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Vessels, Plants, and Reparations: Otobong Nkanga's Art of Healing

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"I was interested in thinking of the space as a place where our five senses can be stimulated. So it seemed right to create five sculptures that are dedicated to the five senses we have. These senses affect how we navigate this world and things around us. Sound, sight, touch, smell, and taste are so crucial to our wellbeing. These actually aren't all of our senses, though. The pentagon is carved out of a circle, where there is no beginning nor end, creating the perfect form for communication."¹

Otobong Nkanga

Working with Otobong Nkanga is about friendship, the building of trust, and enjoying talking and thinking together. Then, miraculously, she translates those conversations and thoughts into dynamically animated and evolving visual and aesthetic matrixes, made of people and things, all connected and reactive to context.

We have talked together since 2014, when I saw her work at the 29th São Paulo Biennial after hearing about her from Koyo Kouoh, who was a curatorial agent working with me on *DOCUMENTA* (13) from 2009 to 2012. At that time, in Brazil, Nkanga and I barely spoke, since it was the opening of the Biennial and she was surrounded by people hanging out and talking together near her project *Landversation*, five tables filled with plants and minerals, animated through conversations with experts on the land I was in. "*Landversation*," writes Nkanga, "is a project comprised of five tables that are animated by five different groups / communities / persons that have a deep connection to land. What I mean with regard to the notion of 'Land' extends beyond just soil, territories, earth, etc., but relates to our connectivity and conflicts in relation to the spaces we live in and how we humans try to find solutions through simple gestures of innovation and repair."² The work struck me as a strange and new kind of relational art, something like a place where sculpture meets community center and science lab—a place where people could speak through materials and objects that would act as catalysts for conversations. This reminded me of early twentieth-century psychoanalyst Melanie Klein (1882–1960) and her theories of art as a form of reparation and healing (*Love, Hate, and Reparation*, with Joan Riviere, 1937), the same Klein who learned that you could understand traumatized children if you played with them (*Infant Analysis*, 1926), because she believed repressed content would emerge indirectly in children's games.

Nkanga and I have been talking together as friends and cultural practitioners more intensely since we were thrown together in a large modern skyscraper and multipurpose building designed by Arata Isozaki in 2016 for the first edition of the Shanghai Project, initiated by Hans Ulrich Obrist and Yongwoo Lee at the Shanghai Himalayas Museum that Yongwoo Lee was leading at the time. Nkanga was there to present *Landversation* for ten weeks; indeed, the project had become on-going after Brazil,³ repeated in different places but always designed to help heal the fractured relationships that people in an urban environment like Shanghai have with land, culture, and society

through unprogrammed conversations between farmers, scientists, architects, healers, entrepreneurs, and passers-by. I was attending to give a talk and there we were, in a hotel room, after all the public events were over, talking together for hours and hours deep into the night, of Arte Povera (I learned she had studied in Paris with Giuseppe Penone), of Antwerp and craft, of Nigeria and her mother tie-dyeing cloth, of slavery, colonization, women and patriarchy, of feminist science studies and why matter matters, and of so much more. Since then, we have never stopped talking—there are rivers of spoken words to be transcribed and edited someday.

Words and sentences are like lines, lines of flight and lines in a drawing that slowly become a map and a web, both physical and immaterial, which is also made up of WhatsApp chats but mainly of calls, and meetings in different places all over the world during the so-called “globalization” of the 2000s that was accelerated by instant messaging and (problematic) cheap travel. The experience of being with Nkanga, sometimes in the same place, sometimes far away and yet connected, is one of the most fulfilling and grounding aspects of life, a way to navigate a world made of soundbites and bits and numbers, a way of nurturing intellectuality and love even in a realm of algorithms and predictive behavior, of surveillance and fingerprints, of facial-recognition programs and incumbent authoritarian regimes. She is an artist who shapes social sculptures on local levels, weaving together many small markets, squares, museums, and biennales, to create a different and alternative map of the world in the long run, her own map of people joined together because they care for each other, for place, and art. In her case, art is a free form of intuitive knowledge production achieved through the senses that descends from, and departs from, both Western canonical art history and crafts, which she appreciates as a Belgian European,⁴ and cultural traditions and artistic practices and craft from her African heritage. She grafts new trajectories in their encounter, which has been called a form of “Afropolitanism”—although she refuses to be traced and branded with any specific identity.⁵

Then came documenta 14 in 2017, curated by Adam Szymczyk in Athens and Kassel. For this global art exhibition, Nkanga created *Carved to Flow*, a complex multilocational project sited in Athens, in Kassel, and “elsewhere,” as she wrote at the time. Inspired by the notion of circular economy and transformative support structures, for the largest global exhibition in the world she went local and created her own parallel economy, proving that we all could do the same. Her work was sculptural, performative, social, and transactional, and functioned as a prototype methodology that anyone could follow, as a way to live bottom-up in self-sufficiency rather than topdown in charity. In Athens, she set up a soap-manufacturing installation-laboratory whose products were then distributed in Kassel, stored as if in a warehouse and sold in an activated performative installation inside the Neue Galerie. Revenues were then channeled back into her company, which today has headquarters both in Athens (a gallery and non-profit art space) and in Nigeria (a farm run on biodynamic and ecologically sustainable principles). Then, these circular movements have germinated into an array of practices between Europe and Africa, creating a form of alternative grassroots economy. In 2017, oils circulated to become soap, and soap turned into money, and money went to the farm, in an example of a micro-economy and micro-politics of survival. In 2017 in Athens, The Laboratory was a place where oils, butters, and lye from all around the Mediterranean, Middle East, and North and West Africa were kept before Nkanga created these soaps, working with Evi Lachana and the Melissa Network for migrant women. They were produced in bars, dark and ash-colored, which she called *O8 Black Stone*. At the time, soap in bars was out of fashion: it was a fearful solid object in a hyper-hygienic society, because passing soap bars from hand to hand, person to person in bathrooms meant that our different bodies would unwillingly touch each other. This obsession with hygiene would increase dramatically when the Covid-19 pandemic exploded in 2020; but well before that, our fear of the body, especially of other

people's bodies, had ushered in a market for liquid soaps, packaged and distributed in plastic containers that triggered an ever-increasing anti-ecological disaster —mountains of plastic waste produced as a by-product of our wish to clean our bodies while making the planet ever more filthy. While one skin, that of our body, was rendered less oily, another skin, that of our planet—a skin called soil—became more and more inhospitable to life due to increasing carbon fossil fuel waste caused by plastics.

In *Landversation*, soil is a material and it transforms the abstract notion of Land as property, as landscape,⁶ as geography (land-grabbing, the land as defining the surface and location of a nation-state) into something very concrete, physical, and local—soil as terra, terraforming, and *terroir* (the minerals and components of soil that affect the taste of food and wine from a specific place). This reflection on the transformative, generative, and metamorphic nature of the ecosystem, always alive and in chemical transformation from liquid to solid to gaseous, inspired Nkanga's drawing for a Barolo wine label I asked her to gift for a charity auction, which she gladly agreed to do in 2022. The drawing tells us so much about her attention to soil as a space of transit with alchemical references—the lines of earth rising up into wine through flasks that look like lungs, and then transform back into microparticles in the air, inebriating us through our sense of smell and returning downward to nurture the soil. Like our tiny bodies in their precarious balance of survival in the cosmos, soil (or the surface of the land) is fragile. A thin layer of composted carbon-based organisms, both animal and plants, and ground rocks and sediments, watered by rivers and rain and snow, it is no more than 13 to 25 cm thick (about 5–10 inches) and it covers the planet and sustains all life on it. It is porous and permeable, yet it gives back tall trees, fields of grass, insects, animals. Just like skin, soil wraps a body (the terrestrial globe) and turns that body into a receiver, absorber, and sensor of sunlight: an oxygen-producing ball. The connection between soil and skin goes back in Nkanga's work to one of her earliest projects, *H.U.M.U.S.* (the Latin word for earth or ground), implemented in 2000 for the Festival de la Jeune Création in France, where she had moved to study art, just as her mother had encouraged her to do, giving up an early idea of studying architecture in order to lead a creative life not hindered by clients as that of an architect would have been. In some ways prefiguring the five tables of *Landversation*, *H.U.M.U.S.* was comprised of a small book, hammocks in a park for visitors to lie on, and a cylinder with five different shelves where creams were displayed, amongst other objects. Visitors could use these creams during their relaxation on the hammocks: sun creams to tan with, or creams to lighten skin color—artificial products designed to market desires, fight age, and cater to our delusions of changing and metamorphosing into another self in order to conform to homogenized, idealized body-images. But there is another side to this. Nkanga does not wish us to become critical “brains in a vat,” rational thinking beings without desires or pleasures. She loves hammams and spas and she loves creams and skin care, because she loves textures and touching. Every morning now I dampen a bit of cotton with the skin tonic she purchased for me at a duty-free store in some airport, and every morning I think of her and the meaning of gifts.

Nkanga speaks to and with people in her works, every time she engages in new relations. From her early *Shift and Wait* (2003), in which she pressed against a wall while she took measurements of her body, to her exquisite performance at RAW Académie in Dakar in 2018 for *Germination*, where she was wrapped in swaddling bands and was carried as an object until she self-liberated, up to her virtuosic performance of all the things you can do with a ball while traveling on an electrically-powered bus from downtown Turin to Castello di Rivoli in September 2021, Nkanga exercises and trains her body to act and move freely with agency: a decolonized and personalized body. These are processes of individuation in an era of collective intelligence and subjectivities.

She also excels in performances with her own body transformed into a vocalizing wind instrument able to celebrate the many tones, pitches, and gestures a human body can produce. Such vocalizations found their place as disembodied memories of a body performing sound as if it were a wind instrument in the pre-recorded audio track that introduced her exhibition at Castello di Rivoli in Fall 2021, entitled *Of Cords Curling around Mountains*. Visitors would hear her performative vocal achievements while crossing the narrow footpath of the Castello's third floor above a brick vault as they walked toward the exhibition area. Instead of installing her work vertically, as she chose to do in Kunsthau Bregenz in 2022, she displayed it horizontally at Castello di Rivoli, transforming the five large galleries into a single geography of islands and lines marked by ropes piercing and traversing the museum walls to make one single, continuous, ever-changing flowing landscape of wooden objects, terracotta balls, carpets, and glass objects. It became a dreamlike playground, a space to practice embodied relations (after the Covid-19 lockdowns of 2020 and 2021), an imaginary immersive environment where different materials and objects synesthetically provoked the sensation of different sound pitches, higher and lower, suggesting tactile experiences. Brown, red, and ochre walls, at times laced with Nkanga's poems that were not readily visible but that became readable as visitors' eyes slowly adapted to the environment, created a space far from the white cube. Poems were handwritten in a controlled script reminiscent of writing exercises at school, to achieve a proper cursive script. Yet the words were freed by the insubordinate poet's voice, with the artist canceling and rewriting and adding variations to the words on the wall, divergent from any normative language, which referred to pain and freedom at once, so that the exhibition as a whole became a hymn to embodied experience and to the notion of community (in a place that just a year earlier had served as a Covid-19 vaccination center while the museum was shut down to the public). In the largest gallery, on the darkest brown-purple wall, I read "When looking across the sea / Do you dream? / Of cords curling around mountains / Leaving trails in the distance / Lined with shivers sprouting from the rock." This is an elegiac, melancholy, lyrical set of verses. Do they allude to the tormented bottom of the Atlantic Ocean, ridden with bones turned to sediment and incredible marine life, all made from centuries of sunken African bodies, or to the ongoing torment in the Mediterranean Sea, a fault line and frontline of contemporary necropolitical global economic body warfare? And the black, perfectly crafted cords in the exhibition—were they images of carefully tressed hair, or of ropes used in the navigation of ships? In Nkanga's oneiric world, they became the lines of a drawing. This drawing was three-dimensional and the ropes pierced right through the thick walls of the museum, creating an image of ease and agency, of the ability to traverse boundaries not only in a virtual reality metaverse, but in our physical world of five senses.

Nkanga sees history in the story of materials, and sees materials as agents of history. If she can uncover and reactivate materials, she can reroute history, tell new and different stories that are able to germinate and generate well-being, reparation, and healing. Her work around and with the kolanut is an example of this. It all started in 2012 with a work titled *Contained Measures of a Kolanut*, which was a participatory project that anticipated in many ways the discursive and conversational nature of the later *Landversation*. It consisted of a small table for two, where the artist sat and waited for a visitor to sit across from her and perform the West African and Nigerian ritual of breaking open and eating a kolanut together as an act of bonding and trust building. During the actions of *Contained Measures of a Kolanut*, Nkanga engages in storytelling and discussing the history, uses, and meanings of the nut in Africa where it is indigenous; she recounts how it was carried by slaves as a form of energy enhancer to the American continent, where it became the main ingredient for the American-branded remedy and later soft-drink Coca-Cola in the late nineteenth century, severed from its original

African ties and cultural history. By telling this story over and over again, Nkanga performs a form of magic: she redirects the story back to its origins and claims a different one, re-performing and re-narrating history. In 2016, the kolanut returned in her work, when Nkanga created Kolanut Tales – Dismembered as a tapestry and a series of photographs on stone. In 2017, on the occasion of an exhibition about color as a political, aesthetic, and bodily trait at Castello di Rivoli, she created another germination of the work: Kolanut Tales – Slow Stain was composed of large glass kolanut-shaped vessels filled with kolanut extract that slowly trickled out of the glass via tiny orifices to stain the round sculptural pile of felt below, and eventually imbue it with reddish-brown ink. The stain represented the kolanut as a dye used to make colored cloths; the kolanut as a fruit to eat; the kolanut as a kernel of compressed and potential energy; the kolanut seeping into the felt as a slowly bleeding body, or a fertile female body, or a body in pain.

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