

Otobong Nkanga's Exhibition 'The Encounter that took a Part of Me', 31.03-28.05.2017, Aarhus, Denmark

Kasper Ostrowski

imvko@cc.au.dk

In the spring of 2017 Otobong Nkanga was featured at Kunsthall Aarhus in Denmark with a 2-part exhibition entitled *'The Encounter That Took a Part of Me'* curated by Irene Aristizábal and co-produced with Nottingham Contemporary. On show was a new version of the installation and performance piece *'Taste of a Stone'* from the 2012 Sharjah Biennial, but also a new commission: an installation consisting of a large-scale wall drawing, a diptych tapestry and sculptural display structures. While the exhibition only took up two relatively small show rooms, it was easy to lose yourself in her intriguing work.

The exhibition

Her new piece revolves around ethnography, cartography and topography. The sum of these parts is a complex figure of tectonic investigation. When entering the room, you barely register the tapestry at your right-hand side (See figure 1 & 2). Then, slowly, you realize - this diptych tapestry is mesmerizing. When looking closely at it, it seems almost like glistering cobber threads are woven

into the black textile (in reality the tapestry is woven from twisted yarn, polyester, wool and a kind of reflective thread used for high visibility apparel). Seen from a distance rusty desert- or mountain-like geographical structures seem to emerge. The tapestry mimics a satellite photo of earth. A potent piece which both triggers an urge for topographic investigations and makes me question the relationship between scales. It is simultaneously close, detailed almost fractal-like and offers a distanced overview or encompassing gaze. I lose sense of time trying to find the exact spot where one view gives way to the other.

The wall drawing is in fact not painted on the wall, but mounted on large wooden squares arranged on a colour scale from dark grey to white (See figure 3).

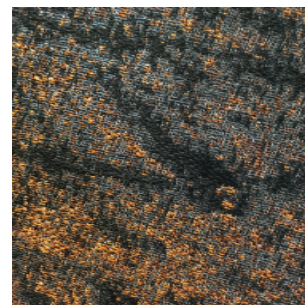


Figure 2



Figure 1

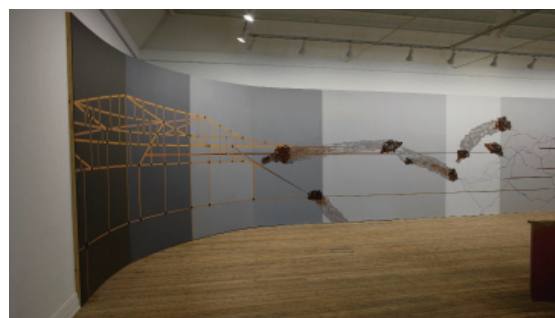


Figure 3

On the darkest couple of squares, bamboo-like lines and dots create an outline of industrial construction in orange hues – maybe a hut or a cabin?¹ It seems as if the painted structure is gradually disintegrating and turning into organic rusty flecks of iron, which slowly moves outwards leaving grey traces on the changing backgrounds. Gradually the traces turn into a giddy mesh of thin roots. The piece seems to outline the procedural changes between constructions and connections *and* natural decay and decompositions.

Centrally placed in the room are three hexagonal display cases mounted with metal poles (See figure 4). The first case contains earthy



Figure 4



Figure 5



Figure 6



Figure 7

shapes of decayed metal scraps placed on top of now lightly miscoloured white felt (See figure 5 & 6). Industrial material on the brink of total decomposition. Simultaneously soft, hard, organic, constructed, clean and soiled. The next display contains thin beautifully coloured slaps of clay placed in brown, grey and blue (contaminated?) dirt, stones and gravel. The broken clay plates resemble cartographic

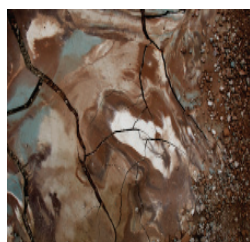


Figure 8

structures or maps - complete with altitudinal indications, rivers and lakes. Nkanga is making maps of earth with clay (See figure 7 & 8). The last display holds a hexagonal pyramid structure of rusted blue iron plates. The hard, industrial steel plates and the porous, organic rust creates a beautiful composition in blue and yellowish (See figure 9 & 10).

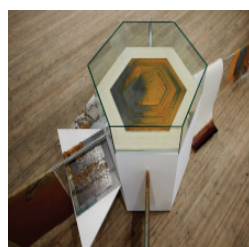


Figure 9



Figure 10

The titles of the three cases are 'Steel to Rust', 'Rust to Debris', and 'Debris to Dust'. The cases thus mimic the process outlined on the wall, but in reverse. From dust to steel. Regressing decay. Nkanga is tracing connections and tractions between the industrial and nature, but in a non-environmentalist manner.

The transition from one stage to next is indicated by flag-like pieces of imprinted cotton mounted on steel rods braced on the sides of the cases (See figure 11). The nonfigurative prints follow the colour-trajectory of the case content from yellowish, orange and blue towards grey and brownish. The flag like constructions touch upon a recurrent theme in Nkanga's work. The distribution of ownership in regards to soil and land.

Nkanga's work explores ideas surrounding land and natural resources along with the social and topographical changes of her environment. She observes inherent complexities included in these

changes and investigates how resources such as soil and earth, and their potential values, are subject to regional and cultural analysis.



Figure 11



Figure 12

Presently, the leap from topographical or environmental changes to environmental crisis is a small one. The radiant (overheated?) threads in the tapestry and the unnaturally blue dirt discretely evoke a sense of crisis.² It is hard not to think of this installation as land art or earthwork. Not surprisingly other commentators have connected Nkanga's work to this art movement³

However, this installation seems bereft of any colonial or political aspirations and more like an empirical narrative visualized as an installation. It might even be labelled as artistic science communication?! Visiting this part of the exhibition as a STS scholar certainly feels a lot like going to work with a committed colleague or meeting with a crafty researcher. It is both intriguing, analytic and triggers an academic ethos worth entertaining.

Entering the installation *'Taste of a Stone'* is a more emotional encounter (See figure 12 & 13). The floor of the white room is covered with white stones. A part from a single white weaved tapestry with green flowers, different embossed stone plates and attenuate plants are scattered around the gentle white stone terrain. The quieting white stone court creates a soothing, contemplative atmosphere. But Nkanga is not offering a spa retreat.

Discreet conversations are taking place in the installation. The aforementioned plants are both situated next to- and printed on the Galala lime stone plates. The flora are different types of 'airplants' or *epiphytes* belonging to the family 'Tillandsia'. Epiphytes absorb water and nutrients through the leaves so their roots need no soil and are mainly used as anchors. The juxtaposition is tactfully powerful. The plants appear tenuous, even fragile, next to the harsh stone plates situated on top of more stones (some even with



Figure 13

stones imprinted on them). They are mockingly delicate, while being strong, soil-independent and able to domesticate cracks in stones and barren hostile landscapes. This conversation also seems present in a Haiku poem imprinted on one of the stone plates:

Here you stand, head high, still erect.
Some caress your cracks leaving a trace.
Some desire your style keeping you near.
I have had a taste of you
in the corners of your court
"How can I forget you?"

Is this erotically alluring 'dialogue' between a plant and a stone a comment on their internal relationship, a reference to mobile frailty versus anchored solidity or maybe even a dip towards the Anthropocene? The softly curated *'Taste of a Stone'* asks more questions than it answers leaving the guest quietly intrigued. It lingers on. As guests leave the installation they literally carry it with them and powder the remaining museum with white dusty footprints.

The stone court is both a piece in itself and a space for encounters or a stage for various performances by other artists invited to contemplate 'The taste of stone' (See figure 14). In Aarhus



Figure 14

the different performances included, amongst other things: essay and poetry readings, dance and sound performances (one performance was inspired by Donna Haraway's notion of 'companion species'). Otobong Nkanga sometimes serves as the protagonist in her performances, videos and photographs, acting as a catalyst that sets the artistic process in motion. She also attended Kunsthal Aarhus with a performance in which she wore a potted plant on her head (by now almost a signature symbol) and sang (opera like). The way she wore a potted plant resonated both with the rootless air plants and the ownership theme from next door while being a metaphor pregnant with displacement and adaptability.

A familiar taste of rust

"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" (Nkanga quoted in: Elderton, 2014).

Nkanga's work in general and this two-part exhibition in particular would be a great point of departure for any scholar intrigued by STS or topographical investigations (Latour's (1999) exemplary study of soil in Boa Vista springs to mind). While the conversations taking place in 'Taste of a Stone' center on experiencing a space through the materiality of a stone it also provides an intriguing take on the notion of taste. Here 'taste' seems much like an encompassing STS-like term in which (amongst other things) the tactile textures, the fragile contrapuntal vegetation, the sounds of gravel and the emotions stirred are all folded into each other, intertwined and interdependent.

'The Encounter That took a Part of Me' exhibits a keen understanding of human – nonhuman interactions. While human actors are physically absent in the pieces, they are made present through industrial materials. Rust seems to be the pivotal notion here. Transformation, decay and displace-

ment is investigated through the 'taste' of rust. Like Latour and Haraway she recognises hybrids and breaks down familiar dichotomies.

If STS is an attitude, as Gad (building on Foucault) has stated it (Gad, 2005), the encounter with an exhibition like this resonates in many ways such an attitude. The discrete language, the familiar grips evoke a sense of conversancy. It reminds us that our grappling with theoretical controversies needs not be dealt with in written form. Here, the conversation is both skilfully aestheticized and pleasantly familiar. Some things are meant to be lost, as Nkanga has stated it elsewhere, but the narrated encounters ripples and affects our way of looking at the world - and our attitude.

Accreditation

All photos by Kåre Viemose, Kunsthal Aarhus and the author

The artist

Otobong Nkanga (born 1974 in Kano, Nigéria) is a visual- and performance-artist based in Antwerp (Belgium).

Nkanga has been featured at numerous high-profile institutions including the Tate Modern, the KW Institute in Berlin, the Stedelijk Museum in Holland, the 11th. biennale of Sharjah in United Arab Emirates and the 20th biennale of Sydney. In 2015 she won the Yanghyun Prize.

Nkanga's works include a wide array of materials. In 'Kolanut Tales' from 2012 the list included: woven textile, photography, inkjet print on laser-cut Forex plate, bio cotton, mohair, viscose and cashmere wool. The listed materials for 'Taste of a Stone' (2017) reads: Woven textile, Polar white pebbles, sand coloured limestone, sand stone, Rein deer moss, Ficus pumilla 'Variegata', Muehlenbeckia complexa, Tillandsia Aeranthes, Tillandsia Usneoides, Tillandsia Straminea, Tillandsia Flexuosa, inkjet print on limestone.

References

Elderton L (2014) Interview with Otobong Nkanga, *The White Review*. 20.

Gad C (2005) *En postplural attitude*. Working Paper Series at the Center for STS-Studies, University of Aarhus, Denmark. Aarhus.

Latour B (1999) *Pandora's Hope – Essays on the Reality of Science Studies*. Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press.

NOTES

1. Train of thoughts: Am I actively exotifying this work due to the unfamiliar ring to Nkanga's name, making me evoke bamboo and huts?
2. The use of reflective visibility-thread resonates with Ai Weiwei's in-your-face crisis-installation at Berlin Konzerthaus in 2016. Here Ai Weiwei mounted a collection of 14,000 bright orange life vests from refugees on the five columns of the Music hall as part of the 2016 'Cinema for Peace' event (<http://www.cinemaforpeace.com>). They both evoke a sense of crisis. However, Nkanga's version is both subtle and discreet while Weiwei's is brutally rash. Nkanga's crisis is a slowly migrating process folded into itself, while Weiwei's is an urgent cry for help.
3. 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.