



ADE ADEKOLA

Andrew Ruffhead

Bimbola Fashola

Zakee Sharif

Bob Burton

Christine Neville

Tim Llewellyn

Joanne McFarlane

Christabel Benneh

Paul Dudman

Dirk Lambert

Christine Stewart

Jonquil Todd

Victoria Sheard

Jed Page

Tim Shannahan

Esther Wyrsh

Sian Weston

Heros Kusano

Cell Animation

YINKA SHONIBARE

MARK WALLINGER



INTERVIEW

Ade Adekola, Yinka Shonibare, Mark Wallinger, Stewart Russell,
London 20 December 1996

Stewart You were my three first choice artists for this project, as Sonia Boyce, Bill Woodrow and Joe Casely-Hayford were for Portable Fabric Shelters. I was expecting it to be tougher than this! I thought the format of these two shows might be considered too narrow, too restrictive, the subject: allegiance to a flag or nation and the materials expertise: printed textiles.

I'm interested in what encouraged you to accept the invitation to work on this show?

Ade I think when we first met the ideas I was thinking about were actually quite difficult to realise, so what made me think it was possible was the fact that you were going to put a team together, a team who would work in conjunction with me. It became something that was more realisable than if I was trying to do it on my own, that was the key factor in making the decision to go ahead.

Stewart The categorisation of subjects at art colleges used to mean that people graduating from fine art courses wouldn't know an awful lot about the practicalities of printing onto textiles.

Yinka did you see this show as an opportunity to learn a new vocabulary?

Yinka I think the same would apply to me as Ade really. I was excited

about this project because I knew you would be able to provide the practical expertise required to produce this work. I've actually really enjoyed working collaboratively. I've enjoyed the design meetings and the various contributions that other people have made. Also in the go's it's rather redundant to talk about the divide between high art and low art practice, young people don't approach the practice of art in that way any longer, so the idea of doing a show with architects, artists and fashion designers I found really quite exciting.

Stewart For Yinka and Ade the practical expertise was available for them to carry out ideas which wouldn't otherwise have been made. That's a bit different from your position Mark. Ade and Yinka relied quite heavily on the LPT's practical expertise, you haven't collaborated in terms of the making of the work. Was there a fear of losing control?

Mark No, I would have liked to have used the facilities and co-operation available, but at the same time I knew that the idea was the main thing and it had to be driven by that, and it just so happened that the idea was to make a flag and it seemed best to have it made by a professional flag maker.

I think in a sense I agree with what you were saying about the redundancy of distinctions. Popular culture, it's consumption and interpretation seems to be the cultural framework and debate, so it would be difficult to know what high art, for want of better term, would constitute today.

Yinka Exactly, and therefore the structure of this exhibition is a reflection



of this, architects, designers and artists showing in the same space is a reflection of the way that boundaries are becoming indistinct.

Mark I think things have shifted that much that we've moved away from the artist with his individual notion of what governed the world to artist's being involved in an ongoing debate about society, to the point where the magazines and institutions are so rapacious for stuff to analyse, interpret and disseminate that in a sense the artists are belittled by that very machinery.

We are now moving into an age of curators where what the artist might have believed he was doing with a certain work can be manipulated, moved into another context to become another cultural artifact that fits a larger scheme of things. I think it's gone rather too far.

Stewart Ade were you ever uncertain about working within an art context, in a sense outside your familiar environment?

Ade No, this particular exhibition was more of a commission which is how I normally work in architecture. You start with some sort of definitive brief and you respond to that, so in terms of the process it was very similar to architecture, there was a strong parallel.

Stewart Ade works from an office rather than a studio, recently I've been wondering why artists continue to use studios?

Looking at the example of London Printworks, artists and designers come here when they need to create work in the area of printed textiles. And there are other visual arts resources which specialise in photography, fabrication, printing, digital imaging etc. The recent graduates that I'm seeing are not looking to rent studio space they're prioritizing their money differently. Typically they'll join open access workshops, buy a scooter to go to private views and a computer and a fax to send in proposals.

Mark and Yinka you are from a slightly different generation from these artists do you still feel the necessity to have a studio, isn't it really just a glorified showroom with storage space?

Mark Well I've had a studio since I left college and I do still make most things myself, it's just a practical space really. On the other hand, I know someone who's been in 49 group shows in the last 2 years and hasn't got a studio.

Ade Isn't it true to a fair degree that the actual process of creating is a very private thing?

Mark It depends: when I'm working on my idea I'm completely internalised so I can relate to the studio set-up, where you're playing with bits of material or bits of paint and actually trying to work things out.

Yinka I actually think that for a young artist a lap top is probably more useful than a studio. You will be more successful as an artist if you can make a good proposal and organise yourself, but it won't work for everyone, it does depend on what kind of work you make.

Mark I don't think you can make hard and fast rules; as much as anything I like the idea of going off to work in the morning. You know I was without a studio for two months and I was going berserk in my flat, I couldn't deal with it. I actually like making things.

Yinka Yeah I also like making things but I feel that it's more important to have access to something that enables you to disseminate ideas. A lot of people can't make their work, you don't have to be able to make it, but you do have to be able to disseminate the ideas.

Stewart You don't know much about each other's ideas or your individual approaches to the brief, Ade could you outline how you decided to tackle the brief and the question posed in the title, pledge allegiance to a flag?

Ade I was actually frightened when I saw the brief for Pledge Allegiance to a Flag? My first reaction was this looks dangerous. Then I asked myself, have I ever thought about whether I do actually pledge allegiance to a flag, either the Nigerian or the English flags and quite frankly it has absolutely no meaning to me and I have no allegiances to them. I then started to look at how structures evolve, when does a flag start to take precedent or when it might be detrimental for people to live within a geographical territory. In essence I've tried to give an individual the means of asking themselves questions. Do I really pledge allegiance to a flag? What does it mean to pledge allegiance to a flag? Do I actually support the structures which control the flag, which in essence always ends up being a government? Do I believe in the democratic process that elects a government? So I'm trying to give the individual a means of asking themselves questions. What does it mean and when I understand what it means will I actually pledge my allegiance to this flag?

There was something else going on in the work, in modern times with the advent of telecommunications, the average corporation makes more money than most nations. You have transnational corporations which don't need or subscribe to national boundaries and I was thinking, in the future will the nation state exist? it may exist in terms of it's boundaries but really what will control it? What is the real flag, is it the nation or the transnational corporation that actually provides employment for people within a country? I know that I would be more likely to pledge allegiance to something that feeds me as opposed to something that I am just because I am. So that was also an interesting proposition, to see if maybe in 50 years time we're not going to have national flags we're going to have corporations with flags. In some cases I would argue that corporate branding is a stronger icon than a national flag.

There seems to be a growing disparity between people, those who are skilled are tradable, they will go anywhere, forget immigration the transnational corporation will take care of that. So the people who are actually earning money are tradable. The unskilled people, most of the people, are getting less likely to get jobs and the question is what will they do?

Will they subscribe to structures that have failed them like governments? I think probably not but I'm not sure what is going to happen.

Yinka You are talking about the disenfranchised people, people who feel outside of society. Interestingly enough, this seems to be the group that are most likely to wave the flag.

I think that certain groups in society actually transcend flags. If we take people who are internet literate for example, those people communicate across cultures and in one sense they do not need a nation. It's actually quite interesting how the middle classes across cultures have more in common than the middle and working class people in the same country. Do you see what I mean, there is actually a kind of global culture for the people with the technological advantages or people with specific skills but at the same time when wars are fought between nations the disenfranchised group are somehow coerced into taking the leading role.

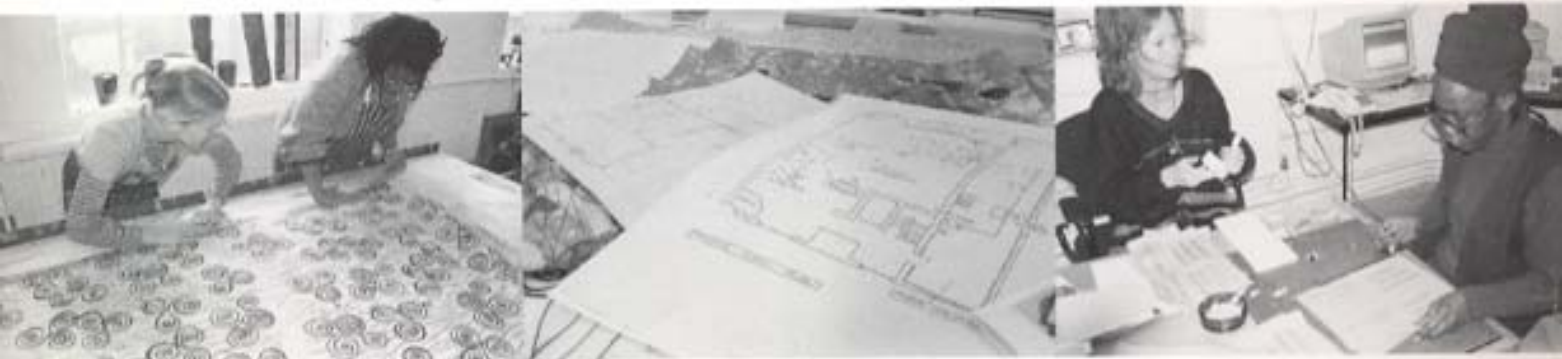
Ade There is something else going on at the moment which has not happened at any point in history; governments are losing their control of information. Governments were the regulators of information the

job of the artist to be moralistic, if I did, I think I would have become a politician. I never really want my audience to be 100% sure of what I'm doing; whether I really want the same kind of opulence as an exploitative Victorian philanthropist. I don't want the audience to be able to separate that from the comments I may also be making. I'm always trying to fuse diametrically opposed things in the same space.

Stewart Yinka, I was interested to see you alight on sport and football for this project. I haven't seen football appear in your work before.

Yinka Well actually some of those corsets I made last year have footballs on them and there was a painting I showed at the Serpentine which also used football motifs, so football has tentatively appeared in my work but this is the first time its full blown and up-front.

Stewart One of the main characters included in your fabrics is Basile Boli, a Ghanaian who became a French National and subsequently went on to represent France and the image on the fabric shows him playing for a Japanese team.



information controlling bodies. Just now if you want information you have more or less free access to it, I don't know how this will alter things but it will be interesting to find out.

Stewart Yinka, how did you decide to tackle the brief?

Yinka When I saw the brief my natural instinct was why would I want to do a show like this? And then I thought about it a bit more and thought well, it's actually really provocative, lets see what happens with this. You asked us to reflect on this idea of pledging allegiance to a flag or nation. Really we are not in the business of flag waving ourselves we are in the business of reflecting.

Ade I was actually very frightened of producing anything that might have created a flag that would somehow be identifiable to a group of people. Like promoting some course that I don't understand or wouldn't wish to promote myself.

Yinka You have to transcend the didactic, I don't actually think it's the

Yinka You see what tends to happen for black people in football and boxing and a lot of other sports is it becomes a way of getting out, upward social mobility. If you are living in a developing country and you sign for an Italian football club for two million, not only are you representing an Italian club, you become an honorary Italian as a result of your football skills and you're free to travel around the world, no immigration no passport controls.

When you are performing well you transcend borders and peoples prejudices but as soon as you stop performing then the racist issues will resurface, just as they did with John Barnes.

Ade In sports you see this celebration of flags and nation, but you don't see the other side of the flag. I felt it was important to try to give the individual a means of actually asking themselves those questions.

Stewart The proliferation of mass sporting events and the advancement of communications technology seem to have put flags in the spotlight just now.

Mark I think the collapse of the Soviet Empire is something to do with it as well.

Stewart That is true, but it's still astonishing how the Olympics and the other cyclical mass sporting events, together with the development of communication systems, now provide this global platform of previously unimaginable proportions. The medal ceremonies, boycotts, television ratings, bombs and kidnappings are providing governments, transnational corporations and single issue activists, access to this platform.

I was particularly struck by the prominence of the flag in one recent example, the rugby world cup in South Africa, where Nelson Mandela used the sports platform to launch the new South Africa, a new national anthem and a new flag to the world.

In two hundred years time when we look back at the birth of the new South Africa surely those images of Nelson Mandela in a Springbok shirt surrounded by 100,000 cheering fans, their faces painted with the design of the new flag, will be the historical images which represent that moment in history. Presumably there were military bands and air force fly-overs but



I can't remember seeing them.

And in the year two thousand when the Olympic Games are in Australia, I wonder what odds I would get on the Australian government using the Olympic opening ceremony to create a defining moment in their nations history by unveiling a new yellow and green national flag, minus the legacy of their colonial past, the Union Flag in the top left hand corner.

Mark, what have you made in response to this brief?

Mark Well I suppose my work in some senses fits the brief the snuggest in that I'm giving you a flag and it's going to be run-up a flag pole outside. I think when you came to me with the brief it was presumable because I had employed flags, the Union Flag, beforehand and certainly I had made works to do with national identity and I'd thought that perhaps I'd said my final word on the subject with the Wembley Way piece where I had a large Union Flag made up and then had my name emblazoned on it and then photographed it in the middle ground at Wembley Way. But I did start to look at it again and that started me thinking that the Union Flag,

at it's most contentious point, is used either by the far right or by the Unionists in Northern Ireland. That is in a sense where it achieves it's full potency.

Then I was thinking about the intractability of the situation in Northern Ireland, I mean all the things we've been talking about in terms of the opportunities for people across national and cultural boundaries are what has stymied the development of ordinary working class people in Northern Ireland. Their identity is so predicated on them being opposite to another identity and that in a sense is an impossible position to think themselves out of.

Oxymoron came to me as the perfect title. The term itself has a provocative sound and something of the whiff of Thatcher's expression 'the oxygen of publicity'. Probably the most famous poem about Northern Ireland is Yeat's 'Easter, 1916' which contains the phrase 'a terrible beauty', which is a kind of oxymoron and that interested me, the use of mutually exclusive terms to express his moral ambivalence.

Then it struck me that if you took the colours of the Union Flag, blue and red, their complimentary colours are orange and green, the colours of

the Irish Tricolour so that brought it back to the oxymoron, the opposite islands of colour on opposite sides of the colour wheel and if you combine them in terms of light you would have white, or if you combine them in terms of the pigment you end up with grey so it's a sort of nowhere as well as no identity and that seemed quite a neat way of encapsulating that situation.

Stewart South London and Brixton in particular is an important area for the production of visual art and design, but there are few outward signs of this on the street. We all live in South London, the work has been made down stairs and is now going to be shown here in this space, with these panoramic views going up to the City of London in the distance and Brixton all around us.

National identity is an important issue for this community. Do you think this project provides an opportunity for contemporary art to engage a wider audience?

Yinka It's interesting for me to show work in Brixton because the fabrics that I have used in my work for quite a number of years now actually come from Brixton market. I think for the work to be seen in Brixton seems really apt. It's curious, I also have a gallery in the West End and I like the idea of showing work, made from materials from Brixton market, in those kind of spaces too.

Stewart I think I'd like to put the same question to you Mark, seeing as you've decided to put a five and half metre flag on a nine metre flag pole on top of one of the tallest buildings in the centre of Brixton.

Mark Yes, I think that having come up with the idea then it is a provocation and so I'm not going to be quiet about it. I think you literally have to shout it from the rooftops. I'd love as many people as possible to see what I do as otherwise it doesn't exist. It was curious for me last year being on the Turner shortlist and having quite so many people coming through, because most of the time you have a show in a space and it's probably only a smattering of people and then the people that write for certain trade papers, for want of a better term, that see the work.

Ade What's more important for people, to see the work or for people to understand the work?

Mark I wouldn't want people to just see the work and go away without anything further added or taken away.

Ade Which in a kind of way restricts the audience immediately.

Yinka The notion of understanding art is not necessarily fixed, it is not an equation like two plus two equals four, it's not a communication system like that. I think that the process of engagement is equally important. Maybe you won't have a full understanding, and maybe the artist doesn't have a full understanding of what they've done either, but there is a process of engagement, having contact and having to go away and think about a number of parallel issues, perhaps none of them fully resolved.

It goes back to what Stewart was saying about the audience in Brixton and the relationship of audience to the space, so that there is a context in which an audience can relate to the work.

I prefer to talk about accessibility in educational terms. By that I don't mean educating people about art, I actually mean an engagement with the particular issues that the show is dealing with. Those issues are more often than not relevant to everybody and I think that as an educational tool shows like this are valuable.





Ade Adekola born 1966

Since finishing his post graduate studies, at the Architecture Association in 1992, Adekola's work has crossed many disciplines, architecture, product design, technology innovation, medical sensors, engineering, electronics and computing.



In addition to this work Adekola has had articles published in New Scientist, presented papers on smart structures and dynamic systems and in 1994 received the Du Pont International Award for Innovation.

In response to the Pledge Allegiance to a Flag? brief, Adekola looked to responsive building systems and smart materials to construct an environment which would monitor viewers physiological responses to projected images and sound. The work questions the need for flags in 1996 as Adekola considers identity to be global, no longer defined by geography nor any one cultural or historical heritage.

Ade's idea was developed by a group of individuals with skills in clinical research, photography, fine art and architecture, individually, and as a group, contributing to the development and production of the original idea. The group are Nick Clark, Tim Hardy, John Rees and Anthony Ward.

