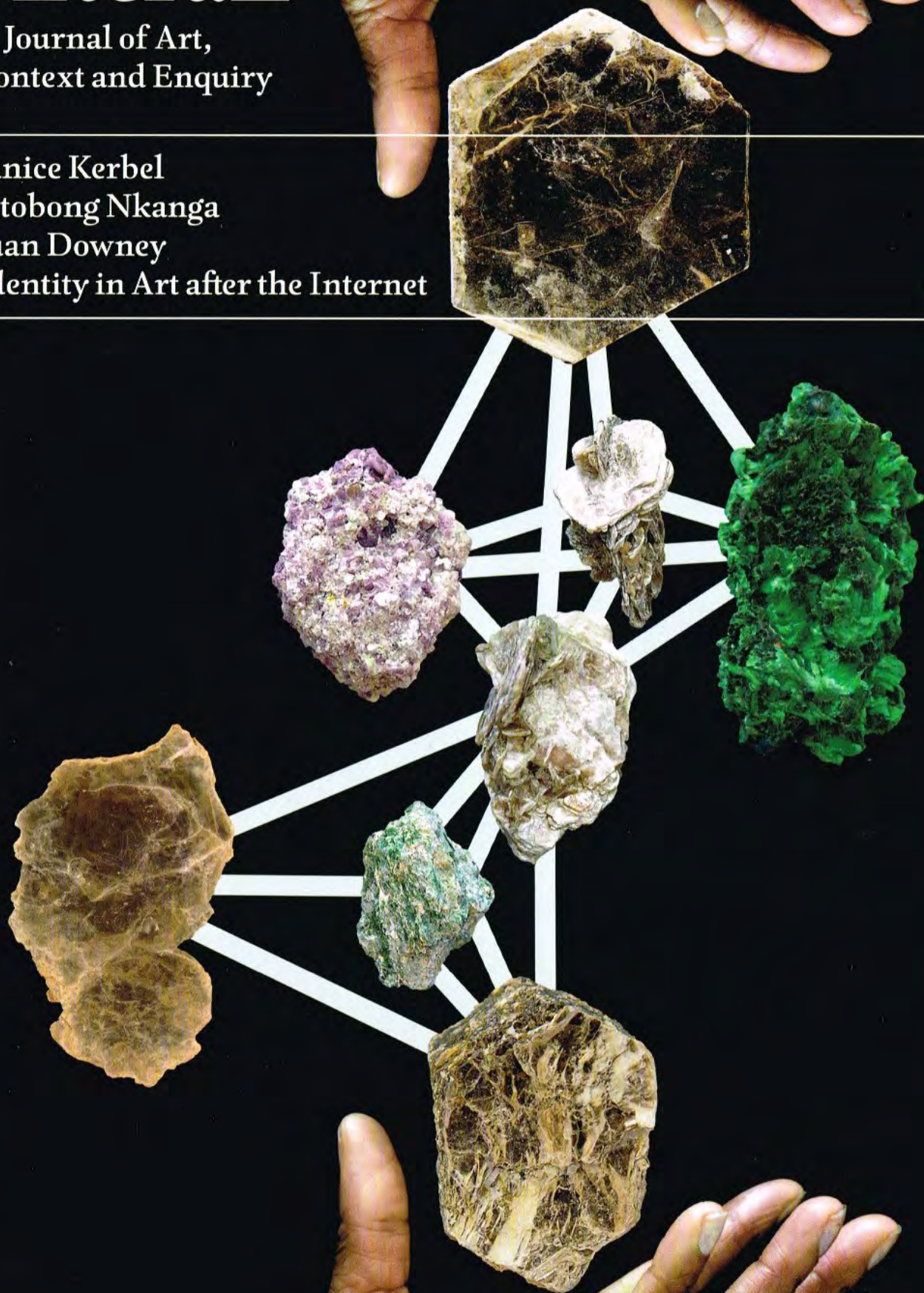


Afterall

A Journal of Art,
Context and Enquiry

Janice Kerbel
Otobong Nkanga
Juan Downey
Identity in Art after the Internet

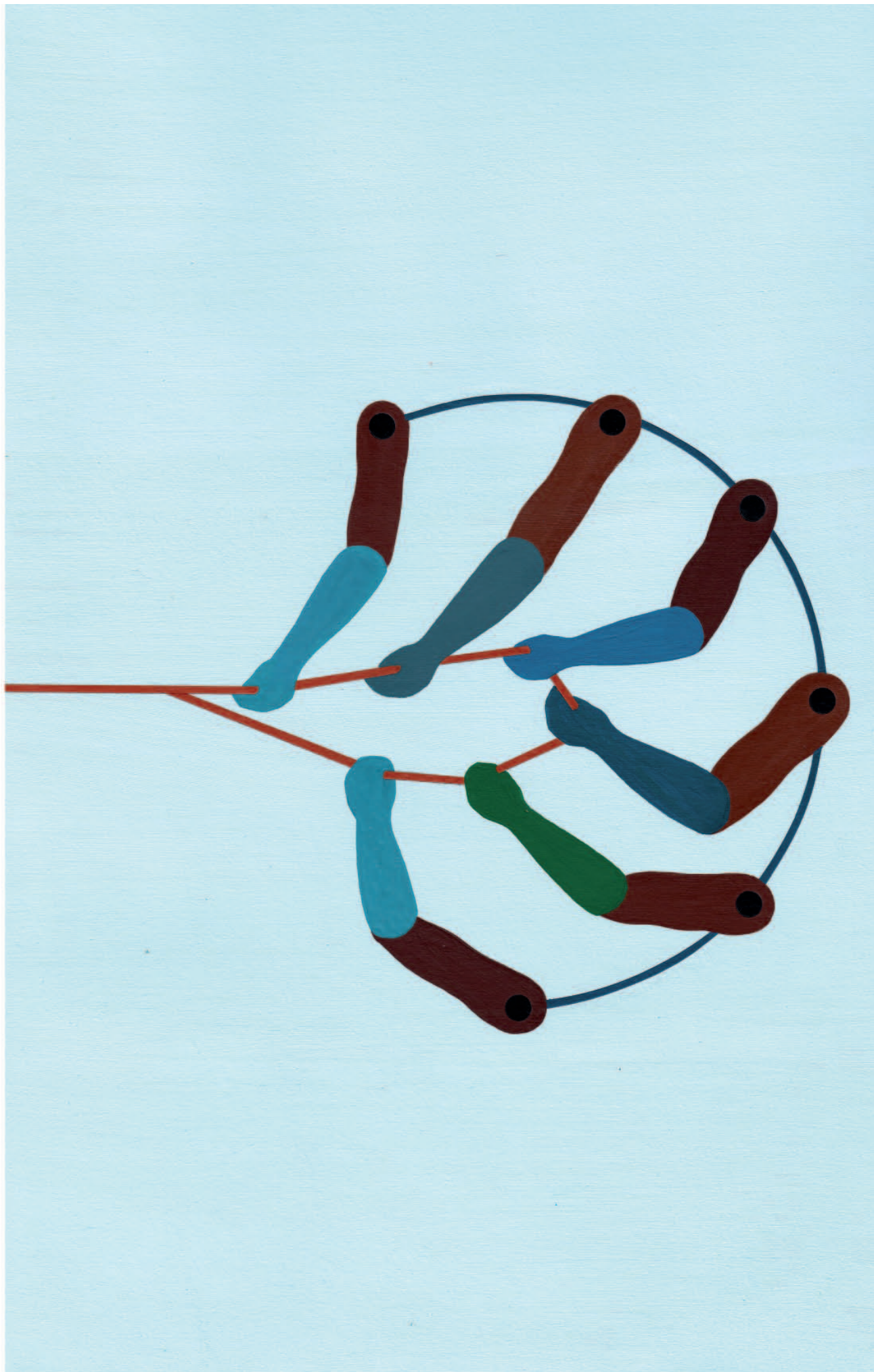


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Otobong Nkanga, *Contained Measures of Shifting States*, 2012, 8-hour performance and installation consisting of four tables of variable sizes, felt, ice, aspirator, aluminum metal strip, heating plate, glass containers and 100 inkjet prints on Forex plates. Installation view, 'Across the Board: Politics of Representation', Tate Modern, London, 2012. Photograph: Wim van Dongen

Previous spread: Otobong Nkanga, *Social Consequences IV: The Takeover*, 2013, round stickers and acrylic on paper, two parts, 29 × 42cm each. All images courtesy the artist; Lumen Travo Gallery, Amsterdam; and In Situ Fabienne Leclerc Gallery, Paris

Exchange and Some Change: The Imaginative Economies of Otobong Nkanga

– Monika Szewczyk

Woe to those who, to the very end, insist on regulating the movement that exceeds them...

– Georges Bataille¹

The last time I spoke with Otobong Nkanga, she told me that she does not like to write. She prefers the spoken word — the traditions of the griot, the storyteller, the advisor, the poet, the orator, but also the open-ended evolution of conversation and all forms of ephemeral verbalised exchange. In the space of one such recent dialogue (with one of the most prolific interviewers in our midst, Hans Ulrich Obrist), she elaborated: 'I like talking but I don't like writing. I think my brain goes a bit too fast and my hands are too slow.'² I like how this points to a desire to consider hand activity and brain activity together. Sitting down, slowing down to write something of substance about this protean artist and the energies she is able to unleash, I am grimly aware that the reader

her work, I propose to give weight to spoken exchange by considering it as a key part of an overall economy of abundance.

Golden Moments

One evening last winter, I visited the artist in Berlin to speak about her work. She had made a wonderful dinner — a stew of vegetables and lamb — which we consumed while speculating about how the yams and the okra had made their way to our table. As the evening wore on, sitting across a kitchen table, with our bellies full and our minds racing, she told me about *Contained Measures of a Kolanut* (2012). The kola nut is a key ingredient of ritual, hospitality, commerce, spirituality and community among many West African peoples and their neighbours or historical trading partners. For her work on the kola nut, Nkanga devised a setting, or installation, of two photo-collaged weavings (one depicting the kola tree and another portraying two girls with feet planted in the ground, like trees). There were also wooden furnishings that included a small table and two chairs connected by rectangular repositories for a growing collection of ethnographic, cartographic and botanical images, diagrams and texts, all mounted on plastic plates, as well as two varieties of the kola nut and a suspended decanter for dripping its amber-coloured extract onto handmade cotton paper. The sum of these parts was a complex figure of tectonic beauty but also precise functionality. One could sit comfortably at the table on the cushioned chairs and choose between the darker brown *Cola acuminata* and the lighter yellow, or cream, *Cola nitida*. Once the nut was chosen, it was cut in half with a knife — as a sign of respect, according to the custom of Nkanga's Ibibio people — and then it was to be chewed slowly.

Monika Szewczyk looks at Otobong Nkanga's ritual engagement with objects, arguing that her desire to put things back into circulation undoes the logic of accumulation of both art and capital.

might here conclude that anything committed to print runs the risk of transmuting the artist's work into something anathema to it. Writing and reading are linear forms, whereas the forms that Nkanga chooses for her work are anything but! Yet the challenge that this situation poses — with the potential for the printed word to arrest what Nkanga calls the 'politics of flux' — need not be paralysing.³ Rather, in thinking alongside

1 Georges Bataille, *The Accursed Share, Volume 1: Consumption* (1949, trans. Robert Hurley), New York: Zone Books, 1991, p.6.

2 Hans Ulrich Obrist in conversation with Otobong Nkanga at Forum, a collateral event of the 1:54 Contemporary African Art Fair, Somerset House, London, 17 October 2013, available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=asqL6iwLHXw> (last accessed on 14 August 2014).

3 Conversation with the artist, 26 November 2013.

All this was prepared as a stage for conversation. If a visitor did not partake of the kola nut, a truthful conversation between this person and the artist could not unfold. In the course of a performance that could last up to ten hours (requiring great endurance on the artist's part, and interestingly also demonstrating the stimulating powers of the kola nut), Nkanga engaged in a series of tête-à-têtes. Her interlocutors could choose from the plates, almost as one might choose a Tarot card from the deck, and through the free flow of words aided by images they learnt about aspects of what they just consumed, and therefore perhaps somehow about themselves. Here, a question arises: through such ritualised processes, might the dialogues, the stories exchanged, begin to feel weightier, more valuable — even a bit like gold, or other parts of the earth's make-up that happen to shine and therefore tend to be valued, owned and traded?

The Precision-Possession Dialectic

However ironic the term 'contained measures' might at first sound in relation to this multivalent, boundlessly generative work, the title clues us into a desire, a search for more precise dimensions, not only of plants and minerals, I would argue, but of knowledge and experience. The term recurs in several titles given to works using the system of presentation found in *Contained Measures of a Kolanut* — namely, the modular table structures, which Nkanga likens to molecular models, ready to receive discrete specimen. In *Contained Measures of Land* (2008), developed for Casa África, Las Palmas de Gran Canaria, the presentation — part science laboratory, part market stall, part studio — served to symbolise the continual parsing of soil as territory and resource, and therefore as a source of competition and conflict. Long, sharp, wooden sticks, which prefigured the recurring use of needles in the artist's work, pierced land in the installation — both

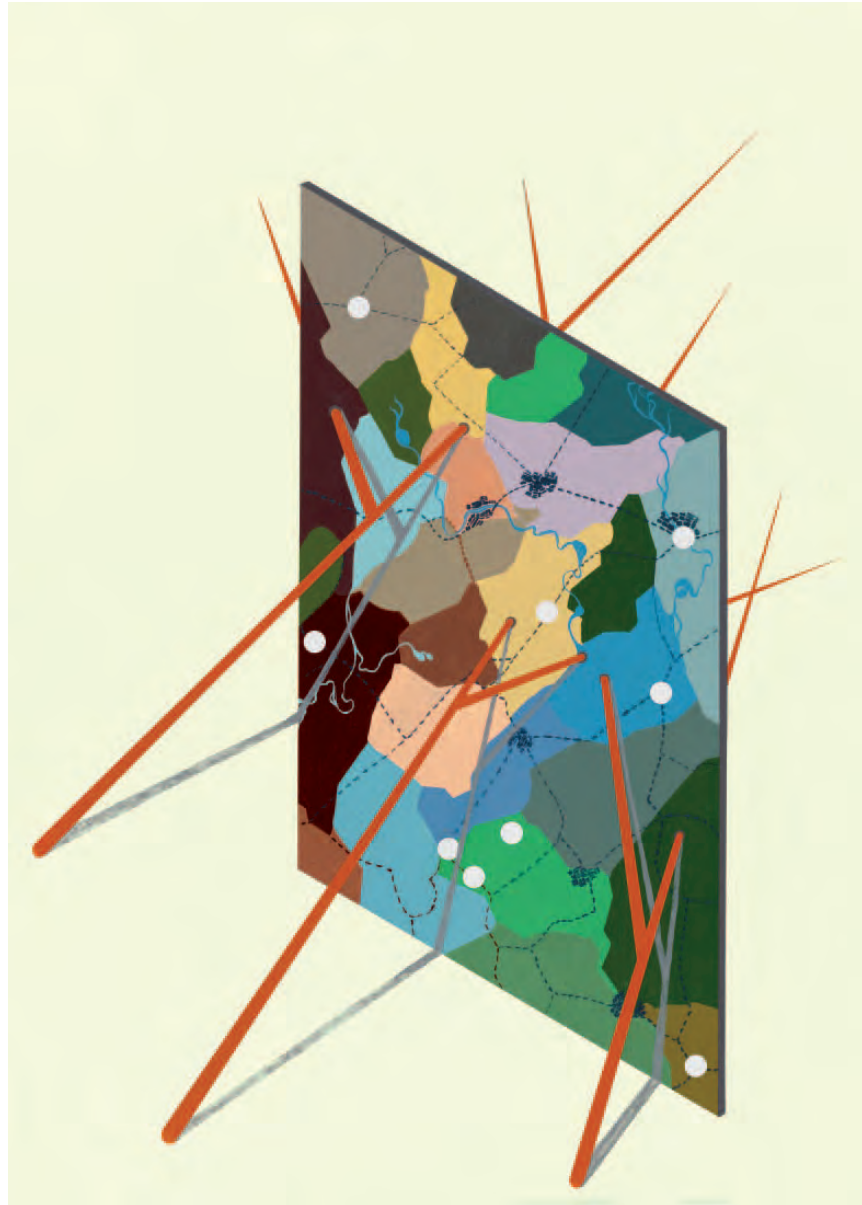
the soil gathered into small heaps in the atomised display and that represented in a series of drawings. One became acutely aware of how pinpointing something helps you own it. The complicity of the precarious piercing/pierced materials not only structured the allegory, it also made matters visceral, bringing temporally and geographically distant concerns close to home.

For *Contained Measures of Fragments of Pointe Noire* (2009), Nkanga gathered eight distinct colours of earth that she found while on a residency in Pointe Noire, a coastal city of the Republic of Congo. Pointe Noire takes its name from its designation by Portuguese navigators as later translated by French colonisers, but black rocks are not the only geological chroma available in the city; Nkanga's installation added shades of rust, brown and chalk into the mix. In an essay on the artist, Philippe Pirotte observed that, in contrast with the perverse drive to transform resources towards human ends, Nkanga creates a vehicle for showing and transporting that does not determine use value.⁴ Yet this is not to say that use is (in the venerable tradition of modern and contemporary art) prohibited. Quite the contrary, and this comes to the fore in her *Contained Measures of Tangible Memories* (2010-ongoing), where two mobile, rickshaw-like table constructions become the carriers of mica, black soap, *Cassia fistula*, indigo dye and alum specimen. With this installation, developed originally for the 2009 Arts in Marrakech (AiM) International Biennale, Nkanga first introduced the possibility of visitors applying to their skin minerals, like those which are commonly found in cosmetics. Here, beauty returns as the use value of art.

The way the distinct components of Nkanga's work actually *work* or animate her practice eludes art's conventional trope of taking things out of circulation in order to make them more meaningful (as objects of pure contemplation).

4 See Philippe Pirotte, 'Participation: A Legacy of Allan Kaprow', in P. Pirotte (ed.), *An Invention of Allan Kaprow for the Present Moment* (exh. cat.), Bern: Kunsthalle Bern, 2009, pp.9–17. Pirotte's text was written for a programme of new commissions that the Belgian curator developed at the Kunsthalle Bern in conjunction with the exhibition 'Allan Kaprow: Art as Life' (2 June–26 August 2007), for which he asked contemporary artists to reinterpret some of Kaprow's scores. Nkanga chose to revisit *Baggage* (1972), a happening that originally involved twenty students from Rice University in Houston (where Kaprow was teaching) exchanging bags of sand from a campus construction site with bags of sand from a beach on the nearby island of Galveston. The work now resides in the annals of Conceptual art, performance and Land art — all relevant sources for Nkanga's practice. And yet, for her reinvention of the happening, Nkanga exchanged land from the beaches of the Netherlands (where she was living) and the beaches of Nigeria (where she was born), folding into Kaprow's gesture questions regarding displacement and exchange between Europe and Africa (e.g. one immediately thinks of the oil-drenched soil of the Niger Delta and the enterprise of Royal Dutch Shell).

Otobong Nkanga,
*Social Consequences I:
Limits of Mapping*,
2009, round stickers
and acrylic on
paper, 42 × 29cm



Connected through networked lines or even, at times, physically merging, Nkanga's crisply outlined drawings of limbs and plants, torsos and oil tanks, buildings and other symbolic fragments take on a diagrammatic, almost instructional quality while mustering traumatic allusions. We see some forms echoed in sculptures, underscoring the status of the drawings not so much as autonomous images but as architectonic plans for things in other dimensions. Their preparatory quality is also emphasised by the dabs of colour found in most of the two-dimensional works, making them function as palette and picture in one stroke. What the

artist appears to be building here is an *emblematics* of colonial capitalism. The drawing *The Limits of Mapping* (2009–10), which features the artist's signature needles piercing a cartographic structure, accentuates the drive for precision in the interest of possession embedded in any map. And yet, this symbolic replay of colonial tactics hints towards something altogether different, more tropical perhaps; Nkanga's works work *through* colonial tropes (separating so as to invade and possess or even critique) to voice a desire not to own but to permeate the world, to seek connections.



Otobong Nkanga,
*Contained Measures
of a Kolanut*, 2012,
performance
and installation.
Installation view,
'Tropicomania:
The Social Life of
Plants', Bétonsalon,
Paris, 2012

Measures to Pleasures

In all this talk of precision and possession one is not left with absolute pain. On the contrary, Nkanga's work is as attentive to the sorrowful stories of colonial exploitation (or the use of intellectual and brute weapons forged over the centuries for the purposes of dividing and conquering) as she is to the enjoyment of rituals that constitute an alternative knowledge — a libidinal economy with a notion of resources that turns the tables on centuries-long imaginings of scarcity. Consider two early connected works, *Awaiting Pleasures* (2002) and *Perfect Measures* (2003), which she developed for an open studios

presentation at the Rijksakademie in Amsterdam and the Palais des Beaux-Arts in Brussels, respectively, and which already featured the network of modular tables that would later become a staple of her *Contained Measures* series. While the first constituted a three-dimensional sketchbook, inviting visitors to partake in the artist's thought processes as well as offering her an opportunity to observe their responses, the second (developed out of the first) allowed for the artist herself to occupy the surfaces en pointe (another mark of precision and often pain, but also poise, beauty, idealism, balance and, perhaps most importantly, self-possession).

5 In a conversation with the author in May 2014, the artist expressed a determination to continue the development of her projects, including their stages of completion, outside the strictures of exhibition calendars. We might consider all the works discussed in this text as pursuing a different temporal measure, one determined less by clockwork than by something we might describe as the workings of presence.

Looking back to these early presentations, it is as if there has been a continuous project underfoot; no single work marks an acme of completion and containment.⁵ An ideal may never be fully achieved, nor is a stasis desired — rather, the point (and there is one) seems to be to maintain a dialectic, a movement, a dance to suit ever-shifting circumstances. The needle already appears in Nkanga's early work: in one of the drawings accompanying *Awaiting Pleasures*, a large one is shown ready to prick a girl who turns away even as she holds out her one unbandaged hand for contact. The point of pain is also the point of pleasure.

Still heeding the artist's statement that what she awaits is pleasure, one can trace the continuity of this imperative throughout her work. One notable recent instance was her performance *Glimmer* (2013) at the Akademie der Künste in Berlin, where Nkanga wore a special circular table contraption around her midriff that allowed her to, among other things, display certain lit-up phrases:

Otobong Nkanga's work is as attentive to the sorrowful stories of colonial exploitation as to the enjoyment of rituals — a libidinal economy whose notion of resources turns the tables on centuries-long imaginings of scarcity.

'Clap for the Present', 'Clap for the Future'. And we all did, sometimes hollering, as much of Nkanga's performative genius lies in the infusion of an excess happiness in those present around her. Much of the performance involved this direct exchange with the audience, but there were also haunting songs rendered all the more magical as the artist performed them covered in glitter and with a light in her mouth. The whole thing might have felt excessive — all too mystical — until one recognised a deep-seated desire on the

artist's part to proclaim that there is no finite measure to the pleasure available to people working in concert with minerals, memories and the desire to draw on the infinite resources of their combined energy.

Tripping

Did I just trip up and say too much? I don't mean to sound trippy. Or maybe I do, but in a more down-to-earth way⁶ — for the artist in question has travelled a great deal. Born in Kano, in northern Nigeria, Nkanga moved to Paris as a teenager, then returned to study for two years at the Fine Arts Department of the Obafemi Awolowo University in Ile-Ife, in Nigeria's southwestern Osun State. Returning to Paris, she committed to an artistic education at the École nationale supérieure des Beaux-Arts. Admitted to the Rijksakademie, she next moved to Amsterdam, where she stayed after her two-year residency to take up Advanced Studies in the Performing Arts at DasArts. Then she taught at the Gerrit Rietveld Academie, also in Amsterdam, although by this time she had already moved to Antwerp, which remains her base, though recently she completed the one-year DAAD programme in Berlin — one of several residencies that have taken her to such disparate locales as Houilles, near Paris; Pointe Noire; and Curaçao, in the Dutch Caribbean. These long-term residences do not account for the distant corners of the planet (Sharjah, Lagos, São Paulo, Belo Horizonte, Stockholm, Singapore, New York, Havana, Las Palmas, Dakar, Bamako, Gothenburg, Reno and many places between) where the artist and her work have also journeyed and taken shape. If it is banal to talk about 'globalisation' in the abstract, and not unusual for today's artists to travel far and wide, Nkanga's approach encourages the writer to exercise some exactitude before claiming that this particular artist's research reflects a constant movement around the planet and a simultaneous resistance to conventional mapping.

6 Others have convincingly written on Nkanga's art as earthworks, bereft of the colonial tinge and macho bravado of certain practitioners of the 1970s. See, for example, Dieter Roelstraete, 'Future Greats: Otobong Nkanga', *ArtReview*, vol.66, no.2, p.88; Clémentine Deliss and Yvette Mutumba (ed.), *Foreign Exchange/Ware & Wissen (or the stories you wouldn't tell a stranger)* (exh. cat.), Zurich and Frankfurt: Diaphanes and Weltkulturen Museum, 2014; and Karen E. Milbourne, 'Strategies of the Surface', in K. Milbourne (ed.), *Earth Matters: Land as Material and Metaphor in the Arts of Africa* (exh. cat.), New York and Washington DC: Monacelli and National Museum of African Art, 2014. I am trying to cover somewhat different ground (pardon the pun).







On the present journey through Nkanga's work, I continue to return to *Contained Measures of a Kolanut*, as the iconographic, structural and performative dimensions of this work condense a lot of her experiments to date. The importance of the simple exchange of ideas across a table — ritualised through the precise performative installation so as to open up and connect the casual tête-à-tête to the invaluable knowledge transmitted via oral traditions — comes to the fore and it is not easily ascribed to some pat notion of the interactive or the relational. The great confusion of cartographers comes from a blind spot: the lack of recognition of the possible expansion of their fields, which already finds its expression in alternative maps that forgo the compass for other co-ordinates that merge stories, histories, myths and territories as well as habits or rituals of movement.⁷ Similarly, critics or historians of contemporary art will trip up if their coordinates are limited to available nomenclature. In order to begin to understand the actual territory being covered by this artist's work, then, a transformation may be required of how we behave (with art).

What's (with) the Use?

Choosing the kola nut as a subject or rather a kernel of knowledge and experience, Nkanga began her research at the historical library of the Centre for International Cooperation in Agronomic Research for Development, located in the former Colonial Experimental Garden, known today as the Garden of Tropical Agronomy, in the Bois de Vincennes on the outskirts of Paris. It was here that she gathered many of the materials that she transformed into image-plates for *Contained Measures of a Kolanut*: botanical illustrations, ethnographic photographs and maps, which became catalysts for conversation. Thus, the worldly wisdom Nkanga accumulates and transmits continues to rub up against institutions whose expressed aim is the thorough cataloguing and mapping of the planet. They, too, have produced 'contained measures': their archives yield oodles of information about the origins, properties and cultivation of so many forms of worldly inhabitants (e.g. plant life). What could be missing?

Most notably, institutions which prioritise cataloguing and mapping tend

Otobong Nkanga,
The Operation,
2008, orange tree
roots, *Tillandsia*
plants, stainless
steel needles,
150 × 200 × 70cm

Previous spread:
Otobong Nkanga,
Taste of a Stone: Itiat Esa Ufok,
2013, 5–9-hour
performance
and installation
consisting of
12 rocks from
Fujairah mountain,
white pebbles,
18 photographs and
10 poems inkjet
printed on Galala
limestone,
Protasparagus
densiflorus,
Aptenia cordiflora,
Carpobrotus
glaucescens,
Carica papaya,
Mangifera indica and
Cestrum nocturnum.
Performance view,
Sharjah Biennial 11,
2013

⁷ See Andie Diane Palmer, *Maps of Experience: The Anchoring of Land to Story in Secwepemc Discourse*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005.

Otobong Nkanga,
Taste of a Stone:
Room I, 2010,
 installation
 consisting of wood
 and inkjet prints
 on Galala limestone
 slabs, detail.
 Installation view,
 'Make Yourself at
 Home', Kunsthall
 Charlottenborg,
 Copenhagen, 2010



to forgo or forget, or simply exclude on a structural level, an investment in actual use, in practice, interpretation and ritual, including rituals of consumption — all key ingredients of Nkanga's work. The fact that she continues to use the materials accumulated by colonial institutions should not be slotted in the drawer of institutional critique. It rather marks a refusal to discount any material already in existence as a kind of cognitive currency, which is to say, a token without fixed meaning but with a potential to generate value in the process of trades, swaps, discussions, chit-chat and other means of exchange. As institutions take images and objects out of circulation, they discard them as such forms of currency. But, interestingly, if a critical perspective on colonial forms of accumulation and display is a by-product

or surplus associated with Nkanga's work, this is not where her art stops working — it is where, I would argue, it works most miraculously. At stake here is a worldly wisdom that, like capitalism, is based on rituals of exchange.⁸

And this brings me to Karl Marx's thoughts on the commodity, which constitute a kind of intellectual currency and remain in circulation, but perhaps at the expense of thinking otherwise. It would take much more time and space to address more fully the aesthetic and intellectual exchange pointing in this alternate direction, and I am just at the beginning of getting my head around this critical mass of ideas.⁹ But perhaps it can be accessed for the time being with something of a story about the turn Marx took when thinking of commodities and tables.

8 This is true of *Contained Measures of a Kolanut*, but also of works that extend the logic of this project, wherein Nkanga will trade stories for objects even more directly. Currently in development is a work, which will premiere at the 31st Bienal de São Paulo in the autumn of 2014, cogently titled *Landversations*. To realise this experiment in dialogue with and through materials, Nkanga will engage different persons who each have a strong connection to the land (a geographer, a botanist, a farmer, a miner or archaeologist, an eco-psychologist). Out of their accounts she will forge objects — always central to the seemingly elusive and ephemeral oral tradition, she has told me — that will form part of an installation centred around a circular table structure. Here the artist's ability to give form to processes of dialogue, translation, knowledge exchange and tradition, wherein oral histories turned into objects help to imagine alternate relations to the world, is reaching for a new level of refinement. Conversation with the artist, 4 July 2014.

9 The anthropologist Michael Taussig, the art historian Christina Kiaer, the philosopher Quentin Meillassoux, the curator Anselm Franke and the artists Liam Gillick and Theaster Gates — in very different ways — are contributing to this critical mass.



Turning Tables

Here is the German economic philosopher writing on ‘The Fetishism of Commodities and the Secret Thereof’:

A commodity appears, at first sight, a very trivial thing, and easily understood. Its analysis shows that it is, in reality, a very queer thing, abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties. So far as it is a value in use, there is nothing mysterious about it, whether we consider it from the point of view that by its properties it is capable of satisfying human wants, or from the point that those properties are the product of human labour. It is as clear as noon-day, that man, by his industry, changes the forms of the materials furnished by Nature, in such a way as to make them useful to him. The form of wood, for instance, is altered by making a table out of it. Yet, for all that, the table continues to be that common, everyday thing, wood. But, so soon as it steps forth as a commodity, it is changed into something transcendent. It not only stands with its feet on the ground, but, in relation to all other commodities, it stands on its head, and evolves out of its wooden brain grotesque ideas, far more wonderful than ‘table-turning’ ever was.¹⁰

The last time I saw the work of Otobong Nkanga — her installation *In Pursuit of Bling* (2014) was at the 8th Berlin Biennale — I was struck by how much she had invested in the will of (seemingly) inanimate things. In one of the videos accompanying an array that could be called ‘contained measures of bling’ (which included a shiny slab of mica floating and rotating as if by magic¹¹), she addresses the severed copper spire of the Kaiser-Wilhelm-Gedächtniskirche¹² amongst other similar ‘man-made mountains’ in Berlin, asking how the material (the copper carbonates azurite and malachite) got there, how it symbolises or materialises colonial glory and whether it has a memory of the mined earth that housed it for millennia — notably the fabled Green Hill of Tsumeb, Namibia, praised in the 1890s as the world’s richest mine but completely depleted only a century later. Standing amidst *In Pursuit of Bling*, one looked around and wondered at all the other material memories.

An expansive, connective, permeating logic is at work in Nkanga’s merging with objects, plants and indeed glitter — that strange cipher of abundance in times of scarcity. Beyond commodification in the Marxist sense, what we seem to be witnessing is a form of camaraderie.¹³

Otobong Nkanga,
In Pursuit of Bling,
2014, video, sound,
13min, still

10 Karl Marx, *Capital*, vol.I, *Capitalist Production* (trans. Samuel Moore and Edward Aveling), London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1959, p.76. Note that ‘table-turning’ was the colloquial term for a seance in Marx’s time.

11 The effect was achieved with magnets.

12 The Kaiser-Wilhelm-Gedächtniskirche is a Protestant memorial church that was partly destroyed in the air raids of World War II.

If Marx, Freud and so many anthropologists after them have pathologised relations to objects as fetishism, we might ask if their theories have addressed the kind of affective, even affectionate energy that Nkanga imparts on minerals, materials and flora. Departing from critical tradition, even if she is well schooled in it, she chooses rather to inspire, to raise the bar of possibility for a form of exchange that exploits the traditional (even the ancient) *and* the transformative (maybe even transcendent) sides of the process of transmutation we call commodification. Uprooted but determined to remain in cahoots with the world around her, it is as if she too understands herself as that source of power, a resource.

Marx was weary of magical thinking, or he at least wanted to get beyond 'table-turning', and therefore beyond that attempt to connect (to ancestors, but also perhaps to tables), which early colonial and Industrial Age Europeans ritualised via the seance. I suspect that he was afraid of the *unfreedom* implied in somehow being possessed by a spirit, by an object — all the while shackling himself entirely to a kind of empirical reason tailored to imperialism. Did he take a turn that limited the imagination? A different notion of possession is offered within the oral traditions that Nkanga belongs to; it is cogently expressed by an elder in the novel *Anthills of the Savannah* (1987) by the Nigerian and Igbo writer Chinua Achebe: 'the story is our escort; without it, we are blind. Does the blind man own his escort? No, neither do we the story; rather it is the story that owns us and directs us.'¹³ One can see this logic of possession operating in Nkanga's willingness to ask and listen to copper or to put a kola nut at the centre of the story. The possession, the seance, the surreal or the fantastic are present alongside scientific data, materials and images, not as opiates but as openings to another understanding of worldly relations. And so, present in a literal sense in the modular and thereby mobile wooden furnishings of Otobong Nkanga's installations, the proverbial tables continue turning...

13 This recalls the notion of objects less as tools than as friends or comrades that Boris Arvatov put forward in the mid-1920s, the period of the most adventurous post-revolutionary socioeconomic experimentation before Stalinism set in. See B. Arvatov, 'Everyday Life and the Culture of the Thing (Toward the Formulation of the Question)' (1925, trans. Christina Kiaer), *October*, vol. 81, Summer 1997, pp. 119–28. Nkanga, however, moves beyond theory into practice, relying less on the Russian linguist's ideas than on age-old traditions passed down through the necessarily performative oral culture that she grew up with in her native Nigeria.

14 Chinua Achebe, *Anthills of the Savannah* (1987), New York: Anchor Books, 1988, p. 114.



Otobong Nkanga, *Filtered Memories, 1990–92: Survival, 1990–91, F.G.C. Shagamu*, 2010, acrylic on paper, 42 × 29cm. All images courtesy the artist; Lumen Travo Gallery, Amsterdam; and In Situ Fabienne Leclerc Gallery, Paris

Otobong Nkanga: Nothing Is Like It Seems, Everything Is Evidence

– Yvette Mutumba

*The authentic artist cannot turn [her] back on the contradictions that inhabit our landscapes.*¹

– Robert Smithson

Otobong Nkanga operates like a scientist. With a forensic gaze, she looks at objects and environments that trigger memories, thoughts or emotions. These are the entry points for her in-depth research into broad historical contexts and engagement with a wide spectrum of disciplines, from political theory to philosophy, sociology and the natural sciences. She submerges herself in archives, examines raw materials and consults experts on their respective fields. Pivotal to her work is examining and altering ideas of land, home and displacement, and how they are connected with memory. ‘Memory is not only an autobiographical state,’ she argues, ‘but also an important notion in relation to objects that leave traces’; however,

objects and bodies: factory buildings, dwellings, barbed wire, mother-and-child figurines and apparitional scenes of sexual encounters function as allegories of labour, domesticity, feelings of belonging, possession, security and the loss of innocence. The drawings include single legs, levitating, marching or carrying objects; flying arms, appearing like torn-off dolls’ limbs, human-object-hybrids or prostheses; bodies without heads or faces; anthropomorphic trees and plants; piercing needles; floating architecture and bits of soil. Their conglomeration brings forth the painful resonances of lost moments – the phenomenon of phantom pain. Although fragmented, the bodies and scenes are connected through conceptual threads, creating a complex picture of how the exploitation of resources and people can shatter basic existence. Nkanga’s drawings – functioning either as preparatory studies or presented in installations that also include everyday objects, unspecified built environments, flora or geological samples – offer an introduction into the artist’s iconography, designed to spark memories beyond her own.

When, in 2011, she was invited to work with the ethnographic collections of the Weltkulturen Museum in Frankfurt am Main, Nkanga proposed to examine the relationship between the present context of the artefacts in the museum’s Africa collection and their original cultural setting. Nkanga decided to focus on money, weapons and jewellery from West, Central and Southern Africa because of their multiple purposes: jewellery and weapons, for example, as accessories of prestige, were often used for monetary exchange. In order to connect to the objects, she took photographs of herself

Yvette Mutumba unpacks Otobong Nkanga’s interest in the environment, bringing her relational approach to land into focus.

she also concedes that ‘nothing is like it seems and everything is evidence’.² For her, intangible elements such as smell are as important as objects in the narration of who we are. While Nkanga scientifically researches broader contexts, it is, in the end, non-written evidence she is most interested in.

In the dreamlike sequences of Nkanga’s drawing series *Social Consequences* and *Filtered Memories* (both 2009–10),³ the artist recollects both her native Nigeria and her adoptive Europe via fragmented

1 Robert Smithson, ‘Frederick Law Olmsted and the Dialectical Landscape’ (1973), *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings* (ed. Jack Flam), Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996, p.164.

2 Conversation with the artist, 5 April 2014.

3 The series of drawings *Social Consequences I*, *Social Consequences II*, *Filtered Memories 1977–81* and *Filtered Memories 1987–96* were published together in the artist’s book *No Be Today Story, O!* (Amsterdam: Lumen Travo Gallery, 2010).

dressed in black and holding them with gloved hands. She also drew diagrams explaining the origins and functions of the artefacts, and wrote texts describing their imagined contexts. The different elements were designed and printed as compositions on placards to reference so-called *calendars* — posters that are widely found in schools, shops and other public spaces across Nigeria and that illustrate a broad spectrum of topics for an illiterate audience, from politics, social criticism and health advice to the newest film releases and fashion trends. Just as Nkanga had to reconnect with these historical artefacts despite their being, to some extent, part of her cultural heritage, she assumed that other Nigerians would also not be able to immediately identify their context and function. By distributing these picture sheets in Nigeria in addition to showing them as part of the exhibition ‘Object Atlas — Fieldwork in the Museum’ (2012) at the Weltkulturen Museum,⁴ Nkanga facilitated new access and understanding of these objects for a Nigerian audience. The *calendars* became, then, re-narrations of the objects’ histories with regard to both their current housing in the museum’s collection and their original cultural context.

The ethnographic artefacts are evidence of past plundering and accumulation of material objects, a by-product of colonialism. In *Limits of Mapping* (2009–10), a table in the shape of a map representing fictional countries has been pierced through with huge wooden rods, recalling how African borders were once drawn up around a table in Berlin.⁵ The map stands here as an abstract and disembodied reference to wrecked livelihoods and exploited resources, while the rods are connected to a central visual motif in multiple works by Nkanga: the needle. In the 2008 installation *Contained Measures of Land* (2008), for example, the work *The Operation* (2008) showed an orange-tree root pierced with oversized, stainless

steel pins and needles, while a series of accompanying paintings depicted enormous thorns that penetrated floating landscapes of lakes and woods. The act of piercing references the procedure of targeting land in the framework of colonial enterprises as well as in today’s corporate exploitation of natural environments. Every time a needle penetrates matter it simultaneously destroys and creates: it produces a hole, which in itself is a new construction. Nkanga’s reiteration of this violent act across her drawings and sculptures reflects on the infinite process of destroying and rebuilding that defines our relationship with the material environment, while also condensing the unresolved entanglement of people and geographies.

Nkanga’s practice can be seen as part of a resurgence of interest in land over the last decade⁶ amongst artists from Africa such as Sammy Baloji, George Osodi, Mame-Diarra Niang and Jo Ractliffe, whose practices attempt to map historical and geo-political traces of memory, narrative, identity and ownership.⁷ From the exploitation of the oil-drenched Niger Delta captured in Osodi’s photographs

Nkanga defies the prejudiced views that African artists should necessarily address the cultural and social specificities of their localities, a phenomenon that needs to be seen in the context of the debate around the ‘authenticity’ of art from Africa.

to Niang’s chronicling of the permanent cycles of destruction and reconstruction that make up the urban landscapes of African cities such as Dakar, the works of this group of artists can be seen to focus on visually capturing the scars on the environment left by colonialism, war and exploitation — that is, on the changing

4 ‘Object Atlas — Fieldwork in the Museum’, curated by Clémentine Deliss, Weltkulturen Museum, Frankfurt am Main, 26 January—16 September 2012.

5 At the Berlin Conference of 1884—85, also known as Congo Conference, diplomats of European governments, the Ottoman Empire and the United States met in Berlin to unscrupulously divide up the African continent amongst each other, marking what is commonly known as the Scramble for Africa.

6 For an overview of artists’ engagement with land since the turn of the millennium, see Kelly Baum, ‘Nobody’s Property’, in *Nobody’s Property: Art, Land, Space 2000—10* (exh. cat.), Princeton: Princeton University Art Museum, pp. 11—43.

7 The importance of land for practices from African perspectives was recently acknowledged in the extensive exhibition ‘Earth Matters: Land as Material and Metaphor in the Arts of Africa’, National Museum of African Art, Washington DC, 22 April 2013—23 February 2014 and Fowler Museum at UCLA, Los Angeles, 23 April—14 September 2014.



Otobong Nkanga,
Facing the Opponent,
2012–13, viscose,
wool, mohair, bio
cotton, inkjet print
on laser-cut forex
plate, 165 × 187cm.
Installation view,
‘Trading Style’,
Weltkulturen
Museum, Frankfurt
am Main, 2012

faces of natural and urban environments. While Nkanga is concerned with the devastation of resources and past and present violence throughout Africa, she shuns the monumental echoes of the past. Rather, with her characteristic forensic ethos, she produces counter-memorials: she zooms in on particular elements that make up our surroundings — particularly sand, stones and plants — to portray the struggle to (re-)define the environmental conditions in which we live.

Having lived in Europe for nearly two decades since leaving Nigeria, Nkanga’s material landscapes span from Antwerp to Lagos, and reflect the interplay between the inescapable histories that

still mark the former colony and enduring mechanisms of exploitation. By working across different contexts and landscapes, she questions the dialectics between what is ‘indigenous’ and what is ‘foreign’, thereby revealing complex entanglements. In this way, she defies the prejudiced view that African artists should necessarily address the cultural and social specificities of their localities — a phenomenon that needs to be seen in the context of the decades-long debate around what defines the ‘authenticity’ of contemporary art from Africa and the Diaspora.⁸ The authenticity debate has pitched two irreconcilable definitions of art from African perspectives against each other, according to which artistic

⁸ For different views on this debate, see Rasheed Araeen, ‘Modernity, Modernism and Africa’s Authentic Voice’, *Third Text*, vol.24, issue 2, 2010, pp.277–86; Jean Pigozzi and André Magnin, ‘Two Conversations’, in A. Magnin et al. (ed.), *African Art Now: Masterpieces from the Jean Pigozzi Collection*, London: Merrell, 2005, pp.10–33; John Picton, ‘Made in Africa’, in Simon Njami et al. (ed.), *Africa Remix: Contemporary Art of a Continent*, Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2005, pp.53–63; Suzanne Preston Blier, ‘Nine Contradictions in the New Golden Age of Contemporary African Art’, in *African Arts*, vol.35, no.3, Autumn 2002, pp.1–6; Okwui Enwezor and Olu Oguibe, ‘Introduction’, in O. Enwezor and O. Oguibe (ed.), *Reading the Contemporary: African Art from Theory to the Marketplace*, London and Cambridge, MA: Iniva and the MIT Press, 1999, pp.9–14; Salah M. Hassan, ‘The Modernist Experience in African Art: Toward a Critical Understanding’, in Philip G. Altbach and S.M. Hassan (ed.), *The Muse of Modernity: Essays on Culture as Development in Africa*, Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1996, pp.37–61; and Sidney Littlefield Kasfir, ‘African Art and Authenticity: A Text with a Shadow’, *African Arts*, vol.25, no.2, April 1992, pp.41–97.



practices should either represent the exotic ‘other’ or conform to the aesthetic parameters of the Western canon (itself an ideological construction). Although the quest for ‘authentic African art’ has always been problematic, today’s digital exchange and the relative ease of international travel make it more difficult than ever before to maintain reductionist views.

According to Edward Said, the ‘plurality of vision gives rise to an awareness of simultaneous dimensions’ so that ‘habits of life, expression or activity in the new environment inevitably occur against the memory of these things in another environment’.⁹ In her investigations, Nkanga does not focus so much on the differences between distinct objects and environments as on their similarities and connections: ‘Going from one region to another, there are elements

that I am familiar with and most times just take for granted, such as trees, sand, stone, water, etc. What we need in our lives is basically the same — food, shelter, love, clothing — what makes us different or unique are our mythologies.’¹⁰ What mythologies, emotions and memories do trees, sand, stones and water provoke in each of us? The topographic landscape of Nkanga’s installation *Taste of a Stone* (2010) presented a space for possible answers.¹¹ On a floor of black gravel, large stones of different sizes were set atop a hump of natural iron oxide magnetite sculpted to imitate the contours of a topographic map. The stones were accompanied by epiphytes, plants that do not feed on the earth but rather moisture in the air, which thus are able to grow in the most inhospitable places — mirroring our capacity to use common elements to make ourselves at home in new contexts.

Otobong Nkanga, *Taste of a Stone*, 2010, installation of treated black gravel, large rocks, natural iron oxide magnetite and epiphytes, detail. Installation view, ‘Make Yourself at Home’, Kunsthall Charlottenborg, Copenhagen, 2010

9 Edward Said, *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001, p.186.

10 Otobong Nkanga, ‘Artist Statement’, in Charlotte Bagger Brand and Koyo Kouoh (ed.), *Make Yourself at Home* (exh. cat.), Copenhagen: Kunsthall Charlottenborg, 2010, pp.57–58.

11 Site-specific work for the exhibition ‘Make Yourself at Home’, curated by C.B. Brand and K. Kouoh, Kunsthall Charlottenborg, Copenhagen, 4 September–21 November 2010.

The creaky sound created by stepping on the gravel, the scene's visual effect and the cold, hard feel of the stones offered up a synaesthetic experience that underscored the commonalities in our perceptive responses to everyday materials regardless of the divergent affiliations we might have with them. In another room, six fragmented, visual narratives offered glimpses of what happens outside the contained zones of our personal realities. On six wooden tables, Nkanga placed photographs of different stones printed on pieces of limestone and accompanied by poetic texts and images also printed on slabs of the white stone. Maps of unidentified territories and photographs of deserted landscapes reflected on the consequences of land demarcation and exploitation, while a drawing depicting hands grasping for soil referenced the race for resources. The texts printed on the limestone pondered our individual relationships with land and natural materials. Choosing not to disclose locations or even regions, Nkanga invited viewers to relate their own experiences and associations to these images.

One cannot claim any territory, not even through memory, Nkanga suggests.

For *Taste of a Stone: Itiat Esa Ufok* (2013), the most recent iteration of this project, Nkanga created another landscape of contemplation for the courtyard of the Bait Khaled bin Ibrahim Al Yousif in Sharjah, a traditional Emirati house recently repurposed as an exhibition space for the Sharjah Art Foundation.¹² She animates this new installation of images and poems printed on Galala limestone, large rocks and plants placed on white gravel by spending hours in the space, either performing or holding a placard with questions addressed to the audience. What would they like her to do — sing, dance, talk? As visitors put

down their answers, she stood up and walked around the courtyard singing and reciting personal narratives while wearing a plant — the *Cestrum nocturnum* (Queen of the Night) — on her head. She chose this plant because it is not, as she had first assumed, specific to the region around the Nigerian city of Kano, where she grew up; the Queen of the Night can also be found in Sharjah, originates in the West Indies and is naturalised in South Asia. One cannot claim any territory, not even through memory, Nkanga suggests.

In this and other performances, Nkanga maps and connects the socio-economic, cultural and political implications of her chosen artefacts — often objects that present no evidence of a specific event or process. As she holds an item and employs her voice to speak or sing, Nkanga adds a subtle layer of meaning, as if body and object are coalescing. The relationship between Nkanga as a performer and the audience has changed over the course of her artistic practice. In her early performance *Perfect Measures* (2003),¹³ for example, she used objects such as towels, face creams, scissors, pins and oversized needles to examine her idea of the ideal place for working, cleansing, exercising, eating and resting. But in the quest for the perfect home, the performance consistently revealed defaults and flaws. In Nkanga's perception, the actual content of her performative work was hardly considered; her black female body became the landscape onto which stereotypes and fantasies were projected. In contrast to this stage-like setting, in more recent works she has attempted to shift the audience's gaze by making her performances part of the exhibition setting, and by using her voice as well as engaging the public directly. In the installations-cum-performances *Contained Measures of a Kolanut* and *Contained Measures of Shifting States* (both 2012),¹⁴ she sat for hours at a table that displayed a landscape of objects,

12 'Itiat Esa Ufok' is Ibibio language for 'The Stones of a Courtyard'. The work was commissioned for the Sharjah Biennial 11, curated by Yuko Hasegawa, 13 March–13 May 2013.

13 *Perfect Measures* was an installation and performance commissioned for the exhibition 'Transferts', curated by Toma Muteba Luntumbue, Palais des Beaux Arts, Brussels, 2003.

14 *Contained Measures of a Kolanut* was an installation and ten-hour performance commissioned for the exhibition 'Tropicomania: The Social Life of Plants', curated by Mélanie Bouteloup and Anna Colin, Bêtonsalon, Paris, 20 April–21 July 2012; *Contained Measures of Shifting States* was commissioned for 'Across the Board: Politics of Representation', curated by Elvira Dyangani Ose, The Tanks, Tate Modern, London, 24 November 2012.



Otobong Nkanga,
Diaspore, 2014,
installation and
10-hour performance.
Performance view,
'14 Rooms',
Messe Basel,
13–22 June 2014

images and archival materials – catalysts for dialogue with the viewer. In the former work, she invited guests to taste the kola nut, while in the latter she asked visitors about processes that could alter common ideas of identity, memory and perception. With their emphasis on participation, Nkanga's performances have become temporal sites for negotiating such notions and attempting to magnify their physical presence.

More recently, Nkanga has invited others to tell their own stories related to land, home and displacement while holding the objects that trigger these

personal narratives. In *Diaspore* (2014),¹⁵ six black women talked or sang, one at a time, while wearing the Queen of the Night on their heads and standing on an invented topography painted on the ground. This interest in representing multiple viewpoints is also at the centre of a work in progress, in which a mineralogist explains her latest scientific findings, a homeless person talks about her definition of home and a migrant gives an account of her journey. As well as bringing into focus Nkanga's dialogical approach to history, these polyphonic performances mark the artist's attempt

¹⁵ *Diaspore* was a performance commissioned for the exhibition '14 Rooms', curated by Hans Ulrich Obrist and Klaus Biesenbach, Art Basel, 14–22 June 2014.



Otobong Nkanga,
In Pursuit of Bling,
2014, installation
consisting of 30
metallic modulated
structures; woven
textile pieces; video;
mica; malachite
minerals; images and
text inkjet printed
on Galala limestone;
and mica insulation
sheet. Installation
view, 8th Berlin
Biennale, 2014

to act outside binaries and to consider instead the many perspectives that define us. Consider her project *In Pursuit of Bling* (2014), which focuses on the myriad transformations that natural materials go through as they move from being raw matter through extraction and manipulation.¹⁶ At the centre of the installation were two large elaborated tapestries, which rose up towards the ceiling: one of a gem pierced with needles and the other of a man and woman metamorphosing into abstract shapes reminiscent of mining landscapes. On a modular metal structure, Nkanga placed geological samples and photographs of minerals such as mica, malachite and copper, as well as texts printed on limestone. Embedded within this structure were two videos showing her presenting shiny materials to the camera and walking through the streets of Berlin wearing a crown of malachite. All these elements traced the connections between past and present desire for raw materials: from the green, copper domes of Berlin's churches to the mica used in industrial products ranging from

electronic appliances to rockets and missiles. And while this focus on our material surroundings allowed for reflection upon the commodification of nature, Nkanga's installation also addressed the ambivalence of bling: at the same time that it showed how the magnificent façades of Berlin's imperial architecture shine only superficially, concealing the dark side of colonial and capitalist exploitation, it also conveyed a much more common fascination with glitter and shimmer as that which makes us, as individuals, feel out of the ordinary. As much as *The Pursuit of Bling* is about the exploitation of resources, then, it is also about the constant pursuit for the better and the brighter, for those moments in which we all can finally shine.

¹⁶ *In Pursuit of Bling* was commissioned for the 8th Berlin Biennale, curated by Juan A. Gaitán, 29 May–5 August 2014.