

ACROSS THE BOARD



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TATE
MODERN

Across the board

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A two-year project, *Across the board* is an organic and experimental platform, featuring emerging artists and exploring recent artistic practices in Africa. It consists of a series of events inviting local and international audiences to engage with artists, curators and scholars to look into current cultural and artistic production in Africa. Presenting various narratives of art making and knowledge production, contributors address questions around the status of contemporary African art as a field of cultural production.

Across the board takes place across four cities, London (United Kingdom), Accra (Ghana), Douala (Cameroon), and Lagos (Nigeria) and will raise questions on politics of representation, institution building, public space/public sphere, and interdisciplinary practices. These events alternatively include performances, screening programmes and artistic interventions in the public space, as well as artists' presentations and talks. It is also a pioneering and challenging approach to cultural partnership that complements Tate's collecting activities, developing further the conceptual framework proposed by Tate's approach to Africa, looking at theoretical aspects and cultural – historical and contemporary – 'non-collectable' material.

Across the board has a multifaceted character defined by two key factors. Firstly, it aims to engage local art scenes, having great visibility and a strong social component. Secondly, it generates new dynamic and experimental types of programming at Tate, transforming the institutional framework.

Tate Media will support these initiatives by working with the artists and other contributors to capture the events through a mixture of film, photography and text; and to disseminate these via the Tate website and other Tate and Guaranty Trust Bank social media platforms, granting access to these events to a larger audience.

A publication assembling some of the contributions to the project as well as seminal essays by prominent artists, academics and curators in the field will be published. This book will explore artistic vocabularies that connect art and society and the crucial relevance of these cultural institutions and visual centres in the build-up of contemporary African art as a distinctive field of cultural production.

Across the board is curated by Elvira Dyangani Ose, Curator International Art supported by Guaranty Trust Bank Plc, Tate Modern, with Loren Hansi Momodu, Assistant Curator, Tate Modern.



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Otobong Nkanga *Why don't you grow where we come from?* 2012 Courtesy of the artist and Lumen Travo Gallery, Amsterdam, The Netherlands

Politics of Representation

Performances

November 2012

The Tanks, Tate Modern

Otobong Nkanga,

Contained Measures of Shifting States 2012

10.00–19.00, Free

Nástio Mosquito

Flourishing Seeds 2012

20.30–22.00, Free. Ticket required

'Who needs "identity"?' This first event of the series uses Stuart Hall's reflection on cultural identity to explore the politics of representation in contemporary African art. The question on African-ness or the African artists' identity seems still to dominate every endeavour connected with the continent. But what are the specific realities that this conceptual framework depicts? Could artists produce their work beyond the limits established by several decades of an imposed canon? And if so,

what are the strategies these artists use to engage the audience into that debate?

Across the board: Politics of Representation, features the performances of artists Otobong Nkanga and Nástio Mosquito in the Tanks. The artists have been invited to address aspects of cultural identity, its nuances and pragmatisms within the institutional framework provided by the Tate collection. Questioning the politics of representation, Nkanga will present a new proposal of her ongoing installation series *Contained Measures* in which the artist invites the visitor to engage in a performance about the shifting states of objects and intangible things, such as identity, memory and perception, through a specific strategy of collecting. In *Flourishing Seeds* Nástio Mosquito will stage a selection of his most irreverent videos in an engaging performance including music, spoken word and 'a capella' songs, through which the artist questions our understanding of notions such as Art, Africa, and the West.

Otobong Nkanga

Born in 1974, Kano, Nigeria. Otobong Nkanga currently lives and works in Antwerp, Belgium. She started her studies at the Obafemi Awolowo University in Ile-Ife, Nigeria and continued at the Ecole Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts Paris, France. She has been an artist-in-residence at the Rijksakademie van beeldende kunsten, Amsterdam, and has a post-graduate diploma in Advanced Studies in Performing Arts, at Dasarts, Amsterdam, the Netherlands.

Nkanga uses a wide range of media, drawing, performance, photography, video and installation to observe how everyday experiences influence social and cultural developments in our local environments. Nkanga's works refer to autobiographical narratives to reveal the layered and complicated relationships between everyday resources and the invisible social, political and economic structures that inform them and are informed by them. Nkanga's body of work presents a poetic account of the social ecological realities of her homeland and of other places she encounters.

She has exhibited widely internationally and her recent shows include: *Tropicomania: The Social Life of Plants*, Betonsalon, Paris, France (2012); *Contained Measures of Tangible Memories: Indigo Regina*, L'Appartement22, Rabat, Morocco (2012); *Object Atlas, Fieldwork in the Museum*, Weltkulturen Museum, Frankfurt am Main, Germany (2012); *The Altered Landscape*, Nevada Museum of Art, Reno, Nevada, USA (2011); *Outres Measures and Radio Programmes*, La Galerie, Centre d'art Contemporain, Noisy-le-Sec, France (2011); and *ARS 11*, Kiasma Museum of Contemporary Art, Helsinki, Finland (2011).

www.otobongnkanga.com



Presentation at De Appel, Amsterdam, 2 May 2008. A happening by Allan Kaprow, *Baggage* (1972 / 2007–8) reinvented by Otobong Nkanga

Nástio Mosquito

Born in 1981, Huambo, Angola. Nástio Mosquito currently lives and works in Luanda and Lisbon.

I believe you could call me DZzzz, Gavião, Fly, The Night Fly, Saco, Nasty-O, Cucumber Slice, Zura, Zurara, e Dzzzzura, and that I will always recognize your call! But if you really want to know, my mother calls me António Nástio da Silva Mosquito, always followed by 'I've warned you!'

I was born in Angola in the month of the enlightened! I am the Crab and for that reason they say I have the potential of being a born psychologist, or even a teacher! Well, I confess that I've decided to be a creative tramp with financial worries! Portugal was the arena where I learned some of the tables, and also learned that a ton of lead and a ton of cotton weighs exactly the same! Queijas, Coimbra, Queijas and then Linhô! The first poem I sang was called 'Abortion'. I sang it to two or three friends. They said that it was cool, I believed them and I never stopped since then.

www.dzzzz.info

A graphic design with a black background on the left and a white background on the right. On the left, a red jagged-edged circle contains the text "don't be cool, be relevant" in white. Above the circle is the word "cool" in white. Below the circle is a white box with the text "Yeap! And if you can be relevantly cool, good for you...". On the right, a red jagged-edged circle contains a list of questions in white. Above the circle is the word "relevant" in red. Below the circle is a white box with the text "You choose where we're gonna go... U Choose.".

cool

Development?
Who is development?
What is development?
What is independence in itself?
What are you trying to mention?
What are we looking for?
What are you selling to us?
What are we buying?
Who am I to you?
Do I represent you? No!
Do I need your interaction? Yes!
What Can you do for me?
What can you do for yourself?
Where are we going to go?
How are we going to participate in?
What we want to achieve?
What is transcendence?
What is art?

relevant

Yeap! And if you can be relevantly cool, good for you...

You choose where we're gonna go... U Choose.



Nii Obodai *Mud House Wall*, from the series *Who Knows Tomorrow* 2009

Institutional building

Screening programs and symposium

February 2012
Accra, Ghana

Nubuke Foundation
Dei Centre
Art in Social Structures

Tate and Guaranty Trust Bank partner with local institutions in Accra and Kumasi, Ghana, to host a three-day event interrogating one of the most critical aspects of art as engine for social transformation: institutional building. Over the past decade, a wide range of non-state institutions and cultural platforms has occupied local art scenes fervently, producing new strategies that connect art and society, sometimes even beyond local

government's remit. This event looks at some of these examples in South Africa, Senegal, Morocco, Ethiopia, Republic Democratic of Congo and Ghana, examining the current status of art, self-sustainability and institutional building in Africa.

Organised in collaboration with

AiSS Art in Social Structures
www.artinsocialstructures.org

Dei Centre for the Study of Contemporary African Art
www.deicentreghana.org

Nubuke Foundation
www.nubukefoundation.org



Lucas Grandin *Le Jardin Sonore de Bonamouti* 2010 Courtesy of the artist and Doualart, Douala, Cameroon

Public Space/ Public Sphere

Interventions in the public space

December 2013
Douala, Cameroon

Coinciding with the Salon Urbain de Douala, SUD 2013

This event looks at the recent manifestation of a new social imaginary of the urban space in Africa. Tate and Guaranty Trust Bank Plc. participate in the third edition of Doualart's Salon Urbain de Douala, SUD 2013. Entitled *Douala Metamorphosis*, this unique African triennial celebrates the presence of arts in public spaces and explores the ways by which African cities in general – and Douala

in particular – have become creative and effective spaces as a result of the social relationships established in them. Speakers and artists at this event will address questions around the increased social engagement and participation of the citizens in the public space and the public sphere.

Organised in collaboration with

Espace Doualart
www.doualart.org



Jelili Atiku *Nigerian Fetish* 2012. Performance in Ejigbo, Lagos, Nigeria. Photo by Tajudeen Busari.

Interdisciplinary practices

Performances, exhibition and archive

March 2014

Lagos, Nigeria

The most recent artistic production in Africa explores multiple narratives, poetics and media. Assembling methodologies of various genres such as performance, conceptual art, photography, drawing or video, contemporary African artists – as some modernist creators did in the past – have established a radical interdisciplinary praxis, which allows them to narrate the daily experience in their societies while connecting them to other realities beyond any geographical boundary. In Lagos,

in partnership with platforms such as the CCA, Lagos, Terra Kulture, Chimurenga and others, the project will explore the legacy of one of the most important events to have taken place in the city, the FESTAC '77, the Second World Festival of Black and African Arts and Culture.

Organised in collaboration with

Centre for Contemporary Art, Lagos

www.ccalagos.org

Chimurenga

www.chimurenga.co.za

Terra Kulture

www.terrakulture.com

The Poetics of the Infra-ordinary

The Aesthetic of Recognition in Contemporary African Art (excerpt)

Elvira Dyangani Ose, Curator International Art

Supported by Guaranty Trust Bank plc, Tate Modern

Over the past decade, in Africa, the production of artistic and cultural projects that challenge the definition of urban space, history, identity and agency, has increased dramatically. In addition to that, there is an ever-increasing proliferation of artist collectives and new cultural platforms, the majority of which start from the need to address issues occurring in their cultural contexts that would otherwise remain invisible.¹ These ventures aim to produce artistic and cultural initiatives that engage their public sphere through means of ephemeral interventions, site-specific projects, serial events, or – circumstances permitting – by establishing permanent platforms: art centres, theatre companies, dance companies, and all sorts of venues for association. My interest here is to reflect on artists and artist collectives whose works intervene everyday experience, emphasising aspects of the 'common things', of the infra-ordinary, questioning 'the habitual' and formulating new spatial paradigms for social relationships.²

It is impossible to conceive of those contemporary endeavors without examining similar ventures that took place during African Modernism. Initiatives, such as *Laboratoire Agit-Art* (1974–), in Dakar, Senegal, and the *Kamiriithu Community Education and Culture* (1976–1977), in Gikuyu, Kenya, are some of these examples.³ These accounts exposed modern artists' search for formulas that linked their work to what was happening in their

¹ The essay defines as artist collectives any association of individuals with an artistic/cultural purpose, whether those associations are ephemeral and related to a specific project, or are permanent and make referent an organization or collective structure.

² 'Questionar lo habitual' (questioning the habitual) is Georges Perec's call to the production of a narrative of daily life, of the 'common things'; far from the newspaper headlines and the big events. Georges Perec, *Lo infraordinario*, trans. Mercedes Cebrián (Madrid:Impedimenta, 2008), 21–25

³ Elvira Dyangani Ose, 'Ways of Doing. Artistic Collectives and Social Change in Contemporary African Art' (paper presented at the third biennial symposium for The Savannah College of Art and Design's Art History Department 'Africa on My Mind: Contemporary Art, Home and Abroad', in Savannah, February 26–27, 2010)

societies – societies that during the 1950s and early 1960s were still in a transitional period, and during which artists and intellectuals played a crucial social and political role in the processes of nation building and inquiring into the reinvention or continuity of African identities and cultures. In the case of artist collectives, that desire went beyond the artworks they created, promoting, critically, the development of cultural initiatives whose goal was to blur disciplinary borders and to propose the experience of a ‘total art’, powerfully influenced by vernacular cultures and languages.⁴ In most cases those endeavors called audiences to action, demanding their awareness and engagement in the making of an artistic product.⁵ Furthermore, their participatory character was intended to provoke in the audience a political consciousness that went beyond the aesthetic experience.

Contemporary projects have inherited aspects of Kaprow’s ‘happening’ and African modern laboratories altogether. According to Kaprow, a ‘happening’ is, ‘the one art activity that can escape the inevitable death-by-publicity to which all other art is condemned’.⁶ The ‘happening’ avoids falling into art’s trap, because of its ephemeral character. It is not a commodity, it cannot be over-exposed, and it needs to be lived. A lived experience is proposed also in the African modern laboratory – an experience that in the case of *Laboratoire Agit-Art*, for instance, satisfies the prerogatives of several artistic categories, such as installation art, performance, and even a ‘happening’. All of those media are determined by a temporary site-specific art involving spectators and affecting their temporality. Other projects, such as *Kamiriithu Community Education and Culture*, have audience participation at their very core. The inventiveness

4 ‘Total Art,’ here respond to Adrian Henri’s definition, as he defined in his book, *Total Art, Environments, Happenings, and Performance, Volumen 1974, Parte 2* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974), 7–12

5 Earlier theatrical experiments as the play *Strike and Hunger* (1945), by Huber Ogunde, Nigerian highlife musician and comedian that struggles for independence, includes theme song ‘Kobo Ojumo’ (A penny day), became a household song, or, as it was called, a ‘song of the people,’ constituting a sort of precedent to those modern total art projects.

6 Kaprow, *Essays*, 59

proposed by Ngugi wa Thiong’o incorporates life into itself. As he recalls, ‘drama in pre-colonial Kenya was not, then, an isolated event: it was part and parcel of the rhythm of daily and seasonal life of the community.’⁷ Plays such as *Ngaahika Ndeenda* (*I Will Marry When I Want*, 1977), and *Maitu Njugira* (*Mother Sing for Me*, 1981), proposed ways of approaching those who would previously have regarded themselves as unprepared for such forms of education. In addition to providing a platform for the public use of their own vernacular language, those plays sought to break with the mechanisms of mystification that characterised theatre and reality.⁸ *Kamiriithu Community Education and Culture* is a significant example of an aesthetic of recognition. It accomplishes the demands of a recognition that ‘forges identity, particularly in its Fanonist application: dominant groups tend to entrench their hegemony by inculcating an image of inferiority in the subjugated. The struggle for freedom and equality must therefore pass through a revision of these images.’⁹

There are two elements that contemporary artists and artist collectives incorporate into this account: the significance of the space in which the art intervention is being produced and a clear reflection on the social relationships established in that space. In that regard, contemporary initiatives look at modern African scenarios, while at the same time proposing a new urban and social imaginary – a broader, more varied narrative that participants could articulate and lay claim to. There is strong activist potential in all of these projects that, ultimately, intend to perpetuate the changes implicit in their ephemeral interventions within the social contexts that they operate.

7 Ngugi wa Thiong’o, *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature*, (Portsmouth: Heinemann, 1986), 37

8 Elvira Dyangani Ose, ‘Envolviendo la palabra. Notas sobre la estética del ritual’, in *De Boca en Boca*, ed. Jacint Creus, (Barcelona: Ceiba Ediciones, 2004)

9 Charles Taylor, ‘Politics of Recognition’, in *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition*, ed. Charles Taylor, Amy Gutmann, et al. (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1994), 66

If for those modern African artists the questions had been: How to engage with a local audience? How to display one's personal identity and that of one's community? How to articulate a postcolonial modern experience? And how to negotiate with both Western and African aesthetic traditions? Then it seems that, given the new strategies available for self-representation and recognition, the questions may indeed have shifted. Instead, for contemporary artists working today, the questions might now be: What does it mean to produce knowledge from a specific territory? How do artistic experiences produce new forms of counter culture or inform new urban solutions? What determines the success or failure of this kind of project? And, as in many of these cases where continuity and self-sustainability are unachievable outcomes, how does one rally against that to make the temporal experience that which can develop into a permanent structure which at the same time would permit certain African actors to exercise their ability to live simultaneously in multiple temporalities...?

An extended version of this paper was presented in the the first Duke University's *Workshop on Diasporic African Arts & Black Esthetics* (Durham, 2011) and it will be published in the upcoming volume *Condition Report* edited by Koyo Kouoh, Raw Material Company (Dakar, 2012)

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With thanks

Kirsty Bevan, Alessandra Bognetti, Fran Burrows, Neil Casey, Dan Crompton, Alice da Cruz, Susan Doyon, Sam Forster, Rachel Kent, Stephan Kuderna, Lumen Travo Gallery, Sandra McClean, Phil Monk, Paul Neicho, Livia Ractliffe, Katie Raw, Mike Sefton, Nyanga Tyitapeka, Wim van Dongen

Special thanks

Guaranty Trust Bank plc for sponsoring *Across the board*

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