



fig. 2



fig. 4



fig. 3



fig. 5

Dispersed across the gallery space, a constellation of video monitors map the different phases in the process of brass casting by contemporary sculptors in the city of Benin in present-day Nigeria. Filmed images of the sculptors pouring the hot wax into clay casts buried into the earth or polishing the brass castings are punctuated by the irregular sound of radios playing and the intermittent noise of sculptors hammering and filing their artworks. Avoiding the medium-shot portrait of the anthropologist's gaze, Orlow's camera lingers on the hands of the sculptors, moulding, shaping and sculpting their raw materials into contemporary artworks. *Lost Wax* is one element of Uriel Orlow's complex installation made up of discrete but interconnected parts which continue the artist's preoccupation with questions of collective memory and restitution. Taking as his starting point the British Punitive Expedition of 1897 (a military excursion by British forces in which the British invaded, burned and ransacked the ancient West African Kingdom of Benin), Orlow's installation is, amongst other things, a meditation on the contingent relationship between the past and the present and between different geographical and cultural spaces that remain inextricably linked, tied together by the metal cast artefacts that have erroneously become known as the Benin Bronzes and which are now distributed across more than 500 museums and collections across the world. Orlow's suite of works, scattered across the spaces of the Fri-Art contemporary art centre are similarly connected to each other by the artist's journey: his physical journey from England to Nigeria; but also his artistic journey from the present to the past and back. Travelling through the installation of artworks, the viewer moves between disparate historical moments and physical locations mapped out by the different constituent parts of Orlow's *Benin Project* (2007), mirroring the journeys undertaken by the artist and the Benin Bronzes across geographical space and historical time.

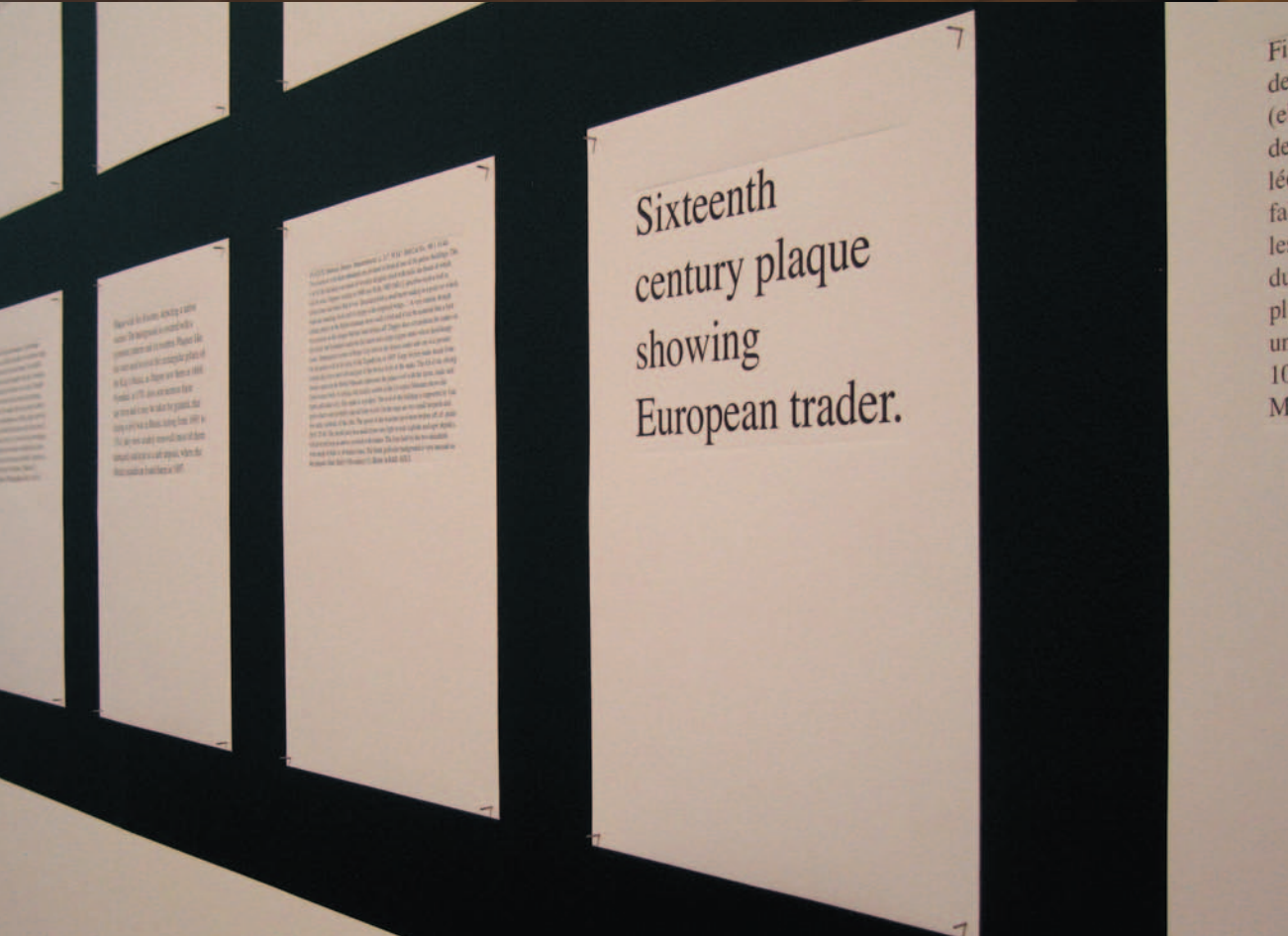
In 1897, following the destruction of Benin and the enforced exile of its ruler Oba Ovonramwen, the British Admiralty seized and auctioned off looted artworks to defray the costs of the Expedition which ended up in private and public collections in Europe and North America where most remain to this day. As the artist writes: '...thousands of metal castings – the so-called Benin Bronzes – along with other artefacts such as wood and ivory carvings were seized as booty and sent to London ...the thousands of artefacts were an integral part of and depicted aspects of Benin court life, ritual and wars from the sixteenth century onwards, shortly after Europe's first contact with West Africa. By this time there was already a thriving trade between the people of Benin and Europeans. So the artefacts already incorporate aspects of the complicated history of economic, political and power relations between Africa and Europe.'¹

The Benin Project charts these complex relationships which are mediated by the artefacts themselves, their journeys, their seizure and their subsequent appropriation as cultural

artefacts to which attributes of authenticity, financial value, ownership and aesthetic quality have rapidly become attached. On a separate monitor, set apart from the others that make up *Lost Wax*, a roll-call of museums and collections around the world records the hundreds of locations where Benin brass castings, seized as booty over a century ago, now reside. Devoid of any visual references or illustrations, the names of museums and collections and their locations appear on the screen of *Worldwide Benin* as monochrome bands of text – 'Bristol City Museum & Art Gallery, Bristol, U.K'; 'Musée Ethnographique, Geneva, Switzerland' – creating a dry catalogue raisonnée that makes visible the expanded global field of museological appropriation and validation of 'authentic' and highly-prized antique African sculptures that seems far removed from the living practice of contemporary sculptors in Benin.

Alongside *Worldwide Benin's* geographical index of stolen booty is another catalogue entitled *A Very Fine Cast* which Orlow presents in the form of line block engravings which reproduce, in different languages, a selection of verbal descriptions of Benin Bronzes ranging across a period of over 100 years and drawn from auction catalogues, books and museum displays. As with *Worldwide Benin*, Orlow's rendering of these apparently neutral descriptive texts belies their dubious authority which, like the artefacts themselves, is steeped in a history of racial stereotypes, colonial exploitation and questionable ownership. The engravings that make up *A Very Fine Cast* construct what the artist describes as a 'historical index of looking at particular moments in time'.² By privileging the linguistic over the visual, Orlow builds a subversive archive which substitutes the traditional objects of the museum archive – the physical artefacts – for their verbal descriptions which unintentionally (on the part of the authors) catalogue the racist and colonial narratives that surround the Benin Bronzes into the present. Fixed and frozen by the printing process, these texts are produced from linguistic negative casts in the form of the metal engraving plates which, quite literally, set into relief the darker, historical context and frame for the museum collections.

A digital tape-slide projection entitled *The Visitor* completes the suite of works that make up *The Benin Project* presented at Fri-Art. Here Orlow observes himself from the viewpoint of a dispassionate third-party observer, reflecting on his journey to Benin and his motivation for travelling there: 'In the weeks before his trip he was thinking about the kind of journey he was making. He fancied himself a traveller, a kind of pilgrim, journeying to a sacred centre of a culture which, however, he only knew through the objects that were taken from it. He hoped to reconnect, in his mind at least, and perhaps through his work, the lost link between the museally omnipresent artefacts and their ignored context.'³ The camera follows Orlow as he seeks an audience with the present-day Oba of Benin and as he talks to Benin Chiefs about the continuing impact of the loss of the Benin Bronzes.



The Visitor brings us back full circle to the origin of Orlow's *Benin Project*, a spiral journey which returns us as viewers to contemporary Benin, a 'living' political, social and artistic culture that negotiates the continuities and ruptures between its present and its past, raising questions (without providing any answers) about the vexed issues of ownership and belonging that continue to haunt present-day social and political realities beyond the borders of Benin: '...he realised that his *quest* for origins was really a *question about* origins, sparked by a complete ignorance of the cultural and physical context of the Benin artefacts he had seen in museums... Apart from the chatter of museum-goers, they are surrounded by a deafening silence...not around their history... but a physically felt silence around questions of belonging; not just questions of who owns them – which are political questions around post-colonial restitution – but also where *they* as objects belong.'⁴

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(Footnotes)

¹ Uriel Orlow, *unpublished notes*, 2007.

² Unpublished interview with the artist, March 2007

³ From Uriel Orlow's unpublished script for *The Visitor* (2007)

⁴ *Ibid.* above

