

# COMMON SENSE

EXHIBITION CURATED BY TOBI AINA, JOCELYN HARTE, JACEY LOZADA



# CONVEYANCE

LEGACIES OF COLONIALISM AND  
COMMODIFICATION IN THE GLOBAL SOUTH

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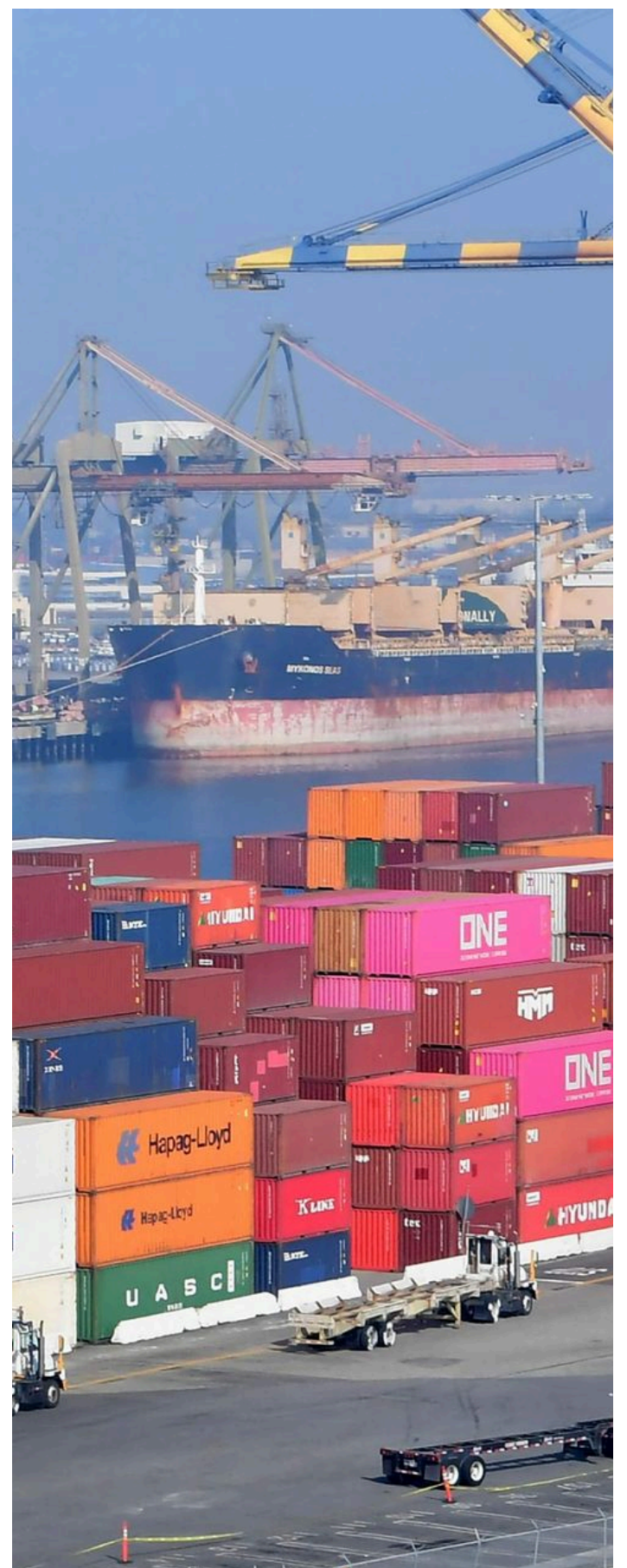
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# INTRODUCTION

**Conveyance** affects the most intimate details of our daily routine. Though the act goes seemingly unnoticed, at its broader scale it has staunchingly shaped the contemporary world. The literal definition of conveyance is representative of globalization – its meaning being the transportation of goods, people, and ideas. When investigating how globalization has radically changed the environment, we can look to the term “Capitalocene”. TJ Demos defines the Capitalocene as “the geological age of capitalism”, and seeks to identify the rampant environmental change and degradation Anthropocene by name (Demos). Though the Capitalocene pinpoints how the Anthropocene creates radical instantaneous environmental change, it is just as crucial to characterize how capitalism originated as a result of colonialism and is fed by the commodification.

The “Global North” and “Global South” are the terms we use in this exhibit in place of phrases such as “first world” or “third world”, and “developed” or “developing” nations. As Demos said, “[w]hat we call things matter.” Admittedly, “Global North” and “Global South” are not perfect terms either, and as language and history develops surely new terminology will erupt to embody the nuances of the world. “Global North” and “Global South” seek to “*amplify how countries in the Global North gained their socioeconomic, industrial, and developed status through colonization, and the Global South are countries that are affected by colonization, like affecting national identity or their economy*” (Lozada).





**Legacies of colonialism are evident through the commodification of the Global South. Globalization contributes to the degradation of these landscapes and the communities that inhabit them through exploitative industries such as e-waste and farming—that reflect the interdependent economic relationship that exploits the Global South for the benefit of the Global North.**

We can examine this under the lens of decolonial theory which “argues that the economic, political, cultural, and epistemic violence of colonialism has entrenched systems of racism, patriarchy, and economic extraction globally” (Morris).

While developing this exhibit, we were drawn to the definition of ghosts in the collection of essays featured in *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet* written by Anna Tsing, Heather Swanson, Elaine Gan, and Nils Bubandt. Their writing amplifies the importance of looking for ghosts in landscapes. They define ghosts as “the vestiges and signs of past ways of life still charged in the present” (Gan et. al). Looking for ghosts is a way of acknowledging the longstanding histories of a landscape, that nothing can truly be stripped of its history. In chapters such as Andrew S. Matthews “*Ghostly Forms and Forest Histories*”, Matthews utilizes radical awareness to look for ghosts in the chestnut steps in Monti Pisani, Italy. Though these forests are seemingly deserted, Matthews is able to discover its past as a chestnut cultivation through “the forms of trees, of areas of forest, of drystone terrace walls and of drainage systems” (Matthews). Identifying ghostly forms “provide ways of imagining and perhaps bringing into being positive environmental futures” (Matthews). Though the example Matthews uses is in nature, this can also be applied to urban cities.

In Nils Bubandt’s chapter titled “*Haunted Geologies Spirits, Stones, and the Necropolitics of the Anthropocene*” he brings up a startling reality of the Anthropocene through the landscapes of elevated mud in Surabaya, Indonesia. In 2006, a mud volcano erupted, and destroyed many livelihoods of the people who lived around the area – but the convoluted part is that no one was able to identify if the Mud volcano eruption was a result of natural causes or oil drilling (Bubandt). Human impact born from capitalistic endeavors through the commodification of natural resources. When the natural world is so enveloped by human creation, it brings into question who begins to be affected.



Mud volcano eruption in Indonesia, 2006, Getty Images.



This dissonance between how the Global North benefits from the exploitation of the Global South is not felt equally. Through this exhibit we hope to make that eerily transparent. This inspired our decision to curate a list of global majority artists from the Global South to share their perspectives on globalization, capitalism, and colonialism through their artistry. Each of their pieces embodies looking at ghosts in their country's landscape through its complex history and how that imbues itself onto daily contemporary life, by making viewers look at history beyond what seems to exist.

Like using specific terminology to describe the extent of violence, art can visualize those realities. The Capitalocene has birthed a new range of what Nicholas Mirzoeff coined "the aesthetics of the Anthropocene" that complicates the purpose of art as a tool for bringing attention to social issues or activism. In Demos's chapter in *Against the Anthropocene*, he uses Canadian photographer, Edward Burtynsky's, photographs of industrial landscapes to describe how they are "*as seductive as they are horrific, as revealing as they are aestheticizing—and aestheticizing in an extremely disturbing manner when it comes to Anthropocene visualizations*" (Demos). The danger of doing this mirrors the harm in which WJT Mitchell amplifies as "imperial landscapes", where artists imbue aesthetics that communicate ownership of the white man over nature and manifest destiny (Mitchell).



Edward Burtynsky's *Manufactured Landscapes*, 2006.

We made sure to gather artists that we believe are actively pushing against fetishizing and normalizing environmental degradation and human suffering – because as Haraway put it in "*Tentacular Thinking*", "*It matters what stories tell stories*" (Haraway).

The commodification of goods is representative of the Capitalocene. Today, everything can be a commodity: music, fine art, nature, and people. Even when something is not created to be a commodity, it still can become a commodity. Commodity fetishism is a term coined by Karl Marx to describe the ways "*commodities have a phantom objectivity*" (Watts). Phantom objectivity is the placement of an ethereal higher meaning that is socially constructed around the object. The meaning that people place on an object reflects the larger relationships between each other.

Commodity fetishism removes the context in which an item is produced and imbues new meaning that makes the object appear more than it's worth. Look at art as an example. Art has become a commodity through the way that it is sold and purchased. Art becomes fetishized through the way their value is constructed. For example a *“Carravagio painting is a commodity - and correlatively, that it is private property and only within the means of the extravagantly rich - fundamentally shapes my experience of that work and of my ability to enjoy its magnificent beauty in some unalloyed way. Its commodity status has tainted and coloured my appreciation of it”* (Watts).

The decision to create a touring art exhibit allows us to use capitalist structures and subvert them. Shipping containers are representative of globalization—as they are key for the transportation of goods overseas. By showcasing art in this way, we are de-fetishizing the various commodities featured by the artists in the exhibit by educating and promoting consumer consciousness. Instead of using them to transport a commodity, we are using them for the spread of ideas regarding themes of the history of colonization and imagining what decolonization can look like.

## THE EXHIBITION ITSELF

In Conveyance, we chose four artworks related to themes of waste, water, and colonialism. Each artwork helps in conveying our message about the legacy of colonialism within the global South. We shed light on globalization’s contribution to the degradation of these landscapes that benefit the global North. And, as we highlight the exploitation of communities through industries like tourism, e-waste, and farming, we reflect on the codependency between the two hemispheres.

These works are Vibha Galhotra’s *Who Owns the Water?*, Nyaba Leon Ouedraogo’s *The Hell of Copper*, Cai Guo-Qiang’s *The Ninth Wave*, and John Akomfrah’s *Vertigo Sea*.

Each work was hosted within a functioning shipping container. The containers each started in different major port cities, and over the course of a mid July to late August 2024, traveled to a different port city. The containers were placed in an accessible and authorized location within the ship yard, allowing outside visitors and local workers alike to visit the exhibition over the course of a couple of days. As the containers traveled across the world, they were tracked for people to follow through the official Conveyance web page. To signify the end of their journey, a small exhibition was opened in the Tate Modern in November 2024, showcasing the documentation of the exhibit.

In the end, thousands of visitors in 8 different locations witnessed various parts of the exhibition. Sponsored by Tate Modern, local workers were employed to take care and guide visitors to the exhibit. People, many for the first time, were able to witness the grand scale of our world’s shipping industry.





# ARTISTS AND SELECTED WORKS

## VIBHA GALHOTRA (b. 1978)

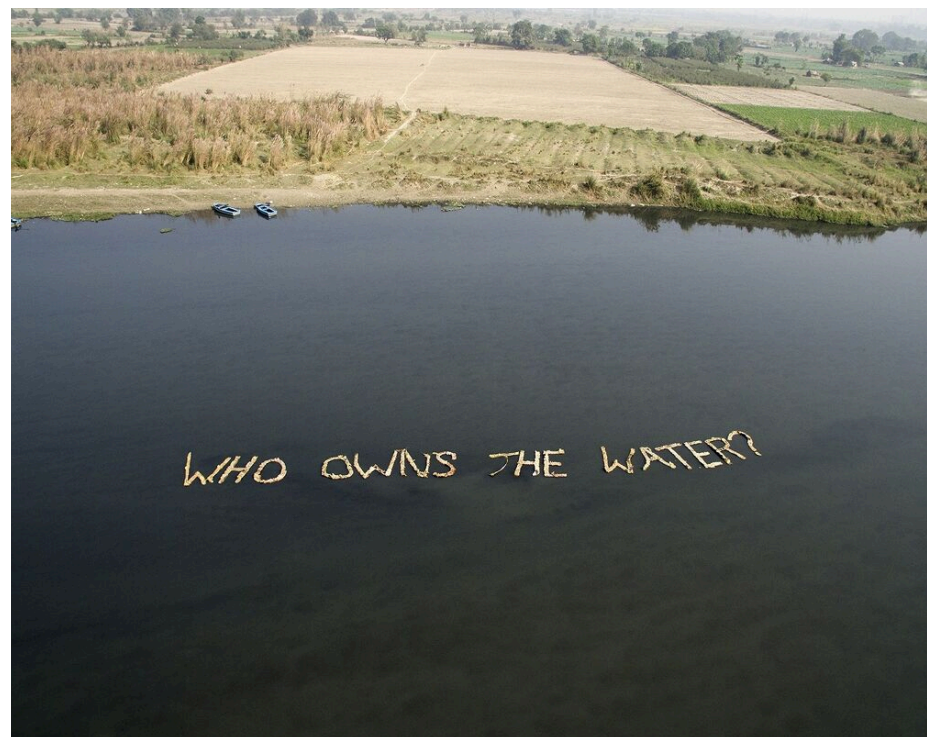
Vibha Galhotra is an Indian Artist based in Delhi, India. As a conceptual artist, her practice is multidisciplinary - she uses installation, sculpture, photography, film, and drawing as methods for environmental storytelling. Galhotra is primarily focused on contemporary issues related to ecology and pulling viewers to ask questions about their position within the environment. Her exhibit traveled from Mumbai, India, to Durban, South Africa.



### ***Who Owns the Water?***

Following the aquatic theme, in *Conveyance*, Galhotra's work, *Who Owns the Water?* is displayed. *Who Owns the Water?* is a site specific land and performance artwork that comments on the pollution of the river Yamuna, a body of water near Delhi, India, where the artist lives ("Who Owns the Water?"). In this work, *Who Owns the Water?* floats alongside Galhotra, who's body emulates the historic practice of river burials in the Yamuna. The river, considered sacred to many in Delhi, is hazardous due to state negligence and burial traditions. *Who Owns the Water?* questions autonomy, tradition, and statehood's relationship with water and indignity.

In *Conveyance*, we recommissioned this land work and placed it outside the ship containers, within the flowing Indian ocean. While the original land art was created in response to issues related to Galhotra's community, it evokes widespread challenges of ecological stewardship. By showing this work in tandem with the other artworks in *Conveyance*, we highlighted water pollution internationally as a multivariable problem. We aimed to show the commonality of issues related to water land gubernatorial interest, individual well-being, and cultural conservation.



*Who Owns the Water?* 2017.



In addition to the land art piece, we also showed another work by Galhotra with the same title. *Who Owns the Water?* is a more open-ended exploration of different methods of environmental storytelling and the spreading of eco-consciousness. A commonality in each of her later iterations of this artwork is the usage of food as a tool for discourse. In 2019, she organized a dinner party to emphasize food traditions as significant social and political events (Galhotra). Likewise, in 2022 she curated another dinner in collaboration with the Jerusalem Food Rescuers and Muslala to inspire discussion about the “geo-politics of the land and the ownership of the natural resources...” (Galhotra). Galhotra’s project mirrors the interdisciplinary nature of environmental action by bringing in a variety of experts and individuals to participate in conversation and art performance, and by using a variety of tools and mediums she highlighted the multifaceted nature of the issue. In *Conveyance*, we asked Galhotra to continue this project highlighting global issues related to water. Within one of the shipping containers, a new version of this series was placed, inviting guests to participate like in the past.



*Who Owns the Water?* 2019.



*Who Owns the Water?* 2022.







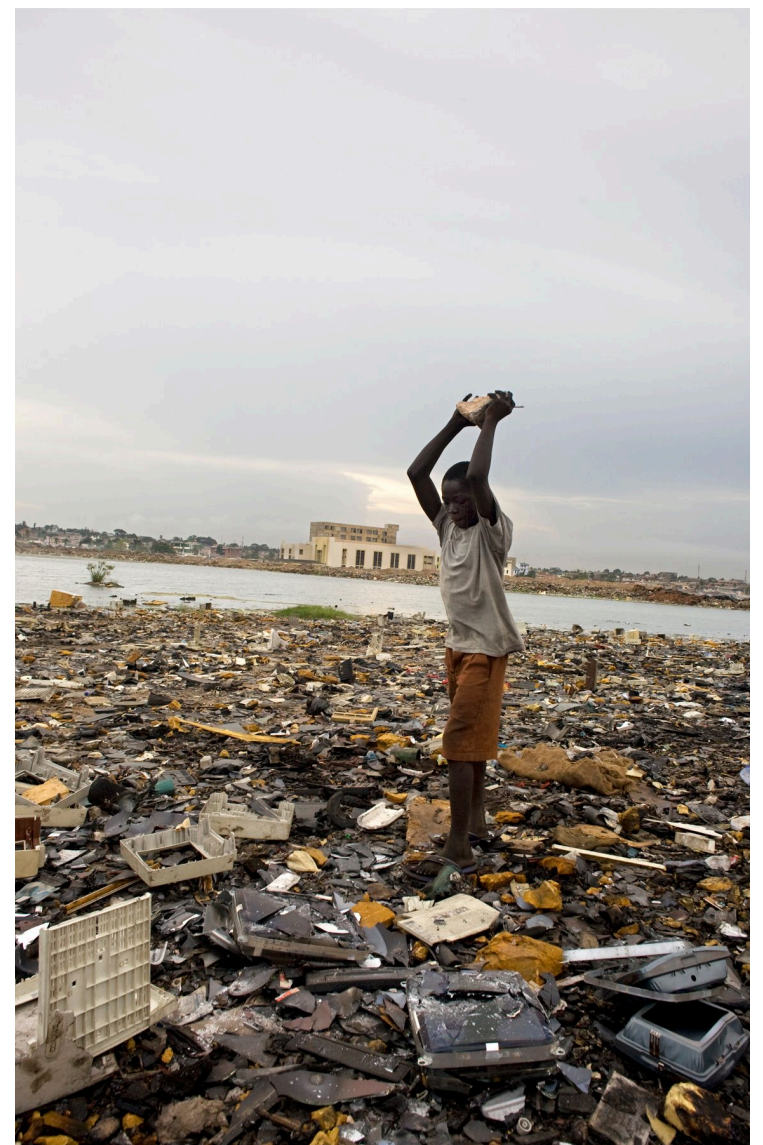
## NYABA LEON OUEDRAOGO (b. 1978)

Born in Burkina Faso, Nyaba Leon Ouedraogo is a photographer who primarily focuses on travel-based photojournalism. Ouedraogo works within the boundary of documentary photography and photojournalism. His goal with his work is “*not showing the images for what they depict, but for what they transmit.*” (Ouedraogo) His work *The Hell of Copper* a series of photographs showing a landfill in Accra, Ghana, is featured in our exhibition.

### The Hell of Copper

In *The Hell of Copper*, Ouedraogo depicts a landscape of electrical waste materials transported from Europe and the U.S. via immigrants from Ghana and into the hands of wholesalers (Ouedraogo). This has become a convoluted, illegal industry that has persisted because of the monetary revenue – where child labor is used to extract copper and is cheaply resold, it also raises questions about general environmental safety on the land and bodies of Ghanaian people (Ouedraogo). In these photographs, the waste is never-ending. Ouedraogo's work highlights the practice of waste colonialism, where “*higher-income countries export their waste to lower-income countries, most of which have inadequate waste management facilities and recycling capabilities*” (GAIA US Canada).

*The Hell of Copper* shows colonialism's lasting impact on the African continent. What could be hospitable land is a dystopian landscape, poisoned by the greed of expansionist ideology. Ouedraogo captures the lives of those who live in these remnants. Shedding light on the modern landscape, highlighting the contemporaneity of imperialism. *The Hell of Copper* directly illustrates the lasting effects of the divide between the global north and south. It is a history of interdependence that has created this landfill. As the north has progressed as a result of their relationship, the south has remained in turmoil. Industries tainted by gluttony and corruption caused by histories of settler-colonialism have resulted in a complete transformation of the land. These structures remain because the global south needs money, and the north needs a place to put their garbage. It is the interdependence between the two hemispheres that allows for continued exploitation.



*The Hell of Copper (L'enfer du Cuivre), 2008*





Exterior of Ouedraogo's container in transit.

Starting in Los Angeles, USA and ending in the Port of Santos, Brazil, Ouedraogo's exhibit was covered inside and out with his series of photos from *The Hell of Copper*, 2008. On the inside of the container, piles of e-waste line the floor as photos are hung on the walls. Visitors waded through the e-waste as they take in the vast impact of what the photos depict, where the technology they use on a daily basis ends up, what people are affected by our actions.



Photos featured within the shipping container, *The Hell of Copper* (L'enfer du Cuivre), 2008





## CAI GUO-QIANG (China, b. 1967)

Cai Guo Qiang is a Chinese artist based in New York. He works in a variety of mediums including painting, sculptural installation, video and performance art. Guo-Qiang is most notable for his use of gunpowder and explosives within an artistic context. Guo-Qiang's work primarily discusses ideas prevalent within Chinese culture, sharing them within internal audiences.



### ***The Ninth Wave***

*The Ninth Wave* is an installation created in response to an incident where 16,000 pigs floated down the Huangpu River in Shanghai (Langfitt). In this installation a fishing boat is filled with various zoological species evocative of Noah's Ark. The work is inspired by a 19th century Russian painting of the same name that depicts a shipwreck and its remaining survivors. Like the figures in the painting, the 99 fabricated animals cling to the old boat as it sails across the river. *The Ninth Wave* is a commentary on China and their relationship with the environment; the Chinese perspective on environmental activism and ecological stewardship.



*The Ninth Wave*, 2014.

*The Ninth Wave* highlights the idea of waste commodification of life as a result of capitalism. The 16,000 floating pigs shows a disregard for life, but also illustrates the impact of commodity fetishization and other effects of overgrown capitalism.

In a world of global capitalism, what is not considered valuable within the market, what doesn't have phantom objectivity is discarded and overlooked. Sustainable practices are not considered profitable. They can't reliably be made into a product that can be bought or sold. In a word where product and profit are royalty, it is fine to abuse nature. It's far easier, and far more profitable, for us to disregard the climate crisis.

Starting in Shanghai, China and ending in New York City, USA, Guo-Qiang's container housed a small scale boat with life sized, delicate fabricated animals. As the exhibit traveled, the animals became mangled and worn. The chaos was on full display at the end of its journey in New York City.



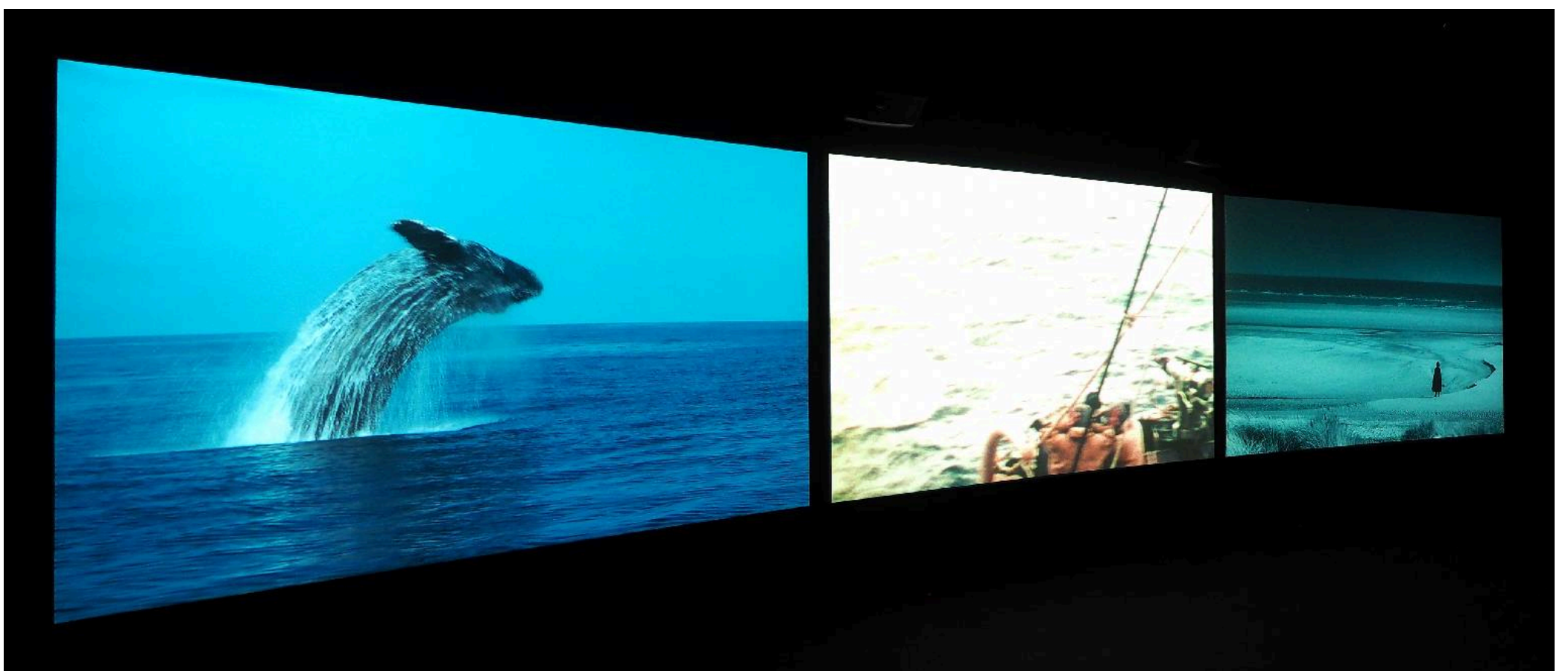


## JOHN AKOMFRAH ( b. 1957)

John Akomfrah is a British Ghanaian filmmaker. His films tackle themes of colonialism, African-diaspora, and the environment. His multichannel video installations combine original video with archival footage to create narratives related to ideas of memory and environmental decay.

### Vertigo Sea

In *Vertigo Sea*, a three-channel video installation, Akomfrah combines archival video with his own footage to bring together contrasting and correlating oceanic narratives. By combining different narrative fragments, Akomfrah highlights the sea not only entity that connects us geographically but natively as well. Akomfrah takes inspiration from fictional and historical depictions of the sea. Drawing from archival footage from film and television as well as fragments from the works of greats like “J.M.W. Turner, Théodore Géricault’s *The Raft of the Medusa*... Caspar David Friedrich... Ralph Waldo Emerson, Herman Melville’s *Moby Dick* (1851), Virginia Woolf’s *The Waves* (1931) and Heathcote Williams’ poem *Whale Nation* (1988)...”(Mac Montréal). Furthermore, Akomfrah’s staged footage, draw from his focus on colonialism and African Diaspora. “*Akomfrah tells the incredible story of Olaudah Equiano (about 1745–1797), a freed slave from the Kingdom of Benin, who became a British abolitionist, sea merchant and Arctic explorer*” (Mac Montréal).



Stills from *Vertigo Sea*, 2015.



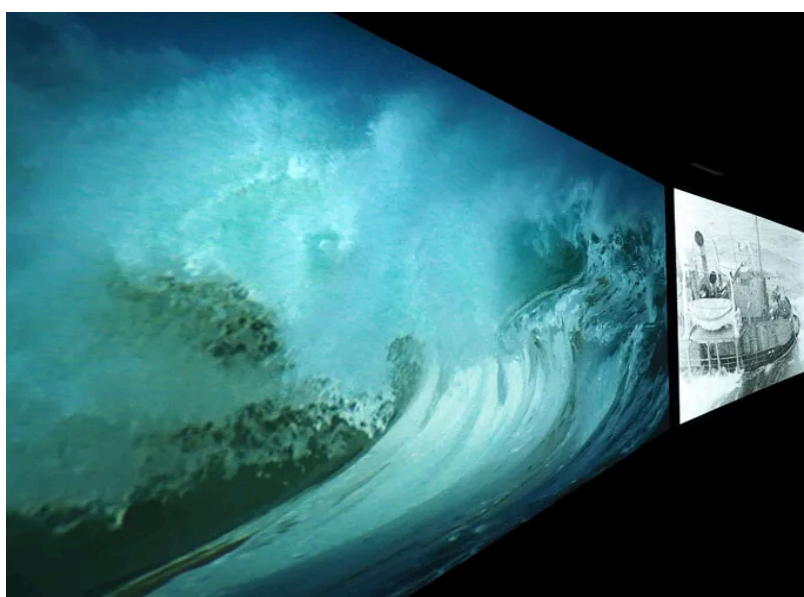
Within *Vertigo Sea*'s captivity is the diversity of oceanic images. Which in tandem overwhelms and confused audience members. This is best expressed by Musée d'Art Contemporain de Montréal writing on the film:

*Vertigo Sea juxtaposes powerful scenes of the whale hunt off the shores of Newfoundland; polar bear hunting on Arctic ice flows; kilometre-long schools of fish and plankton; views of the predatory instincts of all forms of marine life; but also black bodies aligned in the hold of a slave ship; Vietnamese boat people fleeing their country; political prisoners being cast into the sea; and the all too common sight of refugees floating in makeshift vessels. Many of these images are familiar to us, we can identify their historical and geographical references, we recognize the stories behind them. And yet, their proximity one to the other with no apparent correspondence across three screens, and over the 48 minutes the work runs, produces a vertiginous effect.*

As with Golhotra's work, *Vertigo Sea* places audiences within the artistic practice. They, too, like Akomfrah become part of the larger narrative of oceanic stories, drawing from their own understanding of the grand ocean, of imperialism, and their own identities. Musée d'Art Contemporain de Montréal writes:

*The sea is the theatre where multiple (hi)stories come together. The artist deliberately and explicitly implicates the viewer, not only in our collective responsibilities, but also in the creation of new meanings.*

By placing *Vertigo* in conversation with historical, contemporary, and interpersonal sea narratives. *Vertigo Sea* works in the boundary between the familiar and the unfamiliar, ultimately relating to the idea of ghosts described in the writings of Anna Tsing, Heather Swanson, Elaine Gan, and Nils Bubandt: as "the vestiges and signs of past ways of life still charged in the present" (Gan et. al). By comparing and contrasting similar narratives, placing them side by side Akomfrah finds the ghosts within the sea. We see the ghost of the sea in the history of colonialism, in global trade, in our stories of whaling and nautical grandeur. The sea is an ultimate linking force. Bringing together worlds. When we look for ghosts, we acknowledge the longstanding histories of a landscape, that nothing can truly be stripped of its history. *Vertigo Sea* uncovers this dark underbelly.



(View from inside of the container) *Vertigo Sea*, 2015

Akomfrah's exhibit started in the London, UK port, and traveled down to the Port Of Tema in Ghana . Alongside the film's showing, a small camera was placed on the outside of the container, allowing for its existence be documented. Akomfrah was commissioned to take this footage and create a new short film from its contents. This film, alongside with photographs of the exhibit, was displayed in the Tate Modern in September 2024.

# CONCLUSION TO CONVEYANCE

**Conveyance** was packaged like the many commodities seen traveling across oceans, it blended in with the landscape of shipping ports and modern cities. People were reported to feeling in awe as they stepped in the port, inside the containers. But as they left, reality of the impact of capitalism, of environmental exploitation, weighed down on them. We hoped to make people reflect upon how they use the environment, what they spend their money on and how that travels across the world. What communities are your actions actively hurting? The impact of colonialism, waste, and water on communities, specifically those in the Global South, will never be understood fully, but the effort to educate oneself is the first big step. Locals and outsiders alike discovered a new part of the surrounding community, and left more empathetic to the world they take part in.



Still from *Vertigo Sea*, 2015.



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## CONTRIBUTIONS

Tobi Aina - Artist research and bio writer  
Jocelyn Harte - Design, editing, formatting, and exhibition logistics  
Jacey Lozada - Introduction, contextual research and writing