

# Onyeka Igwe

## *history is a living weapon in yr hand*

28 September – 14 December 2024

*history is a living weapon in yr hand* is a solo exhibition of new work by London-based artist, Onyeka Igwe, comprising a two-screen film installation, *A Radical Duet* (2023), alongside film props and production materials.

The exhibition takes London, 1947, as its starting point – a time when the city was a hub of anti-imperialist and Black revolutionary activity, with intellectuals, Marxists, educators and writers such as Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti, Sylvia Wynter, C.L.R. James, Kwame Nkrumah and George Padmore all spending time there. Each was agitating for their respective countries' national independence – but did they meet? And if they all did, what did they discuss? What did they conjure?

Intertwining historical fact and fictional narrative, *A Radical Duet* traces three separate but converging timelines to imagine historical figures inspired by the burgeoning movements for national liberation coming together in London to fight for independence.

Central to the film are two fictional characters – a Nigerian Christian socialist, women's rights activist and union leader, Adua Falade, and Sylvie St. Hill, a Jamaican student, dancer and playwright. These women, from different generations and backgrounds, come together to put their fervour and imagination into writing a revolutionary play. Through staged scenes that move between past and present, Igwe's film depicts the play as a form of political protest, and envisages what it would look like if staged today.

*A Radical Duet* is presented across Peer's two gallery spaces, prompting the viewer to move between gallery one and gallery two to experience the entirety of the film. A collection of props replicating scenes from film, alongside rehearsal scripts, are installed throughout the exhibition space and Peer's street-facing windows, inviting visitors to consider the use of artifice within the film's narrative and its production.

A series of talks, events and workshops has been programmed by the MA Curating and Collections at Chelsea College of Art, University of Arts London in response to Igwe's work and will run throughout the exhibition. Igwe's exhibition is part of Peer's 2024 Programme, which also included new commissions and exhibitions by artists Ed Webb-Ingall and Meera Shakti Osborne.

### Screening times:

The film is 28 minutes long and screenings begin every half an hour from 12pm, with the last screening at 5.30pm.

### Access information:

**Audio description:** *A Radical Duet* has animated captions which include sound descriptions. Audio description can be accessed via radio frequency headsets at the entrance to the gallery. Captions and audio descriptions are facilitated by Collective Text.

**Physical access:** The gallery entrance is 84 cm wide. The gallery is on the ground floor.

**Lighting:** Please note that the exhibition space is dark. The film is the primary light source. Sound plays in the space at a high volume. Let us know in advance if you require the room to be brighter or a lower volume or ask a member of staff.

### Biography:

Onyeka Igwe (b. London 1986). Lives and works in London. Recent solo exhibitions include: *A Repertoire of Protest (No Dance, No Palaver)*, MoMA PS1, New York, 2023; *The Miracle on George Green*, The High Line, New York, USA, 2022 and *a so-called archive*, LUX, London, UK. Recent group exhibitions include *Nigeria Imaginary*, Venice Biennale, Italy, 2024; *Lagos Peckham Repeat: Pilgrimage to the Lakes*, South London Gallery, London, 2023; *Echoes*, Haus der Kunst, Munich, Germany, 2022; *Reconfigured*, Timothy Taylor New York, USA, 2021; *Archives of Resistance*, Neue Galerie, Innsbruck, Austria, 2021. Igwe's work is distributed by LUX and argos. She is represented by Arcadia Missa.

## List of works:

1. *A Radical Duet* (2023)  
HD Video.

2. *Notes on the Production of Props and Sets* (2023)  
Theatre flats, wood, black gloss paint, wooden table, table cloth, tray, prop cigarette, ash tray, cigar case, tobacco case, bookshelf, books, fake books, lectern, lamp, film scripts, theatre curtain, fabric.

## Talks, events and workshops:

**Artist talk with Onyeka Igwe:**  
**Friday 11 October 12pm**

Join artist Onyeka Igwe and Ellen Greig, Director of Peer, in conversation.

**Commemorating Unseen Stories in Hackney (closed):**  
**Thursday 7 November, 2–4pm**

This closed workshop invites Hackney Circle, a membership community for older residents of Hackney interested in creative and cultural events, to share their stories and histories through the creation of heritage plaque designs. The group will be memorialising those most important to them and the wider community of Hackney. This event is programmed as part of Peer's academic partnership with MA Curating and Collections at Chelsea College of Art, University of the Arts London.

**It's okay to begin where we begin: An archival research workshop**

**Saturday 16 November, 2–5pm**

With a focus on Black British histories viewed through a feminist lens, this workshop provides a unique opportunity to explore how personal and collective histories can be reclaimed, re-told, and activated through archival practices, transforming history into a tool for challenging erasure, silence, and marginalisation. This event is programmed as part of Peer's academic partnership with MA Curating and Collections at Chelsea College of Art, University of the Arts London.

**Black British Film and Activism**

**Thursday 28 November, 6.30pm**

A panel discussion exploring the role film has played in Black British activism, particularly in telling the often-silenced stories of women. This event is programmed as part of Peer's academic partnership with MA Curating and Collections at Chelsea College of Art, University of the Arts London.

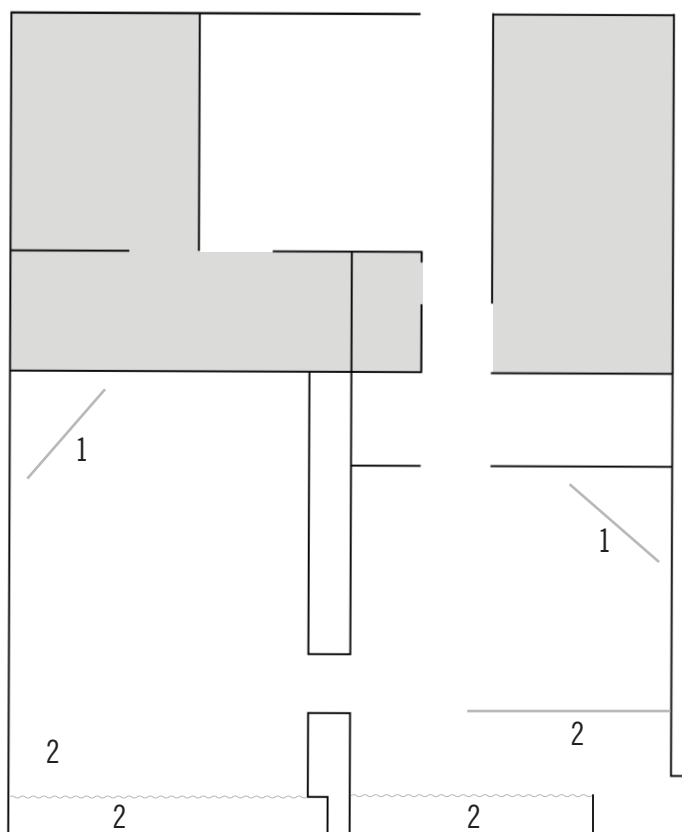
**Community coffee morning and closing event**

**Friday 13 December, 9am**

Join us for a coffee morning at Peer, for the chance to meet others living and working in the local area.

**London is a living history in yr hand: map**

As part of Peer's academic partnerships with MA Curating and Collections at Chelsea College of Art, a printed map accompanies Igwe's exhibition, highlighting significant figures and familiar locations in Hackney, connecting to overlooked Black British histories. These everyday places contain traces of those forgotten or silenced. By remapping, we acknowledge their stories and contributions to shaping the East London we know today.



## Four questions to Onyeka Igwe:

**Ellen Greig and John Eng Kiet Bloomfield:** This exhibition is titled *history is a living weapon in yr hand* and it includes your film work, *A Radical Duet*, as well as a series of theatre props. We're curious about the title of the exhibition and its relation to the film?

**Onyeka Igwe:** The title is taken from a line of Diane Di Prima poem titled *RANT*. A friend was working on a book of her poems Revolutionary Letters and that line stood out to me about what I wanted the exhibition to do. The full stanza reads:

*history is a living weapon in yr hand & you have  
imagined it, it is thus that you "find out for yourself"*

*history is the dream of what can be, it is the relation  
between things in a continuum of imagination*

*what you find out for yourself is what you select out of  
an infinite sea of possibility no one can inhabit yr world.*

I think cinemas are the perfect place to see a film and if a moving image is in the gallery, I like the spatial considerations of the space to come into play. So I wanted to emphasise how the historical period that we see in the film is malleable, is something that is relevant to today, is something we have agency over and that all those things are powerful. Like a weapon in our arsenal to shape the future of our world. I think the movement that is encouraged by the two-screen installation and the passage of time symbolised by the audience crossing a threshold, in the gallery, stresses that key concept.

**EG & JB:** *A Radical Duet* opens with scenes of the outside of what we assume are the London homes of two fictional characters who appear in the film, Adura Falade and Sylvie St. Hill. Are these characters inspired by real historical figures? And if so, who are they?

**OI:** These characters are inspired by several historical figures. I was drawing on black anti-colonial women who lived in London between the 1930s and 1950s. Figures such as Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti, Sylvia Wynter, Amy Ashwood Garvey, Claudia Jones, Una Marson and Katherine Dunham. These were women engaged in political struggle but also had associated artistic or cultural pursuits. I was interested in them because of these dualities, or multiplicities—that being political was not only and always about political parties, speeches and writing like the analogous famed men of the same period. I was also fascinated that they were in London at the same time but didn't know if they knew each other. I presumed they must have met as they were part of the same scene but I didn't know for sure and I wanted to see it. I also wanted to retrace their steps in the film to show that the spaces they occupied are still here present in the city; the film includes

portraits of Africa House, Funimalyo Ransome-Kuti's lodgings, one of Sylvia Wynter's homes, a bricked off doorway to C.L.R. James 1930's flatshare and Kwame Nkrumah's London home.

**EG & JB:** The film is influenced by the year 1947, London. What interests you about this time? What's the relevance of this year to 2024?

**OI:** My friend said to me in passing that everyone used to come to London. I thought I knew what she meant and was thinking of the seventies or eighties but she corrected what she meant earlier – the forties. Shortly after I read that Sylvia Wynter came to London to study in 1946 and that Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti came to London in 1947 to petition for Nigerian independence. I started researching and discovered more and more of the people that influenced me were in the UK before they would go on to launch independence campaigns against the British Empire. London was a formative place for their politics. They were experimental, imaginative, nimble and worked collectively. London doesn't feel like this to me now and I wished it would. The 1940's was also before the Pan-African independent movement dissolved into nationalist governments that disappointed their leader's former revolutionary ideals. So, imagining how characters inspired by these people would relate to one another was a useful way for me to think through my political context today. Could spending time with these people allow for a transfer of their political hope, ingenuity and fervour?

**EG & JB:** In the gallery and window spaces you have included film props taken from scenes in the film, the theatre flats used in the film, a theatre curtain, alongside rehearsal scripts from the fictional play. Why have you included this material element to the film installation?

**OI:** In researching this period, I was reading a lot of Sylvia Wynter's early work: theatre, novels, radio plays and culture criticism. In one text, *An introductory essay to an adaption of Federico Garcia Lorca's The House of Bernarda Alba* she discusses the Brechtian ideas that she is taking on board in this adaptation. She cites his treatise on Epic Theatre and the need to shatter the illusion stage that has been so often utilised in productions. She details the ways in which she will dress the set in order to highlight to the audience the work of theatre, her subjective presence in the text and the goal of the work to 'explode reality'. So I wanted to echo this, by bringing the props that within the frame of the film we work hard to create an illusion of a 1940's home or university lecture hall with tricks of the trade, into the reality of the gallery where you can see and touch the acts of mirage. Hopefully to remind again that these are stories that we have agency within.

## Film credits:

Written, Directed & Co-Edited By Onyeka Igwe; Producer: Tosin Lepe Creative; Producer: Mason Leaver-Yap; Consulting Producer: Qila Gill.

Cast: Adura: Tomi Egbowon-Ogunjobi; Sylvie: Renee Bailey; Grove: Kenneth Omole; Ekow: Emmanuel Kojo; Clive: Chris Rochester; Second Debater: Robbie Capaldi; Supporting Cast: First Debater: Hugo Max; Male Delegate Member: Jarrell Watson; Supporting Artists: Tamsin Heatley, Eleanor Dunlop, Ella Dawson-Gorton, Anna Wright, Celia Bickersteth, Fizza Zaidi, Maleeha Bari, Angel Vickery.

Director Of Photography: Morgan K. Spencer; Production Designer: Sophie Cundale; Editor: Harry Swan; Music Composition & Instrumentation: Naima Karlsson; Music Supervisor: Tabitha Thorlu-Bangura; Sound Designer: Edwin Matthews; Costume Designer: Barbara Ayozie Fu Safira; Casting Director: Xanthe Spencer-Davidson; Production Manager: Lesley-Ann Okantey; Production Assistant: Fleur Johnson; Director's Assistant: Hannah Oliver; Storyboard Artist: Daniel Wes; 1st Assistant Director: Alex Mill; 2nd Assistant Director: Lea Holtfreter; 3rd Assistant Director: Adam Green; Standby Art Director: Joshua Andraos; Art Department Assistant: Angharad Davies; Set Builder: Lilian Caccia; Carpenter: Lidia Stepien; Graphic Designer: Anna Kawka; 1st Assistant Camera: Marco Alonso Monedero; 2nd Assistant Camer: Samara Addai; 16mm Camera Operator: Matti Suttcliffe; Additional 16mm Camera: Bea Macdonald; Gaffers: Tupac Carroll, William Churchill; Sparks: Jacob Campbell, Joe Morgan Hunt, Tupac Carroll, Dylan Schultz Soo; Sound Mixer: Joshua Bamford; Boom Operator: Matti Suttcliffe; Wardrobe Assistant: Roberto Frusciante; Hair & Make Up Artist: Anusha Solanki; Hair & Make Up Assistant: Vanda Ampuero; Script Supervisor: Tianhao Xu; Movement Director: Jamila Johnson Small; Location Manager: Stuart Green; Location Scout: Akshay Desai.

Captions By Collective Text; Consultants: David Ellington, Bea Webster-Mockett; Captioners: Camara Taylor; Emilia Beatriz, Tom Marshall; Text Animation: Daniel Hughes.

Audio Description By Collective Text; Ad Script & Voiceover: Elaine Lillian Joseph; Consultant: Kirin Saeed; Script Consultant: Yara Rodrigues-Fowler; Colourist: Finlay Reid; Sound Design Consultant: Edward George; Additional Instrumentation: Kenichi Iwasa, Adriana Camacho.

Sound Mix For Score: Koichi Yamanoha; Camera Equipment: Mx Films; Lighting Equipment: Direct Digital; Music: 'Duke and Duchess of Kent' Performed by Raymond Quevedo (Atilla The Hun); accompanied by Gerald Clark And His Caribbean Serenaders. Courtesy of Decca Records.

Text: Excerpt from *Maskerade* by Sylvia Wynter in *Mixed company: three early Jamaican plays* edited by Yvonne Brewster. Excerpt from *Women on Civic and Political Education* by Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti (date unknown).

## Artists' thanks:

Calista Feltham, June Givanni, Munesu Mukombe, Coral Knights, Yaniya Lee, Nan Moore, Matti Sutcliffe, Naomi Walmsley, Tyrell Williams.

## Exhibition supporters and partners:

*history is a living weapon in yr hand* at Peer is supported by Arts Council England and Headline Supporter, Mandy El Sayegh. With thanks to Hackney Council's Black History Season.

A programme of talks, events and workshops for *history is a living weapon in yr hand* is programmed in partnership with the MA Curating and Collections, Chelsea College of Arts. Captions and audio descriptions for *A Radical Duet* are facilitated by Collective Text.

*history is a living weapon in yr hand* is produced in collaboration with Bonington Gallery, where it opened on 13 January 2024.

*A Radical Duet* was commissioned by FLAMIN Productions through FILM LONDON Artists' Moving Image Network with funding from Arts Council England. Additional funding from June Givanni Pan African Cinema Archive, and The Oxford Research Centre in the Humanities Cultural Programme.



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