



Otobong Nkanga MATRIX 260 MAY 11 and 14, 2016
UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, BERKELEY ART MUSEUM & PACIFIC FILM ARCHIVE

Apsara DiQuinzio Much of your practice involves an extended engagement with landscapes, whether natural or social, and in particular landscapes in Nigeria, where you are from. Can you tell us some more about what initially inspired this interest and motivation?

Otobong Nkanga Within my practice my interests touch on many different aspects, from performance to sculpture, or even language, and my influences come from the encounters I have had and still have with different landscapes, spaces, and people. Being born in Nigeria and having lived there for a part of my life has had a big impact on my artistic practice. One of the aspects of growing up in Lagos was the possibility to be outdoors and explore, create, experiment, and play with elements such as stones, plants, and in short everything that one could. This landscape has been a very important formative part of my life, work, and sensitivity— encountering other landscapes continues to inform, enrich, and expand my reflections on the social, political, and ecological in my work. I also am interested in working with people and geographies that I have encountered and lived in, which have opened up different ways of engaging with the social, environmental, and ecological impacts that in one way or the other have influenced my practice. I remember one of my visits to Ile-Ife, Osun state, Nigeria, in 1998 when I was following a course at the Obafemi Awolowo University on African architecture, and the lecturer made us visit Brazilian Yoruba architecture that had the same features I later discovered when I visited Oro Preto, Brazil, in 2003. After this experience I realized how our histories are connected, even though they might not always be visible. What has inspired my interest and motivation is linked to the process of trying to understand the different kinds of connections, be it from where I geographically come from, or the many spaces or objects I meet along the way.

Philippe Pirotte I'd like to ask you about the notion of exploitation in your practice and how it circumscribes many subjects in your work, ranging from the exploitation of the land, to the exploitation of raw goods, and even to the exploitation of a people during the colonial and postcolonial eras. Furthermore, how does exploitation relate to artistic production in general, and in particular to the performances you create?

ON I think that comes from different kinds of experiences that I have had or seen. Exploitation is not only limited to the era of colonialism or postcolonialism, but it is part and parcel of our contemporary society. Empires, nations, and economies have been built through exploitative means. The exploitation and destruction of natural resources and habitats are causing a growing discontent in different parts of the world. It is hard to be insensitive to what is going on in different parts of the world when you visit an old mine site that has been emptied out: What remains? What is the correlation between the environmental decay and displacement of the people? Do we know what and where our processed products all come from and what kinds of exploitations and labor have taken place just to have a piece of metal? Everything is intertwined and we are all implicated to different degrees. The performances are not only made for discussions but they are structured to bring together multiple narratives that are connected through objects, actions, gestures, voice, body, and language. The narratives touch and expand on broader topics other than exploitation, but I think they really touch upon what humanity is and what we are becoming in relation to the past, present, and a possible future. There isn't always a fixed way or topic with regard to the performance, but I am interested in layering thoughts, inserting researched materials, experiencing the moment, evoking the past, looking for ways of repair for the future, changing perceptions, sharing experiences, and learning while doing.

PP Likewise, I'm interested in how your work relates to a postcolonial, nomadic life, particularly in relation to the uprooting of both the landscape and people. You have made performances about the uprooting of the mango and the papaya, for instance.

ON The performance *Taste of a Stone - Itiat Esa Ufok* which was performed at the *Sharjah Biennial 11* in 2013 focused on the Queen of the Night plant, mango, and papaya tree. These were plants that were part of my childhood when growing up in Lagos. So when I saw these plants in The Emirates it triggered a sense of familiarity and also a few questions about how they all got there since they were not native to that region. The performance expanded on the displacement of each plant and how it entered different lands and cultures, but I also told stories of the three different plants and my experience with them. There were more questions that arose from the performance, such as what was the future of the plant and the generation afterwards. Storytelling, songs, text, and dance were the means used to expand not only on the plants but on human condition, its displacement and integration in new circumstances.

ADQ Could you elaborate on the nature of storytelling in your work—it seems to anchor much of what you do. Does this connect to Nigerian culture in terms of the importance of oral histories? And how much of your storytelling (which can even assume the form of song) is improvised or scripted, and is this distinction important?

ON Most of the performance pieces are partly scripted but they are prepared in a way to allow for reactions to the moment. There is a structure, but it is a loose structure, so in that way I can react to what people say or to the feel of the wind or the heat of the sun, the bird that sings or the silence around. Some of the songs are improvised and some are songs that my mother composed. Improvisation allows me to manifest the association of words, gestures, and movements that the body has registered consciously or unconsciously.

ADQ One of the performances you will do at BAMPFA as part of your MATRIX exhibition is *Contained Measures of the Kolanut*. What made you want to make a work about the kolanut and what is its significance in relation to Western African cultures? You've made several performances that begin with the phrase *Contained Measures . . .*, how is this phrase important to you, and are these performances related?

ON In West Africa and the Sahel zone, most of everyday life and many main events are heavily shaped by the use of the kolanut, which represents an important socio-integrative element. Kolanuts are offered to every guest as a gesture of respect and deference; they are presented to a lover as a token of one's feelings; they are exchanged at the end of business negotiations to seal the contract; and they are offered to the ancestors, orishas, spirits, and gods. The stimulating nuts are ingested at social and religious events. They are chewed during these occasions or given to others at burials, name-giving ceremonies, baptisms, and sacrifices. They are also used by long-distance commercial drivers as stimulants to keep them awake and alert.

I was invited in 2012 to take part in the exhibition *Tropicomania: The Social Life of Plants* at Bétonsalon as part of the Triennale in Paris and there it was possible to look into the archives of CIRAD [Center for International Cooperation in Agronomic Research for Development], where I knew there would be a lot of information and documentation about plants indigenous to regions in Western Africa. I came across different kinds of plants but the plant that I was most interested in was the kola tree. I had eaten the kolanut on different occasions and my knowledge of the kolanut was quite limited to my experience. I have always been curious about the different seeds, plants, or elements that are so particular to Nigerian culture and how that has entered into other parts of the world. I began the research for the piece *Contained Measures of a Kolanut* in the



archives of the historical library of CIRAD located in the former Garden of Colonial Experimentation in the Bois de Vincennes in Paris. This enabled me to bring together scientific illustrations, archival documents, and literary accounts produced in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, during the peak of botanical exploration and the beginning of its exploitation.

The phrase “contained measures” used as part of the titles for the installations and performances allows for the association of things, ideas, and materials. They are actually fragments that are confined in different containers or structures which belong to the same core. Once I started delving into the subject of the kolanut, I realized that it was not only linked to West Africa but to South America, the United States, and even to China. I look at the mythologies that surround the plant, the aspects that are linked to things we consume, the chemicals found in the plant, its stories of displacement, etc. “Contained measures” allows for all these research materials, the emotions, and the body to find their place within the installation. All the elements have the same importance and are connected in one way or the other but they are contained in a measured space.

PP What about the tables in *Contained Measures* . . . that envelop you during the performance, which seem to act as an extension of the body. How are these different kinds of physical armatures important in your work? This suggests a relationship between the body and the landscape.

ON *Contained Measures of Shifting States* or *Contained Measures of a Kolanut* are very much connected to the body and the voice being a part of the installation. The body and the voice are a part of the table just as much as the elements that are on it. The extension takes place when another body engages with the person that brings to life the objects or elements that are on the table. All the different kinds of physical armatures which include the body and voice all work together as one, each component is as important as the other.

ADQ The other work you will perform for this project is *From Where I Stand* (2015), and this project develops from a large carpet whose patterns are inspired by the form of a mineral. Is this a specific mineral, and how do the performances relate to this mineral? To what extent (if at all) do your performances grow out of the objects (in this case the carpet), which work as platforms for the performances to develop?

ON *From Where I Stand* (2015) is a large carpet inspired by the graphic shapes and facets of minerals. The patterns that are in the different facets of the carpet are based on enlarged scans of electron-microscope images of different mica sheets. The idea was to use and layer different types of graphic languages to emphasize the terms that are used to describe a mineral, terms like: *fracture, earthy, tenacity, brittle, flexible, sectile, elastic, hackly, splintery, even or uneven*; these terms fit into the language we used to describe the human body or mental and psychological states.

From where the body stands, be it as a spectator or a performer, these states are being evoked by the patterns that one sees on the carpet. I remember my visit to The Tsumeb mines in Namibia—while standing in front of this deep hole in the earth that had been fractured, hacked, and emptied I was thinking of the workers, miners that had gone through the same process that the space had been through. It was not possible to disassociate the land, material/object, and the body, all enduring the same condition: a slow break down with moments of resistance to stress or transformation. *From Where I Stand* (2015) indirectly relates to my trip to Tsumeb, in addition to a manifold of other things.

I have made three different performances that relate to *From Where I Stand* (2015)—the carpet is the foundation on which the performances take place. The performances grow through the acts of experimenting with combinations of mediums/elements such as language, voice, objects, and movement. There is also a great degree of improvisation which is impossible to explain. An element of surprise should always remain.

This interview was conducted via email during the month of February 2016.

PERFORMANCE SCHEDULE

Wednesday, 5.11.16 7:30 p.m.

From Where I Stand

BAMPFA
Included with admission

Saturday, 5.14.16 1–5 p.m.

Contained Measures of a Kolanut

Tropical House, University of California,
Botanical Gardens at Berkeley

Admission included with UC Botanical Gardens
and/or BAMPFA admission; reciprocal entry.

Biography

Otobong Nkanga was born in Kano, Nigeria in 1974, where she also began her art studies at the Obafemi Awolowo University in Ile-Ife. She continued her education at the École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts, Paris; the Rijksakademie van beeldende kunsten, Amsterdam; and in 2008 obtained a master's degree in performing arts from Dasarts, Amsterdam. Recent solo projects have taken place at M KHA, Antwerp; Portikus, Frankfurt; Kadist Art Foundation, Paris; and the Performance Room at Tate Modern, London. She has been included in many international group exhibitions, such as the upcoming 20th *Biennale of Sydney* (2016), 13th *Biennale de Lyon* (2015), 31st *São Paulo Biennial* (2014), the 8th *Berlin Biennale* (2014), and *Sharjah Biennial 11* (2013). Last year, she was the distinguished recipient of the 2015 Yanghyun Prize. This is her first solo exhibition in a US institution. Nkanga lives and works in Antwerp, Belgium.

OTOBONG NKANGA / MATRIX 260 IS ORGANIZED BY APSARA DIQUINZIO, CURATOR OF MODERN AND CONTEMPORARY ART AND PHYLLIS C. WATTIS MATRIX CURATOR, AND PHILIPPE PIROTTE, ADJUNCT CURATOR. THE MATRIX PROGRAM IS MADE POSSIBLE BY A GENEROUS ENDOWMENT GIFT FROM PHYLLIS C. WATTIS AND THE CONTINUED SUPPORT OF THE BAMPFA TRUSTEES.

FRONT
Otobong Nkanga: *From Where I Stand: Glimmer*, 2015; performance at M KHA, Antwerp. Photo: Christine Clinckx.

BACK, TOP & BOTTOM
Otobong Nkanga: *Contained Measures of a Kolanut*, details, 2012–ongoing; performance and variable materials; courtesy of the artist.



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