

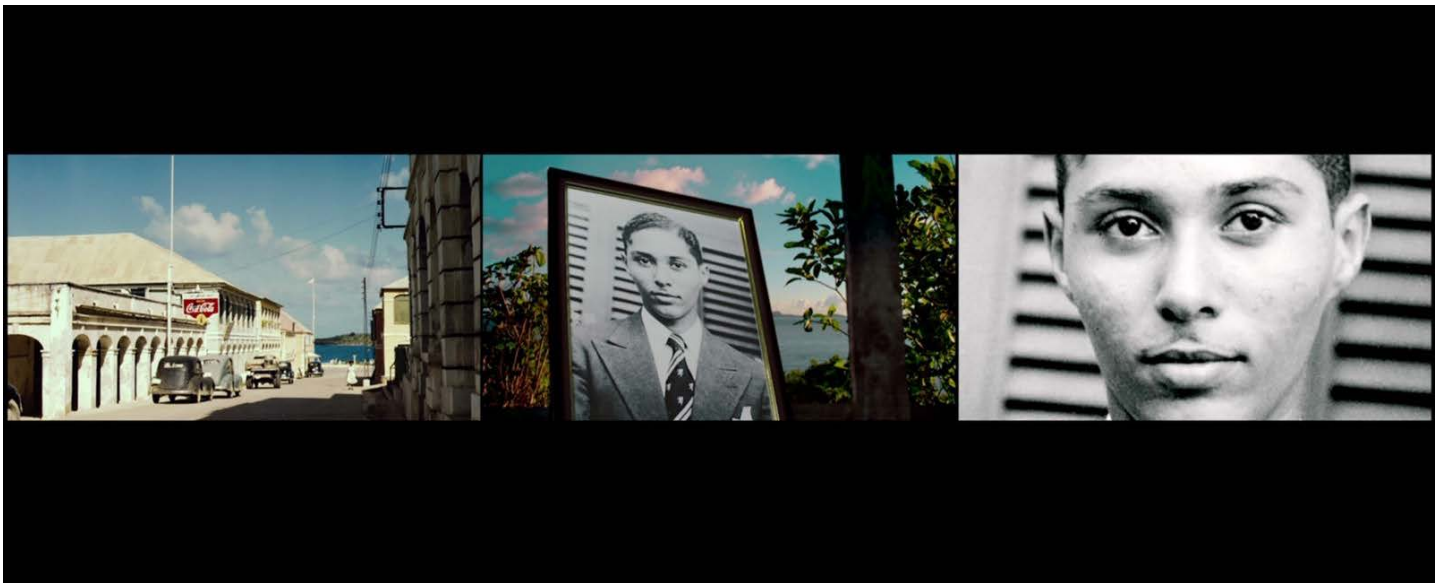
# Unfinished Conversations: An Essay



Thomas J Lax [Follow](#)

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**Thomas J. Lax with Klaus Biesenbach, Lucy Gallun,  
Christian Rattemeyer, and Yasmil Raymond**



**John Akomfrah. Still from “The Unfinished Conversation.” 2012. Three-channel video (color, sound), 45 min. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. The Contemporary Arts Council of the Museum of Modern Art, The Friends of Education of The Museum of Modern Art, and through the generosity of Bilge Ogut and Haro Cumbusyan. Image © Smoking Dogs Films; courtesy Lisson Gallery**

*Unfinished Conversations: New Works from the Collection*

assembles artworks by 15 artists made in the past decade and

recently acquired by The Museum of Modern Art. The exhibition takes its title from John Akomfrah's 2012 video installation *The Unfinished Conversation*, which is included in the show and chronicles the life and work of Stuart Hall, the Jamaican-born cultural theorist and a leader of the British New Left. In his 2011 essay "Social Responsibility, Cultural Sustainability," Hall argued that museums are places where meaning is debated and narratives of the past are shaped. Furthermore, he contended that museum collections are "a source of inspiration which create thought-provoking visions of our past. They provide testimony to the darkest and brightest of human history." This exhibition explores how Hall's understanding of history as both multifaceted and in need of interrogation is reflected in artworks from MoMA's collection, and how these recently made works offer insights into our historical present.

*Unfinished Conversations* considers a set of intertwining themes: social protest; the effect of history on the formation of identity; and how art juxtaposes fact and fiction, realism with the utopian. From Cairo to St. Petersburg, from The Hague to Recife, the intergenerational artists in the exhibition observe and interpret acts and structures of state violence, as well as the resistance and activism they provoke. They reexamine charged historical moments, evoking images of the past and claiming their place within it. And they take on contemporary debates, intervening into contemporary struggles over the significance of government surveillance and the exploitation of labor. The

anxiety that informs so much of our world today is their subject matter, which they approach through a variety of artistic strategies.

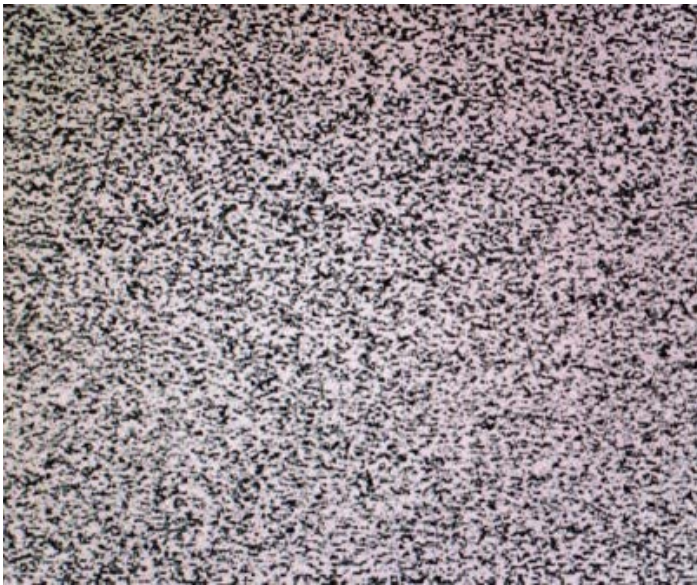


From left: Anna Boghiguian. "Untitled." 2011. Gouache on paper. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Fund for the Twenty-First Century. © 2017 Anna Boghiguian; Andrea Bowers. "A Menace to Liberty." 2012. Marker on found cardboard. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Purchased with funds provided by the Contemporary Arts Council of The Museum of Modern Art and by Susan G. Jacoby in honor of her mother Marjorie L. Goldberger. © 2017 Andrea Bowers

## Social Protest

Some of the artists in the exhibition offer depictions of the social upheavals they witness around them. For example, in her dense, expressive drawings, Anna Boghiguian chronicles the events in and around Tahrir Square, Cairo, following the

Egyptian revolution in January 2011. Similarly, in his large-scale work on paper, Erik van Lieshout reworks a 2014 news image of an anti-Islamic march in a multicultural neighborhood of The Hague and the counter-protest organized in response to it. The bright shards of blue, pink, and orange vinyl he adds to the drawing's surface heighten the fury of a conflict across ideological positions. Other artists make oblique references to a political present whose meaning is contingent on the work's context.



Tillmans. "Sendeschluss/End of Broadcast I." 2014. Inkjet print. Carol and David Appel Family Fund

### Wolfgang Tillmans's photograph

*Sendeschluss/End of Broadcast I* is seemingly abstract but in fact portrays an all-over field of pixels — a familiar image of television static that can occur when there is no transmission signal or because of censorship. Tillmans captured this image in 2014

from a hotel television in St. Petersburg, Russia, where he was participating in Manifesta 10, an international exhibition of contemporary art. At the time, demonstrators were protesting the Russian government's anti-gay legislation and annexation of the Ukrainian territory of Crimea. In Andrea Bowers's drawing, rendered in permanent marker on found cardboard,

she reproduces the cover of radical activist Emma Goldman's 1914 journal *Mother Earth*, which portrays a neoclassical archetype of Patriotism defeating a figure of Liberty. Goldman had written about what she recognized as the struggle between these two ideals on the eve of World War I, in her 1911 article "Patriotism, a Menace to Liberty." Her citation of patriotism as "the principle that will justify the training of wholesale murderers" and the image it inspired reads as a cautionary tale today, a moment when nationalist and protectionist ideologies are gaining traction worldwide.



Kara Walker. "40 Acres of Mules." 2015. Charcoal on three sheets of paper. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Acquired through the generosity of Candace King Weir, Agnes Gund, and Jerry I. Speyer and Katherine Farley. © 2017 Kara Walker

## History of Identities

While some artists adapt and reuse images that exist around

them, others invent new iconographies by disrupting the conventional purposes of monuments and memorials as emblems of official history. Kara Walker, for instance, made her epic three-part drawing *40 Acres of Mules* in 2015, after Dylann Roof murdered nine members of the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina, and after her trip to Stone Mountain Park, the granite public sculpture outside Atlanta that celebrates the leaders of the Confederacy. Walker's oval composition echoes the shape of the Georgia monument, but unlike that straightforward homage, *40 Acres of Mules* instead foregrounds a motherlode of vexed historical references, picturing an orgy of cavalry, horses, Klansmen, mules, mammies, and masters in an apocalyptic scene — all centered around a black martyr figure. Walker's loose, almost breezy sense of draftsmanship and her use of stereotypical figures deflate the heroism that often accompanies history pictures such as this, as she takes the guts out of a range of Confederate symbols.



In Iman Issa's latest sculpture series, she, too, reworks images from the past, fabricating her own heritage objects. While Issa's Heritage Studies invent new sculptural forms, they take inspiration from real artifacts from across the



Fosso. Untitled, from the series African Spirits. 2008. Paper print. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. The Family of Man Fund. © 2017 Samuel Fosso

Islamic world and beyond, identified by accompanying labels that outline their original materials, time periods, and provenance. This purposeful rereading of official history undermines any romanticized or unified notion of Arab cultural identity, exploiting classical museological categories to call attention to their role in

constructing meaning. In his African Series photographs, Samuel Fosso portrays himself as several figures in a pantheon of black freedom fighters and cultural leaders, including prison abolitionist Angela Y. Davis and slain independence leader Patrice Lumumba. Placing himself at the center of each image, Fosso channels the likeness of his subject through their distinctive style, while exaggerating the scale of public portraits of state and cultural leaders. Through imitation and camp, he makes these iconic figures into vulnerable, relatable sources of inspiration. Like Walker and Issa, Fosso places a collage of identities and a veiled version of himself in a vision of the past; all three artists construct the past as speculative, impermanent, and open to reinterpretation.



Iman Issa. "Heritage Studies #5." 2015. Aluminum and vinyl text. Fund for the Twenty-First Century. © Iman Issa

## Fact and Fiction, Realism and Utopia

Several of the artists in the exhibition juxtapose realism and fabulation in their work, eliciting a critique of the here and now and simultaneously creating a vision of what might be. In his 2013 video *The Uprising (O Levante)*, Jonathas de Andrade stages a horse-drawn cart race in the center of Recife — a city in Brazil's northeast marked by a contrast between its peasant class and rural traditions, and its status as a quickly developing industrial center and film capital. The artist organized the race in response to a proposed ordinance prohibiting horses carrying carts, and he was only able to stage it by asking the authorities for a permit to make a movie. The horse owners, however, were invited to participate in a real horse race, giving each group a different understanding about the context of their participation. De Andrade used some make-believe — even guile — to draw out how the event's meaning differed for its



audiences: the ambiguity of its interpretation was tied to their respective positions, and how they experience the city every day. By contrasting these two plots, the artist created a real public spectacle that in the film is mythologized by a traditional folk singer as a modest revolt and call for a more equitable social order.



**Jonathas de Andrade. "The Uprising (O Levante)." 2013. Video (color, sound), 8 min. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Acquired through the generosity of Pedro Barbosa and Patricia Moraes, Luis Augusto Teixeira de Freitas, Mr. and Mrs. John Austin, Mr. and Mrs. Peter Klimt, and Roberto Lima. © 2017 Jonathas de Andrade**

Cameron Rowland likewise considers current social conditions as a set of tools through which another future might be imagined. The artist's works included here were first shown in 2016 at Artists Space in downtown Manhattan. Several of the works in that exhibition were readymade sculptures first purchased as commercial goods from Corcraft, the industries division of New York State's Department of Corrections that employs incarcerated people for well under minimum wage to produce low-cost goods for government agencies and nonprofit organizations. The products Rowland selected emblemize how the state reproduces itself through prison labor, often bearing historical echoes. The leveler rings that comprise *Leveler (Extension) Rings for Manhole Openings* (2016), for example, are sold for the purpose of adjusting the height of manhole openings after repaving, which evoke the African American chain gangs who were forced to build many public roads. Rowland's work also addresses the norms of museum acquisition and property, as the artist does not sell these artworks, preventing them from entering into relationships of outright ownership. Instead, they are leased on renewable five-year rental periods for the total price of the Corcraft products.



**Cameron Rowland. “Leveler (Extension) Rings for Manhole Openings.” 2016. Cast aluminum, pallet, distributed by Corcraft. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Rental at cost with funds provided by the Fund for the Twenty-First Century**

Rowland extends his critique of how slavery structures ideas of possession and protection in his 2016 *Disgorgement*, which consists of a purpose trust — a genuine legal instrument Rowland created to hold an initial investment in 90 shares of Aetna stock. As the artist’s accompanying text states, “Aetna, amongst other insurance companies, issued slave insurance policies, which combined property and life insurance.” The company made some of its original profits by treating people as things to be bought, sold, and insured. According to *Disgorgement’s* bylaws — presented in the gallery as the visible part of the artwork — as the trust accrues in value, it anticipates a moment when the federal government might formally offer compensation to the descendants of slaves. Were

this to occur, the trust would terminate and distribute its holdings to augment the government disbursement. This articulation of the ways in which the system of slavery continues to structure our society also implicates the Museum, specifically as the custodian of the work through an extended loan and a commitment to continue the trust's intentions. Rowland displays materials that speak to an ongoing history of anti-black racism in a matter-of-fact manner that imagines a moment in which this history might be acknowledged — or perhaps its persisting inequality might come to an end.

## Unfinished

*Unfinished Conversations* is about the present, in that all of the works were made in the recent past and many respond to specific circumstances. Viewed in juxtaposition, they are made within the context of today's global rise of populist movements organized around notions of racial and national belonging in both liberal democratic and autocratic states. However, beyond simply responding to the present, many of them participate in the formation of our reality. These artists anticipate the future through a close study of history, whether recent or centuries long. The exhibition attempts to follow the artists' leads, asking how present crises are produced by what came before; querying not if things are getting worse but, rather, paying close attention to some of the cultural struggles that have long structured democracy, freedom, and human rights as values based in historical contradictions.

While the “unfinished” conversations in the exhibition are certainly shaped by political irresolution, they are implicitly cultural. In contextualizing the artworks within the vagaries of state violence, the afterlife of slavery, and the reverberations of global capitalism, the exhibition does not attempt to ground its works as issue-based; nor could a selection of works drawn from MoMA’s collection claim to comprehensively picture our moment. Rather, the multiple, nevertheless particular, positions these artists encourage for the viewer speak to the ambivalence, doubt, and vulnerability involved in the consideration of aesthetic meaning. The artists in the exhibition rethink, question, and give new life to a range of traditions within the visual arts, including portrait painting, readymade sculpture, photographic self-portraiture, observational drawing, filmic montage, institutional critique, conceptualism, memorials and monuments, and abstraction across mediums. But in their expansive reconsideration of these modern and, at turns, pre-modern genres, they also find meaning in cultural forms outside the rarefied halls of art history. In particular, the artists’ use of storytelling and voice resound throughout — for example in the jazz, gospel, and folk singers included in Akomfrah’s video. Together, all of the artists look back to practices both within and beyond the visual arts to imagine possibilities for an uncertain future.



**John Akomfrah. Still from “The Unfinished Conversation.” 2012. Three-channel video (color, sound), 45 min. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. The Contemporary Arts Council of the Museum of Modern Art, The Friends of Education of The Museum of Modern Art, and through the generosity of Bilge Ogut and Haro Cumbusyan. Image © Smoking Dogs Films; courtesy Lisson Gallery**

In one particularly moving sequence in Akomfrah's three-screen video installation, Stuart Hall describes his experience of learning, and then teaching, William Blake's poem "The Tyger" (1794). Mahalia Jackson's rendition of "Silent Night" plays and the montage flickers between documentary footage of a woman giving birth and soldiers in Vietnam burying their own.

Describing the poem, Hall says: "Every time I have to teach it a different way or read it in a different way, and I see something I hadn't seen before." Hall's reflection proposes that cultural meaning is a never-finished project that shifts as one's context and self change over time. In citing this poem — and in pairing it with the images and sounds of creation and destruction — Akomfrah suggests that making meaning is like finding one's place in the world and, conversely, being taken from it. The thing about being read to aloud, or hearing a voice sing to you, is that you — the listener — have the opportunity to ask what matters. And by grappling with how what you hear might mean something, perhaps we might find one another, at least for right now.

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