



NEW YORK

Grada Kilomba Pace

Grada Kilomba is a multidisciplinary storyteller. Performance, staged readings, video, and sculptural and sound installations give body, voice, movement, and form to her written texts. Drawing on memory, trauma, and notions of selfhood, the Berlin-based Portuguese artist traces history's repeating cycles of knowledge, power, and violence. Her recent installation *18 Verses* extended themes that she previously explored in *O Barco/The Boat* (2021), a 32-meter-long sculptural slave ship memorializing the Middle Passage, blending sculpture and

sound to bring echoes of the past to bear on the present while creating new narratives for the postcolonial world.

The soundtrack began with a horn. A call to gather, it gave way to an a cappella ensemble of women's voices. The singers—from the South African diaspora living in Portugal—hummed in harmonizing rhythms. Eighteen deeply charred wooden blocks about the size of large torsos, which could have been bodies, boats, or objects at sea, were strewn across the gallery, set among undulating folds and clusters of black cloth. Representing

the ocean or a guardian female deity, the cloth was a synecdoche for a long history of migration journeys across global waters. The horn blew again; then the hums took over once more, the voices permeating the space.

Each of Kilomba's wooden forms displayed a gold-lettered message from one of her poems, translated into six languages: Kimbundu, Yoruba, Cape Verde Creole, Portuguese, Syrian Arabic, and English. Six blocks, including ones reading "one equality one affection" and "one sorrow one revolution," occupied high ground,

positioned on steps and a landing above the main floor, next to a wall of blacked-out windows. The 12 blocks remaining on the lower level suggested those in the midst of perilous sea journeys, those lost at sea, uncounted deaths, and the dangers of migration, forced or voluntary, from the colonial period to the present. These read, in part: "one memory one oblivion / one body one person / one person one being / one cargo hold one load / one boat one cargo hold."

As visitors came and went, they seemed to whisper as though they were in the presence of something

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THIS PAGE
AND OPPOSITE:

18 Verses,
2023.

Three views of
installation.

spiritual, but I wonder at their responses. I have a passing thought about whether this superficial kind of art viewing is prevalent elsewhere in the world, if I behave similarly, and if viewers' shortcomings severely limit the ability of art to serve its function: Is what viewers take away always dependent on their temporal and visceral levels of engagement?

The humming sounds (coming from speakers lining two facing walls) changed to low timpani, suggesting danger, drowning. A soft voice then whispered the only word in the 30-minute, eight-channel sound sequence: "Help." At the press preview, Kilomba amplified this message, explaining, "Five hundred years of the slave trade is not visible in our everyday lives. We are visible and invisible in our everyday lives." She noted that *18 Verses* draws on research, current immigration policies, water surveillance, exclusion, and how people from formerly colonized countries are treated today, adding that our era is "more complex, a spiral time, a circular time where we can never disengage ourselves from past, present, and future, and we need to reflect on all of that." Works such as *18 Verses* attempt to tell history in its full complexity, because "when history is not told properly, its barbarity repeats itself."

—JAN GARDEN CASTRO

Grada Kilomba is one of the curators of the 2023 Bienal de São Paulo, "Choreographies of the Impossible," on view September 6–December 10, 2023.

