Ima-Abasi Okon in Conversation

The sound of wind is one of the first things a visitor encountered at Ima-Abasi Okon's solo exhibition at the Van Abbemuseum, "Incorporeal hereditaments like Love [can] Set(s) You Free, according to Kelly, Case, Dru Hill, Kandice, LovHer, Montel and Playa with 50 - 60g of -D,)e,l,a,y,e,d¹;—O,)n,s,e,t²;— ;[heart];M,)u,s,c,l,e³;[heart];—S,)o,r,e,n,e,s,s⁴;." Emanating from a video work in a small room at the start of the exhibition, the gale rattled through a brass vent in an otherwise empty antechamber. An energizing force, a deterrent, a sign of what's to come—this sound of wind made me think of breath too, as though it had been mic'd. Across the the exhibition's 10 galleries, it was breath that seemed transformed into and by new mechanisms: contained in balloons that grazed the museum's ceiling and in inflatable arches usually encountered at the start and finish of a race; measured and quantified (though imperfectly) by a system of rubber track pads circumnavigating the gallery walls; abstracted and exploited by the seemingly mundane yet life-altering bureaucratic rigamarole represented in governmental documents and applications stacked in neat piles on the floor. The breath is a primary form of corporeal dispersion, and while Ima-Abasi Okon demonstrated how the body becomes fragmented or pressurized, she also proposed the existence of a vestibular realm—a place where we experience a sense of balance and a chance to rest. In the exhibition's central gallery, layers of electronic sound and percussion poured out of a pair of handmade Leslie rotary speakers at the tempo of a resting heart beat. How did we arrive here? We crossed under thresholds between start and finish, the state and the self, the exhausted and the recalibrated; we were pulled forward by amplified sound both quavering and hopeful.

Annie Goodner: Could you talk about the title of the show? Here, we encounter naming and citation connected to specific works in the exhibition, to artists, to Erykah Badu's 1991 song "Tyrone."

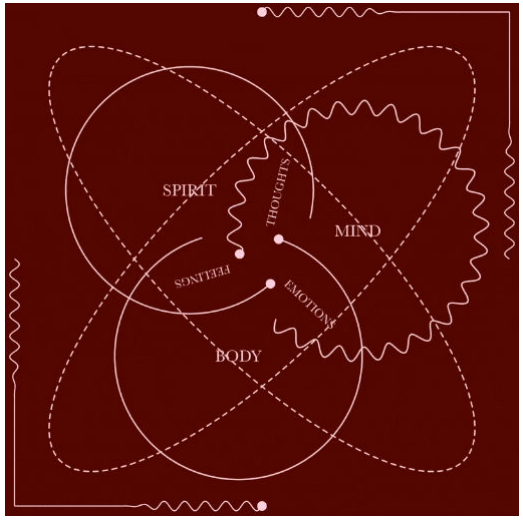
Ima-Abasi Okon: I enjoy titles working like an appendix, or a footnote. The information is relevant, but not fundamental; or the inverse. It offers context and at the same time it's not didactic nor straightforward. I've wanted to examine how I can use that space. How can it be a field to practice writing and similarly practice language? It is a praxis. Importantly, it is not subjugated to the elements in the show, to any bond between name and content. I'm not loyal to that, and don't see a title as having to keep that function.

AG: The title's not explanatory.

IAO: No, but it can point to things. The exhibition is never the end of an idea, neither does an idea culminate in an exhibition. It's always moving; constantly evolving, like a star. If I break that relationship, post-exhibition there's still thought—the idea is still moving along an axis. For instance, the way that a body is repeatedly clothed, you wear one thing one day and another day you may wear something else. Those outfits become an expression of that body in that moment. Decisions have been made concerning how the body will be expressed publicly. An exhibition is just material for an idea. Flesh to dress it. Then the publication, which I am now working on, is another type of garment, another level of materiality for what keeps on living. With all that flesh, it would be remiss to see any title as explanatory.

AG: I see the form of the appendix throughout the exhibition: one work might cite another or organize another in a new way. There are also works on display from earlier exhibitions (for instance your solo at Kunstverein Hamburg in 2023-24) that feel almost like they're making a guest appearance and adapting to the surroundings. I'm also thinking about the construction of a song through repetition and sampling. Do you listen to music when you're making work?

IAO: I'm not listening to music when I'm making the work. I'm just listening to music. It is a continuous activity. So much life is gathered in music. There's a song about every single possible situation: a vegan dog, a broken heart, running up a hill, drinking orange juice out of a shoe. A litmus test for how useful a proposition is could rely on whether it has or can be converted to a song. Songs come out of an interiority that, dare I say, I trust more.



Ima-Abasi Okon, "Incorporeal hereditaments like Love [can] Set(s) You Free, according to Kelly, Case, Dru Hill, Kandice, LovHer, Montel and Playa with 50 - 60g of -D,)e,l,a,y,e,d¹;—O,)n,s,e,t²;— ;[heart];M,)u,s,c,l,e³;[heart];—S,)o,r,e,n,e,s,s⁴;" 2025.

The R&B genre marks a significant cultural period in regard to forms of sampling, citation and reference. Its life span includes instances when instrumentals would appear on the B-side of a single. It was a giveaway that was taken up in so many unexpected ways. DJs would remix these sounds with *a capellas,* producing a third, sometimes a fourth document, sending both listeners and dancers into a frenzy.

There's the pleasure that comes from that, the many amazing club experiences, but there's also a way of looking at this critically. How "take something and make it new" challenged the idea of property. While the true reception of the original song can only be found by putting it into relationship with something else, that also requires a chorus of bodies to give it meaning or at least reflect back some meaning. I enjoy cultural things that push against the way that we're conditioned to live and perform our lives and the harmful ideologies that we're supposed to take on and reproduce. They're very useful for figuring out truths.

AG: Also connected to sampling is the presence of recycled materials in the show. For instance, there's the reclaimed and rolled up pieces of athletic track (Capacities*plural,* 2025) **that sit on pallets on the floor like something organic; like land art.**

IAO: I read them as vestiges of time and absorbed effort. Soaked up toil; commitment to crafting a skill; retention of potential and aspiration.

There's a life span for synthetic running tracks. They lose buoyancy, and the track's responsiveness—which gives you a quick turnover—dulls over time. The track is quite noticeable when it's dead; it becomes very heavy—instead of giving you explosiveness it sucks you in. Effort feels so much harder. At that point, the track gets recycled. It's pulled up and blitzed to dust before being poured back onto the track then covered in a new layer of rubber.

I see those rooms as landscapes.

AG: The first thing we encounter in the exhibition, probably before the wall text or exhibition title, is the sound of wind and of a body in movement. I'm curious about this initial sensorial encounter that seems to prefigure language. What kinds of connections are you making between language and the body?

IAO: Can you conceive of one without the other? On all fronts, is a separation possible? Is A ≠ A? Language is an external and internal mode of governance that produces the body and which the body capitulates to. Can a body exist under this particular organization and structure of the world without language?

If the body is tied to a subjectivation process, what was the substance prior? The sensual thing that held our minds, its soul and the complex sticky emotions that allow us to interact with the environment and others around us. I would like to find out.

AG: The source of this initial wind sound, the video work *(Capture Mechanism Bypass for Surplus - a*Choreographic-*Logic-Complex Dub* (anticipatory talk back), 2018), **has a distinct position in the exhibition: a starting point—though an isolated or separated one—that also makes me think of the sound of breathing and of the breath as a resource; a material. In the video, we encounter a lone figure trudging slowly through the wilderness and breathing heavily. This figure's resemblance to a Rückenfigur is quite explicit in the way their back is turned and how they stand out (especially in a North Face/Supreme jacket) against the landscape. But they also seem weary and vulnerable.**

IAO: The focus is on how this product, marketed under "lifestyle," came to be. What is North Face and Supreme doing with a statement that has been used by the oppressed? Speaking of an idea of being clothed, the exploration and dominance of frontiers is what is being expressed here. The jacket unlocks a lot of questions that I have. Who has security and esteem to frolic in this way? To knowingly put their body in danger, as sport, as a lifestyle no less!? Is that what being held in high regard feels like—leisure becomes risk? I find that wild.

If you're thinking through Malcom X's adoption of the statement, what does it mean for Supreme to take that up and in what context? Is it *by any means necessary* to conquer? Is it *by any means necessary* to continue to appropriate land? It definitely speaks to the insatiable appetite of late capitalism. There's this perverse thing happening, which is also playing out in real time, the appropriation of survival strategies taken up by the very people who are responsible for the violence.

I'm reading *The Living Mountain* by Nan Shepherd published in the 1970s. It's about a deep relationship to the Scottish Cairngorm mountains. The language employed negates the summit and any attempts to conquer. Instead, we are given attempts at *being with* the mountain and excitement to recognize a

mountain's interiority. Generally, most nature memoirs, predominantly written by men, aggressively position their body against nature. And in the case of climbing, all attention is directed to the peak. Shepherd really just does away with that: there's a lot to be experienced standing on the upmost part of a mountain, yet she presents a great occupation and intimacy with the more prosaic moments of a mountain's form. She's flagging the parochial as a microcosm of a bigger picture, wherein its negative or narrowness facilitates a study that can be taken to more diverse contexts.

AG: The exhibition's very architecure reflects your experiences as a runner while also, I think, challenging a lot of the expectations and architectures of the sport. I'm curious how running and the structure of the race inform your new works: a network of blue inflatable arches set in the doorways of the galleries (*Hypothalamic-Pituitary-Adrenal Axis,* 2025), **and track timing mats,** (*Fortunate,* 2025), **that run along the walls. These are accouterment that signal competition, and yet you also seem to deconstruct or refuse competition through repetition and mirroring across the exhibition. The track pads are fitted with a timer that restarts the more people enter the space. Time and tracking are unreliable.**

IAO: There's something about running that always makes me feel positively silly. Moving at a particular velocity, cutting a line through the world without any help still fills me with awe. It's just me carrying myself. This is already a lot for me to comprehend, and it provides a lot of pleasure. In addition, there is the progression one makes by just turning up. It's a feedback loop that I have come to value and to seek out information to become more knowledgeable—as far as being safe and not abusing my body.

As I became more engrossed in the current culture emerging around running, I started to think about the ideology of improvement. In *Colonial Lives of Property: Law, Land, and Racial Regimes of Ownership,* Brenna Bhandar describes this as the permissions settler colonialist governments give themselves to appropriate land. If land was undeveloped—meaning, it wasn't prepped for enterprise such as agriculture or industrialization—then it was the settlers' right to assume ownership. This included a concomitant prejudice that First Nations people also warranted improvement. It disregarded an obvious difference in relationship to property and farming.

I saw connections between the mode of information around fitness, alienation of labor for income and how this related to health.

AG: There's an assumption that, at least within sports or fitness, we're optimizing ourselves for ourselves, not *for* a competitive or extractive system—when in fact we're doing exactly the latter.

IAO: Right. Exactly. It doesn't consider the social aspects of health, such as access to food, housing, education. Instead, the rhetoric is any care or attention our body may need is our fault. It absolves governments of any responsibility and aids the withdrawal of welfare. I wanted to use the language of running and the accoutrement of running, specifically road racing that I was becoming familiar with, to give form to the connections my brain was plotting.

AG: The track pads that run along the gallery walls are referred to in the exhibition as an "enclosure." I'm thinking of the Enclosure Movement in England, and the instantiation of systems of private property. But enclosure in the exhibition also feels like a more broadly communal term, even a form of protection.

IAO: I choose words that allow for multiple interpretations and can yield various feelings. I want to be enclosed with certain people. At a stadium with Beyonce's BeyHive in Paris was an unforgettable experience. Kettling triggers another. Affordances is a proposition that I have adopted from Caroline Levine's *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network.* Levine defines politics as the distribution of arrangements and concludes that these organizations of experience can be seen as "forms." Form not only orders space but it also organizes time. And affordances describes the potential uses and actions latent in a form's character, for instance, a circle will always create exclusion. Similar in form, the enclosure is always going to keep people out and keep people in. Whenever you see an enclosure, it's always going to perform that treatment; that's its affordance. As a sculptor, I want to reach a place where the material is not the form, but its affordances. It's a more concrete way of thinking about affect. What becomes interesting for me is when affordances collide. Which can change the experience of the form. Which speaks to your observation about it feeling more protective. Affect and affordances are my medium. Placing focus here stops me from being too occupied with how it looks.

There are multiple enclosures in the space: the track that runs the peri-

meter of the ten galleries, the archways, the inlets, the ceilings. The first enclosure was a redraughting of the individual spaces into one, which was my departure point in how I approached the show. It's single installation attempting to operate in the realm of affect.

AG: The enclosures or inlets built in the corners of four galleries hold a series of colorful and abstract monoprints. Some have geometric forms; others have a word, phrase, or lyric. These prints were in your studio but never before shown in public. There's an intimacy to these spaces and the works in them; there's a sense of privacy and also direct address. Can you talk about how these works developed?

IAO: There's a lot of reading around different things. At the point of saturation, I stop and do something else. To give my body time to commit or refuse the information I have consumed. I'll take a stack of paper, set up a screen and start writing directly onto the mesh and eventually flood it with ink. Exhausting the "image" until the ink runs out and then I start over again, either reemphasizing the text or adding new text. It generates memories of the previous mark made in ways I cannot control. I'll spend a whole day printing. With each session deemed as a series.

It was Yolande Zola Zoli van der Heide, the curator, who pushed for [the prints] to be in the show. There was some initial hesitation as I needed to think about how they would be brought into the space alongside the other elements. Thinking about my own progress and trajectory as an artist was very helpful. I leaned into the rub between the prints and what people think they know of my practice. There's a lot of vulnerability—not so much about what they're saying or what they're doing, but what they carry. It was important to open up softness among, for instance, all of the bureaucratic documents in the space.

AG: On the other side of the wall from where the prints are hung is a wall work by Cally Spooner (*Screen Test for the Psoas Muscle,* 2023)**. You invited Cally to participate in the exhibition and to also teach you how to make the work, a process that allows the psoas muscle—described by Cally as "a complex informational switchboard"—to be stretched. A loose psoas in turn helps regulate physical and emotional movement in the body. I'm interested in how you approached the topic of regulation through the inclusion of Cally's work, where you described wanting to "cite artworks the way writers cite other writers."**

IAO: In the Van Abbe show, upon leaving a subjective figure behind, I wanted to give way to another b-o-d-y that was not so contained or tied to property. It needed to be unbound in its edges and untethered to current modes of being. I didn't want it to be pure gesture either, it had to have real consequences beyond its material form in the exhibition. Essentially it had to be of a contrasting register to what was depicted in the video work and the affordances of that.

I first saw *Screen Test for the Psoas Muscle* in Bordeaux, when Cally and I were in a show together. I remember paying attention to its install as it and my work were one of the first to be installed, and so I had the privilege of seeing the movement unravel. The psoas is a deep core muscle; you can't really feel it. Starting from the lower back through the pelvis it connects the spine to the legs. Termed the emotional muscle, it affects your digestion, is tied to our fight or flight responses and its state can impact levels of anxiety.

There are only three or four stretches that allow you to activate it. These are the same movements used to complete the work. Determined by a score, watery white emulsion is applied to a red layer of paint using the movements that stretch the psoas. The work therefore has an affordance of rehabilitation for whomever performs it.

It also resonated with my own rehabilitation and the research that necessitated. Issues with the psoas show up as referred pain—a lot of time was spent on trauma, tension, inflammation and what they do to the body if they've gone unchecked. Stress is useful, but unchecked, persistent stress becomes a problem. For a large percentage of the population, the psoas is less optimal; it's become shortened and less supple largely because we're sitting down all the time.

The more I engaged with the work, the more I saw how it spoke to things I desired to give form to. Why produce something new when it already exists? I enjoyed the idea of a screen test being an attempt or an audition, of the suitability of something. Instead of exerting additional labor I took the opportunity to put Cally's *Screen Test* to work. It had to be in the show as a full-on quote. Both its existence and departure—how I deployed the work-needed to be mapped. That system does not exist in visual art.

Screen Test for the Psoas, shows up twice. *Each Screen* Test wall is different. I find my movement revealing. It's an indication of where I was both emotionally

and mentally. This, the sound work *(alongside-ness with-out identification¹⁺ excess over the original value¹< (C-------r--------y----------F--------o--------r--------Y--------o--------u)* and the prints speak to the flesh; they bring the flesh into the space in a way that's not so didactic or representational. The prints and Screen Test are documents of what the body has done. The prints are very much about movement and going from the position of reading to really moving and navigating. I like printmaking because it's very physical and requires all your body.

AG: We've both recently started doing resistance training. I mentioned to you that I'm fascinated by what other people in the gym do when they're not lifting weights. There's structured time: the counting, the reps, the sets (which Kathy Acker notably writes about in "Against Ordinary Language: The Language of the Body"), but there's also a lot of time when people aren't doing anything. Weightlifting is a lot of standing around, gazing into the mirror, wiping off sweat. Some people check their phones; others sit and stare into space or walk in circles. Your body is recovering in these moments, I guess. I thought about muscles moving and recalibrating (even when we're still) in the central gallery, where your *Mahalia* series is hung. In previous versions of the series, you've covered oriented strand board (OSB) with a high gloss varnish, and affixed notes, a publication, homemade oxtail stew. The newest *Mahalia* is a clutch of balloons that floats above the exhibition. Can you talk about the move from the OSB to the balloons, as well as the experiences of levity or lightness in the exhibition.

IAO: They started off being about the performance of language and the dressing up of this lower grade, highly manufactured sheet material and then caking it in a mock version of a higher grade thing. Language performs in a similar way, trying to fit a grapefruit into the opening of a regular water bottle—there's always going to be some bits that don't actually get in. There's always going to be some fallout. There's always going to be something that never gets communicated. There's this desire, this emotion that I'm trying to relay to you. I have to use this thing—language—that we've been given to do that, but it's not equipped to carry all of that. I like that there's always failure in speaking; there's always failure in language. Which is interesting coming back to Kathy Acker and bodybuilding, when she talks about failure, right?

The *Mahalias* as a work—what they do for me—has changed over time. It started off with how the thing was framed. All of the wood for the frame was always as much as possible exotic hardwoods, with some now banned. These are not conventional woods used in framing, because of their aliveness. They bend, they warp, they're not fixable. There was an intention to pursue these woods because over time (and there is one in there that's already done it) the frames twist. And this comes from the idea of trying to make an artwork that is always moving, that is always living, that can't be fixed, that can't be reduced. After a while all of those works are going to bow and twist and I don't know what is going to happen to them. And then just this emptiness, where a picture or image should be, but there's a texture that still carries information. To some people, I guess, it'll look like it's empty. But to me there is a lot of information contained in this so-called absence. The shine in some of them is so brilliant that it reflects you back obscuring any detail of itself.

And then there's hope. There was a decision quite early on that a *Mahalia* must be included in every exhibition. It's a way of bringing hope into the experience, into the space and into the total affect of the works combined. I wanted room five to disrupt the mirroring structure. After being fatigued by governance and administrative procedures, it's that gel that you take at mile whatever, or that coffee after at 4 p.m. in the day when you're lagging and you feel all right again.

The balloons are another iteration of *Mahalia*. And this is maybe a more personal strand: this idea of letting go and not controlling things. I wanted something in there that had a lifespan, where it would die. Not an ultimate death. But its attitude would change during the course of the exhibition. The glass panels were removed to enable the balloons to ascend beyond the height of the exhibition space. Going beyond the confinements of the institution. It was important to include a decision to stop, to change one's mind, to say, "I've had enough"—and to affirm that this is okay. "All the *Mahalias* ever made and those that let go." To those things that are very hard to let go of, even when it's not my choice to let it go, it's the right thing to let it go. This was necessary to offset the insistence in the space. I am still figuring out my relationship to grief; I understand that the absence never goes away. Rather, as life continues and new experiences accumulate around the loss, grief gradually loses its intensity.

by Annie Goodner