

Interview with Otobong Nkanga - The White Review

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Interview with Otobong Nkanga by Louisa Elderton, October 2014

SOME THINGS ARE MEANT TO BE LOST. YOU CAN'T COLLECT emotions. As the artist Otobong Nkanga tells me this, I imagine an elaborate array of emotions, all bottled up, lining a shelf: anger, love, confusion, happiness, hatred.

Nkanga's practice is expansive and multifaceted, encompassing performance, painting, drawing, sculpture and installation. It is characterised by the artist's will to explore and understand stories, narratives and histories—of landscape, nature and place—as mediated by the body. A complex web of information, action and conversation inspires diverse accounts and memories in the audience.

On my first experience of her work I entered *Diaspore* (2014) to encounter two women, plainly clothed, standing poised with a plant, Queen of the Night, tentatively balanced upon their heads. Navigating a drawing underfoot that resembled a map, the women's movements were slow and considered, the rhythms of their bodies effected in the swaying of the plants above. Viewers mingled, sat, stood around the space, marking out their territory. I felt like an observer, absorbing the scene, but a friend described holding eye contact with one of the women for over half an hour: a battle of wills, a silent understanding?

Another earlier work, *Face Me, I Face You* (2013) sees three people standing closely together, physically connected by six pointed black wooden sticks. These crisscross between them, a layered zigzag suspended in space and held in place only by the tension between two bodies – audience participants then begin to expand this network of connectivity. *Contained Measures of Shifting States* (2012), conceived and commissioned by The Tanks, Tate Modern, also sought audience participation. Four separate round tables were placed in a darkened, spotlit room, each displaying four elements: liquid, ice, smoke and heat in a state of movement and shift. On a hollowed out table, 100 printed images showed 'inspiration' from the Tate's own collection as well as pictures of landscapes, maps and scientific diagrams – in the table's central orifice, the artist remained for nine hours without a break, engaging in discussions with the participants.

Born in Nigeria and now working in Antwerp, the artist, who studied at the Rijksakademie in Amsterdam, has shown at numerous high-profile institutions over the past few years including the Tate, KW Institute, Smithsonian and Stedelijk Museum, as well as the Sharjah, Benin and Shanghai Biennales. We discussed the

sense of loss that is endemic to performance alongside the artist's fascination with nature, identity, and more besides.

Q

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— Your practice is research-based, and shifts during the course of its creation. With *In Pursuit of Bling* (2014), there were three performances preceding its final realisation at Berlin's KW Institute. How important is the process of storytelling to you, and do you ever fear that unexpected narratives which have emerged in the process might be lost?

A

OTOBONG NKANGA

— We have to look at storytelling as a process: when transmitted the story gets transformed, layers are added or lost. When we tell a story, people process it differently depending on their cultural backgrounds, beliefs or their experiences in life. Each time a story is told, someone else filters it and tells it in a different way. I consider storytelling not as an end of a journey but as a continual process that ripples and affects our way of looking at the world.

In terms of the research-based works, the multiple narratives and forms of a specific history or event come alive when the various stories create loopholes or contradictions, or fits together in an odd way. You start putting one, two or three stories together in parallel to understand what it means within the context you're researching. To invest in the process is to be interested in its multiple narratives, be they scientific, biological or historical. Some things are not so important for me but they might be for someone else, so I filter as I go, and I expect people to do the same when they encounter the work. Of course I know things will be lost along the line, but different people might find another aspect that might touch or engage them.

Q

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— So your work considers the multifaceted nature of any subject. Further to this idea of multiplicity, you explore identity in your practice and the notion of cultural specificity – or, perhaps more accurately, a lack thereof. What does cultural specificity mean to you within the context of a work such as *Baggage* (2007-08), in which you respond to Allan Kaprow's 1972 performance of the same name {one of a number of his performances or 'Happenings' where earth was moved or excavated to evoke the sense of displacing goods from one place to another}?

A

OTOBONG NKANGA

— With *Baggage*, the shift of the sand from one continent to another brings up the notion of specificity or commonness of what things are. Sand is sand whether it is here, in Congo or China: but at a particle level we can define the geographical origins of a grain of sand by its chemical composition. At the same time, I talk about flux; the flow of water moving sands through manmade boundaries, breaking constructed borders.

In terms of identity, the acceleration of information and the exchange of knowledge and cultures through goods, fashion and social media shifts our perception of the world. None of us exist in a static state. Identities are constantly evolving. African identities are multiple. When I look at, for example, Nigerian, Senegalese, Kenyan, French or Indian cultures, you cannot talk about a specific identity without talking about the colonial impacts and the impact of this exchange — of trade and goods and culture. It applies to architecture, food and lifestyle. In food, as an example, we identify certain types of pasta, tomatoes & vegetables as Italian, but their origins are in other parts of the world. So my questions and interest lie in these blurred narratives, to understand the paths that lead to the creation of our identities and beliefs and cultures.

Q

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— Looking at another aspect of your practice to think about the body, it is often closely connected to the landscape in your work. In *Diaspore* (2014) you use drawing as a mode of topography or land demarcation. Do you think the modern urban condition distances us from the earth? What do you feel the effects of this might be — if we *are* shifting away from the earth?

A

OTOBONG NKANGA

— I don't think there is shift, we are in it. Everything we have, own or possess derives from the earth, even though it might have been transformed by artificial means. We are a species that is constantly adapting to circumstances and the places in which we live, but at the same time, we cannot disassociate ourselves from nature. We get floods, thunderstorms, heat waves, and these forces remind us that we live in nature. In *Diaspore* (2014) the plant, body and the topographic drawing are connected; these different elements in the space resonate through the performances, making it possible to expand on the conditions of life on the earth. I look at the multiple facets of things and try to understand its causes and effects. It's never as simple as it looks.

Q

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— Thinking further about the body and senses, in a work such as ***Face Me, I Face You*** (2013) there's a stark expression of movement and energy exchange and how these can impact the body. You describe the importance of the body as a site of emotion. How vital are the senses to your work and the potential for embodied experience? And what about the potential of synaesthesia and the confusion of the senses; in a work such as ***Taste of a Stone*** (2010) you create a space for walking through stones and listening to these sounds, but you use the word 'taste' to describe that.

A

OTOBONG NKANGA

— I read most works through an emotional space. Looking, hearing or tasting something in your mouth and feeling the sweetness or the bitterness, or the shift of sweetness into bitterness, this is quite a crucial part of our everyday life. Aside from the cerebral side, art should touch the soul, engage our emotions and our senses.

Taste of a Stone (2010) and ***Taste of a Stone: Itiat Esa Ufok*** (2013) were about experiencing a space through the materiality of a stone; a specific sound is made when walking on the gravel, we feel the texture and hardness of rocks when sitting on them; the 'taste' is everything that one discovers and experiences in that element. The exhibition context heightens the senses. Another work, ***Contained Measures of Tangible Memories*** (2009 —) is about the relationship of memory to objects I encountered as a kid. Being in Morocco, I encountered five elements that triggered a forgotten memory of my childhood. The first was indigo — just the smell of indigo dye brought back memories of my mum dyeing fabrics when I was a teenager. Then the pod *cassia fistula*, which we used as kids to play swords. It smelled so bad that if the pod touched you, that meant that you were dead from the smell. I smelled that again and wow! It brought back these memories. And then black soap, which brought back the burning smell of palm oil that my mother used when making it. In Nigeria, palm oil is used to make black soap and in Morocco they make it out of olive oil; it didn't have the same texture or smell, but it had the same name. So the work was looking at all of those things relating to memory. The experience of going through Marrakech brought me back to childhood times. Our senses are so connected to our memories and emotions, triggered by the objects, people, smells that we encounter.

Q

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— Thinking more about physical, tangible artefacts and the intangible nature of memory, most of your family photographs were destroyed in a fire when you were younger. How has this event—the loss of these physical artefacts—affected the notion of memory for you?

A

OTOBONG NKANGA

— The tangible makes it possible for you to believe your memory. I have, for example, only two photographs from childhood: one of my parents' marriage, another with my brother and sister in Yaba, Lagos. I envy people who can look at photos of themselves as kids, can put the picture next to their own kid and trace the generations.

The photographic image is evidence, but it's not necessarily the truth. The frames before and after the image might tell a completely different story. So with the loss of tangible facts from my childhood I can't put any clear story together about the history of my family. My father passed away when I was 7 and my mother when I was 17, so it's not possible to ask certain questions. These lapses or empty spaces in my life make me want to understand what, why, how and where we are. I never take things for granted.

Q

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— That's interesting to think about the nature of truth — truth and reality. In a work such as *Empty Remains* (2004-05), you describe scenery as a smokescreen for reality. Can landscape lie?

A

OTOBONG NKANGA

— The landscape can give an impression of what it is not. So the lie is possible. If we look at spaces that have gone through wars, they are later rebuilt, traces erased. We might not see the full story at first glance. In *Contained Measures of Shifting States* (2012) there were some photographic images of Sudan, places of conflict and war. But what caught my attention about these images was that the landscape was filled with trees, looked so peaceful and calm. Nature does not reveal its secrets until we acquire the knowledge to decipher it. The appearance of something is not necessarily the truth of what it is, or the reality of what it was.

Histories are written from a perspective. Light can fall so that one side of an object is illuminated, the other dark, but both sides are still true of the same object.

The landscape we live in becomes at the point that these stories meet.

Q

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— That's the pertinent thing about your work: bringing together multiple realities, treads of public exterior landscape alongside private interior territories and emotions. It's difficult to reduce your work. It's about expansion, in a way.

A

OTOBONG NKANGA

— Yes, and sometimes I might return to a work I did five years ago, and explore it in a different direction. It expands. There's a lot of material to work on; it's impossible to put it into one big box. Earlier in our conversation I said some things are meant to be lost. You can't collect certain things; you can't collect emotions, you can't be something you're not, and if you attempt it the body revolts. Finding the balance is the hardest thing to do.

ABOUT THE CONTRIBUTOR

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