

THE CRITICS  
COMPANY. ONE  
CAN ONLY HOPE  
AND WONDER



ZOLLAMT<sup>MMK</sup>

EN



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COMPANY  
ONE CAN ONLY  
HOPE AND  
WONDER

01.04.-30.07.2023

“But those wise men have gone to the future. They will use their tears to paint. They will run mad and create something new.”

Emose, in *One Can Only Hope and Wonder*, 2023

In February 1897, British colonial troops conquered, destroyed, and looted the Kingdom of Benin, which had been defending itself for almost 500 years. Between 3,500 and 4,000 works of art were looted, about 40 percent of which ended up in the British Museum in London. The rest was auctioned off, and a large part was purchased by German museums. The descendants of the Oba of Benin began demanding the return of these artifacts as early as the beginning of the 20th century. Nigeria has been making official demands for restitution to the Federal Republic of Germany since the country gained its independence in 1960. Self-assurance through one's own history and culture was considered essential for building a strong sense of identity while founding an independent state. Until 2022, German museums had refused to return the more than 1,100 stolen works. Finally, 125 years after the looting, Germany is returning some of these artifacts.

The emptiness of a history without reference points—without the prospect of examining available works of art—is enormous. It can lead either to madness or the decision to move forward and create new works.

## **Past is present, is future**

Deborah Johnson

In the philosophy of the circle of life, time is continuous.

Similar to the water cycle, it is rain flooding streams and flowing into rivers and lakes, evaporating, and returning into the ocean again as rain. In this manner, I think everything is connected, and we must sometimes face the proverbial looking glass and confront the past for us to understand the present.

Beginnings might not always dictate endings, but they sometimes affect the present.

Today, you are standing in the ZOLLAMT<sup>MMK</sup> ready to experience, understand, or critique this exhibition. Whichever you are here for, it is imperative that you fully grasp the purpose of the now. And to achieve that, you have to see what was and what came to be.

### **ACT 1: THE PAST**

I'll ask that anyone reading undertakes this exercise with me. Close your eyes for a moment, and picture this: we have been transported from the ZOLLAMT<sup>MMK</sup> to a place most of you might never set foot in this lifetime.

Think dusty roads, a scorching hot sun, and dry gusts of wind consumed by many smells like sweat and roasted meat. See the rickety yellow-green buses and commercial bikes ridden recklessly by young men unable to find alternative means of income, old houses with corroded zinc rooftops ready to fly off their hinges in terrible weather.

#### **Location: Kudenda, Kaduna, Nigeria, Africa**

Welcome.

In this small neighborhood in the south of a Northern state, the average household consists of a father, a mother, and children living below minimum wage, with some struggling to make ends meet but still surviving, content with what a person more privileged might deem "less than enough."

The community champions its uniqueness in that way, "tell it as it is," with no individual living under any pretense—simply because there is no need to. When you've been through the same woods as the next person four times over, it allows for a silent understanding and adaptability.

The people here work in various sectors, like teaching positions, offices, breweries, markets, and small shops, some being proprietors and landowners. Needless to say, it is a close-knit community where family isn't just contingent on relations by blood but also on shared experiences.

The community is diverse; unlike most places in Nigeria—where people are segregated according to tribe and religion—Kudenda is home to all and sundry. Some households can afford primary and higher education, while others cannot.

In the environs of Kudenda (Nasarawa), where two members of the filmmaking collective spent their early years before moving to be with the rest of their family in Kudenda, a normalized fate for a majority of young boys was to end up addicted to drugs or, for young girls, teenage pregnancy.

This information is vital for you to better understand how The Critics Company has already addressed a significant part of the exhibition's message just by being here today.

When you know of the limiting circumstances these boys grew up in and the impossibly low odds of this group even existing and creating these films and having them reach you at the ZOLLAMT<sup>MARK</sup>, you will be granted a new lens of appreciation for the work done here today.

All this to say, I hope that when you go through the experience of *One Can Only Hope and Wonder*, you are present, honoring the entire country of stifled, thriving, resilient artists that inspired the production and are behind the domino effect that led to its creation. I hope you immerse yourself completely and, when you leave, can release something here and take something else home.

## ACT 2: THE PRESENT

In this subtle retelling of the 1897 Benin expedition, the illustrious minds behind the filmmaking collective, The Critics Company, take us on a journey of loss and restitution from a new point of view—the artist and his art.

In Nigeria, many of the new generation of creatives, artists, and thinkers operate from the position of westernized identity.

Core cultural values such as the practice of speaking native languages have been traded off, and our heritage is almost nonexistent. Because of this, there are hardly any bridges between the past and the present for artists. We do not know enough, and yet a lot of us are stuck in the past.

The project calls for a commendation of the artists and of art today, urging Africans and non-Africans alike to honor what was but also consider, support, and invest in the possibilities of the future.

## In conversation with The Critics Company

DEBORAH JOHNSON It's not every day you see a bunch of Nigerian filmmakers curating an exhibition so far from home. How does it make you feel? Why this project?

RAYMOND YUSUFF Even though I grew up in Nigeria, I realized that, like many others around me, I was not in tune with my culture. A lot of us do not know how we got here, what our histories are, and who the people were before us. Not knowing why you tick the way you do is a very dangerous place to be in. My brothers and I are originally Yoruba by birth (the Yoruba are a large ethnic group in Africa, a vast majority of whom live in predominantly South-West Nigeria), but we grew up in the Northern part of Nigeria, so we are not even in tune with our own culture; we talk more of the Hausa culture. I do not know what was more upsetting, the sudden awareness or the fact that it had taken us so long to come to this understanding. So, when the opportunity to show our work at ZOLLAMT<sup>MMK</sup> came, after much thought, it felt right that this particular project took center stage—not just for us, but for everyone else back home.

You see, we have somehow managed to carry our entire community in this production, an entire community of artists. From costume design to the crew to the main characters, dance artists, and even the extras, we put everyone's art in it, everyone's spirit in it. All the people working on the set were young; they may have had no idea of how far this production would go, but they gave it their all, which made me very glad. That alone is the essence of what we are trying to accomplish with this film. I feel very proud yet humbled at being tasked with telling this story. I admit, I am a bit overwhelmed but also very expectant. This exhibition is a silent reminder for me and everyone else that anything is possible; literally, anything can happen. That is very humbling to think about.

RICHARD YUSUFF I feel like, for us young artists, becoming literate about our history gives us an extra sense of purpose. In a way, it makes us feel responsible for creating art that is significant in upholding our culture. That, to me, is good enough reason to speak about this when we have the opportunity to be on a global stage.

DEBORAH JOHNSON Beautiful, guys. I think my favorite thing so far is how multilayered this entire production is and how everything is intertwined. I'm particularly interested in the title, *One Can Only Hope and Wonder*—is it tied to a deeper meaning?

RAYMOND YUSUFF The title isn't an innuendo, but it does have a deeper meaning. I thought about how different it would be for our people in all of Africa, not just Nigeria, if history had played out in another way. I know people have talked about this far too many times, but I can't help but ponder who we'd be if we were more connected to our heritage. Africa ranks as the least developed continent other than Antarctica, you know? And when you want to see images of people who are suffering or going through it in the world, they show you African kids, our houses, and all that, and frankly some of it is overstretched. But there's an extent to which it does hold water, so we can only wonder what could've been had things happened differently, if we would have had more pride in our heritage as a people.

DEBORAH JOHNSON That is something I can relate to, and dwelling in the rabbit hole of what ifs is a peculiar and swiftly draining place to be. Can I ask, are you very frightened of the critique that might come from this work?

RAYMOND YUSUFF Yes. This is a kind of statement: we are not little kids playing around with their phones anymore; we are artists finding our voice, creating what we think is important to us, and offering it up to the public to pick apart. They may love it or completely hate it or not even understand it, but we are asking to be critiqued, so, whatever the outcome, we will have to bear it. I think this is a very important part of our journey.

DEBORAH JOHNSON Are you bothered that what you're doing is not a novelty? I mean, a lot of people before you have created art around this before.

GODWIN GAZA JOSIAH I agree that conversations surrounding this part of history are not new, but for me and my brothers, it wasn't something we could personally brag about being informed on until our meeting with the known Nigerian curator Azu Nwagbogu sometime in mid-2022. He opened our minds to the possibilities.

I mean, of course we'd been passively hearing about it for a long time, but this was the first in-depth discussion we ever had with anyone around it, the first one that made it seem duty-like almost to our existence as artists. For that reason, this project is something we are fond of, because we had to learn to even conceptualize it. We had to do research and figure out our own opinions on it as individuals, and we did.

VICTOR JOSIAH Yeah, this particular project wasn't our first attempt at ideation for the film. We were going to go with something more typical, talking about how these artifacts have been stolen from Nigerians, they belong to us, and all of that. I think it took a deeper level of thinking and self-searching to admit that, honestly, that is not the only truth. I am not dismissing the struggle of the past decades and the trauma it imprinted on us as a people, but I also don't think we should limit ourselves to it. I think the point of view we have created is somehow novel in that we've made it in such a way that there are several narratives to be interpreted. You can look at it from the modern-day struggling artist's point of view, you can see it as a dive into the past. I'm not sure how people will react to it, but it's a truth we currently identify with.

DEBORAH JOHNSON I enjoy that this film creates an explorative universe of freedom for the modern-day African artist. As if you would tell them: "There is something to look forward to, and it is you." This is my last question: Imagine I'm five years old and only have a minute to spare, tell me about *One Can Only Hope and Wonder*.

RONALD YUSUFF The story follows Odili—the main character is a depiction of an artwork. He is abandoned and leaves his home Agenebode, instead making his way to Lovewood, with Lovewood representing museums, galleries, and art collectors. The people in Lovewood are aware of Odili's worth, they're appreciative of him, but then they milk him dry. He is shown and exhibited and gawked at, and the people of Lovewood see and know everything they need to about him. As familiarity breeds contempt, they eventually lose interest in him and stop caring. The original artist who created Odili is portrayed by Emose. She is his lover but is not pleased to see Odili return. She understands that their culture wasn't preserved after he left, so having him back will not stop the steady

decline of their culture and the loss of the people's heritage. But the community, blinded by greed, do not care. They rejoice and are glad, thinking that if Odili made a lot of financial returns in Lovewood, then he will do the same for them now. The film ends with a little girl dancing. She represents the new generation of artists, reminding us that we cannot change history, but we can pour energy into what is present and honor the now.

DEBORAH JOHNSON Thank you, I think these exchanges will always be important for us as humans. We will constantly be evolving at different stages, with these similar but distinct conversations, and every time it is discussed, no matter how uncomfortable it may be, we gain a sliver of understanding or inspiration to create something new.

## ACT 3: THE FUTURE

Before time was,  
There was blood.  
This ground has been a resting place for despair.  
How horrifying, to witness humans be.  
To watch us maim and spill on the Earth,  
Then force her to hold the dead;  
She is their first mother after all.  
How lucky the sky is  
To look down and witness humans be,  
Paint its ever-changing surface,  
Write songs about wind and sand,  
Fall in love under the moon,  
Find themselves in the heat of the sun,  
Feel inspired and lose their way,  
And find it again in each other.  
Perspective is a beautiful thing.



## The Expedition Room

### Tsavo, Kenya

Why has my carcass become your viewing pleasure?

The British began with the construction of a railway bridge over the Tsavo River in Kenya—linking Uganda with the Indian Ocean at Kilindini Harbour—in 1898. During the months of construction, work was almost halted when two maneless lions attacked and devoured workers.

These lion attacks feel a lot like Nature was fighting back against the bridge's construction in support of the Nandi tribe's supreme chief Koitalel Arap Samoei, whose resistance against British colonial rule in Kenya from 1890 ended only when he was assassinated by a British soldier in 1905.

The reason for the construction of this railway isn't explicitly stated, but from historical accounts, most of the railway network was used to transport goods and resources from Africa to Britain.

The two lions were brutally shot with high-powered rifles and then, for the next 25 years, their skins served as floor rugs for the British soldier responsible for their death before being sold to the Field Museum of Natural History in Chicago, Illinois.

**So now tell me, why has my carcass become your viewing pleasure?**

## Magdala, Ethiopia

Look on, marvel at me, marvel!

9–13 April 1868

For four days, the British and Abyssinian forces fought at Magdala (መቅደሊ), a mountaintop fortress ruled by Emperor Tewodros II from 1855 to 1868, now known as Amba Mariam (ዐምባ ማሪያም), 630 kilometers from the Red Sea.

With the British winning, the result was a city burnt down and the looting of an enormous number of valuable cultural objects and treasures, including crowns, gold and silver crosses, and numerous manuscripts documenting Ethiopia's history.

**You may look at me, but I am not from here, I am not whole here.**

## Odili, Nigeria

I used to be joy, but now I am marred with blood

In 1897, the British invaded the Benin Empire, which had for years managed to retain its independence during the scramble for Africa.

War and destruction are repeated themes in the looting of artifacts, and another interesting theme highlighted in the story of the Benin expedition is the disregard for culture by the British.

In November 1896, a certain British official wanted to visit the Oba to discuss “trade and peace,” and without waiting for approval from his superiors he embarked on this journey. Now, this was at the same time as the Igue Festival was happening, and so the Oba had instructed that he would send word in a month or two when he was ready to host the official. It was this disregard for the Oba’s instruction that resulted in the death of the official and the others who were accompanying him.

The British chose to retaliate militarily, conquering the city and killing men, women, and children while also proceeding to loot artifacts from the town and setting the city ablaze.

Most of the looted Benin bronzes are still on display at the British Museum in London.

**For I have become the perfect embodiment of joy and sadness.**

## Bangoua, Cameroon

Do not take me away forcefully, or watch me die!

The Bangoua queen was taken from a shrine by a German Colonialist who entered the village under the guise of seeking trade relations and supplies.

This story hints at yet another instance of the blatant disregard for culture, for not only is this a highly significant artifact to the Bangoua tribe of Cameroon, but shrines are considered very sacred places across the whole of Africa.

This artwork has since been exchanged by many art collectors. Now the traditional leaders of the Bangoua are corresponding with the current owners of the artifact, Fondation Dapper in Paris, for its return.

## Shiri, Zimbabwe

I am special and I do not need you to tell me

“Shiri” means “bird” in the Zimbabwean language Shona, and this soapstone sculpture—an artifact of the great Kingdom of Zimbabwe constructed between the 11th and 14th centuries by the Shona people—is a reference to the Zimbabwe Bird and a testament to ancient African civilization.

At the end of it all, I can only be whole and at peace back home

## Open Ground

My people sit at the grave of past glory,  
Mourning what can never be found.  
They claw at the earth  
And resist from breaking into the coffin;  
What are they looking for?  
A part of my people is buried in that grave.  
They have refused to move.  
Move! Move!  
Drag yourself from your pit of despair.  
Let the dead rest  
And let the living innovate.  
My people are stubborn,  
They are like glue,  
They stick to where you placed them first.  
Look at them sobbing on those stones.  
The ground is collecting their tears as fresh offerings.  
They are wasting their tears!  
Their tears are precious!  
Their tears are water to mix with color to make new paint.  
They refuse to paint,  
They will rather cry.  
A woman comes to my people,  
She brings tempting promises,  
She dances around their eyes naked,  
She seduces them with hope.  
"Come with me," she says,  
As she moves her hips to music  
Only people from beyond can hear.  
"Let's go further," she urges.  
My people turn their face from her,  
They are content to lay there.  
She comes around a few more times;  
Some young men feel fire in their bones,  
They abandon the graves and follow her forward.  
Others hang behind;  
The grave is all they know,  
They cannot let it go now.  
She may not come again.

But those wise men have gone to the future.  
They will use their tears to paint  
And all their ache will turn to poetry,  
They will scream and it will release beautiful melodies,  
They will run mad and create something new.  
But my people,  
You people,  
If you refuse to move,  
You will eventually enter the graves.

# Imprint

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*One Can Only Hope and Wonder*

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