

**"Curating the Slave Trade: Exhibition, Re-enactment, Embodiment."
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Perhaps the most recognizable image from the fight to end the slave trade is *Description of a Slave Ship*, engraved for the London Committee of the Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade by James A. Phillips in 1789. In recent years, several attempts have been made to revisit this image, to embody it, to reinvent it, to memorialize it. Especially in 2007 during the celebration of the bicentenary of the end of the slave trade in Britain, *Description of a Slave Ship* was at the center of many commemorative events. It was featured in print form in countless exhibitions around the country and even made part of the graphic imagery of postage stamps issued by the Royal Mail to mark the bicentenary. Indeed the attempts to enable this image to stand as a marker for the memory of the Middle Passage and the graphic violence of the slave trade against black and white bodies vary in scale, scope and intent. My talk will provide an overview of some of these attempts made by artists, activists, actors, curators, politicians and ordinary citizens. At the center of my inquiry is the question, why *Description of a Slave Ship*? What about its graphic quality enables it to continue to have resonance for us today? What compels artists and curators to use it as a visual teaching tool? Why is there an urgent need for ordinary people to embody it, to revisit the terror it represents, to reenact its profound silence and pain?

I will focus on the exhibition *La Bouche de Roi* by contemporary artist Romauld Hazoume of Benin, which was exhibited around Britain by the British Museum in 2007-2008. That large scale installation used *Description of a Slave Ship* to enter into a conversation between the past of the slave trade and the present day corruption and loss of life that takes place along the route of the illegal gasoline trade between Nigeria and Benin. I also will mention briefly the replica of the 18th century square rigger ship that sailed up the Thames on March 29, 2007 as a reenactment of a slave ship in London. Finally, I will discuss the attempt to embody the slave ship and the experience of the Middle Passage in the performance of Amiri Baraka's 1969 play, *Slave Ship*, which was produced in Bristol nearly 40 years later by Say It Loud Production in October 2007.