The storage vaults form the subterranean underbelly, the closet with the skeletons. The vaults are the heart of the museum, where objects, and collections like the Lang, live in a sort of suspended dream world. In this sphere, the seamless narratives and interpretative tools from the world of the Seen hold no currency. These archives and vaults tell a different and truer story. Associate Curator Sebastian De Line likens the vaults to a morgue.⁵ It is where the ancestors lie alone and isolated, wrapped in paper and plastic, cut off from familial bonds and nurturing ritual cycles. These vaults are sites of imprisonment and unrelenting trauma.

An African collection residing in a Western art museum therefore reflects an uneasy partnership. Agnes is the guardian of the impressive Lang Collection of African art. As such, it holds the power to relegate African art to storage for extended periods and to reinforce imperial taxonomies of display. *With Opened Mouths* asks if these powerful objects can exist in the museum space in a different way. Can masks speak for themselves? Can visitors take an active part in enabling these objects to engage with the world today? Can new messages emerge from objects whose meanings have been distorted over time?

Displaced Kinships

Collections of art from Africa are not collections of art objects. They are not paintings like those in the Bader Collection of European art, meant to reflect either the artist’s vision of the world or the owner’s status in seventeenth-century European mercantile culture. In fact, the Lang Collection could not be more different. Objects from Africa followed in the wake of earlier transatlantic trade—the African women and men who were sold as chattel—and became part of a thriving commercial European culture.

With Opened Mouths includes a selection of contemporary pieces by Nigerian Canadian artist Oluseye. These talismanic objects or lucky charms are from his ongoing *Eminado* series (2018–present). *Eminado* is Yoruba for good luck charm and this work memorializes the millions of people transported as chattel across the Atlantic. It was triggered by the history of *Friendship*, a Canadian-built slave ship that carried enslaved Africans from New Calabar in present day Nigeria to Montego Bay, Jamaica, in 1793.

The constant migration of Black people through time, as slaves in the past and as immigrants more recently, is an enduring theme in Oluseye’s work. He looks at the ways in which Blackness moves across space, place and time, shaping and shifting in the world.⁶

The Atlantic Ocean is the canvas of *With Opened Mouths*. It carried the masks to this continent from their places of origin, and it is their last memory of home. As they gaze out over the horizon, the familiar sounds and smells of the ocean might provide some comfort. Oluseye also makes history personal, by imagining the talisman an individual might have carried from home.

Oluseye’s charms recall a variety of feelings: movement, estrangement, discomfort and alienation. Some look as if they could provide comfort, like a palm-shaped piece of rubber, small enough to be clasped in a child’s hand, while others look as if they would hurt to hold, with sharp protruding spikes vicious enough to draw blood. Another has the braids of a loved one, knotted with metal and rubber to make it strong and enduring. By making something out of remnants, out of the discards of life, Oluseye attempts to resurrect an unacknowledged people.

Unlike Oluseye’s contemporary art pieces, the traditional masks from West Africa in *With Opened Mouths* were once used, in masquerade rituals. These community-based collective events take place outdoors and throb with otherworldly energy. They involve elaborate costumes, and are intended to evoke entire cosmologies, completely foreign to the museum world that the masks find themselves in today. The masks and costumes were also not meant to be shown outside of special events. They are part of a world where knowledge has many functions, and is sacred, hidden and protected. Knowledge in this context is not a pursuit intended to be captured, harnessed, analyzed, catalogued and applied.

Throwing Fertilizer at Your Feet

Māori curator Puawai Cairns at the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa, believes that museums can change if they evolve through sustainable indigenized practice.⁷ Cairns speaks of creating new spaces in museums by “throwing fertilizer at your feet”—invoking metaphors of planting, gardening, blossoming and decaying. It is a concept of growing from where you are and of acknowledging individual responsibility as well as the importance of collective action. It is also about intuitively *feeling* for an alternative within a space of elemental familiarity, a space of Earth, Water and Growth. It is striving for a different museum system, methodology and dreamscape.

For Cairns, these ideas materialized as the promise of a new “sovereign space” outside the colonial taxonomy, where Indigenous voices determine content and practice based on their reality and autonomy. This is the museum as “heart centre,” as a ritual gathering place that exists within new knowledge-making processes.

If the Atlantic Ocean beckons the West African masks, the soil of *With Opened Mouths* recalls the outdoor masquerade as well as the epistemic fertility and possibilities in the masks’ new home. This is the soil of Kingston, the first capital of the colonial Province of Canada. If each mask carried African soil on its transatlantic journey as a talisman of remembering and belonging, this display would look very different.

The soil of West Africa is a deep brown, in contrast to the deserts of North and South Africa, which are a light yellow. The more fertile soil is a deep, deep rose, and farther south, the soil is a rich, bright copper-orange. If each mask brought soil from home, the soil in *With Opened Mouths* would be a kaleidoscope of colour.

Senzeni Na

If the masks could speak, they would ask, “*Senzeni na?*” What have we done? Why are we in this alien place, breathing alien air, with alien soil beneath us and an alien sky above? *Senzeni na* is a Xhosa and Zulu freedom hymn and lament that was sung to protest the ruthlessness of the apartheid state in 1980s South Africa. Commanding, mournful and accusatory, it directly addresses the oppressors and questions the humanity of a legislated system of discrimination based on skin colour. What have we done? What have we done? What have we done? What have we done? Our only sin is the colour of our skin.

Masks like these from West Africa are not used in South Africa, but the struggle against brutal colonial occupation is pan-African and universal. It is impossible to fully express the richness and diversity of Africa here. My intention in *With Opened Mouths* is to pay homage to the collective struggle of enslaved and colonized people and also to acknowledge kinship bonds that were torn apart. Placing these powerful, disembodied objects side by side is meant to reassert their collective otherworldly power and kinship in a place far from home. They now have invisible cords that can link them together, however tenuously and temporarily. Presenting masks from West Africa collectively, without drawing attention to their differences, is not to suggest any kind of symmetry between them, but to draw on their power as we look toward the future.

A Circle Is Made of the Points on Its Border

Traditional art was not created as art. These objects form psychically expansive families. Ariella Azoulay reminds us that calling these objects art denies them a place in a world they once knew, among objects and

people who recognize them.⁸ It positions them as the property of the museum and legitimizes colonial hierarchies that shape their reality.

With Opened Mouths sets the Agnes Etherington Art Centre on a new journey with its collection of masks from West Africa and creates a new kind of experience. There is no right way to look at these masks or to understand them—instead, visitors are invited to celebrate their power. Tracing movement, momentum and connection, visitors can re-enact the collective action of the masquerade. Circumnavigating the space, they come across forgotten traces. Visitors might choose to recreate a new pattern in the footsteps of the old. This is how homage and respect are paid to these reminders of an expansive way of seeing the world.

With Opened Mouths presents a space where displaced objects can be (at least partially) disentangled from embedded institutional violence, and can be used to disrupt rather than replicate the imperial past. The exhibition looks at the ways that fields of absence surrounding displaced collections can be made visible, but also how these fields can be reimagined in the present as vital and productive. I see an exhibition space as poetic, sensory and vital, one that enables fluid and opaque dialogues between the various actors: West African masks, contemporary art, visitors and other exhibitions.

—Dr. Qanita Lilla

1 Andrew McClellan, *Inventing the Louvre: Art, Politics, and the Origins of the Modern Museum in Eighteenth-Century Paris* (California, University of California Press, 1999), 91.

2 Carol Duncan, *Civilizing Rituals: Inside Public Art Museums* (London: Routledge, 1995), 7.

3 Tony Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum: History, Theory, Politics* (London: Routledge, 1995), 63.

4 James J. Sheehan, *Museums in the German Art World: From the End of the Old Regime to the Rise of Modernism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 83.

5 Sebastian De Line, online meeting with staff of the Agnes Etherington Art Centre, February 2021.

6 Oluseye, interview by Qanita Lilla, November 2020.

7 Puawai Cairns, “Decolonise or Indigenise: Moving Towards Sovereign Spaces and the Māorification of New Zealand Museology,” *Te Papa* (blog), 10 February 2020, <https://blog.tepapa.govt.nz/2020/02/10/decolonise-or-indigenise-moving-towards-sovereign-spaces-and-the-maorification-of-new-zealand-museology/>.

8 Ariella Azoulay, *Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism* (London: Verso, 2019), 75.

LEFT TO RIGHT:

Oluseye, *Eminado series #95, #146, #153 & #200*, 2019 and 2020, found rubber and object assemblage. PHOTO: Courtesy of Patel Brown Gallery and the Artist



COVERS AND FAR LEFT:

Unrecorded Maker, Agbogho Mmuo (Maiden Spirit Mask) (detail), Nigeria, unrecorded date, unknown elements including wood, mirror and pigment. Gift of Justin and Elisabeth Lang, 1984 (M84-365) PHOTO: Paul Litherland

OTHER PAGES:

Atlantic Ocean from South Africa
Soil from Ka'tarohkwi

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