

Zayannah conversation...with Otobong Nkanga

Speaking with Otobong Nkanga for the first time was like having a conversation with a long lost (and now found!) close friend. Passionate about art, and of course, passionate about her work, this dynamic artist is of the view that the essence of making art is to give another perspective from which to view the world; to highlight and raise awareness of details that would ordinarily be taken for granted - in her own words "Works of art are statements which sometimes serve as lenses to the understanding of who we are..."

FRA Born in Kano and now living in Antwerp...how did that come to be?

ON My family comes from Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria (of former Crossriver State). In the early seventies my parents moved to Kano - my father was working in Kano where I was born; and we moved to Lagos around 1975. I studied and lived in Lagos. At the age of 12, my mother was then transferred to Paris - she was working with UNESCO, and so during part of my teen years I studied at the British School of Paris (BSP). Mrs Diana Schops, my art teacher at the BSP, was very interested in me staying in Paris when my mother was transferred back to Nigeria; but my mother said no...she came with her kids - she will go back with her kids! Back in Nigeria in 1990, I attended Queens College Yaba, Lagos, and then after that, the University of Ife. But when my mother died after a car accident in 1992, Mrs Diana Schops invited me back to Paris to come for a year - just for a change and to study for a bit. I was meant to only stay in Paris for one year. But I stayed on and studied at the Ecole National Supérieure des Beaux-Arts, Paris; and then I got a residency at the Rijksakademie in Amsterdam where I met my husband; and we moved here to Antwerp!



FRA I was really excited to learn about *Across the Board* at the Tate and also your involvement in the project. I was also surprised to read online that some have criticised the project as being an exploitation of African art! What do you say to that?

ON First of all, I do not understand what it means within the context of "an exploitation of African art!" I don't agree - and this is not because I took part in the project. GTBank is financially supporting *Across the Board* - which incidentally, also goes to Accra (Ghana), Doula (Cameroon), and Lagos (Nigeria). The launching of the project at the Tate in November 2012 was the first of a series that is meant to showcase art from the continent of Africa. It is not about exploitation but it is about showing multiple facets of works and ideas coming out of the continent. I was invited as an artist and performer, to reflect on the notion of the politics of representation. I decided what I wanted to do, and how I wanted to work. The curator, Elvira Dyangani Ose, who is in charge of the project, made sure that my installation and performance, *Contained Measures of Shifting States* was produced and presented in the best condition that the Tate could offer; and I was paid for it. So if I'm exploited then I wouldn't have a good condition of working and neither would I be paid for it! When people say it's an exploitation - what are they talking about? It would be good to know what forms their perspective of the notion of "exploitation" in relation to African art and this project. Works of art and artists from Africa and the diaspora are gradually being showcased locally and internationally - and this has come about through the perseverance and hard work of artists, curators and institutions within and outside the African continent. This is a great step to see institutions like GTBank and the Tate working together to support and showcase works of art, artist and ideas from the continent and its diaspora. I think it is an easy way out for some people to talk about exploitation; but wouldn't it be better to discuss and talk about how these kinds of collaborations can open new possibilities of visibility, preservation and awareness of the history and arts from Africa...

FRA How would you describe your art...in your own words?

ON I am a visual and performance artist; and I work in a broad spectrum of media such as installations, photography, performance, drawings and sculpture. I enjoy experimenting and having pleasure



Taste of a Stone Room II

with what I'm making and the materials I discover along the way. I take inspiration from my surroundings and the accounts of certain spaces and natural resources I encounter, which trigger questions that I do not have answers to. My artworks are a result of observations, investigations and sensations of material and spaces. The notions of memory, temporality and displacement of ideas and things have a crucial role in the way I look at objects, architecture and culture. So in most of my artworks I use various forms of expression to expose the complexity and history of certain minerals, plants (eg kolanut), places etc.

FRA Otobong Nkanga...visual artist; Nigerian; African; woman; performer; lecturer; scholar; photographer...are you happy with these descriptions of you? Is there any that you value most?

ON I am a woman who is an artist who speaks Ibibio, the language of my mother and father who come from Nigeria - English, I learnt in all the schools I went to in Nigeria. I am Nigerian because this country was my first teacher and lecturer in the art of performing. There is no other place in the world that I have been to that has such an intensive course. I'm a fusion of different worlds. As I explore other continents, apart from Africa, I encounter fragments and traces that remind me of my own continent. Africa is huge with so many countries and lifestyles - I do not embody the whole continent and neither do I want to! The amazing thing is that our planet has so many hidden secrets, altered histories, and forgotten stories, that it is such a resource to delve into, photograph, research, learn and share. All these are very valuable.

FRA Are you an optimist or a pessimist?

ON I am an optimist. I think to make art you have to be an optimist somehow, somewhere, if not you would give up and do something else that pays the bills! But you have to be an optimist - you have to believe, you have to hope - you still want to do something that tries to change and make us aware of our environment. So I would say that I am deeply optimistic...but that doesn't mean I do not understand the notion of pessimism. I have to find a way of going beyond that which can only come through optimism and believing that things can only get better through what you do.

FRA You're currently exhibiting at the Biennale Benin - apart from showcasing art, the organisers of this Biennale have stated that through it they also seek to provide a platform for capacity building opportunities to empower emerging industry players around specific skills. Is that something that you are keen on - nurturing emerging talent?

ON Most times, going back to the continent is mainly to give a talk, workshop or to meet with other artists or to be part of a biennale or an exhibition, which is another way of exchange, sharing and nurturing. I hope that the works I make and exhibit and the workshops I give would encourage emerging artists as I was also encouraged, influenced and nurtured by the works of artists like Prof Agboola Afolarin, Demas Nwoko, JD Okhai Ojeikere, and more. Within the continent there are a number of artists like Goddy Leye (Art Bakery, Cameroun), Bill Kouelany (Les Atelier Sahm, Brazzaville, Congo) and more curators and structures, for example, Bisi Silva and Jude Anogwih (CCA Lagos), Koyo Kouoh (Raw Material Company, Senegal), Doualart (Cameroon) and many more who are nurturing and discovering emerging talents. They have created a space where artists, art lovers, and supporters come together to exchange, discuss, and debate; and it's great to see that another biennale apart from the Dakar Biennale is playing a part in showcasing and creating a platform for art on the African continent. One of the things I am keen on in the future, would be to open a centre for research of natural resources - but I don't know how to go about it yet. I would like to work with young artists, designers, and architects to experiment...to find new ways of creating, innovating and working with natural resources found locally.



Contained Measures of Shifting States

FRA What makes you most happy?

ON I wake up in the morning and I say "I'm happy to be alive". I'm happy that I'm not ill. I am happy to have found love. It might not be anything tangible but just to wake up to the fact that I feel good, is actually enough to make me happy! I can start the day with doing something or not doing anything. I know how precious health is and what it is to have health - so that's one thing I'm always happy about. Health is priceless. Another thing that makes me happy is having sparks of ideas and imagining and experimenting with different stuff. I'm always happy when I see my work progressing and gradually perfectly falling into place...and in that way, surprising me!

FRA What are you looking forward to most in 2013?

ON 2013 is a great year! I have been nominated for the DAAD Prize in Germany; it's in Berlin which is a nice place. It's a very good residency programme. I will be there from June 2013 to June 2014 and they provide the space for you to work and finance too. So I can really have time to work and expand on ideas that I have wanted to explore but did not have the time. So that's something I'm very much looking forward to. But before that, I will be taking part in the *Sharjah Biennial* in the Emirates. For the exhibition in Sharjah, I will be making new works - so I'm looking forward to that also. But, mainly from June 2013 to June 2014 I would have time to finish off some things or to expand on some things that I've started working on over the last years; and to have that possibility to have a place to focus on things I really want to do without having the pressure of exhibitions or of deadlines.

FRA How does one follow your progress throughout the year?

ON Facebook (Otobong Nkanga) and on my website (www.otobongnkanga.com) click on the CV, it will give more information.

FRA Otobong Nkanga...thank you!



Shaping Memory

*All images courtesy of Otobong Nkanga

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