

Execution of Maximilian 2014 Oil sketch 600x845mm

# Johannes Phokela Dossier 19 April – 10 May 2014

## The Execution of Maximilian dossier

Johannes Phokela has made a second version of Edouard Manet's famous historical painting, *The Execution of Maximilian* (1867), of which Manet himself made four copies. Phokela painted his first version, *The Lord Works in Mysterious Ways*, in 2002, copying the scale and subject matter fairly accurately from the Manet version in the National Gallery, London. Phokela, however, altered and added to the original, effectively producing a postmodern comment on the Manet painting. Phokela's second, and most recent version, an oil sketch, follows a similar trend, but on a much smaller scale, and in a markedly different medium. What is significant about Phokela's versions is the fact that they are pertinent comments on a mid-19th century painting that elicits continuous analysis and debate, chief of which by Foucault. Foucault argues that Manet not only gave the world Impressionism axiomatically, but also ruptured the history of stylistic movements in the late-19th and early-20th centuries, in order to become a modernist, as well as a contemporary artist!

What made Manet's *Maximilian* such an iconoclast in the history of modern art, and how does Phokela articulate its significance in his own work?

Firstly, Manet flouted the fledgling convention of the Impressionists and their penchant for fleetingly capturing impressionistic landscapes, or depicting the bourgeoisie at leisure, by painting a historical picture, redolent of the favourite genre of an earlier neoclassicist school of painters in France. *The Execution of Maximilian* portrays a horrid episode in French colonial history. Napoleon III installed Archduke Maximilian of Habsburg as Emperor of Mexico in 1863, in order to expand his territories abroad, but more importantly, to counter Anglo-American encroachment on South America. When Mexican nationalists sharpened their resistance to European invasion, and on the insistence of the United States, Napoleon withdrew his French troops, effectively signing the death warrant of Maximilian. He, together with two loyal French officers, Generals Miramón and Mejía, were executed in Mexico on 19 June 1867, scandalizing the French emperor. Manet was outraged by the incident, and started immediately on a large-scale painting of the event, based on newspaper accounts and photographs in *La Figaro* and *L'Indépendance belge*, pointing out the duplicity of the Emperor by dressing the firing squad in French uniforms – complete with gray kepis and tunics, belts of white leather, trousers of dark material and white spats – and by giving a goatee beard to the soldier on the right, similar to the one sported by Napoleon III. Manet indisputably highlighted the iniquities of colonialism in this painting. Phokela – an artist who often references the paintings of the past by such artists as Delacroix, Hogarth, Rembrandt, and Rubens – comments in his versions on the notion of globalization, rather than colonialism.

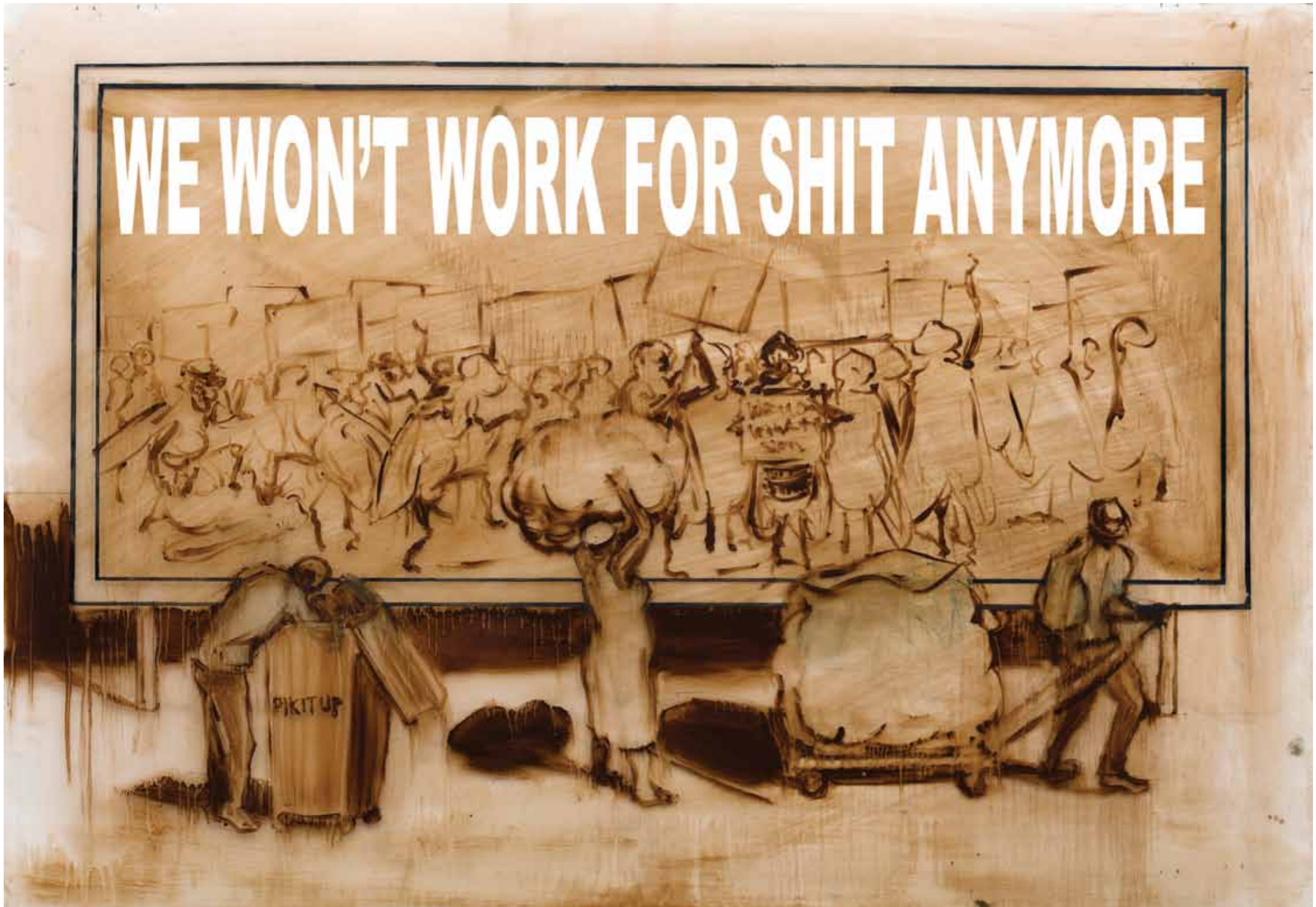
His modus operandi is culling images of famous paintings from newspapers, magazines, and the internet, accessing images of paintings that would otherwise have been rather difficult without global connectivity.

A second aspect as to why Manet can be considered such an important modernist and even contemporary artist is the fact that he repeatedly painted different versions of the same subject matter. Apart from the *Maximilian* version in the National Gallery in London, there is another one in the National Gallery, Copenhagen, and in the Städtische Kunsthalle, Mannheim, in Germany. In addition, Manet made a lithographic image of the scene, which was widely circulated, distributed and reproduced in the press around the world. He acted like a modern day photographer, capturing an atrocious political slaughtering, and paving the way for what Walter Benjamin would have called "the technological reproducibility" of the art work and the advent of the importance of the media in contemporary life. Manet's *Maximilian* certainly attracted widespread attention. The posters on Broadway, advertising its exhibition in New York in 1879 read: "Just Open! Exhibition of the Great Painting of the celebrated French artist, E. Manet, "The Execution of the Emperor Maximilian".

Phokela's two versions have a different sensibility. They are postmodern deconstructions of a well-known painting in French canonical art. They are visual *pastiches* of the original. Benjamin maintains that copies, or reproductions, lose the aura of the original, but Phokela's versions show that something else is gained in a copy. So, for example, Phokela's painting of the Manet work omits the high wall in the background with the group of spectators peeping over it. It also thrusts another weapon in the hands of the soldier on the right, replacing the French infantry musket of the soldier on the far right, who was reported to have given the *coup de grace* shot that ultimately killed Maximilian, with the ubiquitous AK47 rifle. In his second version, Phokela inserts Maximilian, who was cut out from the National Gallery Manet painting, and, in addition, replaces the AK47 with a guitar!

Thirdly, as one can expect from a 'postmodern Manet', he used a form of quasi-intertextuality in the composition of *The Execution of Maximilian*. Manet had seen Francisco de Goya's famous painting, *Executions of the Third of May 1808* (1814) in the Prado, Madrid in 1865 and the terrible anguish of the victims of the execution in Goya's painting made a lasting impact on him. It was, however, the composition, and not so much the expression of suffering and pain that Manet used for his version of a firing squad. Phokela, in turn, also adopt a form of intertextuality by literally *appropriating* Manet's work, effectively quoting it directly in his own work, which is, incidentally, a typical postmodern visual and verbal/written strategy.





Untitled (We won't work for shit anymore) 2014 Oil sketch 600x845mm

A fourth aspect of Manet's modernity resides in the plurality of meaning and significance of his key work. On the one hand, as Foucault points out, Manet was responsible for the reappearance of the painting as object. Foucault argues that the enterprise of much of early modernism was to make the painting as object disappear by, among other things, pictorial perspective and realistic representation. Manet, on the other hand, drew attention to the object status of the painting by, among other things, including shapes in the picture plane that echo the shape of the canvas itself. So, for example, does the flat, and dominant wall in the background of *The Execution of Maximilian* emphasize the rectangular shape of the canvas. Similarly, the predominantly vertical forms of the soldiers' bodies and the horizontal lines of their rifles form a veritable rectangular composition. In the same manner, but much more pronounced, Phokela literally draws rectangles over the image on the canvas to stress the physicality of the painting. His rectangular shapes cuts up or disrupts the modernist notion of unity on the picture plane. It is also significant to point out that Manet 'cut out' parts of one of his versions of the *Maximilian* painting. In the National Gallery version, one notices two pieces of canvas attached to the left hand side of the picture: the face of one of Maximilian's generals, and another, of Maximilian's dead body. What the National Gallery effectively did, was to frame a *collaged* representation of the work and exhibit it as such. Manet originally had to cut out the Maximilian figure in order to sell the painting, thereby self-censoring it for commercial purposes. A more iniquitous form of censoring happened to Manet's lithographic version of the execution; it was banned from being reproduced in newspapers. In addition, even photographs of the event in existence, or the possession thereof, was declared a crime.

Equally important than the formal qualities of the work, is the contextual aspect of the painting. Manet wanted to draw attention to the socio-political roots of the work, highlighting the effects of unbridled hypocritical imperialism. But as a result, the painting was not allowed to be shown in France until 1905. Many critics had prophesized that it would never hang in the Louvre.

Phokela's oil sketch of *The Execution of Maximilian* challenges notions of the 'completeness' of a painting. It is a dossier of ideas, suggesting the underlying structure of the original painting more than anything else. His oil sketch thus serves as cartoon in both senses of the word: a design for a larger enterprise, such as a tapestry, or a comic, if not futile version of an incident.

Wilhelm van Rensburg



Johannes Phokela photographed in his studio in Johannesburg, April 2014

Johannes Phokela was born in Soweto in 1966. After three years of diploma studies at the FUBA Academy, Phokela went to the United Kingdom to pursue a career in Fine Arts. He obtained a Masters Degree in Fine Arts at the Royal College of Art, London in 1993, having completed a Bachelor's Degree at Camberwell College of Arts, University of the Arts, London in 1991. Phokela has exhibited extensively abroad and was given due recognition in South Africa with a major retrospective exhibition mounted at the Standard Bank Gallery, Johannesburg, in 2009. He was awarded the John Moore Painting Award, Liverpool, England in 1993; the prestigious residency award in Stockholm, Sweden; in 2001, and the Decibel Award by the Arts Council of England in 2004.

This brochure accompanies the exhibition *Dossier* by Johannes Phokela at GALLERY AOP, Johannesburg, April/May 2014

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