

Unpacking Wedgwood: An Interview with Roberto Visani

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What's in a Label? Revising Narratives of the Decorative Arts in Museum Displays

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Unpacking Wedgwood: An Interview with Roberto Visani

Interview interview between **Caitlin Meehye Beach**Interview and **Roberto Visani**

WORD COUNT:3,126



Introduction

In 1787, the Staffordshire potter Josiah Wedgwood created a small jasperware medallion bearing on its surface the image of an enslaved Black man in chains (fig. 1). Wedgwood meant for his medallion to make an appeal for the abolition of the slave trade and the plight of the enslaved, and he drove home this point through both the figure of the enslaved, kneeling with hands clasped upwards, and the question that encircles him: “Am I Not A Man and A Brother?” Conceived and reproduced as an emblem for the London-based Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade, the medallion condensed the ideals of the antislavery movement into one tiny, handheld object to act as a form of “abolitionist shorthand”.¹



Figure 1

William Hackwood, Josiah Wedgwood & Sons Manufacturers, *Antislavery Medallion*, circa 1787, jasperware, 3 x 2.7 cm. Collection of the Victoria and Albert Museum, London (414:1304-1885). Digital image courtesy of Victoria and Albert Museum, London (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0).

The artist Roberto Visani’s recent sculptural work, *cardboard slave kit: abolitionist blend*, shatters the Wedgwood medallion’s tidy economy of image and text into something that is at once unwieldy and familiar to behold (figs. 2 and 3). The sculpture begins its life as a boxed flat-pack kit containing sheets of cardboard with cut-out body parts—head, right arm, upper body interior, lower leg, right foot (fig. 4). Not dissimilar to an IKEA Billy bookcase or a Poäng armchair, users are meant to assemble the work by themselves using a sheet of illustrated instructions supplied by Visani (fig. 5). This is a slow and painstaking process: Visani, a multimedia artist, has digitally enlarged Wedgwood’s diminutive figure to a larger-than-life scale, broken it down into hundreds of geometric facets, and prepackaged it for us to assemble.



Figure 2

Roberto Visani, *cardboard slave kit: abolitionist blend*, installed in the exhibition *Do It Yourself: an introduction to the cardboard slave kits*, at Geary Contemporary, New York, Spring 2021, 2020, cardboard and hot glue, 6 × 5.7 × 4.4 ft. Digital image courtesy of Roberto Visani (all rights reserved).



Figure 3

Roberto Visani, *cardboard slave kit: abolitionist blend*, installed in the exhibition *Do It Yourself: an introduction to the cardboard slave kits*, at Geary Contemporary, New York, Spring 2021, 2020, cardboard and hot glue, 6 × 5.7 × 4.4 ft. Digital image courtesy of Roberto Visani (all rights reserved).



Figure 4

Roberto Visani, *cardboard slave kit: abolitionist blend*, package, 2020, cardboard and hot glue, numbered open edition, 9 × 43 × 32 in. Digital image courtesy of Roberto Visani (all rights reserved).

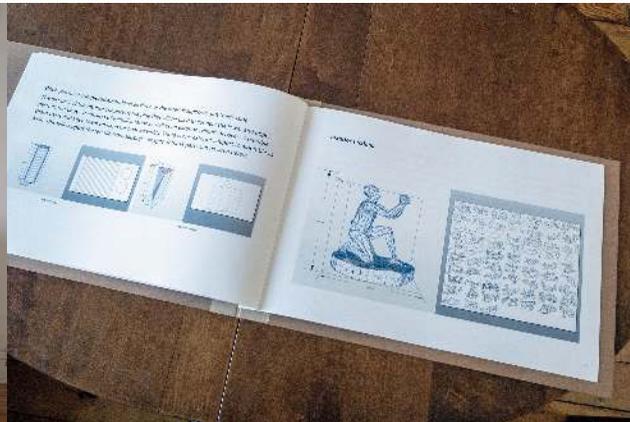


Figure 5

Roberto Visani, *cardboard slave kit: abolitionist blend*, owner's manual and assembly guide, interior view, 2020, 17.5 × 12 × 0.5 in. Digital image courtesy of Roberto Visani (all rights reserved).

In May 2021, Visani debuted *cardboard slave kit: abolitionist blend* as one of two works in the exhibition *Do It Yourself: an introduction to the cardboard slave kits* at Geary Contemporary, a gallery on New York’s Lower East Side (fig. 6). The other work, *cardboard slave kit: h powers blend*, reimagines the American sculptor Hiram Powers’s *Greek Slave* of 1848, a marble statue of an enchained white woman taken captive in the Greek Wars of Independence, in shards of white cardboard (figs. 7 and 8). Visani assembled both sculptures in the round for the exhibition, with their respective cardboard parts joined together through a series of corresponding digits penciled in at their seams in a sort of sculptural paint-by-numbers. 83 denoted the pieces of a tightly clenched pinkie finger of the Wedgwood figure’s clasped hands, 62 a bent elbow, 60 a tensed shoulder.



Figure 6

Roberto Visani, *Installation view of the exhibition Do It Yourself: an introduction to the cardboard slave kits*, at Geary Contemporary, New York, Spring 2021. Digital image courtesy of Roberto Visani (all rights reserved).



Figure 7

Hiram Powers, *The Greek Slave*, circa 1841–1846, seravezza marble, 167.5 × 51.4 × 47 cm. Collection of the National Gallery of Art, Washington (2014.79.37). Digital image courtesy of National Gallery of Art, Washington, Corcoran Collection (Gift of William Wilson Corcoran) (public domain).

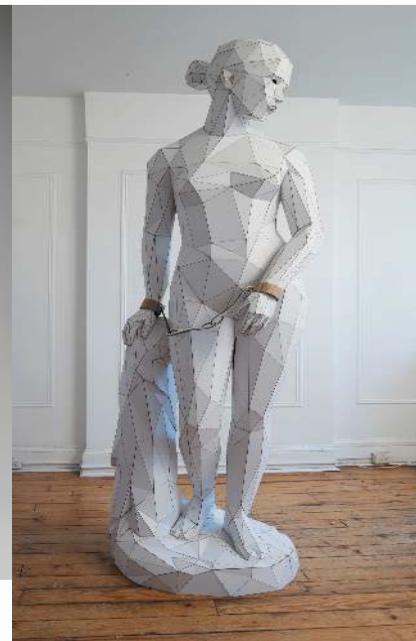


Figure 8

Roberto Visani, *cardboard slave kit: h powers blend*, 2021, cardboard and hot glue, open numbered edition, 8.2 × 2.6 × 2.4 ft. Digital image courtesy of Roberto Visani (all rights reserved).

The process of making—and apprehending—a sculpture is durational. Charles Baudelaire deplored the elusive nature of statues in his notorious polemic of the Salon of 1846, noting that the works on view displayed “too many facets at one and the same time”. It took time to understand them, for “the viewer who walks around the figures can choose a hundred different positions”.² In its painstaking construction and monumental scale, *cardboard slave kit: abolitionist blend* slows the quick process of apprehension that was intended for the beholders of Wedgwood’s original medallion. It also revises it. The chains that bind the figure’s wrists do not simply loop downward as they do in the medallion, but they also snake about in a heavy tangle, demanding the viewer to confront the violence of slavery and its representation in the realm of the visual. The cardboard kit extends this confrontation even further. Viewers-turned-makers

must unpack—quite literally—the constitutive parts of the image in a process that raises a host of questions: Who participates in the production of such imagery? Who consumes it? And how is that consumption inextricable from a longer history of racial capitalism and the commodification of human life?

In August 2021, Visani and I met to discuss his ongoing confrontation with the visual archive of slavery through the *cardboard slave kits* series. In addition to taking on the works by Wedgwood and Powers, he has also created sculptures after Jean-Baptiste Carpeaux’s bust, *Pourquoi Naitre Esclave* (figs. 9 and 10) and John Quincy Adams Ward’s statuette, *The Freedman* (figs. 11 and 12). Our conversation was wide ranging, considering the legacy of the Wedgwood medallion, the aesthetics of cardboard, his conceptualization of “social sculpture” and the participatory dimensions of art, and the paradoxical relationship between capitalism and social justice reform.



Figure 9

Jean-Baptiste Carpeaux, *Pourquoi Naître Esclave*, 1872, cast terracotta, 53.7 × 44.5 × 34.9 cm. Collection of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Gift of James S. Deely, in memory of Patricia Johnson Deely, 1997 (1997.491). Digital image courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (public domain).



Figure 10

Roberto Visani, *cardboard slave kit: Carpeaux blend*, 2021, cardboard and hot glue, open numbered edition, 38 × 27 × 22 in. Digital image courtesy of Roberto Visani (all rights reserved).



Figure 11

John Quincy Adams Ward, *The Freedman*, 1863, cast 1891, bronze, 49.5 × 37.5 × 24.8 cm. Collection of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Gift of Charles Anthony Lamb and Barea Lamb Seeley, in memory of their grandfather, Charles Rollinson Lamb, 1979 (1979.394). Digital image courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (public domain).



Figure 12

Roberto Visani, *cardboard slave kit: freedman blend*, 2021, cardboard and hot glue, open numbered edition, 69 × 53 × 30 in. Digital image courtesy of Roberto Visani (all rights reserved).

Interview

Caitlin Meehye Beach: One initial striking aspect of these sculptures is, of course, the fact that they must be assembled. Can you share how the cardboard kits work and how they help us see an object like the Wedgwood medallion in new ways?

Roberto Visani: I think the medallion has such an iconic presence in terms of thinking about the history of Black figuration and the history of slavery... it is important because of its advocacy in the abolition of the slave trade, which was its intended use, but also is seen as problematic because of the supplicant pose of the figure. And it continues to be a potent image after all of this time. I wanted to really understand—to literally unpack—the artwork.

Making the kits allowed me to do so. It led me to the idea of, “Well, I’m probably not the only one who has these questions, and, as an artist, making is how I answer these questions”. A kit that asks you to think about the meaning of these images by reassembling and reconstructing them made a lot of sense from that point of view.

CMB: The Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade intended for the medallion to be consumed as a shorthand—to be apprehended instantly as a sort of slogan or token. It seems to me that you’re trying to stretch out, or even slow, the process of understanding it as an image *through* the act of making. And perhaps this opens up a new kind of space for re-evaluating the medallion? I wonder if you could speak about the points in this process of making at which you came to new or different understandings of the Wedgwood figure.

RV: In general, I'm a very tactile thinker, so working with materials—touching, manipulating—really helps to generate new ideas and opinions. Any durational process helps delve deeper into the content of a work; seeing something in a museum from a variety of angles, writing about something, thinking about what it means to a particular viewer.

CMB: Right, I didn't fully understand the Wedgwood medallions until handling them in museum storage. They appear much larger when reproduced in photos in books or on the Internet but, in person, are lightweight and even difficult to pick up because of their scale and fragility. You're dealing with a little figure—one that's barely sculptural, as opposed to a monumentally scaled figure in the round. This seems to resonate with what you're describing as an image that is much larger than life in terms of its history and its legacy. How does scale come into play with your work, either metaphorically or practically? What made you decide to build these objects at this size and scale?

RV: I have to say that one aspect is practicality. I made several versions of the kneeling Wedgwood figure and from a structural standpoint realized it has to be this size, which is just slightly larger than human form. And then I wanted all the works to be of equal standing—I didn't want to place the sculptures on a hierarchy by making one really big and one really small. But it is also kind of like the elephant in the room. The physical presence is a kind of echo of the work's presence in other dimensions. With some of the historical works I draw from, the content and context of the work may be obscured. So, scale definitely helps reframe the works.

CMB: Scale seems to complicate the idea that a statue is a body to be consumed. A monumental sculpture forces the viewer into a different kind of viewing position than a handheld medallion or a small statuette might—it is harder to visually or phenomenologically “possess”, as Robert Morris would have it; instead, it is humbling.³

RV: Right. Along with the idea you are making this thing. The project is after all based around the idea of a kit—a do-it-yourself artwork. But it's bigger than one person can probably manage. You'll probably need several people to help you build it. So you're forced to think about it in a social way and in a collaborative way. It also goes back to the emotional weight of the content and that large works or art are commonly displayed in social settings. That's why I like to think of the series as a social sculpture.

CMB: How does materiality enter into this equation? I'm curious about the associations of cardboard in particular—its relationship to global supply chains and the fantasy popularized by megacompanies like IKEA that products and production can be put directly into the hands of the consumer.

RV: The tools and materials that I choose to work with are usually linked to what the finished object will be both formally and conceptually. For this I was really interested in cardboard for several reasons. We see it everywhere. It doesn't really have a lot of value. We always feel like we can get more. Cardboard is also flat, yet takes on dimension. Its collapsibility relates in a way to how we compress history and archives, and the digital processes of creating and reproducing the sculpture complement those qualities. It's also used to ship goods, and so the links to enslavement, commerce, and the trade of bodies for goods is echoed in many ways through the material.

CMB: This raises an interesting counterpoint to Wedgwood, who was constantly searching for ways for ordinary ceramics to imitate more expensive or precious materials. Jasperware becomes a substitute for onyx and sardonyx, creamware for porcelain, basalt for bronze. And technology and industry are key actors in enabling this. Whereas you are using technology in a wholly different way, as a mode of dissection and reimagination.

RV: The digital process refers to the content of the work itself. The data is just numbers. These things are made of triangles and polygons that basically get put together. Edge 25 gets glued to edge 25. This echoes slavery, which is a data-driven enterprise as well; traditionally, industry and technology have been the impetus for this kind of labor. In other ways, numbers can be very emotional. The kit is an open edition. The edges are numbered in a way that begins to numb our attention. Numbers in this way reference our inability to quantify important aspects of our histories. Both missing and counting “unknown numbers” can carry weight.

CMB: Numbers elide. I am reminded here of how scholars have contended with the archive of slavery; the way the ledgers of enslavers functioned as a shorthand for death, as Saidiya Hartman has written, or as a “monetarizing anatomization of the body”, as Ian Baucom has written.⁴

Can a work of art, and a sculpture specifically, counter this? It’s striking to look at the rendering of feet in the Ward sculpture and in the Wedgwood medallion. It seems like in the case of both statues, the communication of agency and resistance comes from the feet and the legs. With Wedgwood, it’s the curled toe of the kneeling figure that propels him upwards. With Ward, it’s the cupped foot and flexed legs that tell us he’s rising from a seated pose.

RV: And the hands also. They’re crunched together. It is a process of trying to identify some of those aspects of the original works and translate them. The drawings do this but in a different way than the sculptures. The drawings allow me to extract one part and say, “Look at this a little bit more carefully”. The drawing of the Wedgwood figure shows the figure from the back rather than the side, as he is usually depicted; the result is that we as the viewer have the same vantage point that he does (fig. 13). This changes our relationship to the figure from object to a more humanized subject. The Wedgwood medallion is a generalized African male, stylized according to the tools and materials of the time. My tools and materials speak to the mediating presence technology has on our lives. The drawings are laser cut onto the surface of paper and placed in antique frames. In doing so, I’m asking the viewer to consider the figure in both past and present tenses.



Figure 13

Roberto Visani, *Back*, 2021, laser cut drawing on paper in antique frame, 29 × 19 in. Digital image courtesy of Roberto Visani (all rights reserved).

CMB: Can you speak a bit more about the question of reception and interpretation? At Geary, you assembled your works as prototypes of sorts, with the idea that their respective kits would be purchased and then built by a consumer—maybe an individual, maybe an institution like a university art gallery or an art museum. What are the moral or ethical issues involved in participating in the making of your art? How does a collaborative process of reception—what you aptly term “social sculpture”—figure in here?

RV: By making a kit, I am inviting people to confront the legacy of slavery in a different way than simply being consumers of its history. I want to democratize that experience, so it’s not just about the history of the enslaved and enslaver, or the artist and the collector, but also about everyone in between. It’s the artist’s responsibility. It’s the institution’s and collector’s responsibility, and the audience’s responsibility. It’s shared amongst all of those groups to engage in a common goal, which, in the case of the kit, is a constructed sculpture. So, the questions of labor and capital are some of the questions that I hope arise. I really don’t want to tell people what to think. But posing these kinds of open-ended questions is really exciting to me—to see what people come away with. And that’s sort of led me to this notion of a social sculpture, something that could be shared—something that I or an institution wouldn’t necessarily define but would be defined by how people interact with it. And that’s what I think the kits are beginning to do. I am also an educator and my experiences in the classroom and in developing curricula have informed how I created the kits. The interaction that is part of the artwork is different than a static work of art, but perhaps aligns more closely with how public-facing art organizations interact with their audiences, particularly within education and public programming departments.

CMB: Have you found that to be the case with the initial feedback you’ve got from viewers following the Geary show?

RV: Well, a bit. The audience is new to the work. It takes some time to consider the ideas contained within, so the first responses are usually supportive and complementary. In general, people seem to be really intrigued with the idea that this artwork can be made by just about anyone by simply following the instructions. And I think that there will be some really meaningful dialogue when the kits are built with a group of people. That durational experience, I think, will elicit more responses.

One of the reasons I came to the idea of describing my work as “social sculpture” is that when I was discussing with the gallery how to price these things, I wanted them to be affordable and accessible, from an institutional perspective. A school, library, or art museum should be able to acquire a kit so that it could be activated in that setting, ideally a public venue. And that relates back to the production and dissemination of the Wedgwood medallion—they wanted it to be accessible to everyone.

From your end, I’m curious. Your writing and the soon-to-be published book, *Sculpture at the Ends of Slavery*, is meant not only to inform, but also elicit a response from the viewer in terms of reconsidering what nineteenth-century artworks engaging with abolition mean to them. There is a kind of comparative history we are both asking the audience to consider, albeit through different media.

CMB: Like you, I’m thinking through the contradictions of antislavery imagery. In the case of Wedgwood, we have an object that is more often than not still seen today as a “good” or “positive” image simply because it’s connected to the abolitionist movement. He contributes the medallions to the Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade; the act of making becomes a sort of philanthropic gesture in and of itself. But we know that philanthropy is not always unequivocally good or morally sound. A central preoccupation of my book is how the manufacture, circulation, and consumption of this genre of antislavery imagery—and sculpture in particular—remains embedded in circuits of commerce that are themselves related to slavery and racial capitalism. How is an image’s capacity to prompt reform undercut by the ways in which it circulates through a capitalist network?

RV: What happens if we are all compromised because of the way the system is? In an earlier series of sculptures, I created guns that were connected to the slave trade (figs. 14 and 15). The trade of guns for enslaved Africans fueled the growth of cities like Birmingham, England, which became a producer and supplier for many of the firearms that were subsequently traded for people. It also destabilized tribal relationships and led to massive human suffering throughout West and Central Africa because of the influx of powerful new weapons. So historically, this web of commerce has often obfuscated a lot of human suffering and abuse.



Figure 14

Roberto Visani, *Migmatic Cross*, 2001, wood, concrete, clay, plastic, metal, and sea shells, 61 × 23 × 19 in. Digital image courtesy of Roberto Visani (all rights reserved).



Figure 15

Roberto Visani, *Ogun NY Money*, 2005, wood, metal, artificial hair, rubber, plastic, ceramic, and polyester resin, 33 × 33 × 5 in. Digital image courtesy of Roberto Visani (all rights reserved).

CMB: Your mention of your earlier gun sculptures just now, as well as Birmingham’s ties to slavery and the slave trade, connects back to the broader theme of commerce, and its catastrophic legacies, that we have been grappling with throughout this interview. And as we’ve explored, and as other essays in this issue explore, sculpture and the decorative arts have historically been implicated in those catastrophic commercial networks in manifold ways. Your work not only calls back to those histories but moreover asks viewers to perform the urgent labor—do it yourself (!)—of reassessing and confronting those legacies.

RV: Well, the irony of a do-it-yourself ethos is that you are not a consumer of products—one can and does produce things for oneself. And much of the rhetoric around the founding of the United States is based on principles of independence and ingenuity. Pulling oneself up by the bootstraps, a pioneering spirit, and other sentiments used to reinforce notions of hard work and freedom from the larger political and economic forces swirling around us. The reality, however, is that from slavery to the present day we have been inextricably dependent on global supply chains and consumption. That contradiction is what I hope the work ultimately addresses.

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About the authors

Caitlin Meehye Beach is Assistant Professor of Art History and affiliated faculty in African and African American Studies at Fordham University, where her teaching and research focus on transatlantic histories of art of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Her first book, *Sculpture at the Ends of Slavery*, is forthcoming with the University of California Press in 2022 as a recipient of The Phillips Collection Book Prize. She has published articles in *Nka: Journal of Contemporary African Art and Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide*, and has also recently contributed to the volumes *Republics and Empires: Italian and American Art in Transnational Perspective, 1840-1970* (Manchester University Press, 2021) and *Designing Motherhood: The Things That Make and Break Our Births* (MIT Press, 2021). She holds an AB from Bowdoin College and a PhD from Columbia University.

Roberto Visani is a multimedia artist residing in Brooklyn, New York. Primarily working in sculpture, his artwork examines the black body, often through the reinterpretation of historical artworks and artifacts. He has exhibited in New York at the New Museum of Contemporary Art, The Studio Museum in Harlem, and The Bronx Museum, and at the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, San Francisco and Barbican Galleries, London. Visani has been awarded residencies from Lower Manhattan Cultural Council, New York, Chelsea College of Art, London and Art Omi, New York. He is a NYFA Fellow in Sculpture and was a Fulbright Fellow to Ghana. His work has been reviewed by the *New York Times*, *Art Forum*, *Art News*, and *Frieze*, among others. Since 2004, he has taught at John Jay College of Criminal Justice where he is an associate professor of art. In spring 2022, Visani will have a solo exhibition at the Brattleboro Museum and Art Center in Vermont titled *Form/Reform, The cardboard slave kits and the Myth of Identity*.

Footnotes

1. J.R. Oldfield, *Popular Politics and British Anti-Slavery: The Mobilisation of Public Opinion Against the Slave Trade, 1787–1807* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995), 179.
2. Charles Baudelaire, “Why Sculpture is a Bore”, in *Baudelaire: Selected Writings on Art and Artists*, trans. P.E. Charvet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972), 98.
3. Morris’s discussion of the subjective relation—or consumption—of a sculptural body through circumambulation is relevant here. Robert Morris, “Notes on Sculpture: Part 1”, *Artforum* 4, no. 6 (February 1966): 42–44.
4. Saidiya Hartman, “Venus in Two Acts”, *Small Axe* 26 (June 2008): 5; and Ian Baucom, *Specters of the Atlantic: Finance Capital, Slavery, and the History of Philosophy* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), 7.

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