

# Yinka Shonibare MBE: *Movements*



*Movements* is a tool designed by DHC/ART – Education to encourage in-depth explorations of key concepts evoked by the works presented in the exhibition Yinka Shonibare MBE *Pièces de résistance*. By highlighting these points of conceptual departure through the document *Movements*, the DHC/ART educators intend to inspire dialogue about the exhibition and to encourage visitors to elaborate on the proposed themes with their personal interpretations and reflections. Over time, these *travelling concepts*<sup>1</sup> are subsequently enriched as they inform new contributions to our evolving conversations about art.

*Movements* also serves as a reminder that an aesthetic experience engages the body - its senses and its movements - as much as the intellect. The body's physical, emotional, and perceptive gestures are intimately linked as we move through the exhibition space and our senses are awakened. The rhythm of our trajectories and changing perspectives also mobilize our vision; images take shape as our memory and imagination are touched by the emerging aesthetic landscape. *Movements* is thus an invitation for the visitor to become immersed - mind and body - into DHC/ART exhibitions, thereby developing a rich and dynamic understanding of the works.

<sup>1</sup> Mieke Bal, "Concept", *Travelling Concepts in the Humanities: A Rough Guide*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001).

# Context: Migration



Yinka Shonibare MBE, *Homeless Child 3*, 2013. Mannequin, Dutch wax printed cotton textile, fibreglass, globe head, steel base plate, leather suitcases. © Yinka Shonibare MBE / image licensed by SODRAC / Photo: Stephen White / Courtesy James Cohan Gallery, New York and Shanghai.

The image of Yinka Shonibare MBE's *Homeless Child 3* (2013) rises up: a child's body bent under the weight of a heavy burden, a dizzying pile of leather suitcases from another era. And despite all, he resists, walks and grasps the straps with his fingertips. His head is a black Victorian globe of the Earth marked with fine white handwriting. The figure is homeless. Is he a child stigmatised by poverty, wandering the streets? And yet his wax-fabric clothing makes him ambiguous. Although this kind of fabric is typically associated with authentic African identity, it is actually a controversial hybrid; artisanal Indonesian batik designs were appropriated by the country's Dutch colonisers to produce industrially manufactured copies sold to West Africans. The clothing style is also typical of the Victorian aristocracy. Is he of African origin? A hybrid figure, of indeterminate social class, bearing the burden of colonial history? Which burdens, which histories? From whose point of view?

*Homeless Child 3* employs a migratory aesthetic, a rich, open and demanding concept developed by the cultural theorist Mieke Bal. Our culture of globalisation is characterised by movement: people and things travel at great speed, often and everywhere; we defy geographical distance and communicate instantaneously with our mobile devices; we consume cheap clothing made in India, China and South America without much thought. We think that we can transcend borders as we dash about at great speed. The art produced through a migratory aesthetic does not deny this culture of mobility, but it asks, in a critical manner: who profits from these forms of mobility, and who is excluded? Who is restricted in a perpetual situation of "in-betweenness"? Who is forced into exile, to always relocate, and why? Migratory art proposes alternative movements with a strong political and historical awareness, in which identities are relational and not unique or fixed;

in which migrating forms are tangible and material, giving rise to an engagement of mindful proximity in those who encounter them;<sup>2</sup> and in which it is possible to imagine a "home" that is at once nomadic, open to the presence of the Other and anchored in multiple roots.

*Migratory art has a strong material quality which leads to an "engagement of mindful proximity" (what does art do? what does art do to us?) between the viewer and the work. Drawing on the works by Shonibare in the exhibition Pièces de résistance, describe this kind of engagement from your own point of view.*

*The concept migratory aesthetic must constantly be re-appropriated. Describe your own understanding of the term by entering into dialogue with some of the works in the exhibition Pièces de résistance.*

<sup>1</sup> Sam Durrant and Catherine M. Lord, introduction to *Essays in Migratory Aesthetics: Cultural Practices between Migration and Art*, ed. Sam Durrant and Catherine M. Lord. (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2007), 11-20.

<sup>2</sup> Mieke Bal and Miguel Á. Hernández-Navarro, introduction to *Art and Visibility in Migratory Culture: Conflict, Resistance and Agency*, ed. Mieke Bal and Miguel Á. Hernández-Navarro, (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2011), 9-20.

# Content: *Relationship*



Yinka Shonibare MBE, *Self Portrait (after Warhol) 2*, 2013. Unique screen print, digital print and hand painted linen, 53 x 52 7/8 x 2 1/4 in. (134.5 x 134 x 5.5 cm). © Yinka Shonibare MBE, image licensed by SODRAC. Courtesy of James Cohan Gallery, New York/Shanghai

Appropriating moments in political, economic, and artistic histories, Yinka Shonibare MBE's use of allegory draws our imagination to myriad, complex relationships -- between Europe and Africa, past and present, fact and fiction, as well as the multiple, contradictory, and ever fluid elements that comprise our cultural identities and collective memories.

In deconstructing paintings, literature, and public monuments, Shonibare creates entry points to re-readings of the present that places it closer to the past than one would perhaps like to acknowledge. One's perception of - and thus relationship to - objects, people, and events are transformed with a more skeptical sensitivity to the hidden, the unspoken, the taken for granted, the revered, the glorified. These transformations are as playful as they are cutting; Shonibare denies any moral authority, rejecting any approach to art making that could be interpreted as didactic. He instead proposes a sustained conversation that considers the complexities of origin, the dubiousness of authenticity, and the politics of representation.

Like others of Shonibare's mannequin works, *Nelson's Jacket* is both inspired by and appropriates codes of traditional museum display. With the garment's immaculate tailoring, epaulets, decorated cuffs, and high collar, it assumes even further clout positioned behind the glass of the cabinet. The following recent encyclopedic entry speaks to the aura surrounding its namesake, the 'reckless and brilliant' national hero that was Lord Horatio Nelson: "...struck down by fever—probably malaria—he was invalidated home, and, while recovering from the consequent depression, Nelson experienced a dramatic surge of optimism. From that moment, Nelson's ambition,

fired by patriotism tempered by the Christian compassion instilled by his father, urged him to prove himself at least the equal of his eminent kinsmen."<sup>1</sup> He is for Shonibare the perfect allegory for the imperialist fervor that is not so far removed from the power relationships - to which the artist acknowledges his own complicity - that feed present-day globalization. They are embedded in the canon of modern painting, the leisure activities of the upper classes, and international military strategies. More specific but no less telling, they also permeate the current marketing and design practices of the multinational company that fabricates the Dutch wax fabric of which *Nelson's Jacket* is made -- and that which plays such a central role in Shonibare's practice.

*Shonibare has said "I have no anger about anything, so there's no anger to my work...I'm not making these definite political statements: because I have agency, I can be playful...I have a lot more freedom, and there's an indulgence that goes with that, so I can have fun with it."<sup>2</sup> What is your response to this statement? In exposing the complexities of history to provoke conversations about power and identity, Shonibare also articulates his ambivalence relative to these intersecting concepts. How does this positioning shape your reading of his works?*

*What current events or key public figures do you imagine an artist of the future might appropriate in order to better understand their socio-political and cultural realities?*

<sup>1</sup> Tom Pocock, "Horatio Nelson, Viscount Nelson." *Encyclopedia Britannica*, accessed April 9, 2015, <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/408359/Horatio-Nelson-Viscount-Nelson>.

<sup>2</sup> Rebecca Jagoe, "Colonialism and Cultural Hybridity: An Interview with Yinka Shonibare, MBE," accessed April 9, 2015, <http://theculturetrip.com/africa/nigeria/articles/colonialism-and-cultural-hybridity-an-interview-with-yinka-shonibare-mbe/%0A>.

# Composition: *Pleasure*



Yinka Shonibare MBE, *The Age of Enlightenment – Immanuel Kant* (detail) 2008. Life-size fiberglass mannequin, Dutch wax printed cotton, mixed media. © Yinka Shonibare MBE / image licensed by SODRAC / Courtesy James Cohan Gallery, New York and Shanghai.

In the worlds that Yinka Shonibare MBE creates, the viewer is submerged in a colourful masquerade involving theatricality, texture, and a saturation of the senses. Themes of decadence and excess are visually explored in his paintings, photographs, films, and most poignantly with the multitude of brightly coloured Dutch wax fabrics for his sculptures. It is a pulsating vibrancy that draws the viewer into Shonibare's works and results in a truly pleasurable viewing experience. Pleasure is an important notion for the artist, as he states: "I consider myself a hedonist... I think that pleasure is king – as well as a very strong basis for being subversive."<sup>1</sup>

If pleasure is king, it is nonetheless subversiveness that reigns in Shonibare's empire. Because beneath the hoards of colourful fabric and the superfluous splendor that Shonibare presents, lies a powerful story. History, in all of its irony and hypocrisy, inequality and betrayal, is buried there. A history that is known but perhaps too often ignored, such as depicted in *La Méduse*, 2008, which makes reference to colonization, France's slave trade, and scandal with vibrant red, yellow and pink targets and triangles on agitated sails. Alternately, Shonibare presents imagined histories, as in *The Age of Enlightenment – Immanuel Kant*, 2008, where Kant, dressed in lavish and playful garments, is depicted headless and without his legs. Shonibare uses beauty as his bait. Once the viewer has been dazzled by the appealing and pleasurable compositional elements of his work, they bite, and only then realize the weight of *Pièces de résistance*. Backhanded politics, colonization, power struggles. Pleasure's antithesis.

*Contemporary French philosopher Michel Onfray states that "hedonism suggests identifying the highest good with your own pleasure and that of others; the one must never be indulged at the expense of sacrificing the other."<sup>2</sup> Discuss this idea in relation to Shonibare's emphasis on pleasure versus the subversive and critical questions he raises through his works.*

*Shonibare is not alone in using a visually seductive approach to difficult and controversial issues. Can you think of other contemporary artists who use this tactic? Do you think that it is an effective way to bring light to challenging matters?*

<sup>1</sup> Robert Hobbs, "The Politics of Representation," *Yinka Shonibare MBE* (New York: Preschl), 2008. 34.

<sup>2</sup> Jasmina Sopova, "Michel Onfray: A Philosopher of the Enlightenment," *THE UNESCO Courier* 9 (2007), accessed March 26, 2015, <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0019/001921/192178e.pdf>.

# Considerations: *Dandy*



Yinka Shonibare, MBE. *Un Ballo in Maschera (A Masked Ball)*, 2004. Video. Duration: 32 minutes. © Yinka Shonibare MBE / image licensed by SODRAC / Courtesy James Cohan Gallery, New York and Shanghai.

“Unduly concerned with looking stylish and fashionable”;<sup>1</sup> this is one of the principal definitions of the dandy, a male character who first appeared in England in the eighteenth century and who in the nineteenth century became an archetype of European society. A dandy was seen at the time as a superficial figure obsessed with clothing and appearance. Aspiring to social mobility, he was attracted to the wealth and grandeur of the aristocracy, of which he was not a member. Several authors in the nineteenth century endowed him with an almost spiritual dimension, seeing dandyism as a kind of self-discipline, a particular mode of engaging with the world by celebrating the aesthetic. In *The Painter of Modern Life* (1863), Charles Baudelaire explained: “These beings have no other status but that of cultivating the idea of beauty in their own persons, of satisfying their passions, of feeling and thinking”. For Baudelaire, it was not envy, money or love that dictated the dandy’s behaviour, but rather “the burning desire to create a personal form of originality, within the external limits of social conventions”.<sup>2</sup>

Following Baudelaire, the dandy is a figure on the margins whose fine tastes afford him the leisure to defy the social and aesthetic conventions of his day. And yet, despite the attitude of marginality in which he operates, the dandy is also a figure defined by cultural appropriation and the rejection of other forms of otherness. An extremely codified figure, the dandy appears to have existed in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century society in only a male, white and Eurocentric form. Yinka Shonibare MBE takes up the figure of the dandy to carry out one of the many reversals typical of his work. At first appearing to explore the seductive and material aspect of the dandy’s appeal, such as the fabric of his clothing, Shonibare then places the spirit of the dandy at the heart of a critique of the way African culture is represented (or not) in the history of European art.

He makes the dandy a vector of otherness and displacement, encouraging the viewer to go beyond the charm of the decorative to question representational customs and become aware of the ideologies underlying Western visual culture.

*In many of the works presented at the Foundation, Shonibare uses the figure of a man dressed like a dandy. Are other figures or stereotypes of Western masculinity explored in Shonibare’s work? Which ones?*

*How would you define a dandy today? Is this figure still present in contemporary culture?*

<sup>1</sup> *Oxford Dictionaries*, s.v. “dandy”, accessed April 8, 2015, <http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/dandy>.

<sup>2</sup> Charles Baudelaire, *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays*, trans. Jonathan Mayne (London: Phaidon Press, 1995), 26-29.



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