

THE REAL STORY IS WHAT'S IN THAT ROOM is the first solo-exhibition in Canada of work by Onyeka Igwe. This exhibition includes the North American premiere of a so-called *archive* (2020), co-commissioned by Mercer Union, Toronto; Plug In ICA, Winnipeg; and KW Institute of Contemporary Art, Berlin; with support from Julia Stoschek Collection; Outset Germany_Switzerland; Arts Council England; and Projections: Tyneside Cinema, Newcastle-Upon-Tyne.

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THE REAL STORY IS WHAT'S IN THAT ROOM is presented in partnership with British Council and Scotiabank CONTACT Photography Festival.



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Mercer Union, a centre for contemporary art

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We continue to take every precaution to ensure the health and safety of our staff, visitors and artists.
Learn more about our **COVID19 Protocols for a Safe Visit** at mercerunion.org/visit

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BIOGRAPHIES

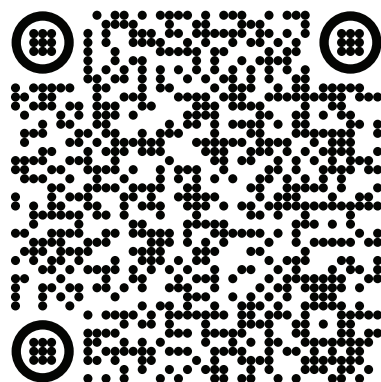
Onyeka Igwe is an artist and researcher working between cinema and installation, born and based in London, UK. Through her work, Onyeka is animated by the question—how do we live together?—with particular interest in the ways the sensorial, spatial and non-canonical ways of knowing can provide answers to this question.

Canisia Lubrin is a writer, editor and teacher; and the 2021 Windham-Campbell laureate. Her books include *Voodoo Hypothesis* (Wolsak & Wynn, 2017); *Code Noir* (Knopf, 2023); and *The Dyzgraphist* (McClelland & Stewart, 2020), listed for nine book prizes and other honours, including winner of the OCM Bocas Prize for Caribbean Literature, the Griffin Poetry Prize, and Derek Walcott Prize. Lubrin was also awarded the Joseph Stauffer literature prize. She is poetry editor at McClelland & Stewart and inaugural Shaftesbury Writer in Residence at Victoria College, University of Toronto. Lubrin completed her MFA at University of Guelph, where she is also an Assistant Professor in the School of English and Theatre Studies.

EXHIBITION SUPPLEMENT

THE REAL STORY IS WHAT'S IN THAT ROOM includes archival broadcasts from Commonwealth FM, a public radio station operating in the UK between 2003–2006 featuring programs made by local residents from across the Commonwealth of Nations.

Igwe's selection of broadcasts are available for your listening at mercerunion.org or by way of the code below which can be activated using a mobile device camera.



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Cultivating artists and challenging audiences since 1979.



SPACE: Shellie Zhang | *A day passes like a year: Ode to Autumn*
22 September - 14 December 2021

Mercer Union's SPACE billboard commission has invited artist Shellie Zhang for its 2021-22 season for a yearlong series titled, *A day passes like a year*. Known for her highly composed still life works that assemble objects of pop iconography, cultural construction, and diasporic memory, Zhang's photographs offer vibrant gestures of reclamation, humor, and dissidence. In a quadriptych portrait of the year ahead and a reflection on the year that has passed, *A day passes like a year* looks to the Chinese four seasons painting traditions and the immediate locale of Mercer Union to glean a format for telling time in its place through change, personal connection, and collective association.

Read the artist's note on the first edition: *Ode to Autumn*, and an accompanying text written by Maya Wilson-Sanchez at mercerunion.org

Shellie Zhang is a multidisciplinary artist based in Tkaronto/Toronto. She creates images, objects and projects that explore how ideas of integration, diversity and assimilation are implemented, negotiated, and manifested in relation to lived experiences. Zhang is interested in how culture is learned and sustained, and how cultural objects and iconographies are remembered and preserved. She is a recipient of the 2021 Toronto Friends of the Visual Arts Artist Award, and in 2017, was an Artist-in-Residence at the Art Gallery of Ontario. Recent and upcoming projects include exhibitions at AKA, Saskatoon (2021); the plumb, Toronto (2021); and the Anchorage Museum (2020).

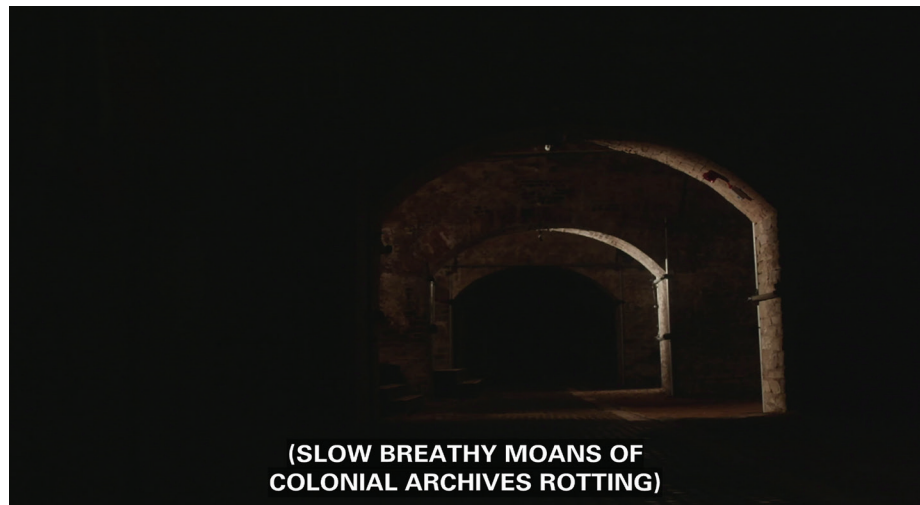
SPACE invites one artist to produce a yearlong series of images for a public-facing billboard located on the east façade of Mercer Union.



Onyeka Igwe:
THE REAL STORY IS WHAT'S IN THAT ROOM

6 November 2021 – 26 February 2022





Again, To This Scene: Onyeka Igwe, A SO-CALLED ARCHIVE

By June 2020, the coronavirus pandemic had deepened the world into a silence. That soundscape is what availed an unusual number of people to the brutal outcome of the state-sanctioned death of yet another Black person. The scope of this apparent reckoning, global under those circumstances, carried the name George Floyd into expanding public consciousness. That summer revealed newly the power and violence that produced the British and American empires. It was unclear whether the difficult work at the heart of the world's entanglements with this still-ongoing past, could be scaled in the demands being made to redress its harms. Here is a paradox: solutions to the problem of racial terror arrive through repetitions of Black death in a system that only bureaucratizes Black life. This sordid realism is foundational to the continuing catastrophe of empire, even as empire dies. Even as ruin is everything in it. Public discourse through trans-geographic protests were voices upon voices within voices, their languages resonating across eras of similar events. Televisual technology allowed us to witness efforts to co-opt and curtail what felt to me like a seismic moment in the fight for Black lives. The globality of the Black Lives Matter uprisings of 2020 proved it was logical, then, that Floyd was only one addition to the centuries-thick roster of depravity that led to the scale of the intervention that followed. And I found myself wondering again at the tools and ordinances continuously deployed to obstruct the better future proposed in those demands for abolition.

As though conjured from the blueprint of the disordered violence produced by empire, people flooded the streets with demands to end racial terror. Resistance on that scale should compel us to look more closely at how time becomes marked by the history of erasure and dominance that precede these events. Such live encounters with history deepen our grief as the simultaneity of our ingenuity, interventions, and being mobilize our emergence from the sites of such ruin. Into this past-tense present, we deploy the beauty and care that lets us persist. This is part of the record of our way-making in the catastrophe of the modern. The archive of this history is replete with suffering, but it is also facsimile to the wonder we live and know.

Onyeka Igwe's film *a so-called archive* casts a searing light into British colonial past through a cross-cutting, pastiche interrogation of the administrative methods of the colonial archive. Images, records, and economies central to this portrait are revealed in their process of deterioration and abandonment. In such a way does Igwe subject the psychic landscapes of Lagos' Colonial Film Unit (1932–55) and Bristol's former British Empire and Commonwealth Museum (2002–09) to fragmentation's aesthetic force, mixing media in order to depict the continuing dissonant linkages between Britain and its former colonies. Igwe's lowering of the colonial archive from its perch of monolithic discretion, involves the human voice as a tool of interruption against the hegemony of colonial narrative. This approach also exposes the naked vulnerability of the archive as an enclosure of domination.

The human voice. Two abandoned buildings. Reels of documentary footage and recordings. Cardboard boxes. The radio. In Igwe's prismatic soundscape, the visuality of the archive joins the friction of sound: interwoven voices from the empire are dubbed over images of the abandoned museum collections and archive buildings are collages of news clippings, poetry recitations, radio play excerpts, and documentary audio: flora and fauna and waterways in Bristol and Lagos. Voices carry: *people can be so.../ nourished.../ wicked.../ degenerate.../ dignity.../ natural history.../ fabric.../ mutilation.../ our political fabric.../ permeating...* (Igwe, 05:20). The voices relay as images of the index of British conquest where the two buildings in Lagos and Bristol are contrasted through a mix of close-up and panoramic shots. The aesthetic doorway of Igwe's interrogation casts trans-geographic "sonic shadows"¹ in the direction of the colonial archives, as opposed to the usual conscript of the archive being sourced for such power. The subordinate spaces where Black life intervenes in the ruins is used to map the means of our creativity.

As Igwe's camera pans over evidence of the archive as a space of ruin, the British Empire is characterized as dust, rust, cobwebs, waterlogged boxes, cracked walls, termite tracks, water-stained ceilings, telecommunications equipment covered in filth. Many of the objects that appear in the film were recorded in the last locations of their use. Archival abandonment in situ contrasts the sense of liberation that the formerly colonized people in those records achieve in spite of racial capitalism, death, precarity, and incarceration. The bureaucratic practices of the British colonial architects remain self-evident though their centuries-old scenes of neglect have been abandoned. Such archiving proves disinterested in the humanity and creativity in/of the former colonies: record-keeping is revealed mainly as enabling the kind of neurosis central to colonial exploitation.

This exhibition is an invitation to think through the archives as overlapping forms of abandonment and active neglect². Igwe's soundtrack mirrors the double-doorway visions of Black agency where *a so-called archive* constellates Black livity beyond the irony of the official narrative of British rule. The near-extinguishing force of empire's commitment to record-keeping, to annotating the measure of its conquests, are placed under immense pressure through Igwe's rendering of the visual sociality of archival structures themselves. There Igwe transforms the space of deep wounding where history is met with the counternarrative methods of our continuous life-making in its ruins. Uncovering what is buried is itself part of the crucial work of attending to the otherwise ways we dream and make. The film's exhumations privilege the creativity of the Black subject who now



encounters the archive and exposes the pathology of but not in its records. The potential to fundamentally alter what is interpreted at such sites is the liberating disruption of cultural hegemony that uncovers the ruin.

We know that such ruin repeats—as in Africa, Bristol, Asia, the Americas—and that these acutely equatorial connections are made of the movements of Black people in the film's locales. This is activated by the metaphor and metonymy: Black hands holding up partial blueprints of the buildings in the foreground of their actual decompositions. So, in the laced worlds evidenced by material distortions, we begin to grasp how time in the archive is disrupted by Black living. The context here is the historical and contemporary shoring of peoples between locations of ruin, allowing associations between geographies and related psychic landscapes. These appear as actions that counteract the effects of time passing: the hand holding up the blueprints belongs to a person who is intervening in the absences that appear. In the future, past, and present, the losses, though plural, reveal the deep silence of the archive as always also aesthetic. The empire's invisible clothes³ are modulated in the unique language of Igwe's double portrait, weakening the agility of coloniality. In the scale of "sonic shadows,"⁴ annotations of the former colonies only appear as exposition in the voice of colonial journalists. Thus, the fictions of the colonial narrative are denied their discontinuous fantasies.

Consider what is made when narratives of Black-being-as-fungible are troubled—or refused—particularly when erased or otherwise made invisible by institutional archival processes. In the final, poignant scene of the film, a woman dances in a ruinous building. She dances. The static story of the archive is threatened here, where life intervenes with more life.

—Canisia Lubrin

¹ Mason Leaver-Yap, introductory note to *KW Production Series 2020: Onyeka Igwe*. Online exhibition, December 2020. <https://www.kw-berlin.de/en/kw-production-series-2020-onyeka-igwe/>

² Christina Sharpe, "Scale", *Grief and Grievance: Art and Mourning in America*, Exhibition Catalogue conceived by Okui Enwezor (Phaidon. New Museum, 2020), 114.

³ Hans Christian Anderson, *The Emperor's New Clothes* (C.A Reitzel, 1837).

⁴ Mason Leaver-Yap, introductory note to *KW Production Series 2020: Onyeka Igwe*.