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Beyond A History of Things

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How to create an exhibition that “does not occupy” a space? How to “dialogue” with a region instead of reducing it to a context? How to “engage” multiple senses to share ideas and knowledge? How to “ease” body and mind, provide calm, and offer tranquility? Among the many possible ways of beginning this essay on Otobong Nkanga’s exhibition at Castello di Rivoli Museo d’Arte Contemporanea, I have chosen to open with some of the many questions the artist asked—first and foremost addressing herself—while preparing the project. The exhibition, the works created for it, and the ways in which it was all developed and produced are rooted in multiple questions, the formulation of which is a fundamental part of Nkanga’s artistic process. While the artist’s work has often been interpreted in relation to postcolonial themes, including exploitation of resources, social inequality, and the ecological crisis, the Rivoli exhibition makes it clear that Nkanga’s art cannot be reduced to specific subjects. Instead, starting from the need to ask questions and launch experiential processes, it above all reflects the artist’s methodological approach and the ways in which she develops and constantly expands her practice, which flows from the awareness that living beings are all tied to one another and to the places where they live. Branching out from this, we find the multiple, consciously ethical and holistic paths that Nkanga defines through her works. In this essay, I will not only analyze the exhibition but also trace the main phases that preceded it.

Organized in the context of a collaboration with Villa Arson Nice, which hosted the retrospective solo show *When Looking Across the Sea, Do You Dream?*, Nkanga’s exhibition at Castello di Rivoli was titled *Of Cords Curling around Mountains* and was conceived as a single large project developed starting from a new work. It engaged the building, the region, and the people, following a vision that aimed to avoid imposing an a priori concept on a place, and instead developing a relationship with it. Starting from some of the above-cited questions, Nkanga formulated countless others over the course of 2020, during the months of work preceding the exhibition. The timeframe partially coincided with the closures necessary for fighting the spread of Covid-19, which, as in other venues, shifted many trips, meetings, and site visits online. Always starting conversations with a sincere “How are you?” the artist frequently expressed her deep interest in the exhibition venue and surrounding region during the first online meetings. Although she had already visited the museum in 2016, in connection with her participation in the *Emotions of Color in Art* exhibition (2017), she devoted an initial phase of the work to wide-ranging exploration, during which she asked us to share our knowledge of the area around the museum and to carry out further research to obtain specific information: “What is the land like in the region?” “What are the crops?” “What do people eat in this part of Italy?” “What grows wild on the plains, in the hills, and on the mountains nearby?” “What are the plants and herbs?” The themes raised also involved close investigation of, for example, the colors of the land and the kinds of rocks and minerals found in the morainic hills of Piedmont and the mountains that can be seen from the museum. The characteristics of the broader swath of land stretching from Rivoli, which is home to the Castello, to Nice, where Villa Arson is found, were also the subject of many conversations and reflections, with the aim of harmoniously developing the relationship between the two exhibitions, going beyond institutional formalities. The idea of the mountain chain, especially in relation to the view of the Graian Alps

that dominates Rivoli, and that of the coast, thinking of Nice, the place where the land ends and the sea begins, were discussed and analyzed. Interpreted by Nkanga with her poetic sensibility, this little part of the world—mountain and sea, vertical and horizontal—became the poem *When looking across the sea, Do you dream? Of cords curling around mountains*. The artist wrote this poem in Antwerp, where she lives today, in an area where “the earth is flat,” as she reminded me with a smile one day when I dragged her on a walk through the undulating Piedmont hills. The first lines of this poem became, respectively, the titles of the exhibitions at Villa Arson and the Castello, following a vision that created a broader, more coherent whole while also maintaining the precise identity of each institution’s exhibition.

With respect to Rivoli, Nkanga immediately spoke of a project that, developing organically, could welcome visitors to a “calm place” that would soothe body and mind, easing tensions and reducing anxiety, following a holistic vision that accommodated the uncertainties and difficulties caused by the pandemic, at a time when, starting with personal interactions, many aspects of everyday life were being subjected to profound change. From her initial premises, the artist formulated a vision of an experiential exhibition centered on the idea of “embodied” knowledge, in reference to the fundamental role our bodies play in understanding our surroundings and the formation of thought that ensues. Hearing, sight, smell, taste, touch: those who encountered Nkanga’s works in the Rivoli exhibition were urged to respond actively with their ears, eyes, nose, mouth, and skin (while needing to respect limitations imposed by the safety measures required during certain periods).

The idea of involving the senses without ever separating them from the mind was already clear at the beginning of the visitor’s path through the exhibition. The route started in the part of the Castello colloquially called the “attic,” a gallery with an elevated walkway that was designed during the building’s renovation carried out by the architect Andrea Bruno, so that the extradoses of the vault of the grand salon below, on the second floor, a stunning masterpiece of eighteenth-century engineering, could remain on view. Instead of starting the exhibition by showing visitors one of her works, Nkanga created an opening for the project as a sequence for hearing and the imagination. The sounds were meant to suggest the artist’s presence, as if she were welcoming visitors. Connected to ideas about and feelings of depth, breath, love, creative energy, and comfort, the audio track was made up of Nkanga’s vocalizations. Open to eliciting individual responses, as if it were the beginning of a conversation, the sequence was not so much about the many myths on the power of the human voice and song as tools of seduction, but rather seemed to conjure the cohesive force of sound and its capacity to open spaces for shared experiences.

In the next gallery, the visitor found an “atmospheric” environment, filled with a pleasant warm light that evoked that of the sun and the feeling of wellbeing and improved mood that it can provide. Without changing the museum’s lights, Nkanga modified the temperature of the space by working on the walls, painting them a yellow ocher hue. As anticipated by the title *Of Cords Curling around Mountains*, the first element visitors encountered was a series of long black cords that, arranged horizontally on the floor, also went through the building’s thick walls, firmly anchoring the project to the site. The presence of the cords characterized the whole exhibition, starting with the initial plan for installing it in the Manica Lunga, which was then abandoned in favor of the museum’s third floor. Made of hand-woven and twisted cotton thread, the cords were produced with different techniques and in different thicknesses, using ancient methods that the artist learned from specialized artisans at the TextielMuseum’s TextielLab in Tilburg, the Netherlands. They suggested crossroads of narratives, itinerant stories traveling from one place to another, and the multiple readings that envelop them. A cord is a tool capable of tying and imprisoning, or saving and rescuing, helping to reach a destination, transporting cargo, or building bridges. It is also a form alluding to braided human hair, the path of rivers and streets, or the infinity of digital connections. Whatever interpretation you prefer, each cord maintained a clear function of

physically linking all the sculptural elements in the exhibition and conceptually linking the project for Rivoli to the one for Nice. As the artist explained, “For Rivoli I was thinking of this idea of having to climb a space: you need cords to climb, and you need the cords to move around. In relation to the exhibition in Nice I was interested in the idea of the sea, hence the title I gave it, *When Looking Across the Sea, Do You Dream?* And so, I was imagining a cord that connects continents. The cord is not necessarily the cord that you see visually. It is the cord that connects to our emotions, that connects to our desires.”

The sculptures in this gallery were made of a single material, following an exhibition concept that, stimulating attention and inviting discovery, gradually introduced the few, essential materials with which the artist chose to work for the project. Openly anti-monumental, the sculptures were made of solid wood. To make them, Nkanga worked with local craftsmen and used the trunk and branches of a weeping beech (a tree with long branches that droop toward the ground) that had died from natural causes. The decision to work with a dead tree was of special importance for the artist. As she explained, “I’ve always believed that nothing is dead, so even if we talk about a dead tree it still brings life in another form. Most things change form and that form can actually bring another kind of life. It’s mainly about transformation. For me, the point is not about thinking of death but thinking about the movement from something that has given up its life in this world and that is given a potential of life in another world.”

Beech is a species very common in many of Europe’s foothill regions, including the one around the Museum, and there is a rich tradition of the everyday and domestic use of its wood. Historically employed as firewood, beechwood also lent itself to the production of a variety of objects, including furniture and work tools as well as toys, clogs, and kitchen utensils, such as stirring spoons and bowls, helping the local population to get through the cold winter and also trade with the people who lived in the plains or city. As noted, although the artist’s point of departure was to use a tree that had fallen due to natural causes, it is a happy coincidence that this led her to a tree whose name references the idea of nourishment (the Italian word for beech, *faggio*, presumably derives from the Greek *φαγ-*, which means “eat,” probably in reference to its edible nuts) and that also has medical and pharmaceutical uses, since its wood is employed to make creosote, an oily liquid with strong antipyretic, antiseptic, and disinfectant properties.

The concepts of nourishment and transformation are at the base of these wooden sculptures, which were hand-finished by the artist using beeswax and vegetable oil. The wooden sculptures were also present in the galleries that followed. “I had this idea of having something that is dead carry life again,” the artist explained, “as a container to carry elements that can go beyond the object itself, that can enter into the space as something in process and in progress.” Designed by Nkanga in a range of soft, rounded forms, almost like irregular but generous human bellies, most of the beechwood sculptures were concave at the top. Never larger than the palm of a hand, these little hollows evoked the more domestic uses of this wood, such as for trays and bowls. Just like receptacles for containing food, many of the sculptures were filled with a variety of organic materials and preparations, alluding to beneficial offerings from the land and to stories, both local and from afar, that the artist wanted to share with visitors. Her research, which included excursions to the Piedmont countryside and hills, led her to meet and have long conversations with local producers and learn about the numerous medicinal and aromatic herbs cultivated in the area. From among the list of species, the artist chose for the exhibition lemon balm, mint, chamomile and, especially, lavender, which brought with them their aromas, healing properties, and histories that often span centuries and document the dense network of trade that linked peoples and cultures. Originating from Eurasia, lemon balm, for example, has been widely used among Mediterranean populations since antiquity, and the Arabs, Greeks, and Romans all knew of its purifying and calming qualities. Known as analgesic and disinfectant, in the early twentieth century mint came

from England and France to Piedmont, which is now the biggest producer in Italy. As for chamomile and lavender, they have also been very widely used in Mediterranean cultures since ancient times, both having powerful healing and calming properties. Lavender in particular, which can restore balance to the nervous system and works as antiseptic, decongestant, and anti-inflammatory, gave Nkanga the opportunity to integrate an element into the exhibition that is native to the landscape of Southern France as well as, in more recent times, that of the Piedmont hills, providing a tangible and organic link between her exhibition at Villa Arson and the one at Castello di Rivoli. Nkanga used these medicinal herbs—lemon balm, mint, chamomile, and lavender—in the form of dried leaves and flowers and as essential oils, sometimes mixing them together, as documented in a video screened in the second gallery that showed the artist's hand using a mortar and pestle to grind and combine them.

Besides herbs, some of the beechwood sculptures contained incense, clay, and salt; in an early phase, the artist also prepared mixtures with unrefined palm oil (which she then decided not to use because it turned out to be too unstable for the museum environment). As the artist explained, "When I was thinking of the containers, I really wanted them to contain elements that are within the local region. At the same time, since what we think of locality is not a stable thing, and there are new things that are coming in, new constellations that things are forming, I thought that it was important to also be able to bring in things that have traveled from elsewhere and are embedded within different communities here in Italy." And so, besides bringing a few materials with her, some collected during her extensive travels, others alluding to the idea of home, like clay from Africa and the salt that she uses in her home in Antwerp to decalcify the water, Nkanga also went to various markets and shops in and around Turin. There, she bought things like incense and palm oil, which belong as much to her family tradition as to those of many ethnic groups living in Italy. Alongside products with a long local tradition, the materials in the exhibition alluded to various forms of nourishment and wellbeing that result from their encounter.

Introduced earlier in the exhibition in the form of a small polygonal sculpture and a hand-tamped loaf of local earth, the dominant material in the fourth gallery was clay. Here, the artist used it to make a few spherical shapes, large balls that could be held in a wide embrace, as seemed to be suggested by their sensual material nature and almost velvety surface. The veining on two of the spheres closely connected them to the wooden sculptures, echoing the stratifications that, as the artist observed, are also found in many minerals. The different colors of the spheres, ranging from beige to brick red, marked out the exhibition space and stood out against the walls. Painted in a palette ranging from yellow-orange and ocher to dark brown, walls echoed the colors of the earth. A different hue was assigned to each gallery, except for the space in the middle of the exhibition, designated as the place where multiple colors met and mixed.

In the exhibition, the encounter with clay sculptures was accompanied by a sound experience. Like a belly that fills with air when preparing to sing (a discipline that the artist has practiced since childhood), one of the spheres spread sound throughout the surrounding space. Starting from the dynamic of breathing and the concept of the body/container, the artist developed the work according to the ideas at the base of the exhibition. "It is my voice, mainly talking about a bed, a soft bed, rocks, water, and love," she explained. More than a sequence of recognizable words, the sounds one heard were whispers, light murmurs. "The sound is like multiple voices," she added, "almost like a person who has many voices in their head, so sometimes the words are not legible."

Nkanga also explores the concept of legibility through poetry, which was included in the exhibition starting in the third gallery, in the form of ephemeral, sometimes barely visible colored-chalk handwritings on the walls, evoking the huge blackboards used in the analog age to write out formulas and complex calculations. As noted, it was the first time that the artist shared in an

exhibition context a part of her practice that had previously appeared only in catalogues devoted to her work. In addition to actual poems, the texts, all composed directly in the exhibition space, included visualizations of future compositions that delved into ideas about change and process. Exhibiting Nkanga's working methods and mapping thought processes, these poetic sketches juxtaposed lists of assonant words or put different languages, including English, Ibibio, and Portuguese, into dialogue.

In the fourth gallery, clay and wall poetry were joined by another sculptural material, glass. Introduced by Nkanga in a few pieces installed in the previous gallery, glass became dominant at the end of the visitor's path through the exhibition, used in the sixth and final gallery as a material that somehow linked all the sculptures on display. Various hues and produced using different techniques to make it opaque and like shot-silk, or colorless and totally transparent, the glass on view was shaped by the artist into forms that suggested marine organisms and their fluid, spherical, or oblong shapes. In other cases, it seemed to evoke alchemical vessels and alembics for extracting and distilling curative essences. The artist also used glass as a container for essential oils—chamomile oil, for example, a distillate with an unexpected intense blue hue and recognized for its calming and relaxing properties. In the exhibition, glass was in any case exalted as a material suited to transmitting concepts of primordial life and coexistence, but also fragility and transformation. To produce these sculptures, Nkanga collaborated with master glass blowers from Murano, the island where the Italian glass tradition finds its roots. For her, working with glass, which has silica sand among its constituent components, is a further deepening of her attention to the extraction and processing of raw materials and the social, economic, and environmental consequences that derive from those activities. "What does it mean," Nkanga asked herself, "to have buildings with vast amount of glass in certain parts of the world in relation to the places out of which the silicate is taken? ... Sometimes we do not understand the complexity behind a lot of things that have been produced and processed for us."

Back to the visitor's path through the exhibition, the fifth gallery hosted two carpets, the real focus of the whole project. The long cords, the multiform sculptures through which the cords passed connecting them, the numerous substances deposited in their hollows, and the multiple aromas wafting through the air: everything in this exhibition originated from these carpets, revealing it all to be a single large installation. Titled, respectively, *Leaving trails in the distance* and *Lined with shivers sprouting from the rock*, the two carpets take their names from verses in the poem that also contains the titles of the exhibitions at Villa Arson and Castello di Rivoli, following the artist's idea of drafting one poem containing everything.

Nkanga traces the desire to produce these carpets to a specific personal need, expressed in the exhibition in the form of a very short poem written on the wall. "Thinking of those carpets," she explained, "was linked to one of the phrases that I put there, Soft rock, Soft bed... I imagined a route of walking up the mountain and then arriving at a rock. There's a certain kind of relief in finding something that you can just lie on, and all of a sudden a rock can become a bed, no matter how hard, because your body is demanding a place to lie. I was thinking of this hardness that psychologically becomes a sort of softness. And that's why I looked at healing stones."

In keeping with this line of thought, Nkanga's concept for these carpets was inspired by the jagged outlines of rocks and minerals. For *Leaving trails in the distance*, the carpet in gray hues, she looked at quartz, whereas for *Lined with shivers sprouting from the rock*, the one in blue-green shades, she took inspiration from a rock containing malachite and azurite. Each of these stones has been attributed specific powers in many ancient traditions and cultures, and today's crystal therapy continues to recognize their therapeutic properties, prescribing quartz as a mineral with marked balance-restoring qualities, malachite to help with processes of transformation, and azurite as a

revitalizer during healing, aiding the detoxification of internal organs and warding off worries. All of them are healing stones with a close link to energy, a feature that, in the case of malachite and azurite, coincides chemically with the presence of a high percentage of copper, a known electrical conductor, as recognized and explained by the artist herself: “We can imagine these carpets as conductors of energy.”

In 2020, Nkanga began working out an initial project for five carpets that could be closely connected to one another while existing as individual works. At Castello di Rivoli, Nkanga presented the first two carpets, *Lined with shivers sprouting from the rock* and *Leaving trails in the distance*. To fabricate them, she worked in Tilburg with the same craftspeople who produced the cords. There, using drawings interpreting the photographic material she had collected as a basis, she proceeded with the choice of wool and cotton fiber and also oversaw the dyeing process. For *Leaving trails in the distance*, she chose fifteen different shades of gray and inserted details made with the same cotton used for the cords that unravel from the carpet. She also included yarn made of metallic polyester, commonly called Lurex. The reflective nature of this material links the carpet to the artist’s previous work with stones and the concepts of shimmer and luster, spanning a long history that runs from the exploitive extraction of metals and precious stones to the cosmetics industry and the broad use of sparkling mineral powder in makeup products. To interpret the three-dimensionality of the original stones, Nkanga incorporated techniques that gave the carpets different thicknesses, exalting as many degrees of softness in the fibers used.

The proportions of the two carpets enlarge the minerals that inspired them, adapting them to the size of a human body. As a result, the mostly gray carpet resembles a kind of boulder containing a micro mountainous landscape, while the greenblue carpet looks like a map complete with coasts, plains, valleys, and mountains. Reflecting on the experience of producing *Leaving trails in the distance*, Nkanga observed: “I actually made this work from the quartz. By expanding an image of a small stone, the work then started looking like a mountain itself. For me it’s quite amazing when you have enlarged an image how that becomes an image of something that we start projecting, going beyond the object itself. The relationship with our own memories and experiences, our own traumas, our loves, informs the way we can look at things. That’s why the idea of abstraction becomes interesting... it’s somehow abstract but it’s not.”

When the exhibition opened at Castello di Rivoli in September 2021, the Covid-19 pandemic made it impossible to invite visitors to interact with the works, physically lying down on them. Nevertheless, the idea remained of the carpets as a place where people could, at least theoretically, lie down, finding comfort and perhaps also interacting with some of the small sculptures placed upon them. “I wanted to go from a stone, a small stone, into something that the body can lie on. Turning hardness into softness, the carpets are meant to work for the body and around the body. I wanted the carpets to have a performative potential and I included on each a variety of sculptural elements. The idea is to have something for the body to play with, and to rest, and to meditate,” the artist explained. And she added: “The starting point is the body at rest; this grounds the whole exhibition. It is a project in which I bring everything back to the ground, back to the floor.”

The horizontal dimension is critical to Nkanga’s practice, connecting to the concepts of relation and experience touched on at the beginning of this essay. Although alluding to mountains in its title, the exhibition mapped out a powerfully horizontal landscape, in which the various elements linked by cords became clear expressions of situations of co-emergence among different species, human and otherwise, going beyond vertical hierarchies. Moreover, just as our experiences do not take place in accordance with orderly, coherent processes, and are instead subject to the environment within which we move, the exhibition offered multiple sonorous, aromatic, visual, and tactile encounters.

Changing while one moved within it, Nkanga's exhibition could therefore act as an agent of transformation.

Otobong Nkanga's quotes in this essay are excerpted from conversations with the author on the occasion of the production of the new artwork and during the organization of the exhibition.