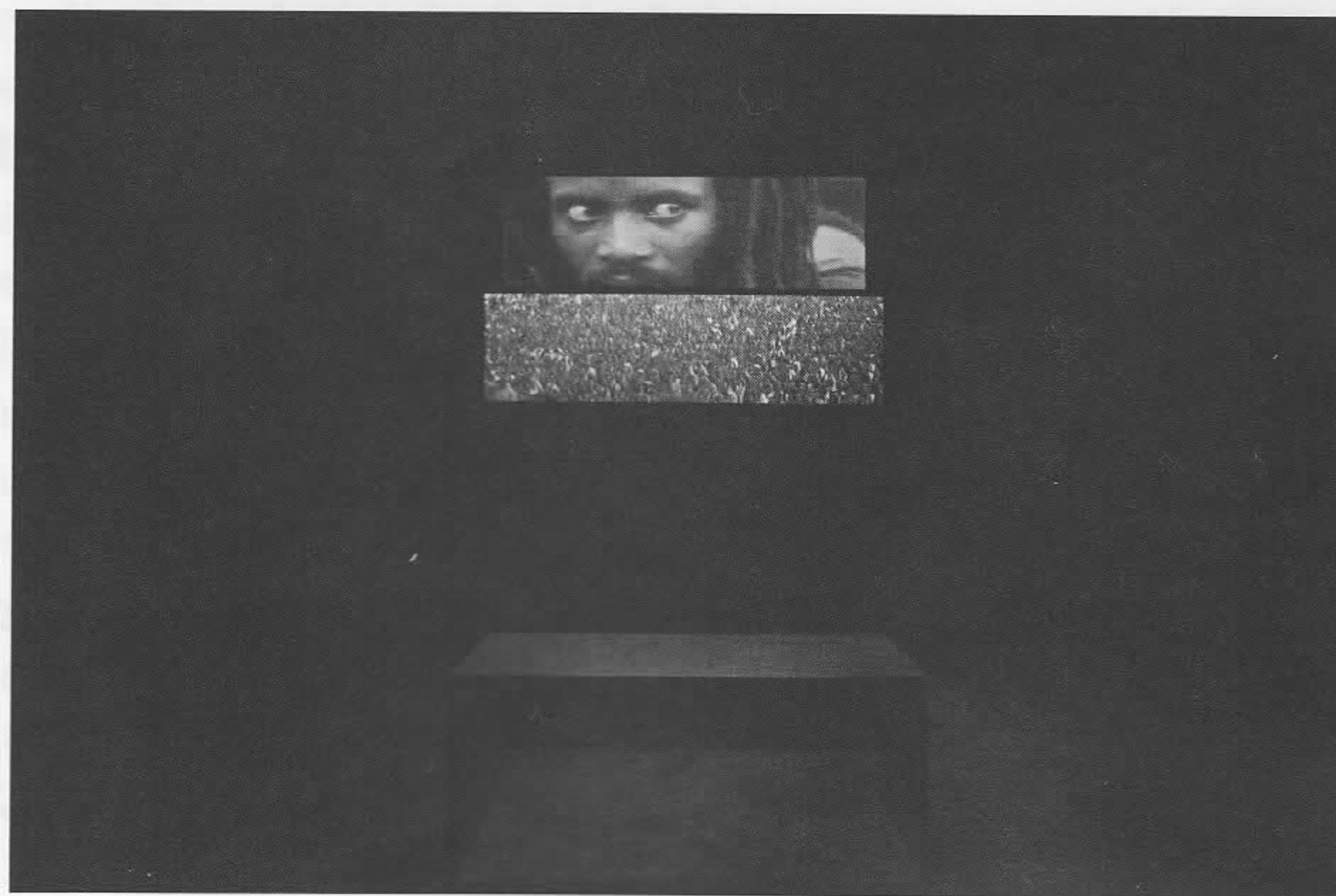


Renée Akitelek Mboya: A Glossary of Words My Mother Never Taught Me

It may seem that art which deals explicitly with language lends itself to the task of writing about it, as if the subject matter of words prompts the proliferation of more words. Yet the conversion to the textual, apparently half-done already, is never straightforward, especially when the problematics of language are under scrutiny. Renée Akitelek Mboya's film *A Glossary of Words My Mother Never Taught Me*, 2021, throws this discordance, this inevitable Wittgensteinian failure, into such sharp relief that I am reminded of the potential violence of my own words as I describe it. The film is signposted with words for freedom, starting with the Swahili word *uhuru* – the rallying cry of Kenyan independence – presented as fundamental components to the nation's postcolonial political lexicon. The banal, state-authenticated dictionary definitions of this word (visible on slides inserted into the archival footage), contrast with the messy, complicated and emotionally fraught images of imperial and postcolonial oppression – and with Mboya's own voice-over, poignantly relating what the words mean to her.

The film opens with fireworks – temporary, explosive monuments in the sky – accompanied by ecstatic cries when the screen splits. A British broadcaster's voice pinpoints the historical moment: 'Nairobi, December 12th 1963.' The screen splits horizontally into two, showing scenes of jubilation and cries of '*uhuru*' as East Africa celebrates its independence at different times of day and night; dark and light mythically suggestive of revolutionary change. The action is then obfuscated by the quick cuts, constant motion and hurried, agency-denying close-ups, often isolating a single part of a person's face: an ululating mouth, ebullient eyes. The intrusive presence of the British voice (notwithstanding the accented trappings of power), corresponds with a close-up image of a white woman holding a camera that obscures her face, and the disquieting initials 'BP' on the shields of tribal dancers. This is British footage, *uhuru* is British-sponsored, the gaze is unidirectional.

Mboya interweaves history and autobiography, the political and the psychic, relating her perspective on Kenya's recent past with diaristic intimacy. She gives her personal interpretation of *uhuru*: 'The things you learn to deny come back to haunt you. *Uhuru*. Freedom. A word that feels dirty in my mouth. This saviour taught me to traffic truth and look away from it as though it would burn my eyes.' Accompanying her words are images that bear the bodily hallmarks of dictatorial rule: a leader pontificating into a microphone, the populace's sky-thumping fists and soldiers marching the streets. The leader is Mzee Jomo Kenyatta, and *mzee* is the next word to be defined: 'An older person; an elder (used as a title of respect)', or as Mboya puts it, 'he is the one we grew up calling



Renée Akitelek Mboya, *A Glossary of Words My Mother Never Taught Me*, 2021, video installation

baba ... father [...] We see him on TV saying he loves us and we learn to sing songs in his praise. This is how you raise children who are afraid all the time. This is how you teach them silence. This is how they learn that they are exceptionally unexceptional.' Such wordplay between positive and negative resonates with the splitting of the screen, which by now feels almost cellular, evoking cross-fertilisation, reproduction and mutation as much as division – of history, peoples and property, and the meanings we ascribe to words.

Despite all the chaos and uncertainty, Mboya's multi-sided presentation about the state of affairs leaves no question as to who, primarily, should be held to account. The film's second half addresses issues of land, enclosure and property, the history of which, Mboya says, 'is the history of white people owning property'. The British voice-over then interjects: 'Here, settlers transform the rough African bush into ... a little piece of England,' and what follows is a fox hunt with a black man holding a dead fox on a rope. 'Together they make a fine scent for the hounds,' the voice adds, equating fox and man. Terrified, he runs through the manufactured green and pleasant land to the sound of sentimental 'cinematic' music. The footage is all the more horrific for originally being intended as propaganda to promote British presence in Kenya, and uncanny because, at moments during this painfully protracted chase, the setting *could be* England. Seen now, it serves as a powerful reminder that just because it happened there, it doesn't mean that it is unrelated to what happens here.

Renée Akitelek Mboya's *A Glossary of Words My Mother Never Taught Me* was screened at Cell Project Space, London, 4-19 December 2021.

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