

# 1.1. Shock, Tension, Offence, and Satire in Utopian Contemporary Art

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## **Abstract**

In this paper, I discuss versions of utopia which offer challenging or controversial perspectives expressed through environments modelled in contemporary installation art. I will focus on the darker side of utopia and analyse how the artist constructs worlds which may provoke unrest, or transform the gallery space into something unexpected, confrontational, or potentially shocking. I locate the installation artwork as a place-making device in which imaginary worlds can be explored, and the physical impact of the work has the power to shock, disrupt, and engage the viewer from disconcerting and politically controversial positions.

**Key words:** utopia, world-building, place-making, installation, satire

To demonstrate the connection between the installation artwork, the imagination, and a physical engagement with place, I analyse Yinka Shonibare's *Gallantry and Criminal Conversation* (2002), an installation artwork produced as part of the art biennale *Documenta XI* (Figure 1). The artwork critiqued is modelled within a temporary exhibition space in Kassel, Germany where five of Shonibare's works are exhibited together culminating in an overall environment. The five works featured together feature sex acts and are titled *Threesome* (2002), *Woman with Leg Up* (2002), *Parasol* (2002), *Carriage* (2002), and *Fellatio* (2002). The artwork incorporates two historical points of reference. Firstly, *Criminal Conversation* was a law condemning adultery, which was still active in England up until 1857. Secondly, the work stages a scene from the "grand tour", the journey taken across Europe usually by the aristocracy for the purposes of cultural enhancement. It provided an opportunity for extended travel, and was popular throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The grand tour was typically a European phenomenon and included cultural capitals, for example, Venice, Rome, and Paris. In the words of historian Jeremy Black (1985: 109), "[t]ravel abroad provided a great opportunity for

sexual adventure”, as travellers often had time and wealth to invest in recreational activity. In 1715, the Earl of London recounts that “[i]t is impossible to take more freedom than that place allows” (Black, 1990: 339) as the grand tour often included opulent celebration and the exhibition of personal wealth.

**FIGURE 1.** Yinka Shonibare CBE, Installation view, *Gallantry and Criminal Conversation*, 2002. Eleven life-size mannequins, metal and wood cases, Dutch wax printed cotton, leather, wood and steel, 200 x 260 x 470 cm (carriage) (overall dimensions variable), Brooklyn Museum, New York, 2009. © Yinka Shonibare CBE. All Rights Reserved, DACS/ Artimage 2022. Commissioned by Okwui Enwezor for Documenta 11, 2002. Image courtesy of Brooklyn Museum. Photo: Christine Gan.



However, Shonibare’s interpretation of the grand tour refers to a different aspect of the utopian traveller. He conveys a sense of anonymity through the act of travel which facilitates a departure from social convention. The audience encounters headless performers and public sexual acts portrayed as free from social restraint. Participation in Shonibare’s grand tour is staged within a scene where the traditional rules of social conduct and propriety are suspended. Placelessness is emphasized through an imaginary environment depicted in transit. Packing cases have been discarded and loosely stacked; and a stagecoach is hung overhead. This is a mobile place outside the permanency of what is familiar or established.

*Gallantry and Criminal Conversation* locates a relationship prompted by the artwork as a space apart. Michel Foucault’s essay “Of Other Spaces” (1984), based on a lecture given in March 1967, established social ritual as a performance of alterity; however, an alternative view on the production of anonymity

has been argued by Marc Augé. In *Non-Places: An Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity* (1995), he describes an emerging “placelessness”, as society produces “ephemeral or transient” places in which human relations are characterized as impersonal within structures of movement or passing through.

However, in Shonibare’s independent world, “placelessness” has a dual purpose. It enables the set-up of a location (or non-location) within which alternative social behaviours can be explored, but it is also essential for the engagement with shock and humour. Critical distance enables an objective and flexible perception of events where ridicule or mockery become possible. An audience’s awareness of engaging with fiction — with a non-place — enables the artist to push the boundaries of propriety and offer creative, explicit, and provocative depictions. These are imaginary acts, positioned as if elsewhere and at a distance.

The “placelessness” that I suggest, however, also establishes a viewing paradox. Shonibare’s communication of humour also relies on a tense visual comedy which centres on corporeality. The human scale, primary contact, and scope of the work physically confronts the viewer, enhancing the potential to create unrest. However, the modelling of these sexual acts also emphasizes the ridiculousness and performative aspects of the situation. An example of this is the balancing of copulating figures on the fine point of a parasol, a visually absurd composition; or hands steadied on piles of travelling trunks. These theatrical gestures are elevated to farce as the work signals to a self-conscious pageantry. Elaborate costumes and exaggerated behaviours contribute to the flamboyance of *Gallantry and Criminal Conversation*, and signal an underlying humour attached to the staging of the sexually explicit actions that the viewer encounters.

This mockery is juxtaposed with serious themes of culture and conquest which extrapolate an underlying tension in Shonibare’s fictional scene. His practice is designed to “question the validity of contemporary cultural identities”, highlighting a language of provocation rather than didactic communication (Shonibare, 2018). In *Gallantry and Criminal Conversation* cultural politicization is inferred through Shonibare’s utilization of fabric design and pattern. Shonibare questions cultural supposition through utilizing Dutch wax textiles with complex cultural origins. The fabrics borrow batik processes from Indonesia, a Dutch colony at the time of original manufacture in the seventeenth century, yet have rich associations with Africa. Shonibare achieves a further level of obfuscation through the cultural juxtaposition of Victorian costumes made from these brightly coloured prints. The patterns are reminiscent of African cultures subjugated by the British Empire. This is a presentation of a world in which cultural associations are reconfigured and uprooted. The installation artwork provides an entry point to a world elsewhere, and by doing so, a new world of contradiction is established.

I interpret Shonibare's work as a social commentary, drawing on Merlin Coverley's definition of satire as a sub-genre of utopianism. He writes, "the satirical utopia is as old as the genre itself, its primary aim being to highlight the short comings and absurdities of contemporary society" (Coverley, 2016: 68). Playful juxtapositions of social histories, hypocrisies, and an exposure of the complexity of cultural attribution suggest a social interrogation of views which claim cultural autonomy. However, insight is also provided by Nicole Pohl, who, in contrast to Coverley, offers a more visual description of satire as a "world upside down", which "may serve as a satirical ploy to ridicule contemporary deficiencies" (Pohl, 2010: 66). Pohl distils an optical aspect of satire which may display physical and visual transformations as social critique. In *Gulliver's Travels* (1726), for example, visual humour and juxtaposition is utilized for powerful effect. The Lilliputians' enlarged sense of self-importance is contrasted with the actual size of individual citizens not six inches high (Swift, 2003: 13). The Lilliputians' description of the city of Mildendo as a "metropolis" also suggests social pretention, as the city is approximately 500 feet square (Swift, 2003: 13).

The visual of Shonibare's world also portray an exploration of contradiction. The recognizable Victorian styling of Shonibare's scene, for example, transitions from something visually familiar into another version of itself, as African textiles are imprinted onto historical costume. An aesthetic mismatch is also evident in the work, as lively textile prints create visual pleasure, yet the overall scene portrays raw and controversial sexual content. I read these visuals as a strategy for creating new ways of looking and seeing, as an arresting combination of textile design, historical costume, and overt sexuality are modelled. However, *Criminal Gallantry and Conversation* is also an artwork which instigates resistance. The politicization of racial and cultural supposition is reflected upon the visiting audience. On contact with the work, the prejudices of the viewer are challenged and explored, leading to an uncomfortable space for viewing.

The physical building of worlds in an exhibition space establishes *Criminal Gallantry and Conversation* as a three-dimensional scene in a public place. The exhibition space, therefore, and the encounter with explicit fiction, is potentially experienced as part of a communal viewing audience. This group dynamic creates the opportunity for shared dialogue and a shared experience of humour, but also produces a potentially uncomfortable space where an audience member may feel inhibited. Controversial works in the exhibition space may provoke feelings of unrest and disgust towards explicit subject matter, and this in turn raises questions as to how the exhibition reflects the outside world, and the expectation of the viewing public on entering the space. An unusual and challenging spectrum of viewing possibilities is created within *Criminal Gallantry and Conversation*, which are usually outside the scope of the exhibition viewing experience. Shock, embarrassment, or ridicule form part of a testing relationship with the exhibition facilitated by the installation artwork.

However, the explicitness of the work depicted also scaffolds a confrontational space where tension counteracts audience apathy or indifference. The role of provocation, therefore, can be conceptualized as part of an aim of audience transformation. Through challenging preconceptions of propriety, race, and culture, Shonibare introduces an alternative world view, communicated through the lens of a place-making device which prompts an engagement with challenging and complex topics. From this perspective, the utopianism in *Gallantry and Criminal Conversation* is part of a transformative audience process of social engagement rather than the portrayal of a world considered more ideal than the viewers' contemporary society.

In summary, *Gallantry and Criminal Conversation* embodies a place apart, where an engagement with 'placelessness' is visualized as a physical space of alterity. In a similar vein to the traditions of satire, I locate Shonibare's artwork as an exposure of the hypocrisy of a bourgeois society claiming moral authority. The mannequins highlight the supposed conservatism of the upper classes, while depicting sexual acts in public. In addition, the artwork creates the opportunity to encounter a visual and physical manifestation of a satirical world which challenges cultural and racial assumptions. Provocation, shock, and tension all contribute to a space of resistance, where confrontation establishes a mutual dialogue with the audience and performs the essential role of social critique. This approach to world-making highlights how artists are engaging with both positive and negative emotional responses in contemporary installation, and points towards a significant role for controversy in emerging practice.

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