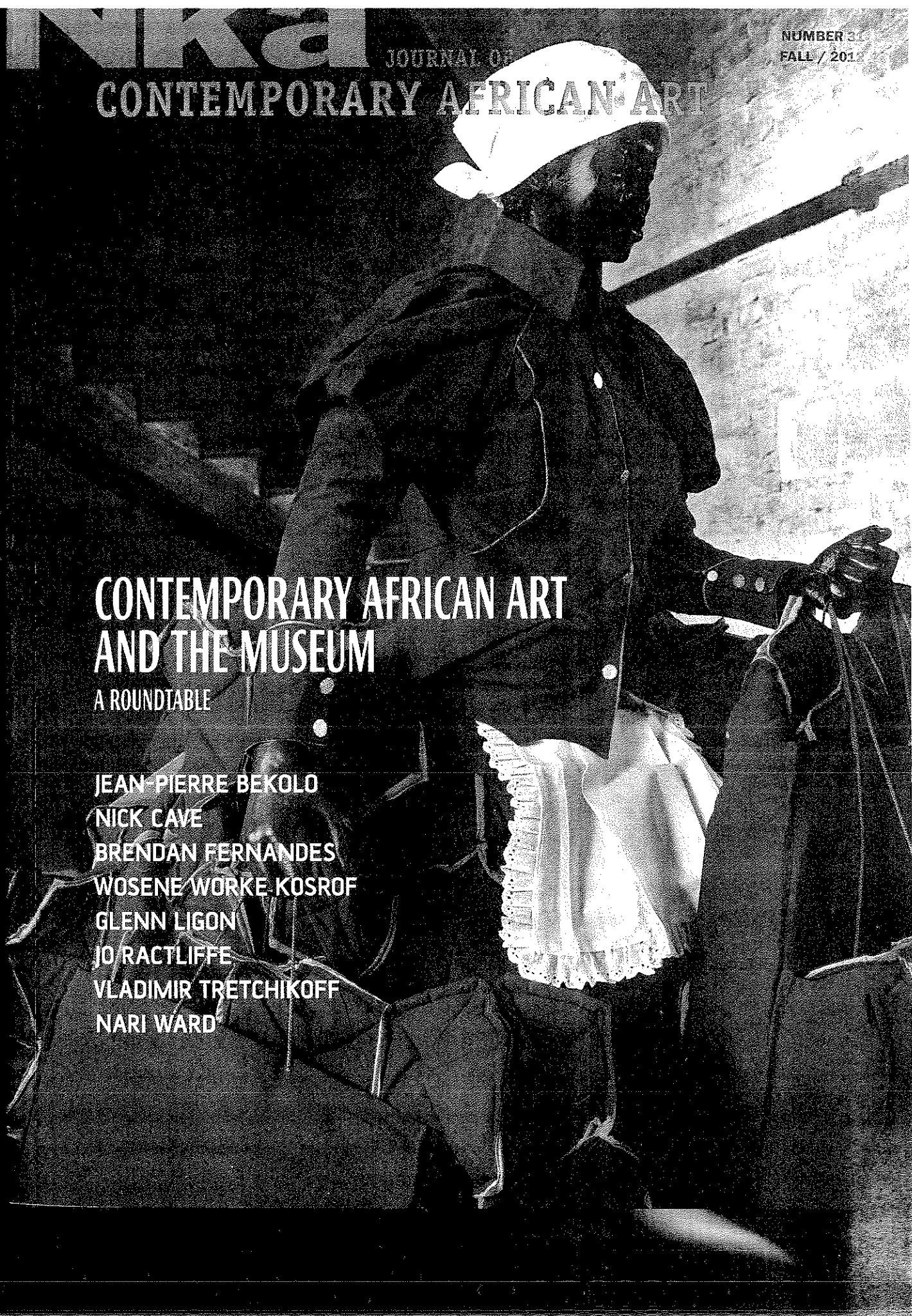


CONTEMPORARY AFRICAN ART

CONTEMPORARY AFRICAN ART AND THE MUSEUM

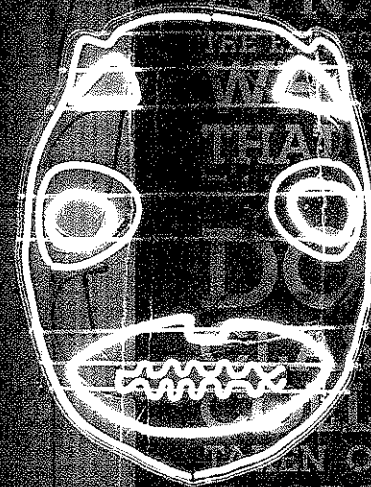
A ROUNDTABLE

- JEAN-PIERRE BEKOLO
- NICK CAVE
- BRENDAN FERNANDES
- WOSENE WORKE KOSROF
- GLENN LIGON
- JO RACTLIFFE
- VLADIMIR TRETCHIKOFF
- NARI WARD



BREAKING the CODEX

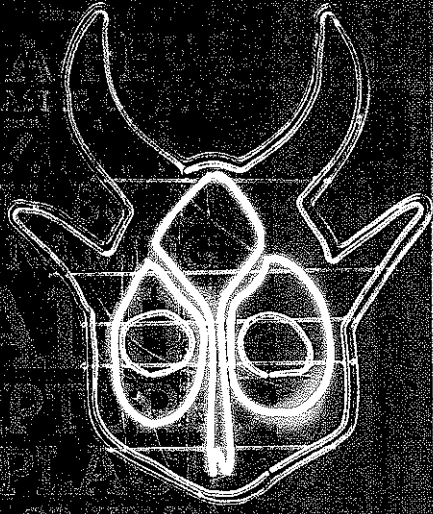
Brendan Fernandes's RECENT WORK



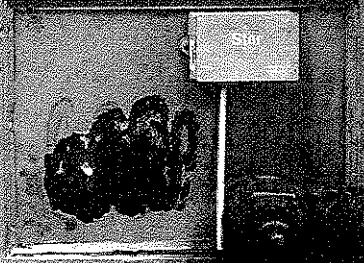
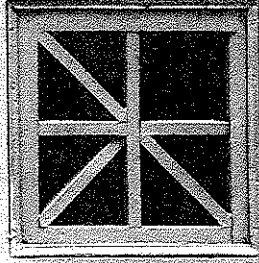
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W. Ian Bourland

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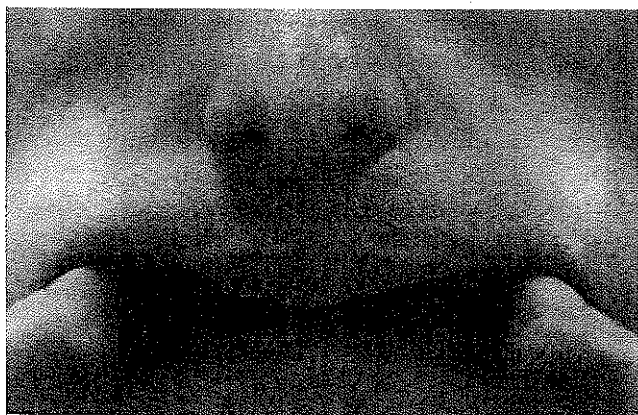


Brendan Fernandes is a multimedia artist who lives and works in an industrial section of Brooklyn, New York. The linguistic and performative sophistication of his practice evinces a decade spent primarily in urban areas: years of graduate school in Toronto and western Ontario, a year at the Whitney Museum of American Art, and residencies from Copenhagen to Korea. Periodic soft *o*'s in his speech betray his Canadian upbringing, but running into him in Manhattan, one would gather that he is thoroughly a product of the city: a hypereducated South Asian denizen of the early twenty-first-century downtown scene. But he's also an African.

More precisely, Fernandes is Kenyan, of Goan descent, his skin a reminder of the long-standing Indian Ocean circuits of transit and trade that punctuated the past six hundred years. Of course, the name Fernandes evokes the Iberian, routed by way of India during those earliest of colonial sorties, under the sails of the Portuguese explorer Vasco da Gama. Fernandes's family relocated from Kenya to Canada during the 1990s, but his work is not obviously about a "Kenyan" cultural patrimony or diasporic narrative; rather, it mines the complex somatic, linguistic, psychic, and juridical processes by which a subject *becomes* itself. By now we broadly interpret contemporary African art as work either by those living and working on the continent or by African-identified artists living in (or in transit between) other places. Fernandes's work is important precisely because it sheds light on the historical and contemporary complexities of identification and migration by which "Africanness"

itself is inscribed. It is important, in other words, because it emphasizes the very flows, linkages, and hidden histories that make an African constellation possible at all.

Like many other young African artists, Fernandes is currently enjoying both wide circulation and a strong critical reception. During 2010 and 2011 contemporary African art of many stripes enjoyed high visibility and good market attention from the pathbreaking Africa Auction at Phillips de Pury to solo shows at blue-chip New York galleries for Wangechi Mutu, Julie Mehretu, Claudette Schreuders, Odili Odita, and Pieter Hugo.¹ Similarly, Fernandes added to his already substantial record of solo and group shows two high-profile exhibitions in Manhattan: *From Hiz Hands* at Art in General, and a subtly show-stealing entry in Nat Trotman's linguistically charged, time-based *Found in Translation* at the Guggenheim Museum.² The latter placed Fernandes in the company of heavyweights such as Paul Chan, Sharon Hayes, and Steve McQueen. And while many of the works in *Found in Translation* were—despite the show's emphasis on language-oriented slippages and convergences—strongly rooted in a geographic or political context, Fernandes's four-and-a-half-minute video *Foe* (2008)³ nodded to a constellation of verbal and locational nodes but avowedly refused to *speak for* Kenya or a history of Kenyan art. On the one hand, Fernandes adds geographic balance to the ongoing conversation of contemporary African art: he is from eastern rather than western or South Africa; he was educated in Canada rather than England or America;⁴ and his work puts us squarely beyond the



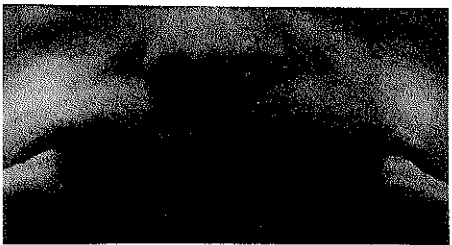
Foe, 2008. Original video, runtime 0:04:39. Video still by and courtesy the artist

ambit of the Black Atlantic triangle into something more like routes of Euro-Indian trade. Fernandes makes us think of the ocean and of diasporic dispersal, to be sure, but gone are Lagos, Liverpool, and Port-au-Prince, and in their place appear Durban, Mombasa, Zanzibar, and Goa. But to be clear, while Fernandes is of Kenyan extraction, his art is not a Kenyan art per se in any sense beyond the purely taxonomic.

This slipperiness is particularly important now, as we are in the midst of intensive ontological and epistemic shifts born of the near-total expansion of neoliberal capitalism and the concurrent rise of technologies — satellites, cable news, fiber optics, GSM phones, digital photographs — that allow for the diffusion of products, signs, and experience alike. This is, on one level, nothing new: the history of modernity itself is one of economic interdependence and cultural collisions, as many contemporary practices in the areas of political philosophy and art history alike remind us. The work of, for example, Yinka Shonibare, MBE, or Homi K. Bhabha points to the deep interdependencies and the unexpected coterminousness of “Africa” and the “West” dating well into (at least) the eighteenth century.

But the rapidity and totality of our current interconnectedness is something new indeed. It is no longer possible to speak in the present tense of “hybridity,” of the splicing of one discrete thing with another; cross-pollination and imbrication are givens. As the critical theorist Irit Rogoff has argued, we have just passed through a decade that gave us both the groundbreaking, platform-driven *Documenta XI* and a televised “global war on terror,” yet “in the process a concept of ‘location’ — of being able to clearly define named entities in relation to which we would instantly know how to position ourselves — has greatly eroded. The ‘where of now’ . . . refers to the fact that location is increasingly a slippery construct of conjunctions between virtuality, materiality and the vicissitudes of circulating signs.”⁵⁵

In place of more widely accepted notions of cultural heritage, or locational specificity, Rogoff suggests that, at best, we can examine moments of singularity, in which the “vicissitudes” of the rapid



Foe, 2008. Original video, runtime 0:04:39. Video still by and courtesy the artist

circulation of people, objects, and signs become clear and, for a moment, reveal deeper structures and affinities that modulate the disorienting fragmentations and convergences of late capitalist globalization. In her terms, which draw on the work of Jean-Luc Nancy, singularity can “enable the kind of fractured conjunction that [Serbian artist Milica] Tomić’s images and Nancy’s parade of unacknowledged identities manage to produce, at times in a comic at times in a tragic, vein. ‘Singularity’ is being that is not inscribed with identity, is not in a relation of legible identification with other beings but nevertheless performs some form of collectivity or mutuality.”⁵⁶ I argue that Fernandes’s work breaks significantly from earlier conceptions of diasporic cultural production, particularly the Thompsonian⁷ model of transatlantic retention or more recent conceptions of cultural hybridity. Instead, his work suggests that, given the complexities of acculturation, migration, and identification (in the past and present alike), all we can grasp at are moments of singularity in which we see brief moments of radical specificity and glimpses of the armature that gives form to the whole. Fernandes exposes such

"EEZ FRRY DE EN EEM BAS EEL EEN CEP E BUL UV SPICH?" AY ASKED.

"EEZ THAT WHAAT U MIN TU TELL MI?"

K1USO MOAJ SHUNED F1YDE N1RER.

"OAPIN YOA1 MOW1," HEE JOALD HIM, AND OAPEND HIZ OAN.

F1Ry day Oapund hiz mOuuuth. "Luk," sed KRoooa.

Ay Lukd, but saw nuthing in tha daRRk sayv tha glint uv teeth wayt az ayvary.

"LA-LA-LA," SED K1USO, AEND MOA SHUND F1YDE JU1PEE.

"HA-HA-HA," SED F1YDE F1UM THA BEK UR HIZ HROAT.

"HEE HOZ NOA TUNG," SED K1USO.

GREEPEENG FRY DE BY DE HEER, HI BRROT HEEZFESKLOAS TU MYN.

"DUYUSI?" HEE SED. "IT IZ TU DAARK," SED AY. "LA-LA-LA," SED KRUSO. "HA-HA-HA," SED FRRY DE.

AY DRU U VEY, AND K1USO REL EESD F1Y DAYZ HEI1.

"HEE HEZ NO JUNG," HEE SED.

"THOT IS VAI HEE DUZ NOT SPEEK."

THEY CAWT OT HEEZ TAWNG.

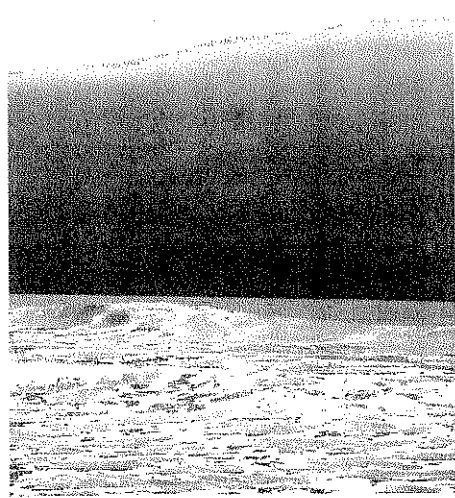
Excerpt from *Foe* by J.M. Coetzee, Viking Press: 1986.
©Brendan Fernandes 2009

Foe, 2008. Poster multiple (front), 16 x 20 in. Photo: Brendan Fernandes

moments of singularity and shows just how fragile the more “commonsense” notions of nation and cultural identity are.

Consider the video *Foe*, which references the South African author J. M. Coetzee’s controversial 1986 novel of the same name.⁸ Coetzee’s text centers around the linkages between power and its explicit relationship to the subject’s capacity (or lack thereof) for expression — indeed, for enunciation. Language lies at the core of Fernandes’s practice, and he finds common cause here with Coetzee, who in a stroke of postmodern reconceptualization uses his fiction to comment on the racially coded silencing at work in 1980s South Africa, and does so within the deeper historical and semiotic ambit of a familiar work of literature: Daniel Defoe’s eighteenth-century classic *Robinson Crusoe*, the story of a castaway in the Caribbean. In Coetzee’s reworking, Defoe becomes Foe, a writer enlisted by Susan Barton — another castaway on “Cruso’s island” — to render her experiences into literature and thereby, in effect, give her a viable voice. Already, then, we are knee-deep in the muck of racial politics in multicultural South Africa and of the deeper historical trajectories of Black Atlantic slavery, commerce, and piracy, to say nothing of the gender and racial politics in Britain proper during the dawn of modernity in the mid-eighteenth century.

For his part, however, Fernandes takes up the connection between language and power, particularly the power intrinsic to a subject’s self-articulation through language. This is not the simple enunciation of an intrinsic personal or cultural identity; rather, it is a foregrounding of the power of language and speech to dynamically alter and empower the subject, to bring new iterations of the self into being despite geographic dislocations. Fernandes himself speaks in relatively unaccented, nearly flawless English — he is anything but a fresh-off-the-boat immigrant. But in *Foe* he makes a performative gambit, casting himself in the role of a “foreigner” from the Indian Oceanic world, attempting to “find” his voice as an empowered Western subject with the help of a speech coach. The video documents a real-life session in which Fernandes plays the guileless outsider who, with the help of an expert from Yale, literally sounds out sentences taken from the text of *Foe*, with the camera



Foe, 2008. Poster multiple (back), 16 x 20 in.
Photo: Brendan Fernandes

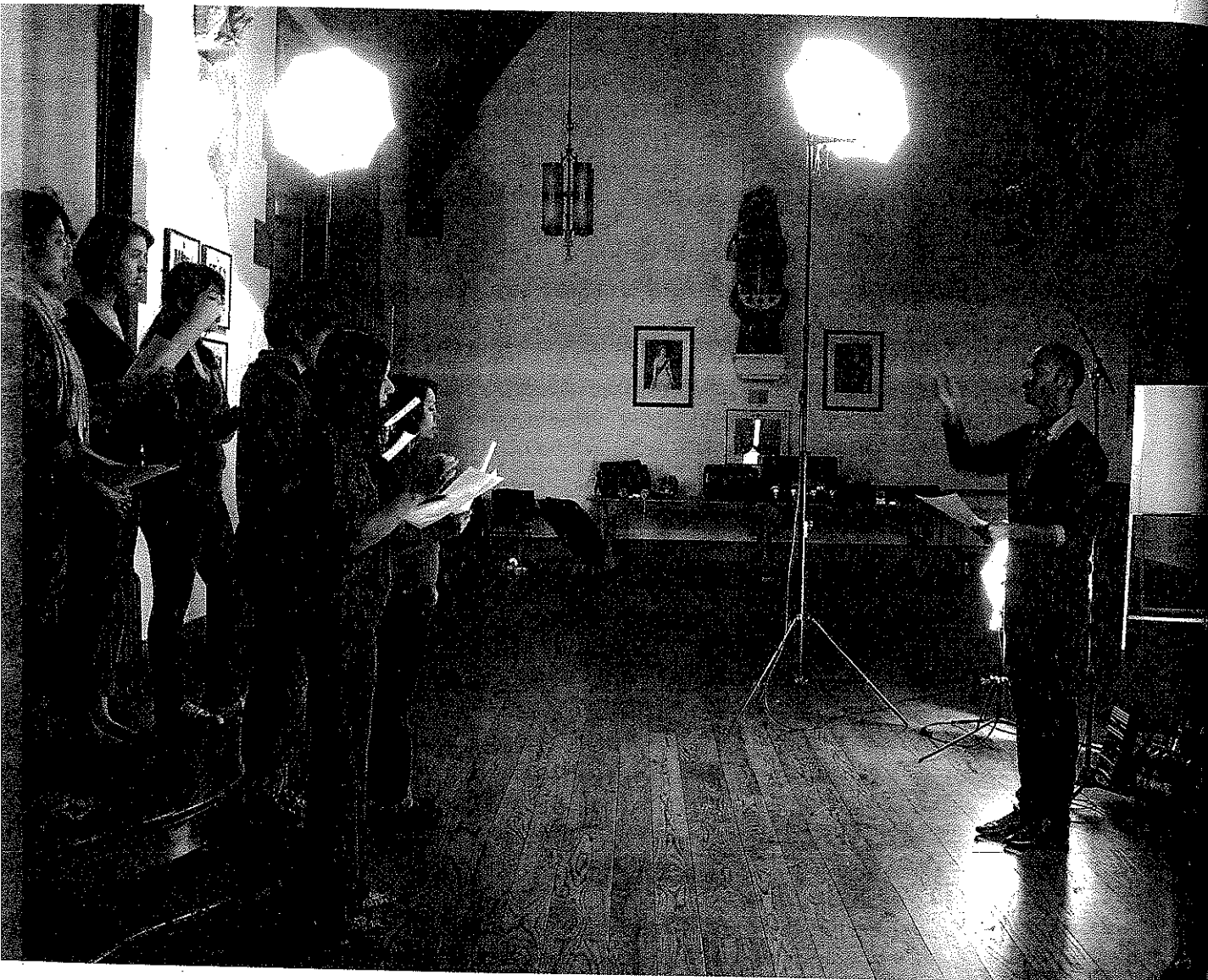
focused tightly on Fernandes’s mouth, or in wider angles as he consults his coach. The segment of text is speech by the character Friday — that is, the “savage” (black) man whose tongue has been excised, who has been literally stripped of speech. The video, by contrast, shows a staged process of acculturation in which Fernandes, often comically, works “past” a heavy South Asian patois into the bland tonalities of rational, Western authority. The straight-ahead documentary style of the video, with the coach herself present only as a disembodied voice, adds to its multilayered ambiguity.

In reality, Fernandes the artist is learning to perform himself as his “authentic” African self, even as the character he plays learns to flatten out his elocution, bending and rolling the syllables in affectless monotone. The complicity of the (presumably) white, Ivy-educated expert remains unclear. In part, this is a rehearsal of Bhabha’s conception of colonial double consciousness, of the dark subject mimicking the colonizer, in effect refracting herself through the eyes and ears of the other before performing, before *creating*, herself anew.⁹ But *Foe* goes a step

farther, utterly eroding any plausible assumptions of stable origins, implying instead that our own histories can be recuperated and our own selves created through acts of dynamic, individual volition rather than through the determinism of skin color or “national” origin. Fernandes carries this off with remarkable humanity: *Foe* is neither tedious nor didactic; rather, it is infused with a sense of whimsy and discovery. The piece is humorous and playful, not dense and circumspect; as a result, its deadly seriousness creeps up on an entranced viewer. Such was particularly the case in the context of the heady installations surrounding it at the Guggenheim.¹⁰

In other words, Fernandes densely codes his work with an evidently theorized foundation and a deep, at times ironic awareness of the colonially

inflected history of modernity. But there is never a sense that his work is political merely because it is autobiographical. Similarly, issues of linguistic and cultural fluidity are not foregrounded simply because he is an emigrant from Kenya. Indeed, his work continuously postulates that our constructions of self and other, individual identity and collective belonging, are all diachronic, the by-products of specific choices and interventions. While Fernandes’s own cognitive map¹¹ and experiential footprint—which suture together India, Kenya, Canada, and the United States—give him both the privilege and the burden of investigating the relay of language and power among those geographic nodes, in practice the work goes a step farther. *Performing Foe* (2009),¹² for example, builds

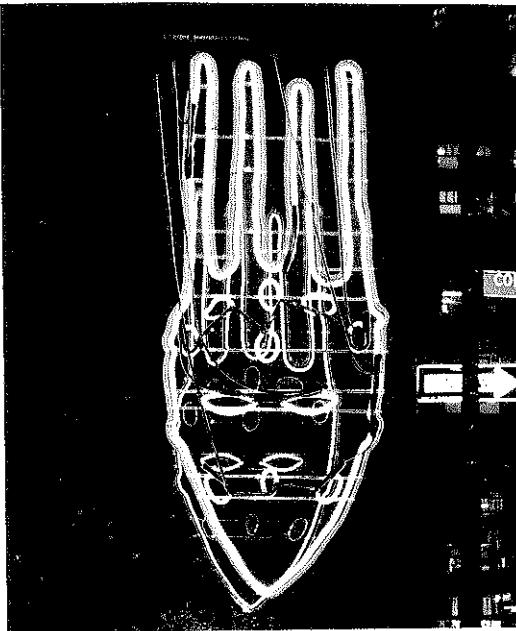


Performing Foe, 2009. Original video, runtime 0:02:22. Video stills by and courtesy the artist

on Fernandes's experience in *Foe* and extends the process to a collective setting. Here Fernandes becomes the instructor, guiding a mixed group of participants through the verbal exercises necessary to master his alien elocutions. The effect, again, is comical and good-natured, but the implication is radical: that "authenticity" is not innately connected to one's point of origin—it does not exist *as such* at all. Language mediates culture, and together the two form a complex intersubjective game. Mimicry is a two-way street between "Africa" and "the West," a process that can represent mastery as much as the implicit subjugation of colonization.¹³

These themes—the tenuous domination and consumption of Africa by its Euro-American counterparts, and the artistic efficacy of humor, duration, and participation—run deep in Fernandes's practice. A visit to his studio reveals numerous drawings of zebras and giraffes, the grazing creatures that populate the grand touristic safari. The contemporary and historical construction/consumption of Africa by deep-pocketed audiences—whether art collectors or Range Roving shutterbugs—is central to his 2011 installation at Art in General, *From Hiz Hands*.¹⁴

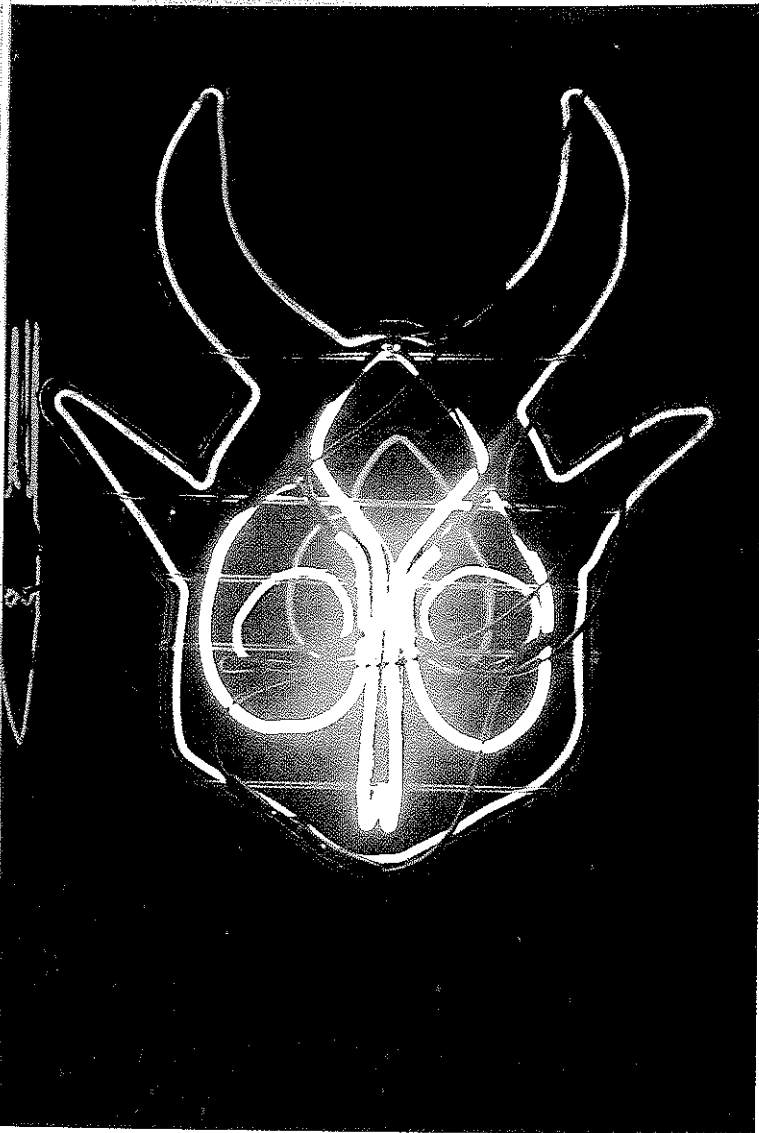
From Hiz Hands works like two sides of the same coin, or an inextricably linked inner and outer operation.¹⁵ For the outer, Fernandes researched accession records for objects from the Nelson Rockefeller bequest at the Metropolitan Museum of Art and selected three objects—a Bamana N'tomo mask; a Bamana "cow" mask, most likely associated with the Komo blacksmith order, which controls the production of *ntawa* through creative acts; and a checkered, grotesque hyena mask made by the Wamiana people of present-day Burkina Faso. The selection of these objects is significant: on the one hand, they have little to do with each other and even less to do with Fernandes, an artist of eastern African extraction; on the other, they are bonded by their handling by Western sources of museological and anthropological authority. Their authenticity derives from both their early colonial manufacture and their ironclad provenance; no individual artist is associated with any of the masks (which would have had a distinct use value in their original context), and each stands in as a floating signifier



1978. 412.367, 2010. Neon, 51.5 × 20.0 × 1.5 in.
Photo: Morgan Watt

for "Africa" and traditional cultural practices "in general."

This sort of generic "primitiveness" is at least in part the result of a long chain of dissociations and conflation that gave rise to Western conceptions—positive and negative, anthropological and stereotypical—of Africa more broadly. The transfer of artifacts from Africa into Euro-American knowledge-power networks such as the museum and art journal is one such link, and their integration into the fabric of modernism itself, from Pablo Picasso to Barnett Newman, is another. Fernandes ambivalently enters this lineage by further blurring these objects, first in their equivalence in his project and, ultimately, in his treatment of them. A visitor to *From Hiz Hands* first encountered the exterior of the gallery space on Walker Street in Tribeca¹⁶ and was greeted by three neon masks in the window, in blue, red, and green, each abstracted from the accession records into kitsch neon sculptures.



1979.206.143, 2010. Neon, 35.0 x 30.0 x 1.5 in.
Photo: Morgan Watt

In this single gesture the masks were further evacuated of their original cultural context and use value but simultaneously afforded another use function, as brazen commodity fetish, even as they were pushed still farther into the realm of problematic signifier. For Picasso, a Pende mask neatly crystallized an entire set of assumptions of the hierarchy of cultural evolution and the “purity” and pathos of African (savage) peoples more broadly; for the casual present-day observer, Fernandes’s masks functioned as a shorthand for authentic, exotic tourist goods, albeit in an even more commercialized and quotidian form than one might find on

nearby Canal Street, on the steps of the Sacre-Coeur in Paris, or in the markets of Dakar and Lagos. Just as we seem to be putting debates of “primitivism” and the “culture game”¹⁷ behind us, Fernandes revivifies them and suggests that they may still resonate in unseen ways.¹⁸

And that is the task of the interior element, a dynamic sound installation that draws together the voices of Fernandes the Afropolitan sophisticate, the humorless (white) expert, and the bombastic pidgin English of the African street vendor of cheap sculptural reproductions. Although the recordings (as in *Foe*) are newly created sonic performance pieces, through them we experience anew an entropic breaking down of rational, neat boundaries, a deconstruction inherited from surrealist automatism and the pages of *Minotaure*; here too is a note-for-note mock-up of the “objective” documentary sound recordings of late colonial anthropologists and museum workers. Both structurally and in its swirls of voicings and content, the recorded segment rubs the tools of modernism and empirical science against the insouciant flows of the alien, the transcendent, the emotional — all the great unknowns that have so beguiled and vexed the modern project. Despite every effort at containment (in knowledge, in media, in vitrines), Fernandes seems to suggest, language itself reappears to upend and unravel any fantasy of neat categorization. That is, language gives us the power to speak and to communicate, but also to emulate and to name: in other words, as the medium that gives rise to location and cultural identity, it can just as surely undo and recast them.

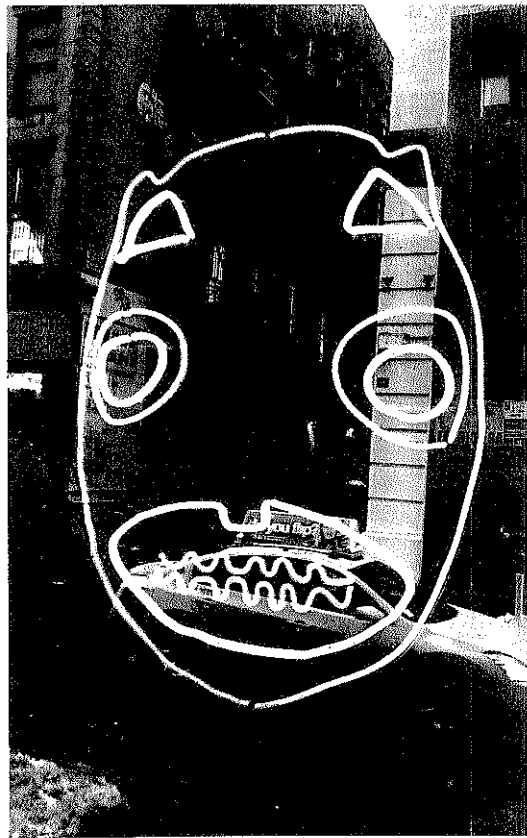
Thus the central problem of Fernandes’s practice is the language/knowledge/power configurations that are endemic to modernity, and the ways in which they intersect our past and present. His use of *Foe* is one clear signal: with its reimagining of the genesis of an iconic text and recasting of its events through the enunciative acts of *Crusoe*’s “minor” characters, it approaches what we might call a parallax view, the apparent displacement of an object caused by a change in observational position. In this case, the subjective shift is from Robin to Susan Barton, who recasts the familiar objects (events) within the story; similarly, separated by temporal distance, this reworking shifts our view on

the original text and the social landscape in which it was conceived. According to Slavoj Žižek,¹⁹ however, a parallax view is significant precisely because it underscores a deeper psychoanalytic proposition: subject and object do not exist discretely but are instead mutually constitutive of each other. In the context of the parallax view, the object acts on the subject, tickles and traumatizes her; the “epistemological” shift in the subject’s point of view always reflects an “ontological” shift in the object itself.”²⁰

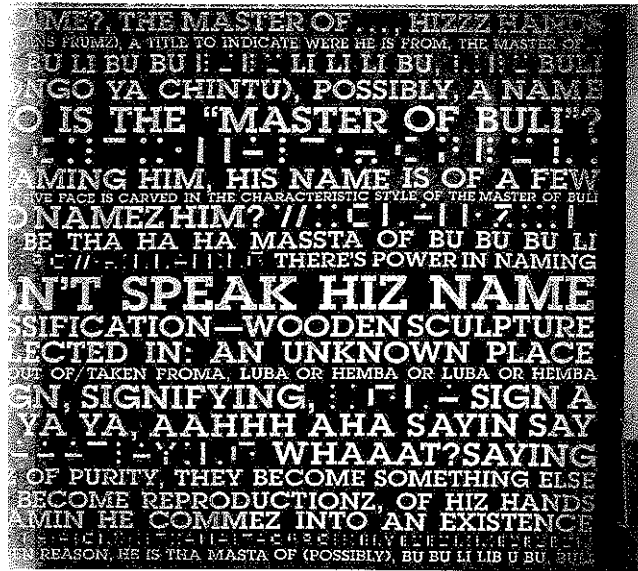
Such ontological interpenetration is, of course, central to the colonial encounter: Africa, the primitive, and a host of normative evolutionary metrics were developed during the nineteenth century to make legible, to catalogue, to hold in stasis. Bhabha, deviating from the more psychoanalytic interpretation of fetishism, argues that the imbrication of metropolitan areas and their colonial territories was mediated by a complex psychological game of “fixing,” a fetishization that kept the colonial other within arm’s reach — close enough to be fascinating and psychically useful — while also holding it at bay, by decontextualizing and renaming it according to the colonizer’s deepest fears and projections.²¹ When viewed through a Lacanian lens, such a game makes total sense: as Hal Foster (among others) has argued, the metropole needed, the colony — was *constituted by and in opposition to it*.²² The trick was to displace the genuinely destabilizing power of the other into another location, to shield the Western subject from the ontological shift that was already under way. In the realm of modernist art, this fixing was called “primitivism,” and it allowed painters and sculptors to draw “primal” energy from African and Polynesian cultures even as they pulled objects from their cultural context. In the ontological and epistemological realms, the museum and social sciences were employed to generate false differentiations and hierarchies between peoples that defined, brought into being, the modern consciousness as it named and viewed with total knowledge the others with which it was so existentially helixed.

In Coetzee’s terms, suddenly in the eighteenth century and the dawn of globalization there was simply too much — too much language, too many voices (and perhaps this is true now more than ever). Writing of a repatriated Crusoe, “it seemed

to him, coming from his island, where until Friday arrived he lived a silent life, that there was too much speech in the world. In bed beside his wife he felt as if a shower of pebbles were being poured upon his head, in an unending rustle and clatter, when all he desired was to sleep.”²³ Friday, his black man, had been given speech and the ability to write; in the end he had to be silenced to give Crusoe peace. And the multitiered practice of fixing in place is another expression both of this speaking for and of silencing. This is, I think, why Fernandes spent so much time in those archives at the Met, examining



1979, 206, 200, 2010. Neon, 34.0 x 26.0 x 1.5 in.
Photo: Morgan Watt



Current Location (Possibly), 2010. Vinyl on wall, 15.0 x 14.5 ft.
 Photo: Erika Neola

the late nineteenth-century bequest of a captain of industry, a trove of powerful objects flattened, contained, converted into the numeric rationality of the accession codes that Fernandes used for the titles of his neon sculptures. In this light, they have lost all meaning beyond the symbolic, as our own useful fetishes onto which we have displaced our fears of change and trauma and rendered them into just another data point, just as Western experts “discovered” and named the “Buli Master,” made him familiar by slotting him into the grand march of individual artistic geniuses so familiar to modernist art history.²⁴ In naming, Fernandes reminds us, here is power.

The problem, according to Žižek, is that these attempts to see with totality, to know and master, are futile. “The reality I see is never ‘whole’—not because a large part of it eludes me, but because it contains a stain, a blind spot, which signals my exclusion in it.”²⁵ Fernandes’s refusal to identify with a fixed location or culture and his reliance on the malleable and embodied form of language—articulation, nomination, enunciation—mean that differentiation can never fully occur, that taxonomies are always undermined and deferred. In many respects, then, Fernandes is indebted to the psychoanalytic and poststructuralist theory of earlier decades and his work (particularly photographs) by visual artists

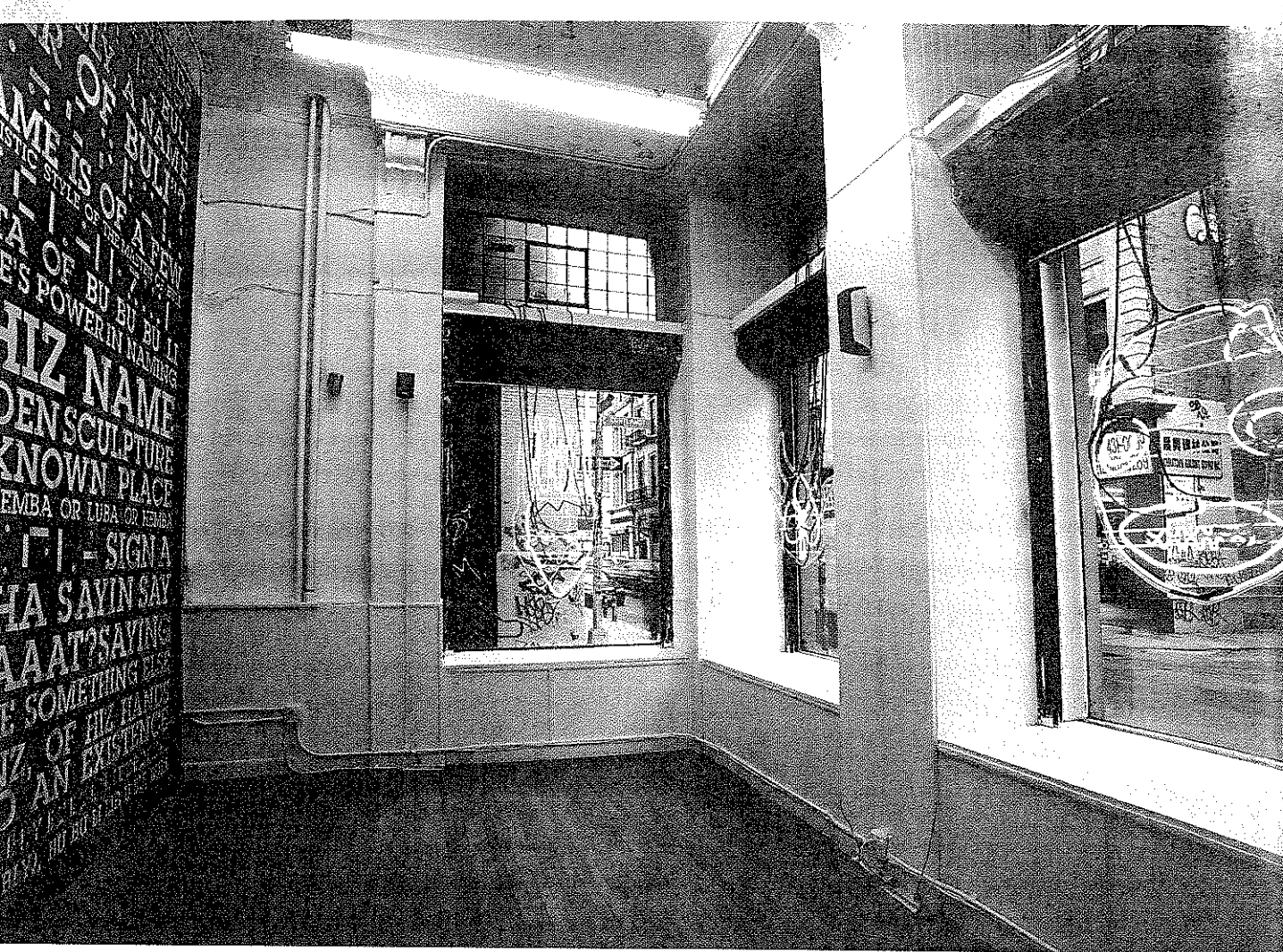
such as Cindy Sherman and Samuel Fosso (or, more recently, Iké Udé and Yinka Shonibare), whose works both show that subjectivity and representation of subjects are mediated by a complex semiotic system and reveal the visual and performative processes undergirding that system.

But it is the linguistic, with all its absurdity, its overt teachability, and its living rather than static character, that is well suited to examine means of forging identification and collectivity in our past and the tenuousness of such identifications (names, wherenesses) in the present. What is more, Fernandes mobilizes language through textuality but without the heaviness of textuality—with levity and humor instead. His work is, as a result, a kind of serious play. What it ultimately demonstrates is the constructedness and reconstructibility of many of our most entrenched knowledge-power hierarchies.

In this way Fernandes presents us with a problem. He is certainly an artist and, by dint of his particular genetics, an artist of a Kenyan diaspora—that is how we would talk about him in terms of his Africanness in the simplest terms. Yet in his work there is no clear “retention” of an intrinsically African practice into a non-African field of production and reception; likewise, there is no hybridization of one discrete sensibility or tradition with another. Indeed, one could imagine Fernandes bypassing questions of location or identity altogether; he could also easily make do with a number of valences beyond Africa, from his young adulthood in Canada, or the early twenty-first-century scene in Williamsburg, to the histories and stories of the Indian Ocean trade routes. Instead, Fernandes elects to take up Africa, and while specific nods to Kenya emerge, so do the Buli Master of the Congo, the age-grade masks of the Malian Bamana, and the buskers and merchants who sell deracinated crafts on the urban thoroughfares of Europe and the United States. The problem Fernandes tackles here is the very *idea* of Africa—how we construct it, name it, catalogue and sell it. While he is implicated in this process, he also seems outside and above it, not bound by a duty to speak *for* Africa but driven by a desire to show us how we think and speak *about* it, speak it in and out of being. For as one of the many voices in the sound component of *From Hiz Hands* reminds us,

NO NAME?, THE MASTER OF ... HIZZZ HANDS
 OF (COMMINNS FRUMZ), A TITLE TO INDICATE WERE HE IS FROM, THE MASTER OF...
 BULI, BU LI BU BU LI LI LI BU, ... BULI
 (NYONGO YA CHINTU), POSSIBLY, A NAME
 WHO IS THE "MASTER OF BULI"?
 // ...
 IN NAMING HIM, HIS NAME IS OF A FEW
 THE EXPRESSIVE FACE IS CARVED IN THE CHARACTERISTIC STYLE OF THE MASTER OF BULI
 WHO NAMEZ HIM? // ...
 THAT BE THA HA HA MASSTA OF BU BU BU LI
 // ... THERE'S POWER IN NAMING
DON'T SPEAK HIZ NAME
 CLASSIFICATION—WOODEN SCULPTURE
 COLLECTED IN: AN UNKNOWN PLACE
 TAKEN OUT OF/TAKEN FROMA, LUBA OR HEMBA OR LUBA OR HEMBA
 A SIGN, SIGNIFYING, ... SIGN A
 SAY YA YA, AAHHH AHA SAYIN SAY
 // ... WHAAAT? SAYING
 LOOSZ OF PURITY, THEY BECOME SOMETHING ELSE
 THEY BECOME REPRODUCTIONZ, OF HIZ HANDS
 IN NAMIN HE COMMEZ INTO AN EXISTENCE
 HE IS GIBEN REASON, HE IS THA MASTA OF (POSSIBLY), BU BU LI LIB U BU, BULI

Current Location (Possibly), 2010
 Vinyl on wall, 15.0 x 14.5 ft.
 Photo: Erika Neola



From *Hiz Hands*, 2010. Installation view, Art in General, New York. Photo: Erika Neola

“In namin he commence into existence.” It is unclear whether Fernandes’s future work will continue in this linguistic vein, but for now it enables him to break the rules and to teach us just how strange a game we have been playing.

W. Ian Bourland is a scholar and critic who writes about globalization and race in contemporary art. He is currently a lecturer at the University of Chicago and visiting professor at the University of Illinois at Chicago. He is finishing a book project on the photographer Rotimi Fani-Kayode.

Notes

1. The Mutu show ran at the Barbara Gladstone Gallery; the Mehretu show, at the Guggenheim Museum; the Schreuders and Odita shows, at the Jack Shainman Gallery; and the Hugo show, at the Yossi Milo Gallery.
2. *From Hiz Hands* ran from December 10, 2010, to March 5, 2011; *Found in Translation*, from February 11 to May 1, 2011.
3. Fernandes describes *Foe* as follows: “*Foe* represents video footage of me receiving lessons where I have hired an acting coach to teach me the ‘accents’ of my cultural backgrounds. I am not interested in the authenticity of these accents but in the idea of being taught to speak in these voices. The text that I have learnt is taken from a book with the same title as my piece. This book, a sequel to ‘Robinson Crusoe,’ was written by J. M. Coetzee. In this book, Friday (the savage) has been mutilated; his tongue has been removed and he cannot speak. For this work I have memorized the specific passage where Crusoe explains this to another” (e-mail message to author, December 1, 2011).
4. For a biography and vitae, see www.brendanfernandes.ca.
5. Irit Rogoff, “The Where of Now” (2004), www.kein.org/node/64 (accessed August 10, 2011).
6. Ibid.

7. Here I refer to Robert Farris Thompson's watershed studies during the 1970s and 1980s, which charted the emergence and translation of sub-Saharan aesthetics, rhythms, and spiritual practices throughout the Black Atlantic world. The most celebrated of these studies is *Flash of the Spirit: African and Afro-American Art and Philosophy* (New York: Vintage, 1984).
8. J. M. Coetzee, *Foe* (New York: Penguin, 1988). Coetzee returned to the interlacing of allegory, mimicry, and language in his acceptance speech for the 2003 Nobel Prize for Literature, for which he simply read a new fictional work that blurred memoir, history, and contemporary politics. See "He and His Man," nobel-prize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/2003/coetzee-lecture-e.html.
9. See Bhabha's landmark essay "Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse," in *The Location of Culture* (1994; repr. London: Routledge, 2004), 85–92.
10. For more on *Foe's* context within the exhibition, see my "Found in Translation," artforum.com/picks/id=27958&view=print.
11. The reference to Fredric Jameson here—and, by extension, Michel de Certeau—is intentional. See, e.g., Jameson, *Postmodernism; or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991); and Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven F. Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2011). Although neither my framework nor Fernandes's is overtly dialectical or Marxist, a model that takes into account both the lived experience of the subject and the subject's articulation within a global system of power structures is useful for understanding the work at hand. While Fernandes's practice looks backward to historical processes and systems of domination, much as Rogoff suggests, it also locates us in the present—a present in which we can discuss with less and less credibility the discrete geographies, nations, and static cultural identities. In their place we can look to singularities and nodes that position us in a larger constellation of fluidity, relationality, and difference. Perhaps in this respect Jacques Derrida's notion of *différance* is helpful, as it implies intersubjectivity over essence and also the endless *deferral* of closure and definite meaning.
12. Fernandes describes *Performing Foe* as follows: "A sequel to my video *Foe* where I received voice accent lessons from a speech coach, this time I have taken on the role of teacher and begun to instruct my students on how to enunciate and speak in the ways of my cultural voices. The video features a group of students standing before me like a choir, reciting sounds that become abstracted in their repetition. The work plays on the notion of pedagogy through mimicry and disguise" (e-mail message to author, December 1, 2011).
13. This Lacanian/structuralist account of identification and subjectivity is at the heart of two pieces by Hal Foster, written in the wake of William Rubin and Kirk Varnedoe's "Primitivism" in *Twentieth-Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern*, held at the Museum of Modern Art in the fall of 1984. See "The 'Primitive' Unconscious of Modern Art," *October*, no. 34 (1985): 45–70 and "Primitive Scenes," *Critical Inquiry* 20, no. 1 (1993): 69–102.
14. *Brendan Fernandes: From Hiz Hands* was exhibited at Art in General from December 10, 2010, to March 5, 2011.
15. Fernandes describes *From Hiz Hands* as follows: "This work explores the dissemination of Western notions of an exotic Africa through the symbolic economy of 'African' masks sold on Canal Street and on the streets outside museums in New York (the Whitney and Metropolitan, for example), and their contrasting relationship to the masks on display in the museums themselves. The exhibition examines the objects themselves but also looks at the personal narratives of the mask sellers, drawing on the artist's own migration from Kenya to Canada in a series of works that create a shared history of identity and origin" (e-mail message to author, December 1, 2011).
16. Perhaps ironically, many of the initial exhibitions and discussions that gave shape to the emergent discourse around contemporary African art in the 1990s took place only a few blocks from this very location—at, for example, Matrix Art Project.
17. I am referring to Olu Oguibe's collected essays, *The Culture Game* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004). Oguibe argues the mimicry angle from the far side of the "primitivism" debate, suggesting that whereas the modernist Europeans mined and decontextualized African "fetishes" and masks in conceiving their work, contemporary African artists were forced, in short order, to in effect primitivize and perform a version of themselves for the benefit of the expanding global art market.
18. The fraught relationship between "tourist" art, traditional African masquerade, and "authenticity" within the field of contemporary African art has been integral to debates over the past several decades and has featured in these pages. Fred Wilson, for his part, investigated these themes and the deeper threads of globalization in the early modern period as part of his project for the United States Pavilion at the 2003 Venice Biennale. The classic scholarly work on these themes is Christopher B. Steiner, *African Art in Transit* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).
19. See, e.g., Slavoj Žižek, "The Tickling Object," www.lacan.com/zizparallax.htm (accessed April 2, 2012).
20. *Ibid.*
21. See Bhabha's essay "The Other Question: Stereotype, Discrimination, and the Discourse of Colonialism," in *The Location of Culture*, 66–84. This piece is profoundly helpful for our purposes because in it Bhabha, like Fernandes, emphasizes the power of the discursive but also addresses culture games rooted both in the subject (the psychoanalytic) and in a larger framework of identification (ontology) and knowledge (epistemology). Here Bhabha locates stereotype as one type of "fixing," of keeping at bay; he mobilizes the language of fetish, which elsewhere invokes the investment of an object with inordinate power, from the sort of African art objects that Fernandes researched for *From Hiz Hands* to sexual or commodity fetishes in the Euro-American psychoanalytic and Marxist contexts. Bhabha's argument seems to be that the "West" has used the linguistic and semiotic power of stereotype to defuse the potentially damaging power of its others, in effect investing power in an array of new practices, from the reconstitution of the very identity of those others to the total control of the symbolic meaning of their material practices.
22. Foster, "Primitive Unconscious."
23. Coetzee, "He and His Man."
24. According to Fernandes, the artist was reminded of the Buli Master when searching Metropolitan Museum records for Luba wooden statuary, which originated in what is now the southeastern Democratic Republic of the Congo. It is not uncommon to find Luba material archived as "Buli style," referencing the idiosyncratic genius of the presumptive artist—a kind of genius usually denied to traditional African artists. The problem, Fernandes reminds us, is worsened by the common practice of displaying African objects less like visual art than like decontextualized specimens.
25. Žižek, "The Tickling Object."