

ArtReview

I respect,
respect

I respect not respectful
Power aspects.

You got power...

I am POWER.

Strange fruit

rots.



I see U...

be.PURPLE

Nástio Mosquito

The P8.L.1.T.Cn

If I speak

ArtReview

what makes you think

I fight?



Strange fruit

floats.

I see U...

be.PURPLE

Nástio Mosquito

The P.R3.8C.Hr

ArtReview

Blood
bleeds

& it ain't sweet

Strange fruit



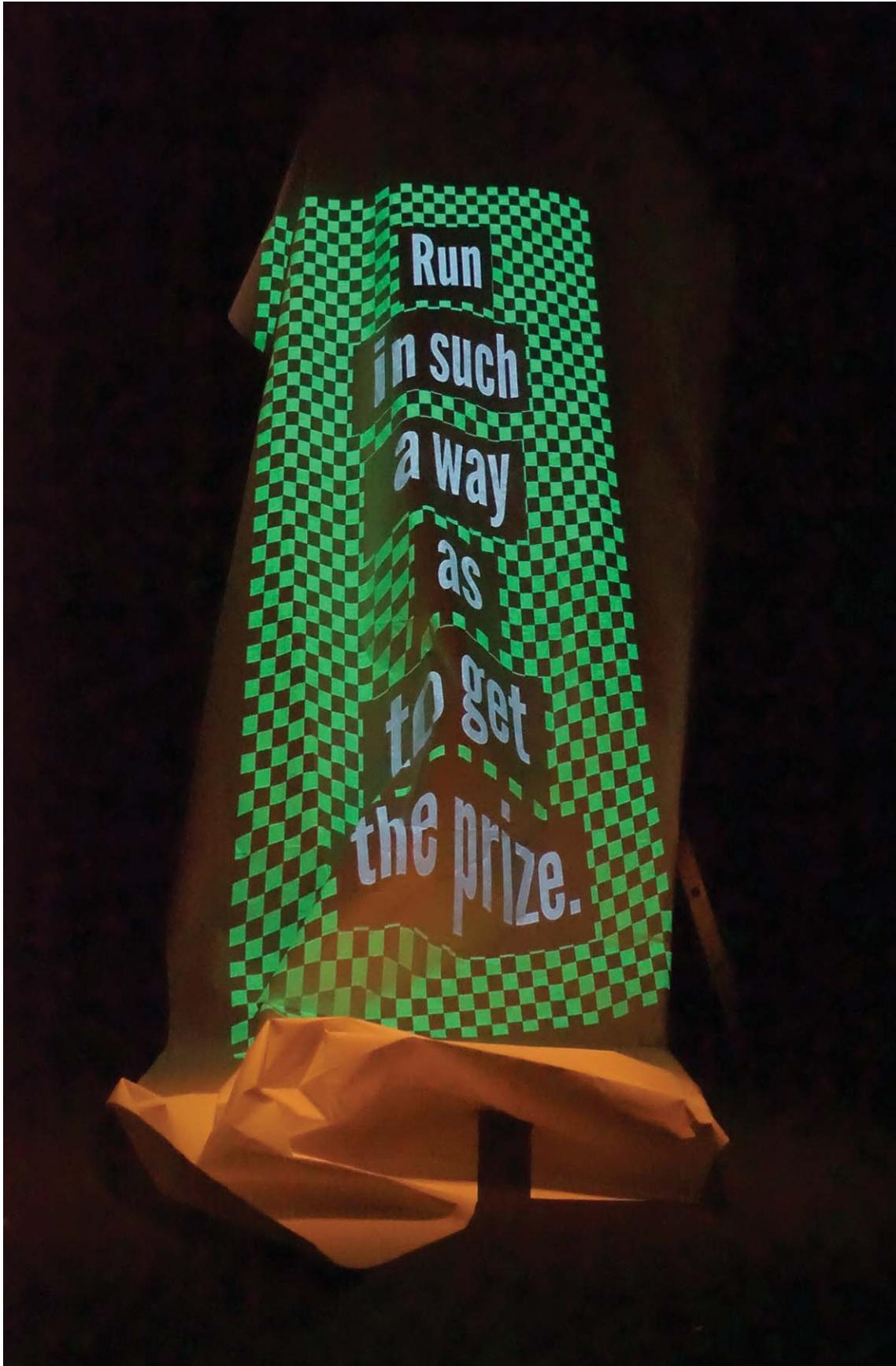
floating.

I see U...

be.PURPLE

Nástio Mosquito

The J.oK.3.R



Joker Politician Preacher

Nástio Mosquito

By Matthew McLean

A man stands alone in a dark room stripped to the waist, ranting messianically about sanity and betrayal. In a thick Russian accent, another tells an unseen conversationalist that members of royal families should be forced only to breed with other races. A politician, recording notes for a speech, reminds his assistant to edit out his plan to gas the elderly of his country.

These characters and more populate the world of Belgium-based Angolan artist Nástio Mosquito. More specifically, they are, broadly, roles inhabited by the artist. With artistic *noms de plume* including Cucumber Slice, Nasty-O, Saco and Zura Zurara, Mosquito cycles through characters across different works. Sometimes, he revisits them, as he does Nástia (a feminised form of Nástio), who responds with gutter wisdom to questions posed by real-life curator Gabi Ngcobo (in the video *Nástia Answers Gabi*, 2010). When Mosquito formally collaborates with other artists, he often adopts yet another identity, such as Nastivicious, the hybrid moniker under which he operates with the Spanish artist Vic Pereiró. To add complication, a Nastivicious production might be nominally voiced by one of Mosquito's characters, such as *Nástia's Manifesto* (2008) or *Nástia Answers Ryan* (2014). For the viewer seeking clarity, *Nástia's Manifesto's* subtitle might offer a retort: 'Hypocritical, Ironic and Do Not Give a Fuck'.

These characters are present across the range of Mosquito's output, whether providing the authorial or narrative framework for his installations, or appearing in performances. But they come most vividly to life in his videos. Despite being the part of his practice that circulates most widely, Mosquito's videos are difficult to appraise, showing consciously little visual technique and featuring neither beautiful frames nor expert editing. *I Am Naked* (2005), for example, is shot with a single, static night-vision camera. Mosquito performs in the piece, approaching and then moving back from the camera, like a tiger pacing its cage. When he presses his face to the camera for a closeup, the

image is pixelated, distorted by the fisheye lens: it could be an outtake from a low-budget ripoff of *The Blair Witch Project* (1999).

The bareness of this work, in which Mosquito appears alone, exclaiming to the audience, mostly shrouded in darkness, is typical: his videos generally eschew breathtaking locations for empty concrete wrecks, scrublands or bland corporate interiors. Similarly, his characters' movements are casual, apparently barely choreographed. Costume and props, too, are never more than rudimentary.

When postproduction effects are employed, the resulting aesthetic is no more polished, or painterly: *Fuck Africa Remix* (2015) features found images and footage of American newscasters, white

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big-game hunters, British royals, black bourgeoisie in shopping malls and career politicians – from Nicolas Sarkozy to Idi Amin, David Cameron to Robert Mugabe – dissolving in and out of one another in a crude montage, saturated with brash colour. For all the grandiose vulgarity of

Mosquito's monologue in the video – "The Americas – fuck – I love that place," he intones. "Good people. Black people, Chinese people, German people – it's mine. I bought it. Great place, fantastic" – the video gives the impression it could have been made by any amateur enthusiast on a desktop.

One effect of these apparently consciously 'poor images', to borrow a term from Hito Steyerl, is to put the emphasis on the one element that knits them together: Mosquito's language. Whenever he appears onscreen, or onstage, he speaks (or, sometimes, sings). The primary content of his static artworks, too – whether projections, or wall and floor decals, or posters – is, in the manner of big-C conceptualists like Jenny Holzer or Lawrence Weiner, primarily verbal. While his performances vary in format, and employ a range of devices including lighting, sound, video projection – and, during *The Age*

I Do Not Remember, performed at the ICA in London in 2015, alcohol in plastic cups, distributed to the audience in order that they might toast Elvis, and a

facing page *The Age I Don't Remember*, 2015
(performance view, ICA, London).
Photo: Jean-Christophe Lanquetin

shower of stickers bearing Mosquito's own slogans: 'Don't be cool – Be Relevant' – they are still primarily vehicles for Mosquito's dialogue.

In this respect, they feel more reminiscent of the confrontational standup of Lenny Bruce or Richard Pryor than that of any other performance tradition, though Bartholomew Ryan, who included Mosquito in *9 Artists* at the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, in 2013, locates Mosquito in the context of 'spoken word' – the first-person, invective poetic tradition of the US that spans Langston Hughes and Gil Scott-Heron (and, arguably, prefigures rap). However, Ryan clarifies in an essay on the Walker's website, while the spoken word tradition 'is attended by self-essentializing positions as a mode of making visible/giving access to/pushing into the public sphere hitherto marginalized identities', there is nothing 'self-essentializing' about Mosquito's art. This is not just a matter of the panoply of characters he employs, nor the various ethnic and economic positions they inhabit (Nástia speaks with an air of entitlement, though seems to inhabit only wastelands; AL Moore, a political operator in the fictional state of Botrovia and subject of Mosquito's *Transitory Suppository Act #1: Another Leader*, 2016, lounges in hotel rooms in a luxurious dashiki, complaining that he's been sent Eastern European prostitutes when "I specifically asked for Brazilians"). Rather, it's a matter of the very words they speak. The register of Mosquito's art is direct, assertive, redolent with the language of self-help therapy, mass political platitudes and corporate motivational speech, but its seemingly straightforward, even trivial, statements betray a tricky, self-evading syntax. For example, the speaker in *I Am Naked* (a claim that, as it happens, can't

be taken at face value – since Mosquito's body is being handily obscured in shadow from the waist down) exhorts repeatedly that "You must take care of your sanity". This unobjectionable advice is complicated by the speaker's wild, wide-eyed delivery, which implies something quite far from sanity. Now, a statement's being spoken by a mentally disturbed person might typically be grounds to doubt its veracity. But who knows the importance of protecting one's sanity better than someone who's lost it? Even when his statements are seemingly coarser, cruder and more gaglike, Mosquito is capable of intimating equally vexing conceptual scenarios – as if smuggling them into the work, under cover. In *Nástia Answers Gabi*, Ngcobo asks how Nástia understands justice (her questions appear as text onscreen). Nástia responds midway through defecating in an empty field. After ruminating – "Justice is about what you know, and what you don't know. And mainly it's about what you do with what

**“There is not much respect for the art of words.
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you know, and what you do with what you don't know” – Nástia concludes that “right now it would be very just if someone would give me some toilet paper”. Is this just a punchline? Or is there a genuine insight in the suggestion that justice might be demonstrated through context-specific gestures – like, here, rescuing someone from shame? And if that gesture implies something like respect, care or attention, is that what justice concerns itself with? Or is Mosquito leading us down a path of speculation only to evade the question of justice entirely? Consider for a moment that, in developing countries in Africa and elsewhere, sanitation is a serious, indeed life-or-death business. How serious is Mosquito being?



Nástio Mosquito in collaboration
with Vic Pereiró, *Fuck Africa (Remix)*, 2015, video, 3 min 9 sec

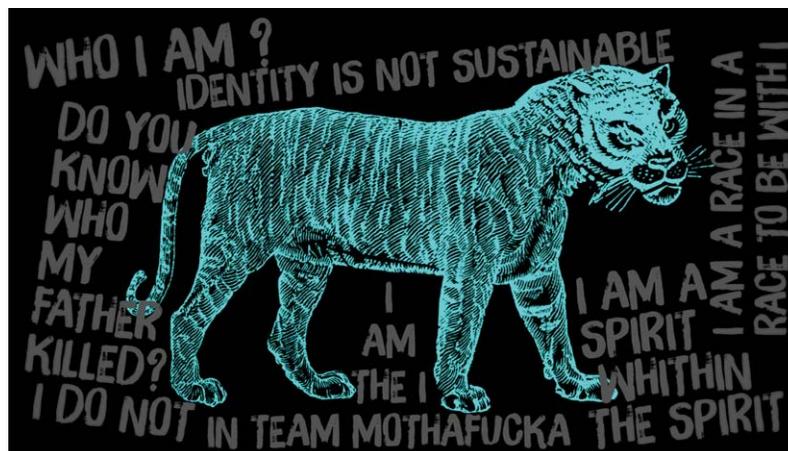
“There is not much respect for the art of words,” Mosquito tells me when we meet in person. “When you paint, you’re just painting a surface, and you can make it more or less soulful – if you can paint. But anyone can talk. We are not careful with the danger of talk.” It’s summer and Mosquito is in Berlin to present *Embrace*, a regular programme for the Documenta 14 radio project, *Every Time A Ear di Soun*, curated by Bonaventure Soh Bejeng Ndikung, director of the city’s Savvy Contemporary. Though Mosquito is an accomplished singer – *Gatuno, Eimigrante & Pai de Família*, an album of dark, Tom Waits-ish blues hybridised with beats, was released in 2016 – the format is not musical, but closer to that of a talkshow phone-in: ‘unruly behavior put to use, favoring the brutality of human limitations’, as it’s described on Documenta’s website.

Limitations are not usually part of Mosquito’s story, so rapid, if not positively meteoric, has his ascent to acclaim been. Born in Huambo in 1981, he trained for and began his career in television production in Angola, directing and scripting documentaries. But having been “advised to leave my job a few times”, he realised that his ideas would find more purchase in the artworld than in broadcast media. With few concrete examples of professional artists to look to – “I did not know what video art was, what performance art was” – the realisation was arrived at only by a process of elimination. “I don’t like repetition,” Mosquito explains, “so I couldn’t do theatre. Not skilled enough to be a film director, not committed enough to be a musician, not disciplined enough to be an actor... So I’m an artist!” He started exhibiting in 2006, and was soon included in the São Paulo Biennial (2010), and group exhibitions at Tate Modern (2012) and the Walker Art Center (2013). In 2015 the vocal reception to his breakthrough solo show at Ikon in Birmingham led to a version of the exhibition opening at the Oratorio di San Ludovico in Venice alongside the 56th

Biennale; the same year, he was cowinner of the Pinchuk Art Centre’s Future Generation Art Prize. Last year, he was nominated for the Artes Mundi Prize, and opened commissions at MOMA, New York, and the Fondazione Prada, Milan. He still isn’t represented by a gallery or agent, he tells me proudly.

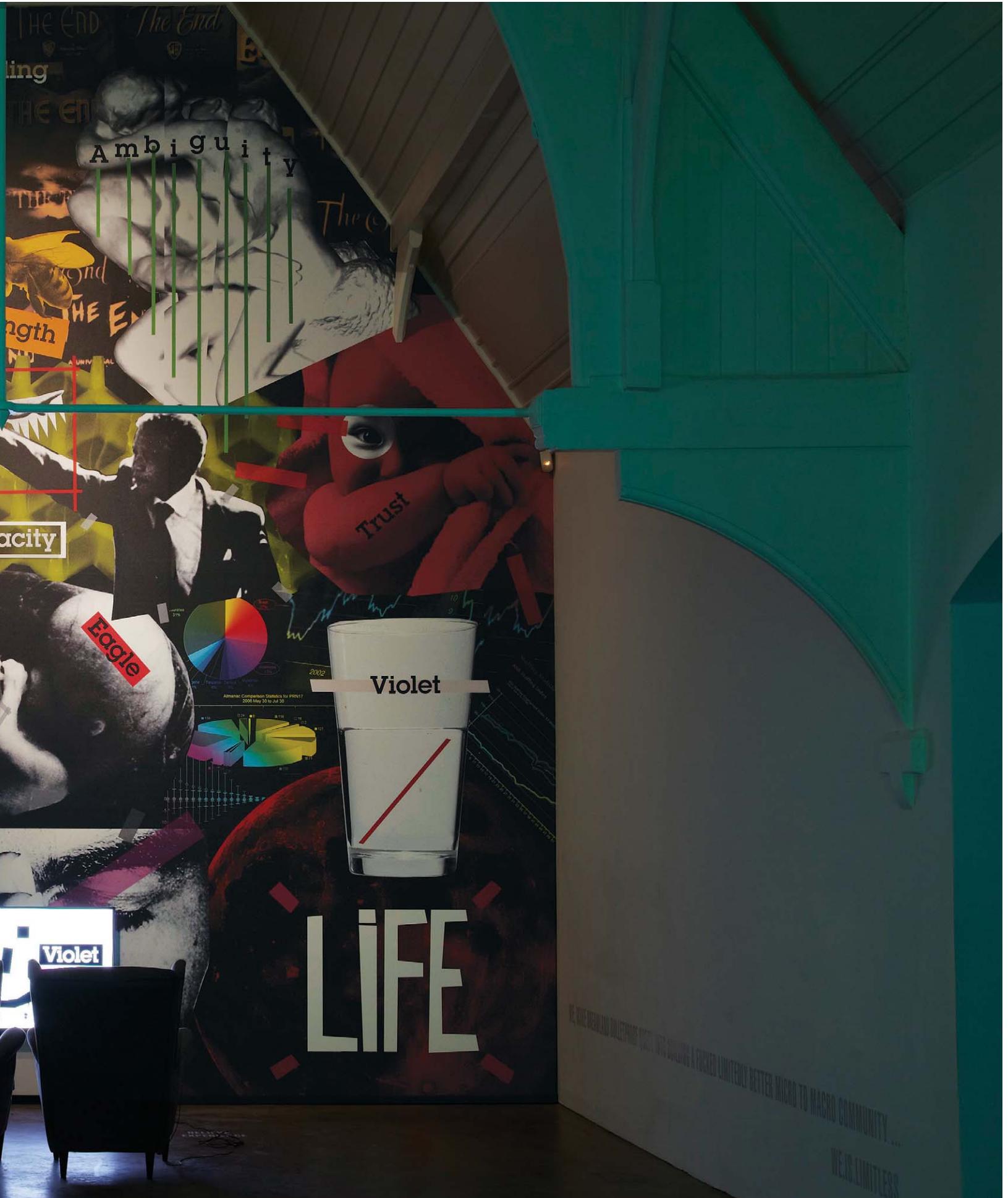
Power preoccupies Mosquito. The headline of his homepage reads ‘be.power’, while *The Age I Do Not Remember* featured a long passage in which the artist declared to a furious piano riff: ‘I DON’T NEED TO BE POWERFUL, I AM POWER’. His work is also populated with leaders of one shade or another – whether backstage agents, like AL Moore, or public figureheads, like the monarchs and presidents who flash up in *Fuck Africa*. At the core of his pivotal Ikon exhibition, titled *Daily Lovemaking*, was a mural in the form of an ugly collage of found imagery, garish colour and cheap fonts: like something a teenager might scrapbook together from printouts of websites. At its centre was a foetus, over which loomed the figures of Adolf Hitler and Nelson Mandela, their raised arms crossing each other like ceremonial swords at a regimental wedding.

Was this a sly reminder that Mandela was on a US terror watch list until 2008? In interviews, Mosquito gave nothing away, telling *The Guardian* in 2015 that: ‘They were both determined people, intelligent people, they had a capacity to lead’. Is that what being powerful consists in, I ask Mosquito. What does ‘power’ mean to him? “I think that there is nothing more powerful than what I *consider*,” he responds. “What I consider is the most powerful, possible thing. Looking at something, going somewhere. How many different ways that human life can be experienced. As individuals, we do get to determine how we *look* at something.” He gestures to a pack of Gauloises (mine) on the table. “You could think: the pleasure of having a cigarette. Or: it gives me cancer. We don’t have to be prisoners.” In the same vein,



Nastivicious, *Nástio Answers Ryan* (still), 2014, video, 19 min 22 sec





WE ARE BEYOND... WE ARE LIMITLESS...
WE ARE LIMITED... WE ARE BETTER... WE ARE TO... WE ARE COMMUNITY...
WE ARE LIMITLESS

we can indeed ‘consider’ if Hitler is like Mandela (he isn’t), or if the pleasure of smoking is worth it (it’s not). The value of the exercise is not to see if our opinions or values change, per se, but to realise that these values are ours to determine – that our perspectives are ours to frame, project, decide and, eventually, enact (going over my notes, I see Mosquito’s conversation is full of verbs).

In other words, Mosquito is an idealist – not in the utopian, perfectionist sense of the word, but the philosophical one, going back through the existentialists to Bishop Berkeley and Arthur Schopenhauer – the conviction that far from being shaped by base materiality, all our minds have access to are ideas, and thus what we think of as reality is really mentally constructed. It follows that intention matters, perception matters, because in some fundamental microsense, they actually change the world. Or, in Mosquito’s own words: “To do things is just to think about it.” In an interview with *Art South Africa* in 2015, the artist described the theme of *Daily Lovemaking* as ‘how hard it is to come back to your partner’s “uterus,” a partner you LOVE beyond feeling, after you’ve found her or him in your bed with a cucumber, condom, baby oil and the photo of their boss!’ When I recall this quote, Mosquito reaffirms: “You can decide ‘fuck my boss’, or you can go back and keep fucking your wife.” “To forgive”, Nástia declares in the 2010 video, “is an action you take. It’s a decision you make. It’s not a feeling you feel.”

Betrayal, and forgiveness: Mosquito’s reflections on the topic remind me not a little of American philosopher Stanley Cavell’s argument, in *Pursuits of Happiness* (1981), that marriage and – per films like *The Awful Truth* (1937), in which couples prepare for divorce only to fall back in love with each other during the process – forgiveness and recoupling somehow figures our will to know: shows us that to know is to return, as we would to a former lover, to something that

we *already* know. Philosophy, in this picture, is, to use philosopher Stephen Mulhall’s phrase, nothing more nor less than a ‘recounting of the ordinary’. There is nothing, from this perspective, inconsistent in a statement being both very profound and very mundane. “You choose,” Nástia declares towards the end of *Nástia Answers Gabi*. “That simple. That complex. Not complicated.” In the video, this last phrase is repeated for emphasis. *Not complicated*.

Except that everything is complicated with Mosquito’s work – or, rather, its complexity resides in its simplicity. “The public speaker, the preacher, the joker,” he tells me. “This is the triangle. There are always these three characters in my work.” Indeed, Mosquito plays these roles not sequentially, but each one at the same time, each position of perspective undermining and enhancing the other. Take his installation for the Artes Mundi exhibition, *Transitory Suppository: Act #II No. Pruritus. No. Ani* (2016), depicting a crate of airlifted relief aid, parachute still attached (nominally the brainchild of AL Moore). What spilled out from the broken netting was not rations of food, or water treatment kits, but hundreds of packets of suppository pills, their boxes promising a ‘Quintuplet Action’ (‘Soothes/Shrinks/Pain Relief/Locates/Awakes God’). Oswald de Andrade’s *Cannibal Manifesto* (1928) – another response to Portuguese colonialism – exhorts the postcolonial subject to ‘absorb the sacred enemy’. In *Fuck Africa*, Mosquito asserts that “We’re gonna grab Africa – we’re gonna make it spread – and we’re gonna fuck it in the ass.” So is the suppository a miraculous gift, or a fraud – or worse, a poison? The answer, of course, would not be found inside the boxes: one critic, who swiped a packet, found it empty.

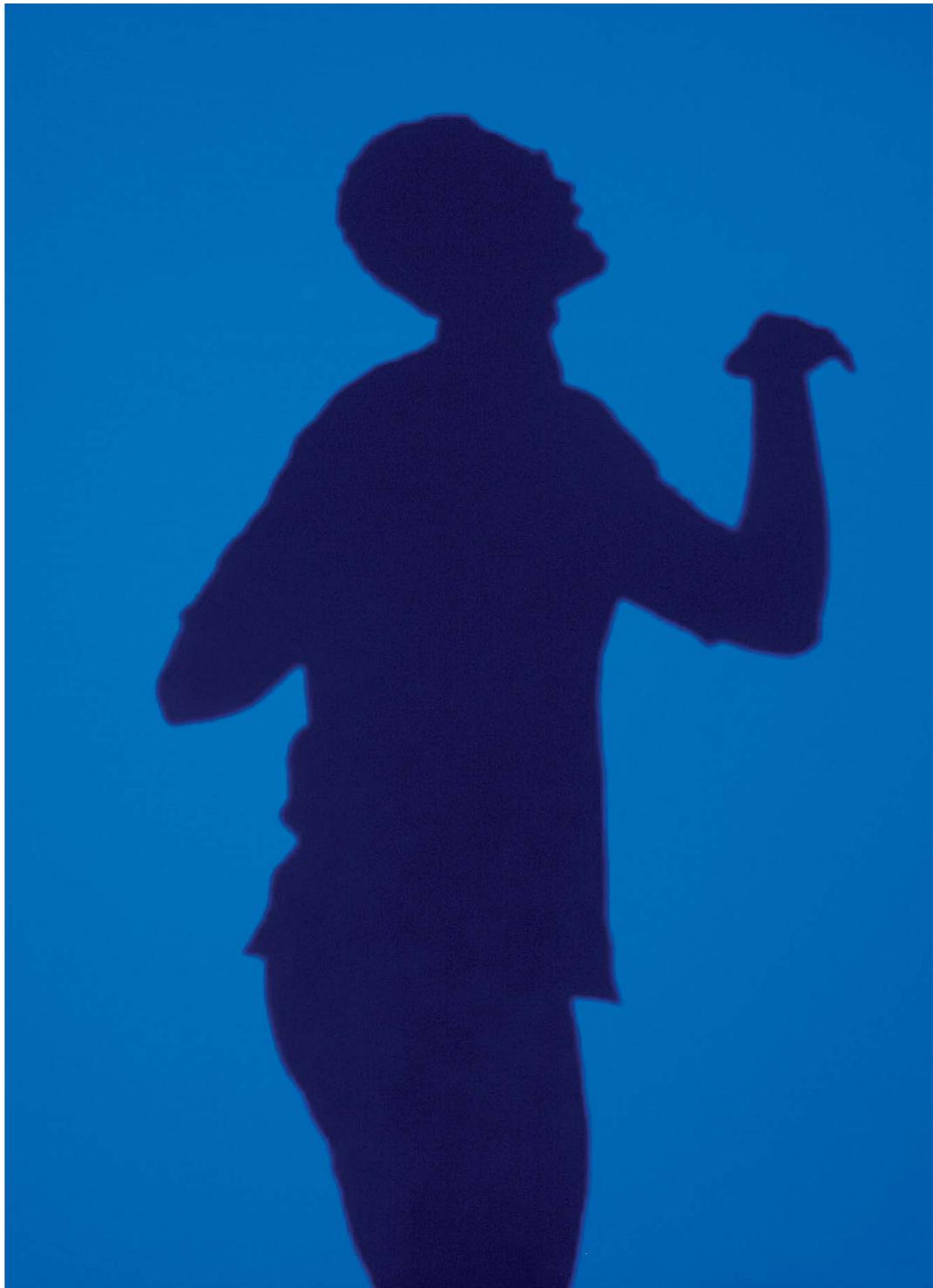
It may have been a simple matter of production budgets, but echoes of this black-to-the-point-of-nihilistic humour – the hollow cackle of the empty aid parcel – can be felt throughout Mosquito’s



above left *3 Continents* (still), 2010, video, 7 min 45 sec.

above right *Nástia Answers Gabi* (still), 2010, video, 19 min 44 sec

preceding pages *Nastivicious, Ending Bad People is Ambiguity The Strength, the Courage & the Audacity is in Trusting the Universe! Have Faith, a Violet Spirit, be an Eagle, never loose Hope Be Coherent & U will find (the) Tangibility of Life*, 2015, wallpaper, dimensions variable



Nastivicious, *Acts* (detail), 2012, video, 12 min 17 sec. Photo: Stuart Whipps

corpus. “I don’t worry too much about being an asshole,” he tells me when I raise it with him. “I don’t want people to be excited to fucking meet me because they’ve seen a piece of mine that they like.” Yet it is easy to imagine someone being excited to meet Mosquito: his voice is honeyed, he is charming and extremely good-looking. I realise not long into talking with him that I want him to like me. I start to wonder if his interest in charismatic mass leaders – whether Mandela or Hitler – is in part connected with the possibility that he has enough charisma to be one himself.

My desire to be accepted by Mosquito has another component, however embarrassed I am to confess it – which is his difference. In an artworld that increasingly fetishises a nebulous global ‘authenticity’, Mosquito being African is an element of his work’s reception as impossible to ignore as it is to articulate. This much is acknowledged by a 2016 commission from the Emdash Foundation, which took the form of a photograph published on the cover of *CCQ* magazine, showing Mosquito (staring out at the camera, half-startled, half-bored) mobbed by a heap of blandly dressed white teens (I was reminded of the declaration in the 2014 campus comedy *Dear White People* that “the minimum requirement of black friends needed to not seem racist has just been raised to two”). Indeed, that Mosquito might enjoy a kind of token, precarious privilege is, I think, key to his outrageousness: the scatology, the lo-fi aesthetic, the seemingly trite self-help assertions and the deployment of stereotypes like the vulgar Russian or the corrupt, horny African that, in another artist’s hands, would invite the charge of xenophobia. As a designated interloper, outsider, other, Mosquito can indulge, abuse and ultimately rebuke this unspoken special status. How else to understand the statement

in *Fuck Africa* that “Black on Black porn... That shit’s disgusting, man... Just big bellies?” Who else, we ask, gets to get away with this?

And yet, again, the more I talk to Mosquito, the less simple things seem. Bar inclusion in two 2016 group shows in South Africa, his recent CV features only US and European venues. So, I ask, how does he feel making work in the West, for Westerners? Mosquito looks down for a moment, then away. “Sometimes I would like my grandma to see my shit. There are people I want to see proud of me: to go to the gig. I’d love to be able to do this at my local. So, on a personal level, yes, it matters to me.” His tone is, if anything, sad, rather than raging. “But my message,” he continues, “that you can live any life you have the capacity to imagine, to commit to, even if you die on the way – this is a message that people in Angola need just as bad as people here. In Europe, it just has space to happen, to sustain itself. I appreciate an audience no matter.” He starts to laugh. “An audience of midgets, or one-legged, one-testicle people – it doesn’t matter to me. I just need to share that energy.”

Mosquito’s conviction in the power of mental intention does not much lend itself to acknowledging the determining legacies of grand historical processes, let alone feeling confined or crushed by them. Perhaps he doesn’t feel like an outsider here at all: “Context – Angola, Cold War, whatever – my vibe is that you cannot escape context,” Mosquito responds. “So why the fuck worry about it?” He tells me about a Catholic friend from Belgium who was so distraught about revelations of systemic tolerance of paedophilia in the Church, they decided to renounce their faith. This friend’s decision was incomprehensible to Mosquito, he says. Why should what others do in the name of a concept, a creed, alter your relationship to it?



Transitory Suppository Act II Another Leader, 2016
(installation view, Artes Mundi 7, Chapter Gallery, Cardiff). Photo: Ric Bower

The only thing that matters is the meaning that you bring. “What do you buy when you buy a slave?” he asks me. “My mind? Who I am? No. You are trying to reach a place you will never imprison.”

Belonging, put simply, is not Mosquito’s vibe: not if it means being responsible for someone else’s bad faith, or being distracted from your own choices. “The whole Belgiums [sic],” he continues, “they have done some fucked-up shit. So: are you going to give them back your passport? And then where the fuck are you going to go?” As Ryan writes in the Walker essay, Mosquito’s work contains an acknowledgement that ‘we are all caught up in this mess – yesterday, today – where it is becoming increasingly difficult to trace the tendrils of history back to some definitive moment of “Oh yes! That is it. That is where it all began.”’ If assigning cause and responsibility is so vexed, Mosquito seems to ask, why not just *move on*?

In *3 Continents* (2010), the artist addresses the camera, flaunting his proprietorship of Europe, America, Africa, announcing the figures (Bill Gates, Muammar Gaddafi) who will or will not be involved in each “new venture”. There is a frisson here of the implicit upturning of power dynamics between the developed and developing world, resonating with the manner of the late 1990s Diesel advertising campaign ‘The Daily African’, in which newspaper reports gave news of African aid missions to Europe, or 2012 parody charity single ‘*Radi Aid*’, which ostensibly aimed to ship radiators from Africa to Norway (“We can’t take advantage of Europe – don’t use their fucking funds!” Mosquito exclaims during *Fuck Africa*). But, in view of Mosquito’s comments, a different emphasis comes to the fore. “I bought Europe, not Europeans,” Mosquito says to me with emphasis, quoting from the video. With that distinction, he says, he offers the possibility

of a break. If the population is not the territory, then the agents might be separable from their history. Some guy may have bought Europe, but he doesn’t own Europeans; maybe Europe, like ‘the Belgiums’, did some fucked-up shit – but that doesn’t mean Europeans will always be fucked up too.

Instead of a hair shirt, an eternal burden of deserved white guilt, then, what Mosquito seems to offer is grace: absolution. If that seems surprising, note that for his Fondazione Prada show, *T.T.T.–Temple Temples of Tenacity*, he mimicked stained glass, rendering cartoonish fables in candy-coloured window decals, bathing the space in soft light; the performance through the space, *I Make Love To You. You Make Love To Me. Let Love Have Sex With The Both Of Us. I Make Love To You* (2016), brought a group of figures dressed in baptismal white to scatter and come back together, gradually harmonising strains of the Christian spiritual *Jesus Loves Me* (1860). “I am a Christian,” Mosquito tells me when I ask about his faith. “No running away from that.” Is this where we are, then, finding a veiled belief in salvation animating some of the more controversial, vulgar, bracing contemporary art of the last half decade? Or is Mosquito the joker so deeply undercover in the role of Mosquito the preacher that I can’t distinguish the two? And to whom do I think I’m asking these questions? I hear Nástia’s voice in my ear all of a sudden. “You choose. You choose.” ar

Nástio Mosquito is presenting work during Copenhagen Art Week, 24–31 August, and will be performing Respectable Thief at the Fondation Cartier, Paris, on 15 September

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I Make Love To You. You Make Love To Me. Let Love Have Sex With The Both Of Us (Part 1 – The Gregorian Gospel Vomit), 2016, performance by the Golden Guys. Photo: OKNostudio. Courtesy Fondazione Prada, Milan

all images except above Courtesy the artist